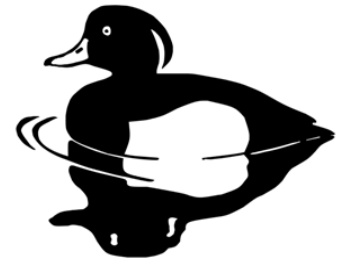


# **Newsletter No 98**

## **December 2025**



### **Editorial**

**Iain Oldcorn ([newsletter@berksoc.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@berksoc.org.uk))**

Welcome to our 98th BOC Newsletter. Neil kicks off with our latest local Conservation news while Sean follows with the national BTO news, including info on past and present Surveys. Brian Clews reminds us of the upcoming RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. Edwin (he's not just our Treasurer) reports on the recent BOC Norfolk weekend trip organised by Robert Godden; and then fellow traveller, Peter Driver, describes their sighting on the trip of the recently opened Robert Gillmor Discovery Hide at Cley and reminds us of how much our hobby owes to that remarkable man. Then we have the solution to Peter's Quick Crossword from our last Newsletter. Our New Membership Secretary, Angela Gunn, describes the revolution in Membership Record handling which she is introducing. John Hard tells of a "first" for him on a recent trip to Alsace. Ray Reedman reminisces again; this time on a new and unusual comparatively recent fossil bird species. Finally, another Gallery of Andy's excellent photos! (Ed. Unless otherwise stated, photos are copyright of the author of the article in which they appear.)

### **BOC Conservation Sub-committee Update – December 2025**

**Neil Bucknell**

**1 – Padworth Lane** – A revised restoration plan from the gravel company has still not been received, but the owner of the site (Canal and Rivers Trust) has confirmed that they are still keen to pass the site over on a lease once restoration has occurred.

In the meantime, we are concerned that the site is deteriorating in the absence of active management. The Canal & Rivers Trust have suggested that the club enters into what they call a community partnership agreement. It is an arrangement that they use with community groups who want to maintain land they own, usually stretches of canal-side land. It sets out their requirements to ensure that any works are carried out safely. This looks like a good basis for carrying out work to maintain the site pending a permanent solution, and we are taking this forward.

**2 – Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy** – this has now been approved by all six Berkshire councils, and was launched at Newbury Show in September. It can now be found [here](#) on the Royal Windsor and Maidenhead Council's website. It is a substantial document in three parts. The club's contribution is acknowledged, both as participant in the process and in providing sources of information, notably Renton Righelato's publication *Berkshire's Birdscapes*.

**3 – Sulham Estate** – We have completed a third 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 and to monitor the effect of the creation of a new wetland by the railway just outside Pangbourne. Unfortunately, the very dry summer has not helped this site. Our contribution was acknowledged at a volunteers' event held in October. Thanks to Andrew Taylor for his help in this.

**4 – Conservation Fund** – No new grants or grant applications have been received since our last newsletter. Please contact us if you know of a bird-related project where we might help.

**News from BTO: updates on new surveys and a BTO county level information resource.**

The BTO 'Birds in Urban Green Spaces' project (see BOC Newsletter No 93 Apr 2024) that was postponed will now be launched in 2026. Green spaces can be recreational areas, e.g.: parks, playing fields and village greens, but can also include spaces such as cemeteries etc. The way these spaces are managed will vary greatly within and between space type and this will influence the local avifauna. Thus, the aims of the initiative are to establish what bird species use these spaces and to develop the best management methods for the spaces to support bird populations and the needs of people, that can be promoted with those responsible for the maintenance of the spaces. The project is open to all with surveys running from April to June. Any green space can be surveyed several times and by multiple volunteers. Resources will be available during this winter, for example, a guide to birds and a 'sensory walk' pack for those with a disability but who would like to take part. There will also be an app available to record data. For further information please see: [Birds in Greenspaces | BTO](#)

BTO is currently making good progress with the plans for the next **Bird Atlas: 2027 – 31**, for Britain and Ireland; the launch of a new Atlas project was mentioned in the BOC December 2024 Newsletter (No 95). To briefly recap, the main aims are to take stock of the distribution/range and abundance of all birds in summer and winter and to identify any changes in the metrics of these. There have been many significant factors that have had an impact on bird populations since the last Atlas (2007-2011) was produced, for example: climate change and the outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI – 'bird flu') that has affected so many bird species. The new Atlas will take advantage of the technological progress made with the tools available for surveys since 2011 with the aim to make data collection easier and more efficient.

