

# THE DIPPER



## THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Registered charity number 1088830

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GOS WEB SITE: [www.gwentbirds.org.uk](http://www.gwentbirds.org.uk)

Newsletter No. 117

December 2010

**NEW YEAR, NEW US!**

Trevor Russell

### Annual General Meeting 2011

It's set to be all change for GOS following the Annual General Meeting on Saturday, January 22 in the Village Hall, Goytre (7.30pm). Several important vacancies have arisen on the committee.

We are looking for a **Vice Chairman** to stand in for Dave during his absence. **Treasurer Keith Roylance** is standing down after six years in the post, and we're looking for an urgent replacement.

I am standing down as **Secretary** after 17 years in the post, and we are also looking for an early replacement. Last, but not least, **Steph Tyler** is stepping down as a valued **committee member** after countless years in various posts, and a volunteer replacement would be welcomed.

The remaining officers and members of the committee have volunteered to stay in their posts for another year. But many are finding that changing circumstances are forcing them to give up or modify their roles, and we would like to introduce succession planning.

Please help by volunteering to join the committee, otherwise an increasing burden will have to be borne by the diminishing remainder. This is unfair, and without your help and contribution, there is a risk that *your* Society could founder.

While other officers and committee members have indicated their willingness to stand for re-election, IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT THEY CANNOT BE CONTESTED! New nominations for *any* and *all* positions are always invited, and new faces would be a most welcome sight!

The constitution allows for up to eight committee members, in addition to the officers, and there are still several gaps to fill. If you would like to volunteer to have a say in the way your Society is run, please submit your name for nomination.

**If you feel cautious about committing yourself, why not come along to a meeting and sit in as an observer?** There would be no commitment and, who knows, you might even enjoy it! We meet only five times throughout the year.

Both the proposer and seconder should sign nominations with the agreement of the nominee, or e-mail me at [tjruss2010@gmail.com](mailto:tjruss2010@gmail.com) with details. **Nominations must be received by January 1, 2010.** In the event that any position or seat is contested, selection will be made by a show of hands at the AGM.

The AGM will be followed by a **finger buffet**. The trick here is to bring some finger food to be shared by everyone, but then select something that looks far more appetising than your own offering! Following the buffet, Keith Roylance, Dave Brassey and Steve Butler will re-live their 2010 **holiday to the Pyrenees**

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## **COMMITTEE COMMENTARY**

**Trevor Russell**

The November meeting received a tantalising invitation to apply for a Big Lottery Fund grant available for various ecological/environmental projects, and our thoughts turned to projects in Goytre House Wood.

Sadly, the bureaucratic demands of the application form and the requirements for progress reporting and 'value for money' monitoring associated with the grant were beyond the scope of our society and the invitation was not pursued. We also received appeals for money from GWT and the RSPB, but these were similarly declined.

The **Treasurer** reminded us that **subscription increases will come into effect on January 1, 2011 and to change our bank standing orders.** But the more encouraging news is that membership numbers are very similar to last year.

Good news from the **Newport Wetlands Reserve** reported that in August, Black-tailed Godwit numbers reached double the required threshold for National Importance as the flock size increased to 380, and Shoveler exceeded their national threshold of 150 by 50.

Parts of **Goytre House Wood** need maintenance, eg, sycamore removal, and some areas have become inaccessible due to undergrowth (bad for pedestrians - good for birds!). A team will draw up a management plan for the wood.

**Llandegfedd Reservoir** reported that the Water Vole introduction is scheduled to go ahead since no predatory mink have been detected. The bird feeding sites have been cleared and the hides are scheduled for repair during the winter. About 70 birdwatching permits were issued last year which, at £6 each, was significantly more lucrative than the previous annual donation from GOS.

The **2009 Annual Report** is nearing completion with distribution targeted by year end.

We heard the details of the **2011 indoor programme**, which sounds varied and compelling, despite the rising cost of speakers. Nevertheless it was agreed that we should always include a few expensive 'stars' to maintain the quality of this showcase event in the GOS calendar.

The committee meets just five times each year, and if you would like to influence the way your Society is run, some significant opportunities will become available after the 2011 AGM. A comprehensive handover will ensure that the successor will not flounder.

**Vice Chairman** - while the expectation is that the Vice Chairman will succeed the Chairman when he retires by rotation, there is plenty of time and opportunity to work alongside and shadow the Chairman in the various aspects of his role.

**Treasurer** - computer dexterity is almost as important as the ability to manipulate numbers. You will track income and expenditure and present balance sheet figures at each committee meeting. Annual figures are audited and the Treasurer's annual report is presented at the AGM.

**Secretary** - computer dexterity (especially in using Microsoft Word) and a facility with e-mail are obvious requirements, as is the ability to organise committee meetings: preparation of the agenda, writing the minutes, writing a summary for *The Dipper* and being a focus for some of the external communication are also necessary.

**Committee member** - an opportunity to bring your own specialisation, interest or local knowledge to the table and make a real contribution to the way the Society is run. It would be helpful, though not essential, if you could communicate by e-mail.

Enquiries, applications and nominations should be addressed to me, Trevor Russell. Tel 01600 716266, or e-mail [tjuss2010@gmail.com](mailto:tjuss2010@gmail.com)

### ***Request for records for 2010***

**Chris Jones**

It's that time of the year again - Christmas!

While I know that members will be out enjoying themselves Christmas shopping, entertaining, partying, etc, there is always the other pastime to think about over the festive period, especially when you're chilling out after the Christmas meal...

#### **...completing your records for 2010!**

So could I ask that everybody makes it a New Year resolution to type up/write up their records for inclusion in the 2010 *Gwent Bird Report*?

Records can be submitted electronically via e-mail - which is the preferred method - by using a spreadsheet (again, preferred) or a Word document, or handwritten on 'recording slips'. These are available from me, or from the library at indoor meetings at Goytre Village Hall.

