

# THE DIPPER



## THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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**Newsletter No. 120 September 2011**

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### COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

**Trevor Russell**

The November meeting was pleased to elect **Lesley Watson** as a co-opted Committee member (and not simply because she turned up to a *second* meeting as an Observer!) and we look forward to her being confirmed as a permanent committee member at the next AGM.

The winter seed crop that had been sown in front of **Goytre House Wood** failed! A victim of the hot, dry Spring, it struggled whilst the weed, Redshank, flourished and smothered it. This, apparently, was a common phenomenon throughout the UK where these conditions prevailed. A case of 'Better Luck Next Year' - provided the grant money remains available.

Unbelievably, nine months after the project to build a gravel bank at **Blaen y Cwm Reservoir** was approved to encourage the breeding of Little Ringed Plovers last Spring, Welsh Water is *still* holding on to the money for the

project which prevents the start of the construction work. It has something to do with bureaucratic tangles between Welsh Water and Environment Wales. No prizes for guessing that the next excuse will be “delayed due to bad weather”! We can only hope that someone somewhere in the system will soon realise that it’s the LRP’s which will lose out – and any work to be done will need to start soon to ensure that there *will* be a gravel bank in place for the *next* breeding season.

Conditions of the hides and footpaths at **Llandegfedd Reservoir** continue to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance. Perversely, this has only occurred since they started making an annual charge for birding access. What is going on inside Welsh Water?

Some Good News! **Annual Report** Editor, John Coleman, has completed his first edition and the 2010 volume has been sent to the printers. We hope to distribute it at the forthcoming Indoor meetings. Well done, John!

**Our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year in 2013** pre-occupied the committee’s thoughts; Andrew Baker still wants details of your favourite birding sites for inclusion in the forthcoming “**Where To Watch Birds in Gwent**” in time for publication by 2013.

We are also planning to hold a joint **GOS/WOS Conference** in November 2013 to commemorate the anniversary and we are looking for a suitably prestigious venue. **Any ideas?** We will need a lecture theatre/hall to seat up to 150 people with catering facilities nearby together with adequate parking. For more details and any suggestions, please contact Al Venables on 02920 756697 or Trevor Russell on 01600 716266.

**Website** requirements were discussed because it is recognised that it can be improved. The website sub-committee is open to receive **your suggestions for improvement**, so please get in touch with Dave Brassey, Verity Picken or Rob Parsons, whose contact details appear elsewhere in this edition.

## **GARDEN BIRDWATCH**

**Mick Bailey**

I was delighted to read Keith Jones’ “A personal perception of the Big Garden Watch” in the last Dipper. (He has been kind enough to warn me that all references to RSPB were meant to be BTO, whose scheme is called Garden BirdWatch (GBW). In the past, I have shared many of his misgivings about GBW. I am grateful for this opportunity to answer some of the points he raised – and to have an excuse to put in a plug for GBW with my ambassador’s hat on!

First, let me clarify the RSPB/BTO issue. The RSPB has been running its Big Garden Watch for over 30 years. In this you count birds in your garden for one hour on a specified weekend (usually in January). Over half a million people take part. This is a terrific way to get more people to take an interest in birds, but it only tells you about one winter’s day, whose weather, and hence the

bird count, may not be representative of the whole month. I must confess that when the BTO introduced its GBW in 1995, I thought they were merely trying to capture some armchair birders in the hope that some of them would graduate to the more “serious” stuff like the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) and Atlas. But no, it appears they saw a genuine need to monitor birds in gardens *throughout the year*. With the loss of many hedgerows and over-wintering stubbles on farmland, gardens have become an increasingly important habitat, especially as more people are putting out food.

Now I want to address Keith’s worries. First, a general point; there is no way the BTO could afford to pay professional staff, even if they could find enough of them, to make all the field observations that are necessary for their population surveys to be statistically significant. Similarly, it is wholly impracticable to vet the competence of volunteer observers; and BTO instructions bear this in mind. It is thus very important that they are followed.

For example, GBW participants are instructed to count the highest number of each species present at the same time in their garden. This is because there is usually no way of knowing whether birds seen on different occasions are the same or different individuals.

OK, you can distinguish a male blackbird from a female, but you cannot distinguish one male (or female) from another. And, of course, both sexes of many species (e.g. Blue Tit) look alike. Participants are asked to be consistent in other ways, too: time spent each week and the area covered.

They choose an amount of time that is convenient for them to maintain from week to week. Paul, the BTO’s Press Officer, does GBW with his daughter for half an hour on Sunday mornings. She was only seven when they started, so half an hour suited her attention span and he was only available on that day. At the other end of the spectrum, retired codgers like me tend not to time themselves or to devote any period to solid observing, but intermittently look out on the garden while doing other things in the house. I do not report on weeks when I am away for more than three days. Of course, if you choose to spend a short time on the GBW, it doesn’t stop you watching for longer out of personal interest or for reporting to GOS or BirdTrack.