BTO plans to have the methods for the surveys confirmed in the Spring of next year. For those who took part in the previous Atlas project, the survey methods will include timed tetrad visits (TTV) and roving records; but more on these in due course. Square allocation is expected to be open in the summer of 2027 with the first field work starting in November 2027. I will provide further updates when they become available.

Turning to our regular annual BTO surveys, many thanks to all those who took part. As in previous years, we had terrific contributions to the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) and the other annual surveys. For the BBS, the most numerous species recorded in 2025 followed the same pattern as in previous years with the Woodpigeon, Jackdaw, Wren, Blackbird and Blue Tit at the top of the list. Also, we had an amazing sign up for the return of the Heathland Bird Survey that was run this year. As Berkshire has a substantial area of heathland, we were allocated many survey squares across the county for the three 'target' species: Dartford Warbler, Wood Lark and Nightjar. The Wood Lark had the largest number of squares, and this was based on previous records from the county and possible habitat use. So, if you participated in the survey, many thanks for your contributions! (The deadline for data entry was extended to the 20<sup>th</sup> November.)

Lastly, news of a new BTO county level information resource on birds. This is an expansion of BTO's BirdFacts Species web site, an online facility that provides up-to-date information on the status, distribution, biology and population trend of each of the UK's bird species. To this facility, the BTO have now added BirdFacts Places. Under this there is now information on the occurrence, seasonality, and conservation status of the birds found on a county basis. However, and just to note, the information has been compiled with data from the BTO regions and Bird Track etc, so the areas do not always exactly correspond to actual county boundaries. The new facility will be developed further with a plan to try and add information from data from other sources; see: [www.bto.org/learn/about-birds/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/learn/about-birds/birdfacts)

We are quickly approaching the next national Big Garden Birdwatch, organised by the RSPB, and registration is already open.

This 'citizen science' survey of our garden birds has been running since 1979, and in 2020 participation topped a half million contributors, making it by far the largest survey of its kind world-wide. But there's still room for plenty more to join in.

As is well known, it is simply a matter of allocating an hour of your time to count the birds that come into your garden during a three-day period. Most members will have been involved previously, but we can all perhaps encourage the wider community to get involved as it can be a fun family event. Why not email your local school office to remind them that they can get involved with a special schools' version of the event? All the resources needed are listed on the project web site (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/big-garden-birdwatch>)

The dates for the event are 23rd - 25<sup>th</sup> January 2026. There are no prizes, and whether your garden is multiple acres full of hundreds of birds, or a typical urban plot with a few feeders to attract 'your' regulars, all records are as important as any others to the scheme.

Through these records we get both a snap-shot of what was happening that particular year, but also an indication of what changes are occurring over time.

This January's records for Berkshire included no fewer than 46 species, whilst the national top ten showed a few position changes, with Woodpigeon now down one position to 3rd most-regularly seen visitor (a decade ago, it was far less frequent in gardens). House Sparrow continues to be the number one nationally (for the 20<sup>th</sup> year running!); but in Berkshire, Blue Tit was top (occurring in 81% of submissions) and House Sparrow third! Meanwhile, Long-tailed Tits have now entered the top ten, another new phenomenon. Chaffinches however are much rarer in our gardens, reflecting dwindling numbers across the nation. Red Kites were noted in 11% of Berkshire gardens whilst less common sightings for the lucky ones were of Tree Sparrow and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Other changes in last year's results were fewer Starlings and Goldfinches, but more Blackbirds, Robins and Magpies.

