

# THE DIPPER



## THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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

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March 2011

### **AGM COMMENTARY**

**Trevor Russell**

A total of 64 attendees were welcomed by President Ian Walker, who invited Treasurer Keith Roylance to make his presentation on the state of the Society's finances.

Keith reported that net membership rose by eight over the year, taking us close to 400. Total income was £6,685 and total expenditure was £6,424, giving a surplus of £261 for the year.

Postal charges and other expenses increased during 2010 and postal charges are due to rise again in 2011. Anticipating these further increases, Keith's 'take home' message was for everyone to give him their e-mail addresses so that *The Dipper* could be distributed free of charge electronically, rather than becoming an increasingly expensive – and unnecessary – burden in this electronic age. At more than £500, the cost of posting *The Dipper* is almost as much as the cost of printing it.

A further benefit of having your e-mail addresses would be to enable us to inform you during the otherwise silent summer months of our involvement with shows and other events.

Towards the end of last year, and to coincide with the launch of the new website, GOS signed up to PayPal in order to receive payments via the website for membership recruitment, renewals and sales.

While there is a fee to PayPal for each transaction, it is hoped the facility will make it easier for people to join and remain as members.

Chairman Dave Brassey compared the society's performance against the aims and objectives as defined in the GOS constitution, particularly in **education, promotion, reporting and conservation**.

He explained how GOS advanced the **education** of the public in all aspects of ornithology with a varied indoor programme which included a talk on Wildlife Crime in Gwent by PC Tracey Bowen-Quirke (ring 101 if you see anything suspicious).

Other highlights were Jerry Lewis on his work with Hawfinch, and Steve Roberts's excellent talk on his study of Honey Buzzard. **(continues after Contents)**

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Rob Parsons was congratulated for putting together an excellent programme for 2010. Steve Butler was also congratulated for his very full outdoor programme of walks, both in and out of the county, including the annual trip to Portland.

During the summer, we also attended various events in the county such as Newport Wetlands, Magor Marsh and Caerphilly's Go Wild.

GOS is also active in the **promotion** of research into ornithology and publishes reports, newsletters and other papers of ornithological interest.

The Bert Hamar Bursary for 2010 was awarded to Jerry Lewis to continue his Hawfinch reintroduction scheme in the Wye Valley.

We also publish highly informative articles in *The Dipper* and Editor Jackie Huybs was again congratulated for continuing her excellent work. Mark Stevens was also singled out for his excellent ornithological articles in *The Argus*. Sales of *The Birds of Gwent* are still going strong at over 400.

Mark Newton has created a new website to showcase the society to a wider audience via this ever growing medium.

The GOS **annual report**, *The Gwent Bird Report*, has become an iconic publication and new editor John Coleman has maintained the high standards set by his predecessors. It is encouraging to see new names credited to the contributors' list and this year, the photographs included over 20 birds that have never appeared before.

In the support and encouragement of the **conservation** of wild birds and places of ornithological interest, we are active at many levels. Dave Brassey, Richard Clarke, Keith Roylance, Rob Parsons and Jerry Lewis represent GOS on the LBAP committees of each of the five counties.

Conservation Officer Andrew Baker represented GOS in overseeing the final demise of the airstrip at Whitson and Chris Hatch was a strong influence at Llandegfedd in restoring bird feeders. On the downside, the Pyllmawr cycle track caused abandonment of the heronry.

On a happier note, there were new additions to the Gwent list with Iberian Chiffchaff in Wentwood and perhaps the most photographed bird last year, the Marmora's Warbler, on the Bloreng.

Treasurer Keith Roylance expressed a desire to step down at this AGM, but since no-one volunteered to replace him, Keith reluctantly decided to continue until a replacement is found. He was adamant, however, that he would relinquish a role he had acquired over the years - that of *The Dipper* producer and distributor. This will be discussed at the next committee meeting.

Secretary Trevor Russell also expressed a desire to step down after 18 years in the role but again, no-one has come forward to replace him. So rather than leave the Society in the lurch, Trevor also agreed to continue until a replacement was found.

Steph Tyler reluctantly tendered her resignation due to pressure of other survey work, but has offered to keep herself available should we need to call upon her considerable knowledge in the future.

A delicious and generous member's evening finger buffet followed the AGM and preceded a fascinating PowerPoint slideshow by Keith Roylance, who presented a compilation of pictures taken by Dave Brassey, Steve Butler and himself during a holiday in the Spanish Pyrenees. The excellent pictures included amazing flight shots of both a Black Woodpecker and a Marsh Harrier.

## **COMMITTEE COMMENTARY**

**Trevor Russell**

The February meeting welcomed two new committee members, **Ed Hutchings and Lynn Jones**. Ed volunteered to organise the printing and distribution of *The Dipper*, enabling Keith Roylance to stay in his role of Treasurer without being overburdened with *Dipper* work.

Nevertheless, **succession planning** is still being thwarted with no volunteers coming forward to replace either the Secretary or Vice Chairman. This situation will only get worse next year when Dave Brassey retires as Chairman after his five-year stint, and Helen Jones steps down as Membership Secretary after countless years in this and other committee roles. **WE URGENTLY NEED NEW FACES ON THE COMMITTEE - WHY NOT YOURS?**

At **NWR**, four new screen hides are being erected: at Goldcliff between the third screen and sea wall; at Boat Lane; the eastern end of the Uskmouth reedbeds and opposite Reedbed 9.