When you join GBW you complete a questionnaire about your garden and nearby features. You also state what proportion of the garden you will observe for GBW. Obviously some areas are not visible from the windows or, in the case of very large gardens, too distant or hidden by bushes and trees. It is important to decide from the start what area to include – and to stick to it. Don’t stretch a point when an osprey perches on your roof! One thing that you *can* vary from week to week is food and water. This is because the GBW questionnaire asks you about it every week.

Statistics is a funny old subject. It would be nice to think that the BTO wanted the most detailed and accurate data possible about my garden. But no! It doesn’t matter that my counts represent only 20% (say) of the Blue Tits and only half the nuthatches that use it. All they want from me is counts made on a

consistent basis, warts and all, throughout the year. Some people will detect a higher proportion than I do, others a lower, but, with thousands of participants, these things tend to even themselves out. This is a scheme for all, not just “experts” or those with lots of spare time. And, as Keith pointed out, you will be surprised at the bird behaviour that you notice for the first time. Never say “it’s only a garden bird”!

To get involved with GBW, visit [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw); phone the BTO on 01842 750050; or contact me at [mick@mickbailey.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:mick@mickbailey.fsnet.co.uk) or on 01633 869580. And please let me know of any groups that might welcome an illustrated talk.

### **“Footprints on the Sands of Time”**

**Keith Jones**

Colonel Harry Morrey Salmon CBE. MC. DL. DSc (1891 – 1985) must need no introduction to most members of the Gwent Ornithological Society. Claimed to be the ‘Welsh Ornithologist of the Century’ and ‘Father of British Bird Photography’, it was he, alongside Geoffrey Ingram who wrote ‘The Birds of Monmouthshire’ back in 1939. This was the forerunner of our own publications in 1977 and 2008. Their other publications include: The Birds of Glamorgan (1925), Pembrokeshire (1949), Carmarthenshire (1954), Radnorshire (1955), and Cardiganshire (1966). Colonel Salmon’s two sons, Norman and Hugh, have recently written and published ‘Footprints on The Sands of Time: The Life of Colonel Harry Morrey Salmon CBE, MC, DL, DSc. Eminent Welsh Naturalist, Conservationist, Ornithologist, Bird Photographer, and Solider’. Although copies can be obtained at the National Museum of Wales shop, GOS also has several copies available on a sale or return basis priced at £10.50, (paperback 166 pages with 77 illustrations). Recently in Natur Cymru David Saunders wrote: ‘...a really great man, well remembered in this biography.’

On a personal matter, I was fortunate enough to meet Colonel Salmon on a few occasions. The first time was in 1963 on a birding visit to Kenfig Pool, and very sprightly I thought him, given his age. Seeing us three young lads with binoculars, David Eynon, Bill Simpson, and myself, he jumped off a metre sand bank to introduce himself, and he must have been the best part of 75 or so at the time. We met him again soon after at a Cardiff Naturalists’ Society bash at the National Museum in Cardiff. Again recognising us, he made the first move. I also recall meeting him later at Kenfig, birding with Amy Heathcote, and had the good fortune of joining them birding for several hours on that occasion. In addition I also phoned him several times to ask his advice on birding matters. He always seemed genuinely interested in us and went out of his way to involve young birders in conversation. I guess he knew we were the future. Copies of the book are available from the GOS librarian.

## A DEAFENING SILENCE

Ray Armstrong

My home area is the Trellech Plateau, which is from 215m rising to 311m above sea level at its eastern edge, over-looking the Wye Valley. It consists of mixed farmland and Forestry Commission woodland which hide pockets of a variety of habitats. Owing to its natural topography it tends to have a micro-climate of its own. Temperature swings can be large and, being at the mercy of winds from all directions, conditions can be quite hostile for small passerines.

Cold springs exacerbate these conditions and when they occur, some of the 'local' residents probably seek a more benign environment at lower altitudes. Incoming summer migrants perhaps respond likewise. These changing weather patterns mean that many species are finding that their breeding cycle is either becoming out of synch with the emergence of their main food source, caterpillars. Certainly, the cold springs have resulted in a greater proportion of breeding failures and broods seem to have become smaller, with the parents more hard-pressed – the sight of my local Great Tits feeding their young on bumble bees has become a familiar sight.

When 'Time to Stare', my personal overview of 25 years of watching wildlife on the Trellech Plateau, was published in 2005 I expressed concern about the past decline and worsening long-term survival prospects of some of the birds of the area. Though concerned, in my worst dreams I never foresaw the dramatic decline that has occurred in the five years since that book was published. In walks around the Trellech area in 2009 and again this year, the lack of birdsong was so frightening that it made me reflect on what it must be like to lose your hearing - the silence seemed deafening.