So do sign up on the RSPB site to take part and let all your friends know about it.

**BOC Weekend Away Trip to Norfolk; 14<sup>th</sup> - 17th November 2025****Edwin Bruce-Gardner**

Another successful BOC away weekend trip following the Somerset trip in February. Destination: North Norfolk based in Hunstanton. However, the weather could not have been more different; from the bitter cold of Somerset to the after effects of storm Claudia in Norfolk.

Friday 14th November

First stop, Nene Washes. Pouring with rain and a cold wind it was hardly an ideal birdwatching day but that didn't stop sighting a Marsh Harrier and Bittern with flocks of: Fieldfare, Lapwings, Redwing and Starlings. A couple of Wigeon, 15 Tufted Duck and a Moorhen with some 10 Mute Swans, a Buzzard and a Red Kite completed the picture.

The birds we had hoped to see, Short- and Long-eared Owls, were nowhere in evidence and probably tucked away in the bottom of the hedge running parallel to the Washes, sheltered from the grim weather. Onwards to Snettisham with a slight improvement in the weather. On the ponds on the way to the beach there were the normal selection of ducks, a couple of Little Grebes with Redshank and Oystercatcher. No shortage of Blackbirds. At the beach there was a huge flock of Oystercatchers, a couple of Brent Geese,

some Shelduck with a wide range of waders including: Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Dunlin, Knot, Ringed Plover, Redshank, Sanderling, Turnstone, and ten sodden birders.

As dark was falling, time for R & R at the Wash and Tope in Hunstanton, where we dined, with half of the party based at the Wash and Tope and the rest in a house close by (the former Hunstanton Youth Hostel, now a private let).

Number of species seen on Day One: 46

#### Saturday 15th November

Up early at 7am for sea/beach watching from Hunstanton cliffs. Stars of the show included: a Velvet Scoter, two Red-breasted Mergansers, a Little Gull, a Kittiwake, four Great-crested Grebe, a Gannet, a Long-tailed Duck and a Red-throated Diver with a Peregrine and Curlew flying over. Not a bad start to the day.

Back for breakfast and then on to the RSPB Titchwell Marsh Nature Reserve until lunch. Almost immediately we saw a Firecrest but no sight of the Pallas's Leaf Warbler known to be around. Plenty of other small birds such as Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests on the East Trail up to the Fen Hide. From there to the Parrinder Hide seeing Marsh Harrier and Bittern with a Chinese Water Deer on the way. Indeed, there were Marsh Harriers wherever we went. At the Parrinder Hide a small island was crammed with Golden Plover but no sign of the American Golden Plover seen recently. Other waders and ducks seen included: Dunlin, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit with two Pintail, Gadwall and 40 Brent Geese. Linnets and Meadow Pipits were also seen.



On from Titchwell to North Point, looking for Short-eared Owls. No sign of any when we left at dusk but we were rewarded with two massive skeins of Pink-footed Geese comprising many thousands of birds off to their roosts on the Wash. Again, there were Brent Geese with several Shoveler and around 100 Teal. A Spoonbill was seen flying in the distance.

Back to Hunstanton for supper at the Wash and Tope.

Number of species seen on Day Two: 92



### Sunday 16th November

First stop Gore Point at 7.30am for a spot of sea-watching. Red-breasted Merganser, Common Scoter, Eider, Cormorant, Brent Geese and a selection of waders were seen. Back to Hunstanton for breakfast.

On to Cley Marshes, stopping on the way at a field opposite Titchwell to try and spot a Hoopoe which was around. No luck. Sea-watching provided: two Common Scoter, five Black-throated Divers, two Red-breasted Mergansers, Eiders, Gannets and two Mediterranean Gulls. Walking back along the East Bank a Glossy Ibis flew over and a Kestrel was spotted. Lunch at the Cley Visitors Centre was interrupted by news that a Pallas's Warbler had been seen up a lane alongside the Centre. Yes, it had been seen but it wasn't by us.

