

BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

Newsletter No 99

April 2026



Editorial

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Welcome to the 99th edition of the BOC Newsletter. We begin with a vote of thanks to Iain Oldfield who has handed-over the reins as editor of the Newsletter after eight years diligent service to the Club. Iain took over the role from Ted Rogers at the end of 2017 and has edited twenty-five newsletters since then. Hats off to Iain! I have stepped in to fill the gap on a temporary basis, with support from Sally Wearing. If any of our talented members would like to discuss taking over the role of newsletter editor, I would be very pleased to hear from you!

We start this edition with a call-out for volunteers to help BOC participate in the University's Centenary bioblitz in May. Our friends at Moor Green Lakes Group share details of their forthcoming open day on 11th June. There is news from our local BTO reps, including WeBS data showing the upward trend of Great White Egrets and Cattle Egrets. Elaine Charlson shares some insights on feather melanin. Ray Reedman speculates on what the fossil record and genetics may yet reveal about the birds we think we know. All the winners and runners up in our 2026 photographic competition are included; please consider entering next year's competition. One of our resident artists writes about his gift to visiting speakers. A poem from John Froy whets our appetite for the return of House Martins, any day now. A selection of Andy Tomczynski's recent photographs of birds in Berkshire include some of the interesting geese that visited the County during the winter. And we end with a 'Five-minute Crossword' - let us know if you complete it in that time.

As well as seeking a new newsletter editor, I am also keen to receive contributions for future newsletters. Please contact me if you have any ideas, articles, photos or other relevant input.

The deadline for submissions for Newsletter No 100 is Sunday July 19th.

University of Reading Centenary 'Bioblitz' and Community Festival –
Volunteers Needed **Peter Driver**

As part of Reading University's Centenary celebrations this summer, a group of the university's ecologists, naturalists, and birders are organising a **24-hour Bioblitz on the Whiteknights Campus** and members of BOC have been warmly invited to take part.

A *bioblitz* is an intensive survey that aims to record as many species of flora and fauna as possible within a specific area over a set period of time. This event will run from **4:00 pm on Friday 15th May through to 4:00 pm on Saturday 16th May**, bringing together people with a wide range of interests and experience.

Participants will have the opportunity to contribute in different ways. Some may wish to carry out their own recording activities on the survey site – either individually or in small groups – while others might prefer to help lead activities or guided walks for the public. Planned events already include a **Bat Recording Walk** and a **Moth Trapping session** on the Friday evening, with more activities to be confirmed. BOC would like to offer a Dawn Chorus walk on the Saturday morning and family-friendly bird walks round Whiteknights Lake, at intervals through the day.

In addition, BOC will be hosting a **stand at the Community Festival** taking place during the event. This will be a good opportunity to introduce members of the local community to the BOC and potentially welcome new members.

Could you be part of BOC's contribution to this event? If you feel able to help staff the stall for an hour or two, lead a dawn chorus walk, or a short family-friendly bird walk round the lake, or get involved with *bioblitz* bird recording across the site, please contact Peter Driver:

berksocpublicity@gmail.com or phone 07585 112301

Even if you prefer not to participate as a contributor, you are still very welcome to attend and enjoy some of the public activities taking place during the event.

We hope to see many of you there!

Moor Green Lakes Open Day, Saturday April 11th

Our friends at Moor Green Lakes Group (MGLG) are holding an open day on Saturday April 11th. Anyone who has visited Moor Green Lakes recently will have seen abundant evidence that spring has arrived: blossom on the Blackthorn, new growth on the recently-laid hedge and the air filled with the sound of birdsong. Many of the birds that spend the spring and summer at Moor Green Lakes have arrived to join the resident species in establishing breeding territory and building nests. With so much to see, spring is a wonderful time to visit the reserve.

Colebrook Hide will be open between 10 am and 4 pm on Saturday 11th April with experienced MGLG members on hand to point out species of interest. Come along to enjoy the spring spectacle, meet fellow members and to learn more about all the wildlife (bird, insects, reptiles, mammals, plants) that can be found at the Moor Green Lakes reserve.

No need to book - just turn up and feel free to bring your friends.



First, a welcome to Alice Trchalik, who took over the BTO Wetland Bird Survey for Berkshire at the end of last year. Alice will be providing news and updates on that survey as part of this regular news section; see below.