Many of the species that I highlighted in my book as in decline, like Grey Partridge, Little Owl, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Lesser Whitethroat, Pied Flycatcher, Redstart, Reed Bunting, Spotted Flycatcher, Turtle Dove, Whinchat, Willow Tit, Tree Sparrow and Yellow Wagtail now appear to be absent altogether from this area. They have gone; we appear to have lost thirteen species locally, in less than a decade.

Ten more species - Cuckoo, Curlew, Green Woodpecker, Kestrel, Lapwing, Swift, Skylark, Wood Warbler and Yellowhammer - appear on the brink of disappearing in the area, while a further nineteen species - Bullfinch, Chaffinch, Common Chiffchaff, Whitethroat, Starling, Crossbill, Dunnock, Garden Warbler, Goldcrest, Greenfinch, House Martin, House Sparrow, Lesser Redpoll, Linnet, Mistle Thrush, Swallow, Siskin, Tree Pipit and Willow Warbler - have also suffered significant losses locally. I know of course that Crossbill and, to an extent, Siskin are irruptive species, but they do not appear anything like as frequently as in years gone by. Sometimes I think that the only birds thriving are Carrion Crow, Magpie and Jay - their numbers have increased.

The virtual loss of the lapwing is particularly poignant; it was the iconic farmland bird on the plateau and one of the most evocative signs of spring over farmland was the rolling, tumbling aerial display of a singing male lapwing. This year, I am aware of only two pairs in the area whereas thirty years ago they were common birds. We also appear to have finally lost the

Turtle Dove. This area was its last tenuous foothold in Wales, its presence each spring announced by its soft purring song.

There have been a few successes. For example, following heath restoration work by the Forestry Commission, there have been some significant pluses in recent years. We have had the first recorded breeding of Wood Lark in Wales for twenty five years and the first recorded breeding of Stonechats in this area for at least thirty years. The re-creation of these heathland areas will also help to sustain a fairly stable population in the district of the secret, mysterious and crepuscular Nightjar.

On the debit side, the reductions in the numbers of hirundines and Swift are particularly dramatic. Ten years ago on a warm summer evening it was possible to see large numbers feeding at altitude over Beacon Hill and swooping over the local conifer plantations. Fewer than twenty have been seen at any one time in recent years. The reasons for this are unclear to me, but I wonder, because Swallows have nested in our barn for the 25 years we have lived here. Over this period they have charmed us with their confiding nature and I suspect that one of the major causes of the drop in numbers is a shortage of nest sites. Most of the barns around the district have become barn conversions and the Swallow, having lost many of their ancestral breeding sites, are unlikely to return.

All of it gives me a sense of huge frustration, for I know that nearly all of the species I have mentioned have suffered significant national losses over the last three or four decades. Some have declined by more than half. This reduction in numbers for both residents and summer migrants has been well documented and much-researched, yet it seems to me that the issue has never received the same urgent attention or funding as the re-introduction projects for more spectacular birds at the top of the food chains.

The reasons for these losses are numerous and complex and in many instances they are interrelated. The list includes habitat loss, climate change and massive changes in agricultural practices and technology – including the overuse of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, the neglect and destruction of hedgerows, the reseeded of old pastures, the destruction of field margins and so on. Climatic change is inevitably very damaging for populations of summer migrants, causing food shortages and drought on their winter feeding grounds, as well as problems here when they arrive to breed. These handicaps are not helped by the often large losses due to the shooting and trapping which still goes on in some southern European countries, such as Malta, France and Italy. Although efforts to eradicate these pursuits have been going on for years, they have not met with much success.

I do not wish to 'knock' the conservation movement. I fully accept that much good work is being carried out by conservation bodies and their armies of volunteers, particularly with respect to the creation and preservation of wildlife reserves and wildlife corridors. But these on going programmes of re-generation, which should benefit our resident species in particular, are not happening fast enough. Part of the problem, in my view, is that today we do not like making decisions that might offend somebody, or anybody, so that the seemingly ever more complex combination of committees and cautious consensus politics rarely produce what is really needed.

We need some rapid decision-making and we need then to get on and implement those decisions. We have to accept that there will be a financial cost, but it is a price surely worth paying, especially as studies show that in many Eastern and Southern European countries, where low-intensity agriculture is still practiced as the norm, bird population losses are significantly less. Do we have to wait until they experience the same losses as the U.K. before anything is done? I hope not, or there will be precious little left to save. Maybe we need to be prepared to rock the European boat a little more - and take a much more independent and decisive role to protect our bio-diversity if we are to have any real chance of arresting the recent dreadful declines.

Decision-making should not be left to academia and the conservation charities. It is imperative planning takes cognisance of the opinions and experience of people who have a deep interest in wildlife and a deep working knowledge of farming and the countryside. Within such programmes much more attention has to be paid to the minutiae of countryside management – for example, formulating plans to restore the proper management of hedges, field margins and roadside verges. In my opinion the over-use of hedge cutting machines and flails devastates hedges, stunts re-growth and ultimately destroys the hedgerow. Mature wood is too often left with the severed ends looking like pieces of frayed rope, leaving them susceptible to rot and disease. Many hedges are cut back too severely, too often, creating gaps, leaving little or no cover for nesting birds and a habitat that is much more readily accessed by predators. It may be controversial, but I have long advocated the selective culling of corvids and, even more so, the other major nest robber - the ubiquitous grey squirrel. I accept this is a very difficult subject because such actions would not go down well with the general public; but if these species are destroying our bio-diversity then something needs to be done to tackle the issue.