Any queries/advice required - especially with regard to the electronic format - please do not hesitate to contact me:

Chris Jones, 22 Walnut Drive, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3SB. Tel 01633 423439, or e-mail [countyrecorder@Gwentbirds.org.uk](mailto:countyrecorder@Gwentbirds.org.uk)

January 22 – AGM, with a short talk by the three amigos: Dave Brassey, Keith Roylance and Steve Butler, on their trip in 2010 to the Pyrenees.

February 5 – David Broadbent: “An artistic view of bird pictures”. With many of his images part of the RSPB and Alamy image libraries and for campaigns such as the No Airport at Cliffe, this award winning photographer takes us on an appreciation of UK birds in the landscape.

February 19 – Mike Lane: “A Lane in Brazil”. A huge country that Mike has visited three times, each visit has been spent in the Amazing Pantanal - a huge wetland area filled with Hyacinth Macaws and one of the best places to see the elusive jaguar. This show includes pictures of the giant otter, capybara and the nut-cracking capuchin monkeys.

March 5 – Mike Leach: “Owls of the world”. Mike has a passion for Owls - of the 133 species alive today, he has encountered 86. This talk looks at many of these and tells of his adventures working with them around the globe for over 20 years. We meet, among others, Great Horned, Pygmy, Great Grey and Spectacled Owls. And, of course, the largest of them all – the Eagle Owl. Mike has also contributed to David Attenborough’s ‘Life of Birds’ and *Geographical Magazine*.

March 19 – Alan Heath: “Views from a hide”. For those having niggles about basic bird ID and problems with your LBJs, then Alan will lead us through the basic principles of bird identification.

April 2 – Chris Grady: “Birding Down Under”. Having only recently started photography again after a long gap, this talk and the stunning photographs of such wonderful birds as Masked Lapwing, Red-capped Plover and Galah are sure to entice people to the other side of the world.

September 17 – Great Bustard Group: “Onto Salisbury Plain”. After many false

starts, the fruits of this project were realised in 2009 when the first chick since 1832 was born. The talk will be an update on the last few years’ work.

October 1 – Dawn Balmer (BTO): “Bird Atlas 2007-11 provisional findings”. With many members taking part in Atlas work over the past few years and the amazing amount of data recorded over six million records, Dawn will lead us through this information.

October 15 – Mick Bailey: “They’re not as difficult as you think”. Ever wanted to ‘bird without binoculars’? Mick will teach us the basics of birdsong, covering woodland birds and waders that are easy to learn and will be singing at this time of the year.

October 29 – Peter Howells: “Bird observatories of the UK”. As the autumn migration of many birds is well under way, the 20 observatories scattered around the British Isles located on coastal promontories and islands will be on the lookout for rarities that drop in.

November 12 – Paul Bowden: “Birding in the land of the camel”. Seeking somewhere different to bird? Paul’s adventures and run-ins with the authorities in Libya and Oman are not to be missed.

November 26 – WWT: “The Great Crane Project”. Cranes are wonderful iconic birds sadly missing from many of their former wetland haunts in the UK. Slimbridge plays host in this project to Crane School, where chicks are hatched, raised and released into their new home on the Somerset Levels. Around 50 birds are now flying within the UK.

December 10 – Chris Hatch: “Northern wildlife”. As winter will have set in, Chris will take us on trip to the real specialist of winter conditions, with many classic sights to gladden the heart at this time of year.

January 14, 2012 - AGM.

**Ed Hutchings wasted no time in joining GOS when he moved to the county recently. Here, he shares his thoughts on one of his two major passions - and has also written two topical articles about our arguably most loved winter visitor - as well as the other more usual sightings we can enjoy at this time of year.**

I suppose I've always been a bit of a birdwatcher, even on a subconscious level. From early days at boarding school in Suffolk, in whose grounds I regularly collected birds' eggs and nests (an activity now frowned upon and understandably highly illegal) to my days in the wine trade travelling the world and visiting vineyards - where picking up a book on the local avifauna in the airport, to sit alongside my books on wine, was second nature.

As invariably happens with most teenagers, however, watching one type of bird takes a back seat as interest in the other species becomes prominent; as does the need to grow one's hair longer than the school barber would allow, and the acquisition of cheap booze to take to band practice.

The latter was to manifest itself in a more refined form later - as my chosen career as a sommelier in various Michelin-starred restaurants in London and, later, Wales.

There are two types of reaction people give when you tell them you're a sommelier. One is of abject bewilderment - as if you've just announced to them that you've eloped to Gretna Green with their sister - and the other is of silent awe and interest.

For those of you who don't know what a sommelier is, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'a waiter who serves wine'. This merely scrapes the surface of the role and unfortunately word count and the editor's pen won't allow me to go into any further details about it here, suffice to say that the name has its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century France meaning 'butler' and it involves knowing a great deal about wine.

For those of you who enjoy wine, you will be aware that it is a vast and, at times, complex subject. There is a great deal of variety and lots of interesting detail – very much like ornithology – and I think this quality in a subject has always held a very powerful appeal for me. I love details and infinite variety.

There are roughly 5,000 different grape varieties worldwide – plenty to get your head and, most importantly, your palate around. When I left the wine trade last year to pursue a career in conservation, and now teaching, I missed that thirst for constantly acquiring knowledge on my beloved subject. That is, until I rediscovered birds and even *more* variety.

There are estimated to be about 10,000 species of bird worldwide, twice as many as the esoteric '*Vitis vinifera*'. The joy of learning bird songs and calls gives me equal - if not more - pleasure than learning about different varieties of grape varieties, the soils they were grown on, and picking out their particular aromas and characteristics once they were transformed into the glass.

I can now walk through woodland in late spring and it comes alive. I don't need to see the birds. I can enjoy the environment and the ambience of the place based purely on the individual, and chorus, of the bird songs I pick out of the canopy alone.

Once upon a time it was a thrill picking out the Grand Cru Chablis among a dozen Chardonnays. Now it is identifying the Wood Warbler among the throng of other *Phylloscopus* warblers in late April.

Rediscovering birds has been akin to making re-acquaintance with an old friend. I have lived in a cottage overlooking the Wye Valley the past two years, where the roll call of birds has been quite spectacular; not many people can say they've had clear and interrupted views of Goshawks on a daily basis from their garden.