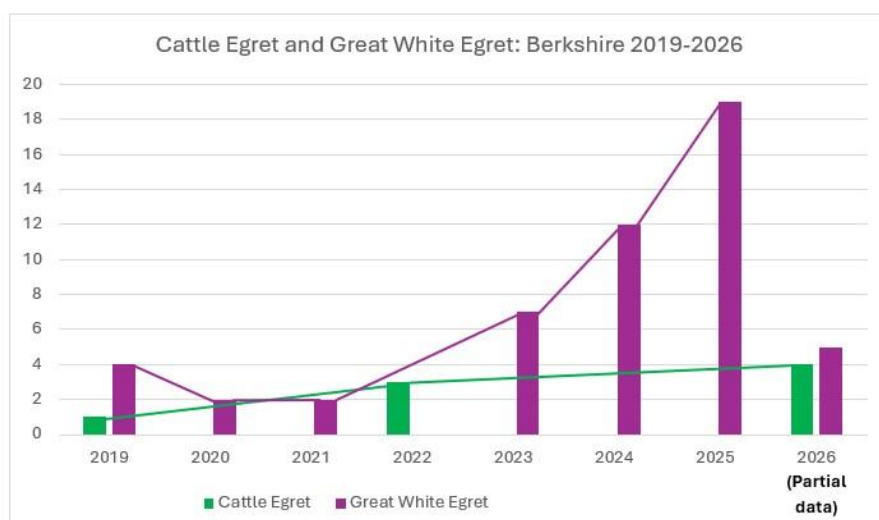
For those who are participating in the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), or may be interested in taking part, BTO have now produced three instructional videos to either help as a refresher on methods or as additional guidance for those new to the survey. The videos can be found in the 'taking part' link on the BBS web page (www.bto.org/bbs). There are three, covering: "Before your visit"; "In the field"; and "Extra recording". If you are interested learning more about the BBS or thinking of participating, let me (STM) know if you need any help or guidance.

In addition, but also of wider interest, BTO are running a series of online courses in late April/early May on song and call identification. These will be two-hour sessions run over two days and are aimed as a refresher or to help those who want to develop their skills. The course will differ from previous ones run by BTO in that the focus will be on birds that occur on a wider range of habitats than before. The dates are Wednesdays, April 29th and May 6th at 7pm, and Thursdays, April 30th and May 7th at 10am, but there is also the option on the same days as the last at 7pm. The cost is £24.

The BTO "Birds in Greenspaces" project (see BOC Newsletter 98 Dec. 2025) started on April 1st and will run until the end of June. Any greenspace can be surveyed several times and by multiple volunteers. Plenty of sources are available, including an app that will make field recording easy. The app also has additional features to help build skills. For further information please see: [Birds in Greenspaces | BTO](#). If you have any questions about the survey, please let me (STM) know.

Thank you to those who participated in the Winter Bird Survey. The final data entry will close on April 30th, so please enter all your data before then.

So, to news about the WeBS and some exciting records. In recent years we have been seeing an increasing number of Great White Egrets in the region as well as the return of Cattle Egrets to Theale Main Pit (last reported to WeBS in 2022). The graph below shows the increase in the regional population in Berkshire (WeBS data) since 2019.



More generally, these species have been expanding into southern Britain in increasing numbers along with Spoonbill, Night Heron and Glossy Ibis. These last three species have been recorded in Berkshire in past years and, indeed, the Glossy Ibis has been recorded in March 2022 at Burghfield Gravel Pits and more recently at Queen Mother Reservoir in September 2025. Warming winters may in part explain the increase in the records of some of these species.

If you would like to participate in the WeBS (with a chance to add to exciting records such as the above) there is an opportunity to conduct wetland bird surveys at some very high priority lakes including Horton Gravel Pits and Kingsmead Island Lake in the Wraysbury area. I (AT) would be happy to address any access issues as best I can since I know that this can be a real stumbling block for this survey. If you are interested, please look at the map of available sites <https://app.bto.org/websonline/sites/vacant/vacant-sites.jsp#region=5> or contact me (AT) via the website.

Light as a feather?

Elaine Charlson

Recent Spanish-led research has shown that melanin makes up around 22% of a feather's total weight. Even in the darkest feathers, it never accounts for more than 25%.

There are two main types of melanin: Eumelanin, which produces black and brown shades, is heavier than pheomelanin, which gives reds and paler tones. The team analysed feathers from 109 specimens across 19 species, including [Pied Flycatcher](#), [Golden Eagle](#) and [Eurasian Bullfinch](#). Darker feathers weigh more, which could mean that extra energy is used during flight. The study proposes that white feathers in species such as Snowy Owl may not just provide camouflage in snow, but could also reduce pigment weight. This would allow denser, warmer plumage without hindering flight. Similarly, lighter-coloured feathers could benefit migratory birds by lowering the energetic cost of long journeys.