What these observations highlight is the seriousness of the species loss and how quickly such declines may accelerate. A good analogy for these losses is to liken them to the drying up of a once-thriving pond; all that is left before it finally dries out are a number of small puddles – except, of course, in this case it will be a number of small oases of wildlife, a scatter of nature reserves. To me, such a scenario is very frightening; could it be that future generations will remember us best for this wholesale destruction? Is this to be our legacy?

## **ED HUTCHINGS ON BIRDS**

### **The Ptarmigan**

**(*Lagopus mutus*)**

The snow lies thick on the high Scottish mountains for three months or more and the Ptarmigan in their smart winter dress crouch unnoticed. As spring begins to melt the snow and rocks and vegetation show again, they develop mottled plumage to merge with the new background. When all the snow has gone in mid-summer, Ptarmigan disappear against the lichen-covered rocks with their grey-brown and black plumage patterns. These mountain grouse really are masters of disguise, but despite their superb camouflage many still fall prey to the Golden Eagle.

In late autumn and winter large parties of Ptarmigan may gather, using the theory that many pairs of eyes are better than one for spotting eagles. The largest flock recorded in Scotland was of 470 birds! Normally, flocks number several dozen at most, with males and females in different groups. The males put themselves in the front line against predators and harsh weather by feeding in the more exposed places. If many males die, the remainder become highly polygamous in the following spring, often having three or four mates. Ptarmigan seem to be oblivious to humans and are often surprisingly approachable.

- *It has a black tail and white wings all year; only the body feathers change colour. Never so rich brown as Red Grouse; males are often quite grey or patchy in summer, females more buff. In winter all white except for the tail. The male has red wattle and a black eye patch.*
- *Perfectly hidden on mountain screes, only movement and blinking white eyelids give them away. Rarely seen below 600m except on northern coastal hills.*

### **The Ruff**

***(Philomachus pugnax)***

Britain is on the western edge of the breeding range of the Ruff, and fewer than ten pairs breed in Britain each year, mainly on wet meadows in East Anglia. The males' communal dancing display (called lekking) is a complex ritual carried out on traditional leks (display grounds). Females watch and then choose with which male to mate. They then depart and bring up the young alone. The Ruff is unusual not only in its display, but also in appearance. In many ways (size, shape and feeding action) it resembles a Redshank, but it is actually more closely related to the Dunlin. In the autumn, migrants from Scandinavia and Russia pass through Britain, some staying for the winter. About 1,500 remain, most on the Ouse Washes, and at Paghham Harbour, in West Sussex. However, several million winter south of the Sahara in Africa. Interestingly, most wintering in Britain are males, but in Africa most are the smaller females.

- *An unusually shaped bird. Long legs but shortish, slightly down-curved bill. Head seems too small for the longish neck. Usually has pot-bellied, hump-backed shape.*
- *In summer, males are extraordinary, with huge variably coloured ruffs and head tufts. Main colours are white, chestnut-brown and purplish-black. Legs of adults are reddish. Ritualised display at lek.*
- *Juveniles have strongly washed, deep-buff underparts; the upperparts look neatly scaled with pale feathers. Bland face and greenish legs.*
- *Males are very much larger than females; the sexes can be told apart easily when in mixed flocks.*

## **NOTES ON A TRIP TO THE GALAPAGOS (Part One)**

**Mike Pointon**

November 2009

### **Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November**

Following the long flight from Madrid I arrived at the JW Marriot Hotel in Quito Ecuador at 19:00 local time.

### **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> November**

The next day featured a sight seeing tour of the city including a call at Mitad del Mundo the equator line and then on to the restaurant El Crator for lunch. The restaurant is built on the rim of an extinct volcano 12,000 above sea level. I was told that we might experience some symptoms of altitude sickness but I escaped that dubious pleasure! That night however, back in the hotel a horrible headache sent me heading for bed. Quito is 9,000 feet above sea level and it is not unusual to suffer altitude sickness here. My fellow travellers went out for a night's entertainment and an excellent meal. My suitcases had not arrived on the plane from Madrid the previous day so I needed a stop to "organise" things. Luckily that night it arrived.

### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November**

Next day Sunday it was off to Galapagos. We flew from Quito via Guayaquil to Baltra in The Galapagos. On arrival at Baltra I went through passport control and was then taken to the jetty via coach. At the airport I saw Small Ground Finches and Lava lizards. By this time I had filled out several forms on our flights; I had not a clue what some were for or which I should keep. We were loaded onto the Zodiacs, later to be known as Panga's, and set off on a short journey to our cruise ship Xpedition. The "Bus Stop" for the Zodiacs was taken up by Sea Lions lying on the benches and under the canopy for shade. First lesson, animals come first on Galapagos.