However, when I wasn't birding in the Wye Valley or the Forest of Dean, I was mostly in Gwent. Here, I instantly fell in love with its churches and blessed interior. The diversity of habitats in just one county is seldom found in Britain. From the mountains in the north of the county, to the wetlands in the south, the birder is spoilt for choice.

Having swapped River Wye for River Usk, I now have Llandegfedd Reservoir on my doorstep, which I look forward to getting to know intimately and with the lasting hope that Ospreys may one day nest there.

Choosing my favourite British birds is almost as - if not more - difficult than choosing my favourite wines. With such variety and diversity to choose from, it's not easy. But half a dozen do stand out.

Coming from East Anglia originally, the Buzzard was always a rare sight for me. After moving to the Wye Valley, they were suddenly everywhere and anywhere. The Buzzard is now our most common bird of prey and I never tire of the sight of them, especially on sunny days when they're soaring on the thermals. Their gentle mewing call is as evocative of the Welsh hills as my following bird is of the Essex marshes.

The Lapwing is the unofficial county bird of Essex and the most beautiful of our plovers. The first time I encountered this bird, I heard it before I saw it. I remember thinking how extraordinary the wheezy, drawn-out 'pee-wit' call was - and how it reminded me of someone trying to tune an old fashioned radio very badly.

When I caught sight of the bird, it looked ungainly as it flapped around on its rounded wings. But, in fact, it's very much in control. On landing, its beautiful plumage of black, white and green hues caught the bright winter sunlight effortlessly. And as for that majestic crest - I was smitten.

Sadly, of all my favourite birds, the recent decline of the Lapwing - due to the loss of its favoured breeding farmland - causes me the most concern, and it is now a Red-listed species. Its future lies in the hands of our farmers, whose futures lie in the hands of our politicians - a trend reflected throughout Wales and across Britain.

The Wren has a most unfortunate scientific name, *Troglodytes troglodytes*, for such a beautiful little creature. Few animals, let alone birds, convey such a sense of indomitable spirit and vitality.

The posture and jerky movements suggest constant alertness, the low buzzing flight has an almost insect-like intensity, while the bird's volcanic song generates an aura of energy out of all proportion to its physical size - an astonishingly loud series of phrases with trills and whistles, ending on a flourishing trill.

Unlike most other birds it has no off-season - truly, the only song to be heard any day of the year in Britain - and whatever the season, the impression is of unassailable joy.

The Goldcrest is well known as Britain's smallest bird and, as you would expect for a bird of such diminutive size, it can be infuriatingly difficult to see. It is far easier to detect by ear; listen beneath a yew or ornamental conifer in the garden and you may well hear its thin, penetrating 'si-si-si' call as it feeds high among the branches.

Sit and wait and you may catch a glimpse of this tiny, warbler-like bird as it hovers out to catch a fly or hangs upside down, as agile as a tit, delicately removing insects with its needle-

sharp beak. That such a tiny, entirely insectivorous bird not only survives the British winter, but chooses to migrate here from Scandinavia, is one of nature's wonders.

The Magpie is the classic pantomime villain of the garden. This noisy, brash black and white bird is actually a real beauty, with subtle greens and purples in its plumage that are easiest to see when the sun shines.

I admire the Magpie – apart from beauty, it has a keen intelligence and downright nerve. It's a born survivor and has adapted to live in all habitats. I see it as the avian version of the fox – a cocky, streetwise creature, roaming the urban jungle and scavenging for food.

Last, but by no means least, is the Bullfinch. The male is among the most gorgeous of all small birds – black head, white rump, steely blue wings and a beautiful rose pink breast. Their affection for their owners in captivity and their ability to perfect a tune are unparalleled.

Sadly they are another bird in decline, the Bullfinch's mournful song seeming to echo that fact. Unlike other songbirds, this isn't a territorial song, for the Bullfinch does not defend a territory. The male Bullfinch sings only for his partner and does so in an extraordinarily quiet and discreet manner.

All in all, the Bullfinch is a very odd bird. Although they are classified as a type of finch, ornithologists are still not quite sure where Bullfinches fit in, in relation to the true finches.

Happily, I do know where I sit in relation to most ornithologists. I'm by no means an expert, yet. But I do have an unquenchable thirst for learning more and more about birds.

I'm delighted that Gwent has this dynamic ornithological society, and I'm looking forward to getting more involved and meeting more members - whether it's at one of the highly interesting walks or talks, or among Wentwood Forest scouting for Great Grey Shrikes...

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## The Waxwing

The Waxwing is a curious looking bird but nonetheless beautiful. It is hardly surprising that when Waxwings appear, often in large numbers, they arouse the interest of both the birdwatcher and the man in the street.

The Waxwing is about the size of a Starling, and one of the most striking features of its plumage are the red 'wax-tips' to some of the secondary wing feathers from which the bird takes its name. These are, in fact, modified ends of the feather shaft.

Waxwings nest in the sub arctic birch or pine forests of Scandinavia and the Russian taiga, building a nest of lichen and

## Ed Hutchings

twigs. In most years, the majority of the population winters close to its breeding grounds, while a few migrate to central Europe. However, every few years - and sometimes for several years in succession - they move out en masse to winter throughout Europe; this is known as irruptive behaviour.

The breeding and wintering movements of Waxwings are still not well understood. The reasons for such invasions are thought to be a combination of lack of rowan berries and high numbers of birds.

Rowan berries are the Waxwings' chief winter food and can vary widely in abundance from year to year, a heavy crop very often being followed by a light one.

A good berry harvest results from warm weather in the spring when the trees are in flower, and thus a good breeding season



may be followed by a plentiful supply of winter food. The following year, berries may be scarce but the Waxwing numbers will still be high, and so the birds must move out to find sufficient winter food.

The first Waxwing winter recorded in Britain was as long ago as 1697-98, and

one of the largest recent irruptions was in 1965-66, when more than 11 000 birds were recorded here in two weeks in November.