A short car ride then to Salthouse for a walk along the beach. A small flock of Snow Buntings was seen together with both Grey and Red-legged Partridges, and a flock of Brent Geese. Two seals were also in the shallows. Again, good views of Marsh Harriers.

Number of species seen on Day Three: 80

### Monday 17th November

Before breakfast sea watching in front of the Wash and Tope produced: two Great Northern Divers, two Red-throated Divers, Fulmars, Brent Geese with Oystercatcher and Turnstone.

After breakfast on to Titchwell to see the Pallas's Warbler. Eventually found and showed well being seen by all, but a rumoured Woodcock proved elusive. A Siberian Chiffchaff was seen by some.

Some opted for home at this stage; and it was then on to Holkham Pines to hopefully see a Hume's Leaf Warbler. A long walk through the pines and a lot of frustration as it kept being seen but again, not by us! Plenty of small birds (a lot of Long-tailed and other Tits, Goldcrests etc.) were seen as it was keeping company with them. Another Pallas's Warbler emerged. A Marsh Harrier, Red Kite, a couple of Little Grebes and some Greylag Geese also made the walk worthwhile.

And so back to Berkshire.

Number of species seen on Day Four: 45.

Overall: 111 species on the trip.

Everyone said how much they had enjoyed the trip but perhaps the weather could have been a little kinder. But bad weather and high winds produce birds! Robert put a huge amount of time into organising the trip and his expertise in putting together the selection of birding sites was appreciated by all. Very many thanks to you, Robert, from those of who were lucky enough to be on the trip.

The following went on the trip: Sue Ashwell, Edwin Bruce-Gardner, Jane Campbell, Elaine Charlson, Peter Driver, John Froy, Robert Godden, Paul Goriup, Erica Johnson, Bob and Jean Lyle, Debby Reynolds, Lesley Staves, and Rupert Woodman.

**A Fitting Memorial for Robert Gillmor MBE**

**Peter Driver**

On the recent BOC members' weekend in North Norfolk, the group was pleased to find the new Gillmor Discovery Hide at Cley Marshes nature reserve, installed by Norfolk Wildlife Trust in honour of the late Robert Gillmor MBE, a former President *emeritus* of BOC and a member from 1948 until he died in 2022.

The hide is decorated with some of Robert's most well-known artworks. Its innovative structure is part of a wider project by the Trust to help the reserve adapt to the challenges of climate change. It replaces

the previous north hide on the edge of the shingle beach, which was destroyed by a severe storm in 2013. The new hide is on wheels, enabling it to be moved to safety when severe weather is forecast.

Newer members may not know about Robert Gillmor's significance to Berkshire Ornithological Club. Robert is well-known as an influential wildlife artist.

Robert designed the BOC's Tufted Duck logo, the RSPB's Avocet logo and his work was seen widely, including on postage stamps and covers of New Naturalist editions. Robert played a huge part in the life of BOC over the years, not only through his artwork (including all the annual report covers from 1949 to 2020), but as a past secretary, chair and president. His contributions to the wider artistic and ornithological world included helping to found the Society of Wildlife Artists and membership of many conservation and ornithological bodies. He also provided mentoring and inspiration for younger artists and birders.

In 1998, Robert retired to his beloved Cley, in North Norfolk, where he became established as part of the local birding scene, particularly at his favourite site, Cley Marshes. He continued his connection to BOC as President emeritus and was an ongoing source of advice, guidance and encouragement for many years.

A full article about Robert, written by our late former chair Renton Righelato, is on the club website [here](#).



BOC members, dressed for the weather, on the edge of Cley Marshes reserve, with the Gillmor Discovery Hide in the distant background, between the first and second birders from the left.