(Reference: Galván, I, et al. 2025. 'Pigment contribution to feather mass depends on melanin form and is restricted to approximately 25%', *Biology Letters*. [DOI:10.1098/rsbl.2025.0299](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2025.0299))



What if things had gone differently?

Ray Reedman

Some years ago, I sat in the hide at Lavell's Lake, just watching quietly on my own, when a family of four came in and settled with due caution. I shared my binoculars with the children, and we talked a bit about the cormorants, ducks and gulls. Suddenly a Kingfisher flew in front of us. Mum could scarcely quell her excitement and exclaimed: "Look, you two! A hummingbird!" It took me a few minutes to work

the word Kingfisher tactfully into the conversation without making her feel foolish or contradicted in her children's eyes. She deserved all my respect just for introducing that moment into the children's lives.

Ah! But was she so wrong? Some surprising facts have emerged in recent years...

Firstly, a fossil found in Wyoming in 2013 has proved to be a vital 'missing link'. It is a 52-million-year-old and superficially swallow-like fossil ancestor of both swifts and hummingbirds, now named *Eocypselus rowei*. With many physical features showing similarity to both swifts and hummingbirds, it represents a form that existed close to their divergence. In the modern world, any association between the two families seems to be highly improbable, since their respective physiologies and lifestyles are now so different.

Swifts seem to have taken a short route towards their modern form. The oldest-known swift fossil, *Scaniacyclus szarskii*, is 49 million years old and was found in Germany. It clearly shows characteristics typical of modern swifts. The hummingbirds seem to have travelled a lot further in their evolution to arrive at the very un-swift-like shape and habits that they exhibit today.

Astonishingly, most of the best evidence about hummingbird evolution comes from Europe, where there are no modern hummingbirds. Discovered in Germany in 2004 and about 49 million years old, *Parargornis messelensis* shows distinctive characteristics of a modern hummingbird, but still retains a swift-like beak that shows that it was still wholly insectivorous. It has been suggested that hummingbirds originally took insects from flowering plants and then evolved to feed on the nectar instead.

A further fossil find in Germany in 2014 is a close ancestor of hummingbirds, this time about 47 million years old. What is remarkable about *Pumiliornis tessellatus* is that it revealed evidence of fossilised pollen in its stomach. That is not only the oldest known example of pollination by birds, but also the earliest evidence of flowers producing pollen.

Two later fossils of German origin from the Oligocene period (33-23mya) were examined in 2005 and found to be unequivocal hummingbird species. They are now classified as *Eurotrochilus inexpectatus*. Since then, specimens of a similar type have been identified in Poland and France.

Such examples prove conclusively that a family, which is today inextricably associated with the Americas, was once present in the Old World. Nobody knows why they died out on this side of the Atlantic, though there are plenty of theories.

Curiously, little evidence of the sort found in Europe has so far emerged in the Americas, which is the only part of the world where hummingbirds still exist. There, all fossil evidence of the family is much more recent. Convergent evolution is an unlikely possibility. It has been postulated that an American ancestor hummingbird may have crossed the Atlantic. The third proposal is that an ancestor population crossed the Aleutian Bridge from east Asia into Alaska and then spread south. That may not be so unlikely since the Eurasian Wren's ancestor apparently took that route in the opposite direction.

Clearly a few new fossil-finds, like those above, could change the story quite radically, but the odds of actually finding them are painfully small. I will not hold my breath. The geneticists may yet have some pointers.

But just imagine! If things had gone differently, that mother's enthusiasm in a moment of excitement might well have been directed at a Coquette, a Starthroat or a Jacobin, but instead we have a Kingfisher – a bird that out-glows any kingfisher that the Americas can offer. Small mercies and all that!

BOC Photographic Competition 2026

Sally Wearing

This year, our members submitted 61 photographs for the competition held on March 4th. Rob Still, from WildGuides, judged the competition, commenting on all the photos, and, of course, selected the winners and runners up. These are detailed below, for all three categories: Portrait, Birds in Berkshire, and Flight

and Action. The overall winner of the Gordon Langsbury Memorial Trophy was chosen by the audience from the three winners.

Congratulations to everyone who was placed, and commiserations to all the other entrants. Rob said what an excellent set of photos had been entered and that he had real difficulty in judging them. Many thanks to him for judging and to Sue Truby for organising the competition this year.