On arrival, the Waxwings first feed on rowan berries but when these are finished they turn to pyracantha and cotoneaster.

They are extremely tame and can be watched at very close range; in Norfolk, an observed bird ate 390 berries in two and a half hours. Later in the winter, they even come to bird tables where they feed on seeds, bread and apples.

They have also been recorded eating crab apples; these particular birds started at the top of the tree and slowly worked their way down. However, once on the ground they often fell victim to cats - not only because of their inherent tameness, but also because many of them were intoxicated after eating the fermenting fruit.

In spring, after these large invasions, displaying birds have been seen in suitable nesting habitats in Scotland. However, as yet, there has been no definite confirmation of breeding.

- **The beautiful photograph on the left was taken by Keith Roylance at Brynmawr where local birders were treated to views of a wintering flock for several weeks in early December.**

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## Winter birding

Ed Hutchings

Though it might be tempting to stay indoors and wrap the Christmas presents, December really is a time for getting out into the countryside, as birds are often easier to approach now. There are plenty of treats awaiting the intrepid birder.

The last month of the year is a time to prepare for winter – and even when the weather is mild, our wild birds still have to find food. With only seven or eight hours of daylight, they must use every trick in the book to make sure they fulfil their energy requirements. In the case of garden birds, this means doing a circuit of the neighbourhood to find the very best places to feed.



Amazingly, for some birds December sees the start of spring. A spell of mild weather may see Blackbirds or Song Thrushes starting to sing and even build nests. Winter bird flocks are now reaching their peak. So take a walk around a traditional farming area and look out for gatherings of Finches, Buntings and Sparrows feeding on leftover weed seeds.

It's a good month to take a closer look at hedgerows, where berry bushes are often still covered in fruit. They attract flocks of winter thrushes, including Fieldfare and Redwing - incomers from Scandinavia - and also our native Mistle Thrushes, which defend their own particular crop of berries against all comers!

January may seem cold, dark and unpromising; but, in fact, it is an excellent month to get out into the countryside and witness hordes of wintering birds. The first month of the year triggers all sorts of activity in the countryside, and even more so in our towns and cities, where temperatures tend to be a degree or two warmer than their surroundings.

This creates a welcome oasis for many wild birds to take refuge during the cold winter months. Spring and the breeding season may seem a long way away, but birds such as the Wren, Dunnock and Mistle Thrush are already starting to sing.

But for most birds, January is all about survival. So they join together in groups to find food and avoid predators, and try to make it through the lean winter months so that they can breed in the spring.

The urge to find food during the short daylight hours means that many birds are active all day long - a real advantage as they may be easier to approach than at any other time of year.

Listen for birdsong. Robins sing throughout the autumn and winter, but they may be joined by Wrens, Dunnocks, Blackbirds and Mistle and Song Thrushes if the weather is fine. Listen for high-pitched contact calls given by Tit flocks, then try to track them down and check for unusual species such as Coal or Marsh Tits, Nuthatches or Treecreepers.

Take a stroll down the tideline - you'll be amazed at what the sea can wash up. As well as the usual junk from ships, you may find dead seabirds washed ashore after winter storms: Auks such as Guillemots and Razorbills are especially vulnerable, as they spend the winter at sea.

Despite relatively recent exceptionally mild winters, February is traditionally the coldest month of the year in Britain, bringing snow and ice to many parts of the country. So it's a critical month for birds, which need to survive the winter so they can breed in the spring.

A run of unusually mild winters, with temperatures in February sometimes more like what you would expect in April - especially in southern Britain - means that spring appears to be starting a month or so earlier than it used to.

Whatever the weather, February is an excellent month to see large groups of waders and wildfowl, which gather in spectacular flocks on our coastal estuaries and marshes. They come here because even in a hard winter they can find food.

Wintering Chiffchaffs may start to sing on fine, sunny days. This little warbler used to head south for the winter, but nowadays often stays here all year round. It gets its name from its repetitive two-note song.

So wrap up warm, head outside and enjoy the best of winter birding.

It was January 1969, and it had been another rather quiet day at Kenfig Pool where - due to earlier disturbance, no doubt - most birds had flown over to the neighbouring Eglwys Nunydd Reservoir.

I bumped into Phil Llewellyn, another keen birder I had previously met on a few occasions; only on this particular day, with time to spare and due to heavy rain, we sank a few pints in the Prince of Wales.

The conversation quickly turned to the birds we had - and had not - seen during those early years, and the vague idea of a 'grand trip' took place. Publican Jack David loaned us his atlas, and we drew up a list of birds we hadn't seen, the wished-for trip quickly emerging.

But this particular plan was different, and due to some strange alchemy, it actually happened. We were very keen, young and unattached. I had a two-week holiday due that July, when Phil was also off college.

Our plan for the first week was to drive up to Scotland, staying the first night at St Bees Head for sea birds, including Black Guillemot. The next day we would go up to Aviemore and the Cairngorms for the Scottish specialities.

The second week would consist of a day's drive down to Cley and on to Minsmere for a few days, completing the trip with the last night at Slimbridge and the final day at the New Grounds, with a visit to the Newent Bird of Prey Centre.

We would do the trip on the cheap, sleeping in remote locations (no ground rent). As a former boy scout, I had the camping gear - including a two-man pup tent, ground sheet, primus stove - and a spare sleeping bag for Phil. We had Phil's car, spare clothes, several tins of food we scrounged from our mothers, binoculars, enough beer money, and would split the cost of petrol.

Having completed my last shift on a surgical ward at Bridgend General Hospital on July 25, 1969, Phil picked me up at 14.15 and we were off. We arrived at St Bees after a long journey, but rather late for any birding. We were up early the next morning for the sea bird city, but sadly dipped on Black Guillemot. Unknown to us at the time, at St Bees the Black Guillemots tend to hide close to the base of the cliffs, and were located a little to the south of our route.

Driving from Cumbria, we didn't quite get to Aviemore that night but managed to reach Kingussie. In the pub that evening, we entered into conversation with a local birder. Phil was keen to see Peregrine; we were informed of a particular site, and filed the information for later in the week.