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11 T	W	I	T	E		E		
I		E		D		R		12 S
13 T	E	R	N		14 S	N	O	W

Across

1. Land Rail (9)
6. Old English eggs (5)
7. Two year old sheep (3)
8. Species peculiar to a location (7)
10. Might be sombre (3)
11. Small finch may have pink rump (5)
13. See 5 down
14. Bunting or Goose?

Down

1. Little punk from Abernethy Forest, etc. (7,3)
2. Abundance status for Goshawk in Berkshire (4)
3. What perpetrators of wildlife crime should be (9)
4. The longest-distance migrator? (6,4)
5. and 13 across, *Thalasseus elegans* (7,4)
9. What we're told our summers will become (5)
12. Prevailing wind direction (1,1)

We are transferring our BOC membership records to Membermojo, an online membership management software system, for the 2025-2026 membership year. This will give us a central online database which will be easier to update and will simplify sending emails to keep you up-to-date. Another advantage is that members will be able to sign in and update their contact details at any time.

To update your details, go to [Club membership | Berkshire Ornithological Club](#) and scroll down to *Update/amend your contact details*.

To sign in you will need to enter the email account in your membership record and you will be sent a link to "Your Membership Record."

Please add the following two email addresses to your "safe sender list" to ensure that our emails to you do not end up in your spam folder: [mailer.berksoc@gmail.co.uk](mailto:mailer.berksoc@gmail.co.uk) & [noreply.berksoc@membermojo.co.uk](mailto:noreply.berksoc@membermojo.co.uk)

If you are a member of other organisations that use Membermojo, you will see these listed when you sign in. This is because the "sign in" is linked to your email and is for your convenience – it does not allow the other organisations to see your personal information in our records.

Your data can only be viewed by the BOC membership secretary and backup administrators; other committee members will be able to email members without being able to see their personal information. Our policy on Data Protection can be found on our website [Constitution and policies | Berkshire Ornithological Club](#).

Another change this year is that we now offer free membership to under 25-year-olds. Under 18-year-olds will still need to be accompanied to indoor meetings and field trips.

Please remember to keep us advised of any changes in your contact details: email address, postal address, land/mobile phone numbers, gift aid status. You can do this by signing in and updating your record or by emailing the Membership Secretary.

**INTERNATIONAL NEWS \* Shrike Strike Hits Hard****John Hard**

United Nations confirm identity – it's a Red Backed Shrike

My wife and I often have a holiday in September in France. These are not birding holidays but I always take my binoculars "just in case." This year we happened to be in the Alsace region for a few days. Amongst other places, we visited a nature reserve known as "La Petite Camargue Alsacienne" – the little Camargue in Alsace. It is situated very close to where France, Germany and Switzerland meet.

The reserve was not much like the real Camargue – I didn't see a flamingo, there were no Camargue cowboys or bulls, and it was not hot or dry. However, it is a large reserve formed from the former flood plain of the river Rhine covering about 900 hectares. This includes the river itself plus working and disused canals, lakes, woodland, and scrub as well as 10 waymarked



trails and about a dozen hides. A bit like Dinton on steroids.

One of the hides was a tower overlooking a small lake. Access was a tricky metal spiral staircase but the views were spectacular. When I reached the top there were four other birders present, all looking across the lake. I started looking, couldn't see much of interest so started to scan the scrub at the front of the hide.

Suddenly a smallish bird landed on a bush and was clearly visible with binoculars. But what was it – too small for this; too large for that – and where were the BOC members when you wanted them?