White Pelicans, by Debby Reynolds
Portrait – Winner, & Overall Winner of Gordon Langsbury
Memorial Trophy



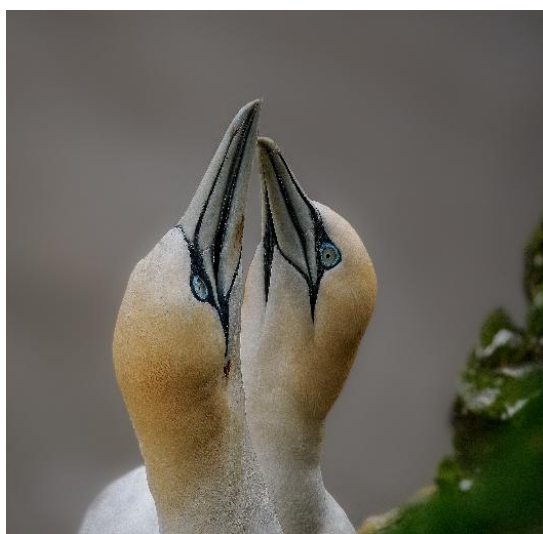
Great Crested Grebes, by Sue Truby
Winner – Birds in Berkshire



Black-tailed Godwit, by Matthew Ball
Portrait – Second



Long-tailed Tit, by David Massie
Birds in Berkshire – Second



Gannets, by Sue Truby
Portrait – Commended



Crossbill, by John Absolom
Birds in Berkshire – Commended



Puffin, by Sue Truby
Flight and Action – Winner



Red Kites, by Trevor Baker
Flight and Action – Commended



White-bellied Woodstar, by Mike Taylor
Flight and Action – Second



Robin Dryden, BOC Chair, presented Debby Reynolds, overall winner, with the Cup

Lesser Spotted now Seldom Seen

Peter Driver

On 18th February, Ken and Linda Smith visited the BOC indoor meeting to give a fascinating talk about their national research into the status of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Their presentation explored the fortunes of one of Britain's most elusive woodland birds and the rather encouraging results of passive acoustic monitoring to locate calling birds in spring. At the end of the evening, I had the pleasure of presenting them with the gift of a monoprint inspired by these enigmatic birds.

The story behind the artwork began a few years ago while I was helping my son renovate his kitchen. As we dismantled the old fittings, we discovered, hidden behind an old Hygena wall cupboard, a glorious piece of floral Seventies wallpaper. Rather than throw it away, I rescued four fragments, intrigued by the thought that this colourful relic dated from the era when many bird species were much more abundant in the British countryside.

Those salvaged pieces of wallpaper became the basis for a series of woodcut monoprints reflecting on birds that have suffered catastrophic population declines since the wallpaper was first hung. Each print represents a species I saw regularly as a young ornithologist in the Seventies: Tree Sparrow, Spotted Flycatcher, Turtle Dove and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

When I first shared the print "*Lesser Spotted — Now Seldom Seen*" on social media in 2022, Ken and Linda commented on how much they admired it and asked whether it might be for sale. At the time it was being prepared for public exhibition, so I had to decline. But when they later agreed to come and

Ken and Linda Smith

speaking to the BOC about their work on Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, it felt like the perfect opportunity to give the piece a new home.

At the close of their talk, I presented the print to them as a small gesture of appreciation for their dedication to studying and understanding these birds. I'm delighted to say they were genuinely pleased to receive it.

Ken and Linda said "we loved the print when we first saw it in 2022 and are so thrilled to own it. We had some similar wallpaper in our first flat."



Ken and Linda Smith receiving the gift of a woodcut monoprint from Peter Driver, on the occasion of their talk to BOC on February 18th 2026

House Martin

John Froy

... this bird hath made her pendent bed and procreant cradle, Macbeth

I miss having you around,
must go elsewhere to find you now –
white rump swoop over waterways,
then landing by a drying pool
to collect mud in countless tiny beaks
to repair your amazing mud-cup nest,
glued to eave, soffit and wall, home
for the brood you came all this way for.
I imagine the clutch of pearly eggs,
watched, hatched, fed and fledged,
their leaving on the great journey south,
sadly no longer from under my roof.