Reaching Aviemore early the next morning, we headed straight for the Ospreys. While walking to Loch Garten, we added numerous Crested Tits to our list, and then spent several hours with the Ospreys. At the centre, I bought several of the grey coloured RSPB *The Bird Watcher's Field Note Book*, which I used during the trip - and still have to help write up this account.

The following morning we both encounter our first ever Red Squirrel, raiding food from a waste paper basket! We had another lifer that morning when we heard a 'pop', and investigating, we put up a female Capercaillie. Later in the day we took the cable car to the

summit of Cairngorm and walked south into the mountains where we added Mountain Hare, numerous Ptarmigan, and spending a very cold night on the banks of Loch Avon.

The following day we reached the summit of Ben Macdui where we added Reindeer and nesting Dotterel to the list, and spent a much warmer night in a sheltered hollow. While eating dinner the evening of 28<sup>th</sup> before bed, a Golden Eagle flew in, circled and then dropped into roost just opposite our valley. We slept in very good company that particular night.

The next morning, we returned to Aviemore and spent most of the day around the Loch Garten area, including the River Spey, hoping for fishing Osprey. The following day, while walking to the Peregrine site, we passed a Buzzard at nest in a wood just opposite.

While sitting quietly admiring the Peregrines, a juvenile Golden Eagle flew over and came a little too close for the Peregrines' comfort. A Peregrine adult flew up to give chase, with the result that both birds tumbled towards the wood - and up came a Buzzard. For a short time, we had the spectacle of a 'dog fight' between Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Buzzard.

Our drive south for the second week was rather quiet, but we had a short break south of Dalwhinnie, where we added Scottish Crossbill to our ever expanding life list.

We left Scotland very early for the long drive back on August 1, and arrived at Cley with enough light for a quick look at the marshes. We were eventually joined by a rather different looking birder than we were used to. He arrived on a powerful looking motorbike, dressed in leathers, with a pair of binoculars and the largest collection of enamel bird badges on his chest we had ever seen.

It was Richard Richardson, bird artist, author - and a remarkable chap by any standards. Peter Scott in 1952 exclaimed: "Clearly, a new bird painter of great skill has entered the field." We chatted and walked on together, and while looking out to sea, Richard commented "Hello - a Ruff coming in."

Bins up - but we saw nothing. Eventually, with location instructions, a speck appeared. It was flying; yes, a bird. Closer; it could be a wader? Closer still; yes, definitely a wader. And then - yes, a Ruff! This guy was good, and very helpful to a pair of young birders. He advised us where the best places for viewing were, and even found us a rather comfortable barn for the night.

We spent the next four days at Minsmere, pitching a little away from the reserve among the dunes. We understood the public hide at the scrape was free, so spent a lot of time there. The first noticeable bird was a Flamingo, and we were informed a Chilean, probably an escape.

We had just missed a Caspian Tern by minutes, but lifers then appeared thick and fast, including Avocets, Bearded Tits, Marsh Harriers, Sandwich and Little Terns. At one time, the door burst open and an agitated birder shouted: "Quick! Outside now - a Common Buzzard!" Everybody rushed out, while a rather bemused pair of Welsh birders remained behind, wondering what all the fuss was about.

On one particularly full day at Minsmere, Phil and I arrived at the south hide and found Eric Hoskins sitting there, busy with his camera. We had both read his book, *An Eye for a Bird*, and spent several minutes talking.

We had another fortuitous encounter later that day. While sitting in the tree hide looking at a Bittern - which was another lifer - Bert Axel turned up on his rounds, and asked what we were doing there, as the reserve had closed 90 minutes before.

We had lost all track of time. Having described the nature of our trip, he no doubt noticed how keen we were and asked what we had not seen that day. Red-backed Shrike, Nightingale and Stone Curlew, we said. "Come with me," Bert replied. An hour later, he had added Red-backed Shrike and Nightingale to our list. But, sadly, not the Stone Curlew.

As compensation he told us where and when to wait on Westleton Heath, where I was able to add another lifer to the list - a Nightjar. A great thrill that, and this has always been one of my favourite birds. I still vividly remember a group of us standing there mesmerised, while a pair of Nightjars flew around us several times before flying off into the gloom.

On another day we ventured further to Walberswick Marsh and Heath, where I added several more lifers including Red-legged Partridge, Turtle Dove, Little Gull and Cirl Bunting. On the final day, we had a quick last look at the scrape and drove down to Slimbridge, where we visited Frampton Gravel Pits. We spent our final night under canvas in a field next to a public house.

The final morning was spent at the Wildfowl Trust - my first visit there - and I had my final lifer of the trip, a Collared Dove. As Phil was very keen on raptors, we spent the afternoon at the Newent Bird of Prey Centre before retuning home. Although several birds were added while at Newent, unfortunately these didn't count.

A very memorable two weeks' holiday, where Phil and I both managed to add over 24 lifers.

## ***Return to Scotland***

**Keith Jones**

Although I began bird watching in 1963, I had only been birding in Scotland on that occasion in 1969. As you know, I gained several lifers on that particular trip, but dipped on Twite. Fast forward 41 years, and I remained Twiteless.

My wife and I thought a visit long overdue. So we read the information, contacted former Gwent Wildlife Trust Chief Executive Julian Branscombe for advice and quickly agreed to try mainland Orkney - where Julian now lives and works.

We located a great sounding Guest House (Castlehill) situated to the north of the island on the RSPB reserve of Burgar Hill. Both Hen Harriers and Short-eared Owls are seen daily, and the house was just 300 metres south west of Lowrie Water, with its nesting Red-throated Diver.

Our plan was to fly up to Inverness from Bristol on June 3, 2010, pick up a rental

car, and drive up to Strathy to spend the night there. We then took the Scrabster/Stromness Ferry to Orkney.

We spent four nights on Burgar Hill before catching the return ferry, followed by a long drive down the east coast of Scotland, spending the last night at Inverness before flying back to Bristol on June 9. We decided on a flexible itinerary while on the island, birding in the morning and the usual tourist sightseeing in the afternoon.