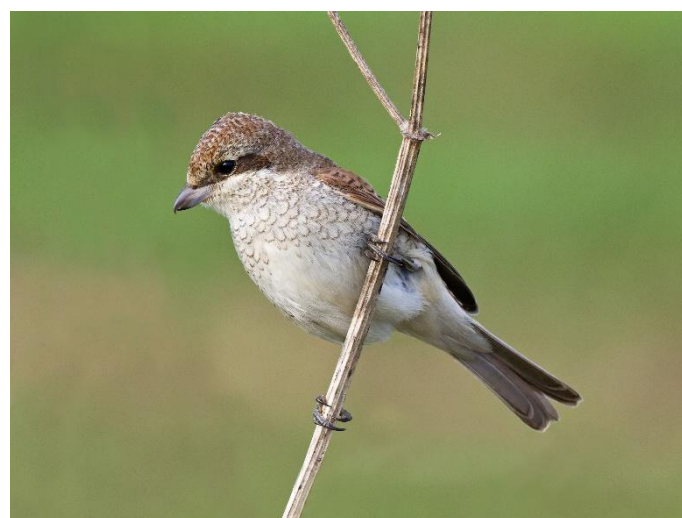
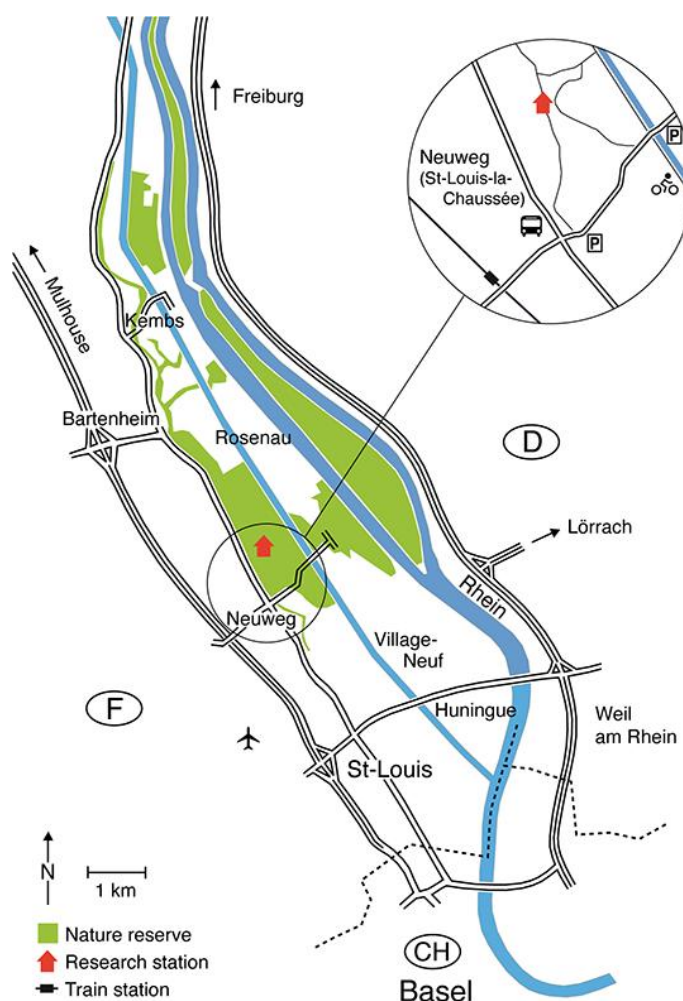
So, I plucked up courage and in French asked if any of the others had seen it. They all turned round and had a look. One suggestion was a "fauvette" (warbler) but that was then quickly dismissed. A Frenchman then said it was an "écorcheur" but he didn't know the English version; another birder said he was Swiss who spoke both French and German and said the German version was a "neuntöter" but again didn't know the English. Then another birder who happened to be German opened his rucksack and produced a European Bird Guide; he found the right page and there in French, German and English languages was the bird – a juvenile Red Backed Shrike.

This was a real first for me – my only previous "possible" was a five second view of a bird in Surrey which other birders claimed as the Shrike (but I wasn't wholly convinced).

So, a true United Nations of birders accurately identified my first Red Backed Shrike.