Once on board we were shown to our cabins, taken through the emergency drill and made aware of the "Galapagos Handshake," hand grips arm not hand a safety measure when transferring from boat to Panga; so it was off on our first trip to the islands. All a bit rushed I thought, after all the travelling we had done but, but no complaints really. Our first island of this wonderful archipelago was to be South Seymour Island.

We saw our first Marine and Land Iguanas Swallow-tailed and Lava Gulls Sea Lions and Fur Seal.

### **Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November**

What a day this was; great views in the early morning of Kicker Rock. I then saw six Dark-rumped Petrels an endangered endemic species in Galapagos, fly by our boat.

After breakfast we set off to Puert Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island. Here we took a local bus to The Darwin Interpretation Centre. The weather was bright and sunny. The centre was like most other centres of this type with photos and information boards. I did not spend too long looking I was more interested in what was going on outside. I got the bus back to the town centre and wandered up and down the promenade. There were a number of tourist shops selling T-shirts and stuff, Blue Footed Boobies seemed to appear on everything. Along the promenade were lots of Sea Lions lazing around taking little or no notice of anyone. I saw a group of Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans squabbling to get at the placenta of a newly born sea Lion!

We returned to the boat by 11:00 and in the afternoon went to explore Espanola which was the real Galapagos experience. From my balcony I got good views of Bottle-nosed Dolphins (The only cetacean we saw) Shearwaters, Petrels, Frigatebird (Magnificent and Great) and Blue-footed Boobies. A bird came in to land on the water and this turned out to be my first sighting of Waved Albatross. I saw ten or so more flying by, an unforgettable moment. Later on the Island I saw some twenty Albatross including chicks on their nests. All the birds on the island were very confiding and allowed views down to two or three feet without them being disturbed. So I managed photos of Nazca and Blue-footed Booby, Waved Albatross, Swallow-tailed Gull, Hood Mockingbird, Land and Marine Iguana. We sat on the cliffs overlooking the sea and watched the sea birds wheeling around feeding and displaying; truly wonderful.

### **Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> November**

We paid two visits to Floreana Island. In the morning we went to Cormorant Point. In the afternoon we saw a group of twelve sharks in the shallows, probably White-tipped Reef Sharks. A flock of 30/40 Brown Noddys flew past the ship with and there were several sighting of turtles and Bottle-nosed Dolphins. It was here we saw four Galapagos Penguins, once common but now threatened.

During our afternoon walk while on the salt pans we saw two Stilt Sandpipers and on the shore Semipalmated Plover, Turnstone, Wandering Tattler, and Whimbrel.

Whilst putting on my shoes following a wet landing a small scorpion ran out of the rocks between my feet. I caught up with White-cheeked Pintail, Lava, Striated and Great Blue Herons.

### **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> November**

Morning: Bachas Beach, Santa Cruz Island. Saw Wandering Tattler, American Oystercatcher, Grey Plover and, most pleasing for me, Least Sandpiper.

Zodiac Ride to Isthmus Point saw White-tipped Reef Sharks 3-4 feet long fishing for crabs in the tide-line, and a little further out an Eagle Ray; using binoculars I could see the spotting on the wings. A Galapagos Penguin kept us entertained swimming in the shallows around our feet.

Last night I went to the upper deck where a light and camera had been lowered into the water. This attracted a large shoal of small fish, two large Galapagos sharks, Brown Pelicans and Sea lions. It was interesting to note that the sharks did not attempt to attack the Pelicans nor were the Pelican at all bothered by the sharks' presence; they just scoop up the fish in their huge beaks.

## **SNIPPETS**

It is hoped 'Snippets' short notes of various items of interest to bird watchers will become a regular feature in forthcoming Dippers. The feature will be written for members by members, something to sell perhaps, an announcement, various ideas, items of news. Do not worry about writing, just send the idea and its source to the editor who will include it in the future Dippers. Ideas for this edition was supplied by Keith Jones, Verity Picken, Keith Roylance, and Trevor Russell.

**Garden Wildlife Conference.** The British Trust for Ornithology in partnership of the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales will be holding a GARDEN WILDLIFE CONFERENCE on Saturday, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011 0930 – 1615hrs, at the Main Building, Cardiff University, Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3AT. Topics will include 'Why gardens and garden birdwatchers matter', Positioning of garden bird feeders, how to record moths in your garden, how to attract and help bees in your garden, how bats use the garden environment: and The Severn Barrage. Good for birds? Etc. Tickets £12.50 includes lunch and refreshments. For tickets and more information, contact the BTO on 01842 750050.

**Malaria in Birds.** Keith Roylance located this story in the Daily Mail on 15<sup>th</sup> August: 'Malaria is killing our Sparrows and Owls.'