### ***Day One***

After an early start from Strathy, we drove to Dunnet Head before our ferry, but had only rather distant views of the usual auks.

The ferry over to Orkney gave me the opportunity for a sea watch, listing: Gannet, Manx Shearwater, Storm Petrel, Fulmar, Cormorant, Shag, Eider, Puffin, Razorbill, Guillemot, Black Guillemot,

Kittiwake, Comic Terns, Arctic and Great Skuas. Driving around Orkney was very quiet, like the British mainland in the 1950s. Also of note while driving were territorial Oystercatchers on most posts we passed, and large numbers of Common Gulls in almost every field.

### **Day Two**

Early morning up to the Loch Lowrie Water, hoping to see Twite from the car, but a few likely candidates flew off before we could confirm. From the hide at the loch we had about 200 or so Greylag Geese, Red-breasted Mergansers, two Red-throated Diver - including one on the nest - and a Short-eared Owl.

We had been advised that the largest concentration of Twite was on the RSPB reserve of Hobbister. We spent two hours there with little to show at first but lots of LBJs, (Meadow Pipits). Then we heard 'tweet' and three LBJs dropped in close on a fence. Bins up - short stubby straw coloured bill, a distinct pink rump on one of the birds – Twite, a lifer!

Arriving at the coast with the rest of the reserve off limits, we had to return. A quick look at the sea produced a single Great Skua flying towards the shore. It seemed to be flying towards us, and the next few moments produced one of those unforgettable birding experiences.

Through binoculars, we watched it come closer. And just as I thought to refocus, I panicked, and lowered my bins. At that moment, it dived straight at me, and I just managed to duck out of the way. Although it didn't hit me, it came too close for comfort. As luck would have it, it flew off at once inland with no further swoops. Why this single attack, I do not know, as I assumed we were nowhere near its nest site.

### **Day Three**

Leaving Gill in bed, I got up just before first light and walked towards Lowrie Water. On the way up I was entertained by several hares, and there were several

Twite around. Returning for breakfast, we enjoyed views of Hen Harriers and Short-eared Owl, seen through the window while tucking into a Full English. That's what I call birding!

That morning, we also visited the small tidal island Brough of Birsay and had fine close views of the Puffins. Then on to Loch of Banks, the premier wetlands on the Orkney mainland, but disappointingly saw just the same species as on our own wetlands.

### **Day Four**

Our last full day on Orkney - breakfast with male Hen Harrier for company, and a drive down to the south of the island to visit the island of South Ronaldsay via Lamb Holm and Burray. The islands are connected, by a series of causeways known as Churchill's Barriers, built during the Second World War by Italian Prisoners of War.

Scapa Flow we found impressive - not only for the rather fine views or the numerous rotting hulks of the German Fleet scuttled after the end of the Great War, but also the bird watching was rather good. Black Guillemots seemed frequent nesters among the boulders of the causeways.

Driving towards Burray, I noticed several terns on the shoreline, but I had to get closer. Walking towards the beach one way, I had to return after being attacked by Arctic Terns. Relocating, we viewed from the south and managed to get fairly close, with a Little Tern and two Roseate Terns side-by-side, and Arctic Terns just for comparison.

### **Day Six**

Breakfast with a Short-eared Owl, and a final look at the Red-throated Divers at Lowrie Water before driving to the ferry. Leaving the harbour, a single Black Guillemot seemed to bid us goodbye. Another sea watch was more or less a repeat of the previous crossing, and – sadly - nothing of note while returning to Inverness and home the following day.

**SIGHTINGS, SEPTEMBER 2010****HIGHLIGHTS**

A Lesser Yellowlegs was present at the Newport Wetlands Reserve (28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>), as was a Grey Phalarope (30<sup>th</sup>).

**Newport Wetlands Reserve**

Wader sightings included 17-plus Curlew Sandpipers (5<sup>th</sup>) and 45 Avocets (22<sup>nd</sup>), while offshore sightings included two Manx Shearwaters and a Great Skua (all 11<sup>th</sup>), an Arctic Skua (19<sup>th</sup>) and four Common Scoters (30<sup>th</sup>). A ring-tailed Hen Harrier was reported (30<sup>th</sup>) and a female Marsh Harrier was also present (21<sup>st</sup>). Other sightings of note included a juvenile Garganey (11<sup>th</sup>) and 62 Little Egrets (29<sup>th</sup>).

**Other sites**

Two Black Terns were reported from Llandegfedd Reservoir (3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>). A Lesser-spotted Woodpecker was recorded at Pontypool (3<sup>rd</sup>). Mediterranean Gulls were seen at Sudbrook (8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup>), while a Little Gull was seen at Peterstone Gout (17<sup>th</sup>). A Guillemot was reported from Peterstone Wentlooge (14<sup>th</sup>). A Barn Owl was recorded at Llanddewi Skirrid (7<sup>th</sup>). Raptor sightings included a ring-tailed Hen Harrier on the Bloreng (16<sup>th</sup>) and Red Kites at Brynmawr (2<sup>nd</sup>), Gilwern (11<sup>th</sup>), Usk (12<sup>th</sup>) and Bassaleg (26<sup>th</sup>).

**OCTOBER****HIGHLIGHTS**

Two Spoonbills were seen at Peterstone Gout (2<sup>nd</sup>). Single Richard's Pipits were reported from Peterstone Gout and Newport Wetlands (both on 8<sup>th</sup>). A Lapland Bunting was recorded at Newport Wetlands (10<sup>th</sup>). Up to 10 Ring Ouzels were seen at Pwlldu (from 17<sup>th</sup>). A Grey Phalarope was present at Newport Wetlands (28<sup>th</sup>).

**Newport Wetlands Reserve**

An Osprey was recorded (2<sup>nd</sup>) as was a female Hen Harrier. Other sightings included Short-eared Owl (3<sup>rd</sup>), and a White-fronted Goose (12<sup>th</sup>).