Elsewhere on that reserve I also saw my first clear Night Heron perched conveniently in the open for at least 10 minutes. And whilst not a bird, a local let me look through his 'scope at a large turtle which he said was rare. According to an information notice at the nearby visitor centre

the species had been introduced a few years back.



### **A Vegan Duck? A New Fossil Bird: *Vegavis iaai***

**Ray Reedman**

I don't usually wander into the realms of fossil birds, but an obscure news item recently caught my eye because it concerned a relatively new fossil bird species with a really clumsy-looking name. A first fossil was found in Vega Island on the Antarctic Peninsula in 1992; but scientists had to wait for a specimen that included a skull, before proposing that this was a 67-million year old relative of the ducks, and that it may

well be the oldest known modern bird discovered so far. What is perhaps more astonishing is that it possibly survived the Cretaceous mass extinction simply by inhabiting Antarctica, far away from the critical asteroid strike. The species has both diver-like and auk-like attributes, but taxonomists have placed it in the Order Anseriformes, alongside: the modern ducks, geese and swans, (Anatidae); the Australian Magpie Goose (Anseranatidae); and the South American screamers (Anhimidae).

That all said, I must confess that I was initially drawn to what I felt was a truly odd name. The generic element, *Vegavis*, suggested to me a culinary item, a bird served up with carrots and greens, while the specific name *iaai* sounded like the scream made when the geologist's hammer connected with his thumb. Sorry, but that is how my mind tends to work! Fortunately I skidded back onto the path of reality and unearthed some interesting facts behind the names ...

Quite obviously, the generic name relates to Vega Island, where the fossils were discovered. The island was named by the Swedish Antarctic explorer Dr Otto Nordenskjöld during a 1901-04 expedition. Vega is, of course, the brightest star in the constellation Lyra, but that sheds no direct light on this matter. For a Swede of that era, *Vega* was a national glory, the name of the ship that had, in 1878-80, completed one of Sweden's most illustrious feats of exploration and navigation: the successful traverse of the Arctic Northeast Passage and the subsequent completion of the first circumnavigation of the entire Eurasian landmass as it returned via the Pacific and Indian Oceans and the Suez Canal to its Stockholm base. What is more, the *Vega* was no Leviathan - just a 150 ft, steam-aided, wooden, sailing barque that had been built for whaling (and was destined to be lost off Greenland when it had been returned to that trade). Such was the subsequent fame of the heroic expedition that the naming of Vega Island was almost akin to planting the Swedish flag there. It was no coincidence, of course, that Otto Nordenskjöld was responsible. He was the nephew of Baron A.E. Nordenskjöld, the leader of that earlier and more famous expedition. One matter of incidental interest to the ornithologist is that, during the famous traverse, the *Vega* gave its name to Siberia's Vega Peninsula, for which reason a local bird is now known as the Vega Gull, *Larus vegae*.

Turning now to the seemingly painful specific name of that fossil, it emerges that *iaai* is actually based on an acronym, the initials of the *Instituto Antartico Argentino (IAA)*, the Argentine scientific expedition to Antarctica. The organisation is undoubtedly worthy of the acknowledgement and there may be other acronyms in use in a similar way, but that is certainly a most unusual ploy and it has the potential to make scientific naming even more obscure than it already is. It certainly underlines the fact that linguistic elegance is not a requirement of names constructed in the Linnaean system.

(Sources: on line reports by The Natural History Museum, BBC Natural History Unit, Sci News, Live Science, etc. Further data from Wikipedia.)



**Cattle Egret;  
Lower Farm GP; 14July2025**



**Peregrine;  
Emmer Green Garden; 7August2025**



**Greenshank;  
Lea Farm Lake; 24August2025**



**Curlew Sandpiper;  
QMR; 14August2025**



**Knot; QMR; 27August2025**



**Ruff; QMR; 27August2025**

*(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, a message from your committee: "Best Wishes for Xmas and the New Year"**