This was the conclusion reached by Laszio Garamazegi in a study including 3000 species over 70 years. Published in the journal of Global Change, May 2011, it concluded that 30 species of British Birds, including House Sparrow, Nightingales, Chaffinches, and two thirds of the Tawny Owls have become increasingly infected. Garamazegi established a link in the rise of infected UK mosquitoes due to the increase in global warming. As an example of the effects in birds, 30% of House Sparrows are now infected compared with just 10% in 1990, and he warned this could also herald a return of human malaria in northern Europe.

**Wind Farms.** Wind energy development can raise environmental concerns such as noise, visual impact, and avian effects. To explore some of the avian concerns, a study 'Changes in the abundance and distribution of upland breeding birds at an operational wind farm', was carried out by David Douglas, Paul Bellamy and James Pearce-Higgins between 2006 – 2009. The

study only included Red Grouse, and Golden Plover because only these two species were sufficiently numerous for analysis. The study concluded there was no significant difference in the change of abundance of either species between the wind farm and control site, and no evidence that changes in the species' distribution were related to wind farm infrastructure

But in repose to the findings, the trio caution similar studies across a range of sites should be conducted to explore the factors that determine the response of birds to particular developments. (BTO Bird Study Vol 58, Part 1. February 2011).

**Pitcher Plant and Great Tit.** We have to thank Verity Picken for locating this particular story of a pitcher plant eating a Great Tit. The incident was reported from a garden nursery in Somerset by a Mr Nigel Hewitt-Cooper, who thought the Great Tit had been attracted to the plant, a genus of *Nepenthes* from South East Asia, by the insects. Probably seeing a particular juicy morsel low in the pitcher, the Great Tit slipped and fell in. Mr Hewitt-Cooper was 'absolutely staggered' by the incident, this is only the second documented case of a carnivorous plant eating a bird in the world, the first reported in Germany a few years ago.

**Coloured Rings.** As a result of their recent coloured-ringed scheme of Curlews, The British Trust for Ornithology has requested information on any sightings of such birds. They write:

The bird species features of UK Special Protection Areas (SPAs), such as the Severn Estuary, are identified from counts from national schemes, such as the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Species may be included as features of these protected sites if their numbers exceed 1 % of the species' national or international population. However, there is growing evidence that individual movements during passage periods and over winter mean that a far larger number of individuals may be supported on a site over the course of a year than are recorded at any one time. This population turnover may mean that sites are overlooked when it comes to designation. As a result of these concerns, a method has been developed whereby count data and colour ring re-sightings can be combined to estimate the total population using a site over a given period.

On 26<sup>th</sup> September 2010, 66 Curlews were caught by cannon-netting at Wibdon Wharf in Gloucestershire. The Curlews have been marked with a combination of five colour-rings and a metal ring so that they can be identified individually. In addition to the precise combination and positions of colour-rings, please record date, time and location (a six-figure grid reference would be ideal). It would also be useful to receive data on the proportions of birds colour-ringed in flocks. Please record the numbers of birds colour-ringed and the numbers of birds checked for rings (not necessarily the total flock size) and provide data even for those flocks that had no colour-ringed birds.

These colour-marked birds have already provided valuable insights into the movements of the Severn Estuary Curlew population. Out of these 66 birds, 25 have subsequently been re-sighted on a total of 65 occasions. The

majority of these records have come from the area of the Severn in Gloucestershire where the birds were ringed.

These data are providing useful insights into the population movements of Curlew on the Severn. It is hoped that further data collected over coming winters will allow both turnover and survival rates of Curlew on the Severn to be estimated, thereby providing a fuller understanding of the conservation status of the species on the estuary. Sightings of the coloured-ringed Curlews should be sent to [niall.burton@bto.org](mailto:niall.burton@bto.org) British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thatford, Norfolk IP24 2PU (T: 01842 750050)

**Nightjars.** A known reduction of population and range of Nightjars, coupled with the reduction of heathland habitats means that forested areas are an increasingly important habitat for Nightjars. In a recent study, charring males were counted over a ten year period, and the study concluded that:

‘As expected, Nightjars showed a preference for open places in younger forest areas (clear felled areas, young stands, windfall and permanent open places). They also showed a preference for old and open stands that had wide forest tracks. Forest type appeared not to be significant. Heath, bare sand and, to a lesser extent, leaf litter have an increased presence in patches used by Nightjars.’