Brent Goose, Queen Mother Reservoir, Nov 1st 2025



Stonechat, Sonning Meadows, Dec 10th 2025



Pink-footed Goose, Cheapside, Nov 20th 2025



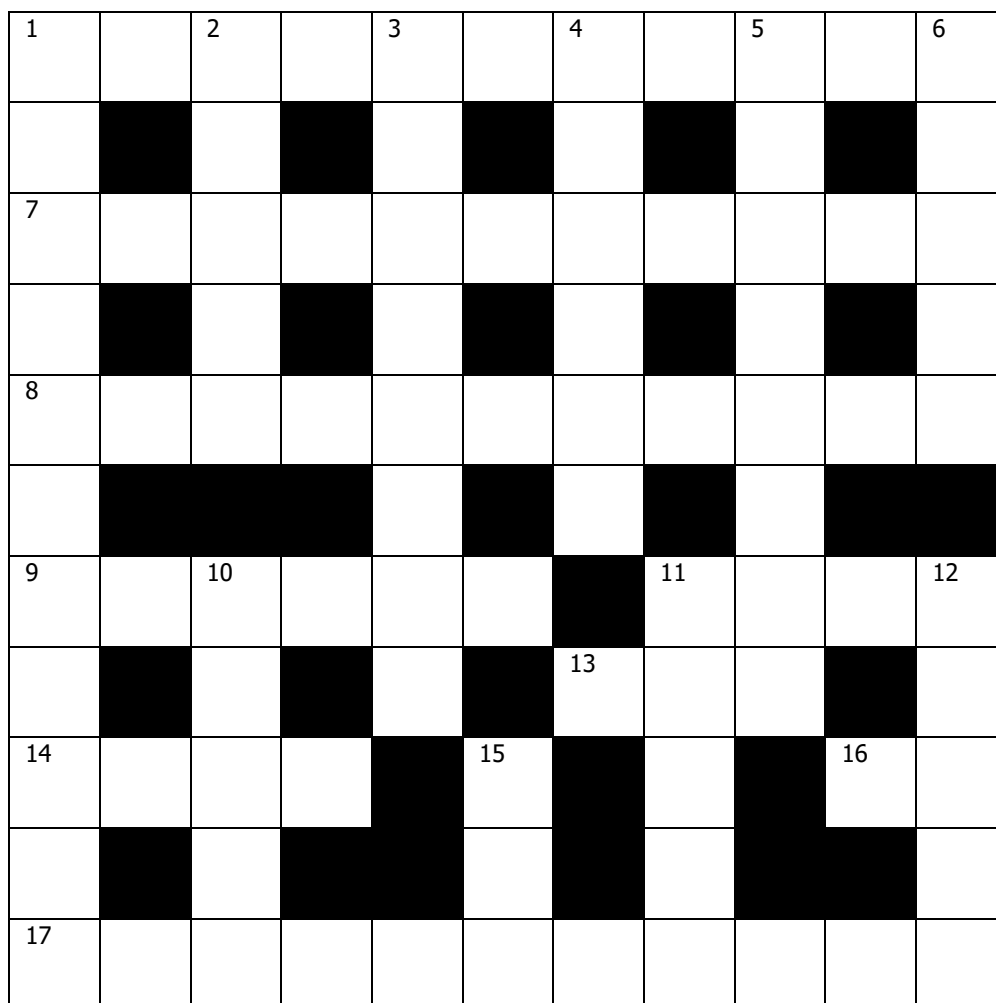
Black Redstart, Green Park, Reading, Feb 2nd 2026



White-fronted Goose, Sonning Meadows, Jan 3rd 2026



Tundra Bean Goose, Langley, Jan 4th 2026

**Across**

1. Songbird, inspiration for Keats' ode (11)
7. Revised species ID for the Hampshire Grackle (5, 6)
8. Small woodland bird with curved bill (11)
9. Branch of philosophy, would include the Birdwatcher's Code (not the County of Billericay Dickie) (6)
11. Animal droppings (also produced by Cleo Laine) (4)
13. Female deer (3)
14. Great river of The Fens (4)
16. BTO code for Bearded Tit (2)
17. This raptor enjoys bird-tables (11)

Down

1. They are black-crowned (5,6)
2. Its neck could be black or red (5)
3. Andean lake with an endemic species of 2 down. (8)
4. Bib of Marsh Tit compared to Willow Tit (6)
5. Jamaican pepper (8)
6. St. Cuthbert's Duck (5)
10. Cultivated plantain enjoyed by slugs (5)
11. Direction taken by Cuckoos in late summer (5)
12. _____ Sandpiper, named after a Russian River (5)
15. How many species of Bean Goose visit Britain? (3)

(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.)