**Other sites**

Ospreys were reported from Sudbrook (2<sup>nd</sup>) and Gobion (6<sup>th</sup>). Other raptor reports included a female Hen Harrier at Garnlydan Reservoir (1<sup>st</sup>), Barn Owls at Tredegar (22<sup>nd</sup>) and Magor (30<sup>th</sup>), a Short-eared Owl at Peterstone (23<sup>rd</sup>) and Red Kites at Brynmawr (10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>), Marshfield (10<sup>th</sup>), Cwmyoy (15<sup>th</sup>) and Tredegar (22<sup>nd</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>).

Observers in the Peterstone area reported a Little Stint (9<sup>th</sup>), a Bearded Tit (17<sup>th</sup>), a Curlew Sandpiper (19<sup>th</sup>) and two Water Pipits (28<sup>th</sup>). Gull sightings included a Yellow-legged Gull at Ynysfro Reservoir (4<sup>th</sup>) and a Mediterranean Gull at Caerleon (24<sup>th</sup>).

# NOVEMBER

## HIGHLIGHTS

Flocks of up to 30 Waxwings were reported from a number of locations including Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, Pontypool, the Pontllanfraith/ Aberbargoed area and Newport. A Black-throated Diver was reported from the Newport Wetlands Reserve (7<sup>th</sup>), with a Black Redstart also seen at this location (14<sup>th</sup>).

### Newport Wetlands Reserve

Sightings of note included a ring-tailed Hen Harrier (21st and 22nd), a Short-eared Owl (22<sup>nd</sup>) and a Spotted Redshank and two Avocets (all 14<sup>th</sup>).

### Other sites

Large flocks of Woodpigeons were reported from a number of locations, with the largest numbers being recorded at Peterstone Gout (27,000-plus on the 7<sup>th</sup>) and Pontypool (24,000-plus on the 7<sup>th</sup>).

Jack Snipe were recorded from Peterstone Gout (2<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>) and Brynmawr (13<sup>th</sup>). A Little Gull was seen at Black Rock (19<sup>th</sup>) and a Mediterranean Gull was reported from Caerleon (26<sup>th</sup>). Three Scaup were present at Peterstone Gout (1<sup>st</sup>), with a single bird at Bryn Bach Park (14<sup>th</sup>).

Bramblings were reported from a number of locations, while a possible Siberian Chiffchaff was ringed at Peterstone Gout (14<sup>th</sup>). A Barn Owl was reported from Oakdale (27<sup>th</sup>), while raptor sightings included single Goshawks near Trellech (9<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>), a Merlin at Peterstone Gout (26<sup>th</sup>) and Red Kites at Garn-yr-Erw (single on 3<sup>rd</sup>; pair on 13<sup>th</sup>), Usk (6<sup>th</sup>), Brynmawr (13<sup>th</sup>) and Abergavenny (28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>).

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## Newport Wetlands

Tom Dalrymple

### SEPTEMBER 2010

#### Birds

Black-tailed Godwit and Shoveler are the two species of waterfowl that the reserve needs to attract in nationally important numbers. BTG numbers are about twice the national threshold of 150 and the Shoveler number reached 200 - 52 above the national threshold. A total of 22 Bearded Tit were seen in the reedbed on September 25.

Other notable bird sightings include: 55 Bar-tailed Godwits and a Black Tern on the 11<sup>th</sup> and a Nightjar seen near the Saline Lagoons on September 2.

#### Management

The main management issue this month has been trying to get water on the wet grasslands. We managed to achieve target water levels in one hydrological unit by taking water from all the others. This will hopefully support the bird interest until the rains come.

Contractors did something that I wouldn't have believed possible this month; they used standard agricultural machinery to cut and bail a trial area of the reedbed. Water levels below reedbed bed level, and 10 years of reed rhizome growth prevented the four-ton machines from sinking out of site into three metres of liquid fuel ash!

This revelation may save the reserve significant amounts of money in future years.

The Abergavenny team, assisted by Newport Wetlands volunteers, carried out a hay cut of all the path edges around the reedbeds. These flower-rich verges are important nectar and pollen sources for nationally scarce Shril Carder Bees. Hay cutting late in the season should help maintain the flowering species the bees rely on.

We were glad to welcome Jean Needham on to our Thursday volunteer team. This month, the volunteers have been doing a lot of footpath maintenance as well as replacing some reed screens, and Sheila has been carrying out the butterfly transect.

Bryn and Ritchie have been doing some fox fence maintenance, as well as clearing

some of the grasslands islands of willows. These trees act as perches for Crows that predate wader chicks. Ritchie has laid the base for our biodiesel tank, so we look forward to reducing fossil fuel use still further.

CCW's Karen Wilkinson and Andrew Lucas carried out a saltmarsh survey this month. The last in-depth survey was done before the reserve began, so the comparison will be a useful indication of the effect of the grazing regime under CCW's ownership.

### **Events & visits**

Kevin, assisted by volunteers Chris Hurn, Keith Thomas, John Bennett and Sheila Dupé, gave a guided walk to look at migratory waders on the saline lagoons on September 11. Kevin gave a talk about the reserve to Gwent Wildlife Trust's Monmouth group on September 20.

## **OCTOBER**

### **Birds**

The wintering wildfowl numbers are slightly down on the previous two years - the Wigeon flock is just over 500 at the moment, compared with about 600 for the previous years.

Notable bird sightings include: American Green-winged Teal on the lagoons on the 31<sup>st</sup>, the Grey Phalarope, a Red Kite seen passing through on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and a female Hen Harrier and an Osprey seen over the reedbeds on October 2.

### **Management**

Lack of water continues to be the main issue this month, with no significant increase in water levels since September. The lower water levels and the comparatively mild weather have meant that the grass is continuing to grow as November approaches. For this reason, I have left stock grazing on most of the reserve.

Caldicot and Wentlooge Internal Drainage Board carried out over 1700m of hedge trimming for us this month. The IDB has also replaced a decaying stank in the wet grasslands with a new drop board sluice. This will give us better water level control and should last for many decades to come.