The study suggested that open places within larger forests should be created. Also a network of wide forest tracks can make smaller patches suitable for Nightjars. (Birds Study, Vol 58, Part 2, May 2011)

## **NEWPORT WETLANDS WALES REPORT**

STAFF: TOM DALRYMPLE (SENIOR RESERVE MANAGER), KEVIN DUPÉ (RESERVE MANAGER), RICHARD SMITH & BRYN JONES (ASSISTANT RESERVE MANAGERS), HAF LEYSHON (GRADUATE CONSERVATION TRAINEE)

### **JUNE**

#### **Birds**

Wader chick predation continues to be a concern. The Avocet had no chicks alive from the original 13 nests, but now have three chicks quite close to fledging from the eight pairs that re-laid. There is currently only one Lapwing chick on the grasslands and one in the lagoons, both are close to fledging. On a more positive note the Bearded Tits in the reed-beds appear to have had a good year. At least three broods of young have been spotted so far.

Notable birds for these months include:

The Spoonbill remained throughout the month again and has been spending time at the saline lagoons and the grasslands

A Sandwich Tern was seen over the lagoons on the 18<sup>th</sup> June.

## **Management**

Salt water and lack of use had seized our electric pumps. Fortunately Kev and I managed to free them up, this allowed us to use our EA abstraction licence for the first time this year. The fresh water was pumped onto the lagoons to maintain salinity and water levels, but it can also be used this autumn to wet the grasslands in preparation for the wintering duck.

Bryn has been busy topping thistles before they set seed. A survey in 2004 revealed that Shril Carder Bees will use Creeping Thistle as a nectar plant. The Shril Carder Bee is very rare in the UK and is one of the species Newport Wetlands SSSI is notified for. However Creeping Thistle is ubiquitous and this year it appears to be spreading at an alarming rate.

## **Events**

Kevin led a bat and moth event on the ninth of June with volunteers Roger James, Sheila Dupe and Fiona Illing. 26 people attended and were rewarded with the rare but gruesome spectacle of a Hobby eating a Noctule bat.

Gareth Beynon from Cymdethias Edward Llwyd gave a guided walk in Welsh on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June. He started at the reedbeds in the morning and the saline lagoons in the afternoon, 27 people attended.

Roger James in his capacity as President of Gwent Wildlife Trust gave a botanical guided walk to 28 people on the 18<sup>th</sup> June, his wife Julia and volunteers Angela Horup and Andrew Wood assisted him.

Kev gave a guided walk for 30 people from Walk Newport on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June.

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## **GWENT UKBS REPORT FOR JUNE 2011**

**Chris Hatch**

### **Highlights**

A Common Rosefinch was reported from Sudbrook (21<sup>st</sup>). A Spoonbill was present at Newport Wetlands (2<sup>nd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>).

### **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

A female Marsh Harrier was present (4<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>). Seawatching produced a single Gannet, Sandwich Tern, Arctic Skua and Storm Petrel and four Manx Shearwaters.

### **Other sites**

Three Common Scoters were observed from Peterstone Gout (5<sup>th</sup>). A Golden Pheasant was reported from Llanhennock (6<sup>th</sup>). Red Kites and Hobbies were reported from a number of locations. Churring Nightjars were recorded at Wentwood, Manmoel, Blaenafon and New Mills.

## **GWENT UKBS REPORT FOR JULY 2011**

### **Highlights**

A Pectoral Sandpiper was present at the Newport Wetland Reserve (30<sup>th</sup>), with a Wood Sandpiper present at the same site (28<sup>th</sup>).

### **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

Three Bearded Tits were reported (4<sup>th</sup>), whilst a Bearded Tit with juveniles was seen (11<sup>th</sup>). Other sightings of note included an Arctic Skua (17<sup>th</sup>), a Mediterranean Gull (19<sup>th</sup>) and three Ruff (22<sup>nd</sup>).

### **Other Sites**

A Ring-necked Parakeet frequented gardens in Llandogo for most of the month. Nightjars were reported from Blaenafon (1<sup>st</sup>) and Wentwood (9<sup>th</sup>). Other sightings of note included a Manx Shearwater at Peterstone (7<sup>th</sup>), and a Mediterranean Gull at Sudbrook (14<sup>th</sup>). Red Kites and Hobbies were reported from a number of locations.

## **GWENT UKBS REPORT FOR AUGUST 2011**

### **Highlights**

A party of six Common Cranes were reported flying over Abergavenny (19<sup>th</sup>). A Cattle Egret was present at the Newport Wetlands Reserve (15<sup>th</sup>), whilst a Wood Sandpiper was recorded at the same site (1<sup>st</sup>). Single Honey Buzzards were observed at Peterstone (1<sup>st</sup>) and Sudbrook (3<sup>rd</sup>). A Woodlark was reported from Dingestow (19<sup>th</sup>).

### **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

A juvenile male Marsh Harrier was reported (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>). 20 Avocets were present (1<sup>st</sup>). Four Bearded Tits were recorded (21<sup>st</sup>).

### **Other sites**

Single Mediterranean Gulls were recorded at Caerleon (3<sup>rd</sup>), Sudbrook (13<sup>th</sup>) and Peterstone Gout (26<sup>th</sup>). Raptor sightings included a Merlin near Garnlydan (14<sup>th</sup>), single Red Kites at Llanybi (15<sup>th</sup>) and Lasgarn Wood Abersychan (28<sup>th</sup>) and a ringtail Hen Harrier at Mynydd Garn Clochdy (25<sup>th</sup>). Other sightings of note included a Black Tern at Peterstone (31<sup>st</sup>), three White Wagtails at Collister Pill (28<sup>th</sup>) and a Willow Tit visiting a garden at Brynmawr (from 14<sup>th</sup>).

The final breeding season of the Atlas ended about a month or so ago, but its not quite over yet !! There are still a few species that may be still breeding, where evidence of confirmed breeding can still be obtained, The most obvious being Hobby, Nightjar and Spotted Flycatcher, but some other multi-brooded species (which may not yet have confirmed breeding evidence) may still have late nesting attempts - birds such as doves (Stock Dove, Collared Dove), finches (Linnet, Goldfinch, Bullfinch) and Yellowhammer. Barn Owls also sometimes have a second brood if it has been a good season. So one last effort, please, before the season is out. Visit the Atlas website, and check the species list for any 10km squares (one where you live or have visited) and try to target your birding to fill any final gaps, you may of course be able to improve the breeding evidence from some previous birding that you haven't yet submitted. Any record from the past four breeding seasons can be submitted, as can any wintering record from the past three winters. Please make every effort to get the breeding records, and species lists, as complete as possible. The projected timescale for completion of the Atlas is as follows - Sept 2011 - submit all outstanding paper records, Dec 2011 - complete all on line submissions, March 2012 - final validation by county coordinators and resolve any queries, April 2012 - complete master dataset, deliver text to publishers in late 2012 and Atlas published in 2013. Thanks to everyone for your contribution and I hope you think the final result was worth all the effort - I'm sure it will be. There will be a bit of a lull with other surveys during this winter, but next spring we will be up and running with new single species surveys again – more information about these next time. For those who have become keen on survey work (as a result of the Atlas), the regular annual surveys (BBS and WEBS) always have some vacant squares waiting for someone – so if you may be interested in finding out more, drop me an e mail. [jerryLewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk](mailto:jerryLewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk)

**VOLUNTEERS ARE SOUGHT...****John Coleman**

One of the main aims of our Society is to produce a record of the changing fortunes of the birds in our county; and we do this each year by publishing the Society's Annual Report. We want to try to make our already good report even better and there are three ways in which everyone in GOS can help to make this aim a reality.

The first, the most obvious and much the easiest, is to ask that people submit records of the birds they see. Without the many records (currently sent in by only 60 or so of our 360 members) there would be no Annual Report. If you don't already have ago at sending in your sightings, why not have a go? Take a look at an Annual Report – one from any recent year will do – and, towards the back of the Report, you'll find a detailed explanation of how to send in your own sightings. Records can be sent in on paper or on line and if you haven't seen any rarities during the year, don't panic. Most of us haven't seen many, either; and, in any case, it's more valuable to report on our commoner

birds, for many of them are now in difficulty and tracking their progress – by sending in records to the local bird society – is vital for their conservation. If you do find something unusual, of course, that's terrific; but it doesn't happen often, even to the experts and, in the great scheme of things, it's of secondary importance! There are a lot of birdwatchers in Gwent and we really want to hear from you.

The second thing is pictures. I am sure that there are many photographers in the county who take pictures of birds. Every year we hunt for photos, for we publish (in the annual report) only photos of birds taken in the county in that year. While photos of rarities are always welcomed, so are photos of our common garden birds, particularly if they are photographed doing something interesting or unusual. We don't publish photos of any species listed in Schedule 1 of the Country and Wildlife Act 1981, of course; for those interested, the full list of Schedule 1 species may be found at the following website:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/policy/wildbirdslaw/birdsandlaw/wca/schedules.aspx>

So once again, why not give it a go? Send us some samples!

While on the subject of pictures, it's not just about photographs. Many people with an interest in wildlife sketch or draw or paint and we are always on the lookout for sketches – ideally done in pen and ink, but anything that will scan is very acceptable. If this is an area where you have a talent, then, again, why not have a go? It would be hugely appreciated!

Third and last – but by no means least! – there is always a need for some help in actually writing up the species accounts that make up the bulk of our Annual Report. Writers are provided with a summary of all of the records for 'their' species – that is, the species they have volunteered to write up – and, using that data pull together the account in the familiar style of the Gwent Bird Report, ready for the Editor's final polishing. And it doesn't end there, for even when everything has been written up, proof-readers are needed to cast their eyes over the final version of the Report to ensure errors and typos are weeded out before it all goes off to the publishers. Both of these tasks, the writing and the proof-reading, require something of an eye for detail but they are not that difficult to do – and most people find the work enjoyable and they don't require a huge amount of expertise.

If you think this might be the way you could best make a contribution to one of our central activities as a Society...well (and I guess by now you know what's coming!) why not give it a go? Just make contact with any of the Committee, who'll be only too glad to help you to help us.