Bryn and Ritchie have both passed their tractor driving course; this should greatly increase the range and scale of the tasks they had previously been able to undertake. Apart from training, they have spent most of the month repairing things: reed screens, fencing and several items of machinery.



The volunteer team has had a particularly arduous month, removing rocks from the hay field at Uskmouth so that it can be cut with a tractor-mounted mower next summer.

Haf Leyshon, our Welsh speaking post-graduate placement, completed a sward survey of the grasslands this month.

### **Events & visits**

Renowned photographer David Woodfall came to the reserve to photograph Wigeon on October 19.

I gave a guided walk for the Wales Environment Link, which was using the visitor centre for its meeting on October 11. On the same day, Kevin showed around local community workers as part of CCW's 'Go Outside' initiative. In the afternoon, Kev and Haf gave a guided walk for Cardiff University students.

Kevin gave a presentation to the Caerleon Probus group on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and I gave a talk to GOS members on the October 2.

## **NOVEMBER**

### **Birds**

By the end of the month, the cold weather had arrived, freezing the grassland pools and flashes. A high tide count on the 14<sup>th</sup> before the freezing weather revealed 1,546 Wigeon. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, when a second high tide count was done, the number had dropped to 549, of which about 500 were found on the Severn foreshore.

Other wildfowl numbers had also dropped, with only a small area of field block three and the reedbed lagoons providing open water for the ducks.

The cold weather has increased the Lapwing and Starling flocks, which were about 1,400 and 30,000 respectively by the end of the month. Two Brent Geese were seen between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>.

### **Management**

Caldicot and Wentlodge IDB has begun the final part of its three-year project working with RSPB and funded by Biffaward. The project involves removing overgrown hedgerows from the south side of many of the reserve's ditches that are a SSSI feature in their own right. The increased light into the ditch encourages

the growth of aquatic and emergent vegetation, which in turn helps support the aquatic invertebrates.

Bryn and Ritchie have been doing a lot of brash clearing and fence repair this month. In addition, they have both qualified as first aiders at work.

The volunteer team has completed another unpleasant task - removing 80 tyres from one of the reserve ditches after fly tippers had dumped them there.

### **Events & visits**

I gave a talk to the Welsh Ornithological Society on November 6, while David Woodfall was at the reserve to take photographs on the same day.

Volunteer Keith Thomas assisted Gareth Beynon from Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd with a guided walk of the reserve conducted in the Welsh language on the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Biodiversity officers Becky Davies and Catrin Grimstead from the Environment Agency were given a tour around the Biffaward project on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

We are now well into the final winter survey period for the BTO Atlas, so I thought I'd give an update on how everything is progressing.

A few dedicated surveyors have chosen to take on additional TTVs (Timed Tetrad Visits), and I hope everyone else will be busy trying to track down some of the more elusive species for their 10km square - Waxwing is obviously a possibility this winter, with large numbers in the country.

Keep a look out for them, particularly when you are in urban or suburban areas, where there are berrying trees and shrubs. I have recently been able to add some new species to SO31 (Green Sandpiper at Llanellen, and Goshawk on the Skirrid Fach) and to SO30 (Sky Lark at Gobion).

I have also been looking through the summary features on the Atlas website, and there is a new feature on the homepage – 'Where are the gaps?' An assessment (based on species recorded in previous surveys, and on current records in adjacent squares) suggests that in SO30 and ST39, there are still a 'significant' number of species yet to be recorded.

The remainder of our 10km squares have near complete coverage, but are likely to still have a handful of new species to find. In SO30, a total of 71 species have been recorded in the winter season - but with an estimated 25% still to find - and in ST39, 94 species have been recorded, and 10% still to find.

Any additional help that can be given in these two squares would be appreciated. Other parts of the website will inform you which species have, and which haven't, been recorded in these squares so far - the species lists can be printed for future reference.

Finally, if you know of - or discover - a record (either in a GOS Annual Report or on the GOS website) of a species that has not yet been recorded in any 10km square for the Atlas, please let me know. We have now worked out a way to incorporate these records into the Atlas, thus making the final version as complete and definitive as possible. Please get back to me if you have any queries - [jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk](mailto:jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk) or phone 01873 855091.

## **Llandegfedd Reservoir news**

**Keith Roylance**

*Richard Poole, Site Controller ECAR South East, has sent us the following information regarding the feeding location at Llandegfedd Reservoir.*

**Just a quick note to let you know that the feeding station is up and running again!  
We've just put a mix of seed and peanut feeders up for now.**

**We will be making a few improvements to it over the winter by removing the bulk of the material at the rear and replacing with shiplap boards to improve conditions inside the hide, laying the trees at the far edge of the feeding station and changing the way the feeders are hung to reduce the impact of squirrels.**

*We wish to thank Richard and his team for the improvements they have made this year to the site and look forward to further improvements as time progresses.*

Did you read Trevor's article on 'situations vacant'? If not, please have a quick look now. The long and the short of it is that the time has now come to inject some new blood into the aging committee.

Some of the old guard who have served the Society above and beyond the call of duty for many years now wish to hang up their pens and calculators. While Trevor has been quite correct in what he says in the article, these are the job requirements as I see them:-

**Treasurer:** must be able to add up and occasionally subtract. **Secretary:** must be able to read and write **Vice Chairman:** must be able to remember what the last chairman did. Plus, for all of them, – must want to contribute to the smooth running of the Society

There you are then, how easy is that? You may say, of course, that the Vice Chairman's position should lead to that of Chairman in the natural course of events. However, there are again no difficult skills required here either, apart from, perhaps, listening to our speakers so you can summarise them and timekeeping to keep committee meetings short and sweet.

You may have noticed that none of the job descriptions require an in depth knowledge of ornithology – thankfully in my case. I know that there are members more than capable of filling these posts so if you feel you can help or better still can suggest any members who are too reserved to nominate themselves then give one of us the whisper.

Good news at last on the website front – we're finally there. Hopefully, you will find it worthwhile and use it enough for you to tell us at the AGM how it can be improved further.

Well that's it from me except of course to wish you all a very happy Christmas!

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