A project to build a gravel bank to encourage the breeding of Little Ringed Plovers at **Blaen y Cwm Reservoir** is being supported by GOS but frustrated by the absence of commonsense: new bureaucratic requirements to enable GOS to act *even as a banker* for the money available for the project demands that GOS must have *written policies* on health and safety, volunteering, equal opportunities, the environment and Welsh language! While we race to write these policies, it is likely that the project will be delayed by a year and the LRPs will struggle for another season. May God preserve the LRPs - but not the health and safety lobby!

Steph Tyler and Jerry Lewis are preparing a management plan for **Goytre House Wood**. Meanwhile, a grant is available to buy seed for a winter feed crop for the small field in front of the wood.

The **BTO Winter Survey** ends this month and surveyors will be asked to fill any gaps in species counts (see article by Jerry Lewis elsewhere in this edition).

The **website** continues to be developed with the assistance of new webmaster, Mark Newton. Any problems or suggestions should be communicated to either Mark or Dave Brassey.

Rob Parsons is seeking new ideas for the **indoor programme** next year by using a feedback form at forthcoming indoor meetings. Volunteers are still required to man the GOS stand at **summer shows**. To volunteer and get more information, please contact Trevor Russell.

During 2010, 21 books were borrowed from our library, which compared with 17 during 2009. Of these 21 books, just three titles which were borrowed last July have yet to be returned: (658) *Field Guide to National Parks of East Africa*, (798) *Field Guide to the Birds of East and Central Africa*, and (651) *Field Guide to Birds of East Africa*.

During March this year, several items that were contained in eight boxes were returned to the library from previous GOS librarian George Noakes. These consisted of various old bird reports from a range of counties, and BTO Bird Studies and *British Birds* over several years. George had done a grand job in keeping these journals - all were tied in neat labelled bundles according to location and year.

Because of our chronic lack of space, the committee agreed to offer all these free to members of the society, as the library also has all the *British Birds* on a DVD. A note was duly placed on the forum page and as a result, the BTO Bird studies went to a good home. But there were very few other responses from the society. The librarian then made contact with other societies in the UK, offering them free to any interested. A few groups responded and we forwarded those they required. What remained from the exercise was recycled.

Of great interest in the returned items were several of the society's first annual bird reports, including the first three from the early 1960s: Pontypool Ornithological Society Report, including No 1 January 1963 (1) No 2 December 1963 (5). These we kept, and because there are so few of the earlier reports, I have scanned all of the reports from 1963 to 1969 and put onto a DVD, which is available to anyone interested.

Last October, the family of the late Mrs MU Morris - a former member of our society - kindly donated 16 books to us. All but one book we already had in the library, so the rest of them were offered free to society members during the November indoor meeting.

Just three books were added to the library this past year: *Finding Birds in Britain - Bird Guides* 2001, by Lee GR Evans, No 815 (Donated by Keith Jones), *Bird Observatories in Britain and Ireland*, Poyser 1976, by Roger Durran, No 816 (Donated by Mrs MU Morris), and *Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo*, 2009, by Michael McCarthy, No 817.

Another DVD was recently added to the library - *Flying High* (no 818), released by the Welsh RSPB to celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This DVD contains five separate programmes totalling 110 minutes: *Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant*, *Wings over Wales*, *Ynys-hir*, *Y Barcud - The Red Kite*, and *The Commendable Crow (Chough)*.

In addition a few odd reports were also added to the library:

Avon Bird Report 2009  
Glamorgan Bird Club Eastern Glamorgan Bird Report No 48 2009  
Gloucestershire Bird Report 2008  
Somerset Birds 2009  
Birds in Wales Vol 7 No 3, Welsh Bird Report No 23 for 2009 x 2  
Welsh Birds Vol 7 No 2, 2010 x 3

It was necessary to remove another 24 books from the library during October 2010 in order to make room in the library cupboard for our kitchen stock. Each of these books were priced using the Amazon on-line second hand store, and most were costed to just one penny plus post and package. These books will be offered free to members at a future indoor meeting.

**THANK YOU, PHIL THOMPSON!**

Helen Jones, Ian Smith and Trevor Russell

## **GOS WEBMASTER RETIRES**

Phil joined GOS in 1991 when he was living in Chepstow. But in 1992, his work as a computer consultant took him to Delaware, USA, for a short period. There he joined a local birding group and became one of the 'Delaware Twitchers', on which he reported in two instalments of *The Dipper*.

His experience of seeing all 11 owl species found in north eastern North America in just 24 days stirred him from 'interested birder' to 'fanatical birder'.

Despite family and work then taking him to East Sussex, Manchester and - in recent years - Delaware, where he now lives permanently, he has continued to be an active member of GOS.

In the 90s, frequent trips to South Wales kept him in touch with GOS, especially through his attendance at the indoor and outdoor meetings. On trips from East Sussex, he brought numerous copies of the *Collins Bird Guide* (large and standard format) when it was first published in 1999, after finding them for sale at a bargain price in his local bookshop. Many of you may remember benefiting from this.

Phil responded to an appeal in 2000 to design and create a GOS website. It's difficult to appreciate now that there were not many local bird club websites at that time.

Although he worked as a computer consultant, he had no previous experience of website design - but rose to the challenge and the GOS website was launched in 2001. It proved to be simple, quick and easy to read and was also very timely as it allowed us to keep members informed during the foot and mouth epidemic that year.

It was an exciting and challenging learning curve for both the committee – trying to explain what it thought it wanted in a website - and for Phil, having to translate those requirements into a workable tool. So successfully, in fact, that British Birds judged it to be one of the best UK sites in a survey they conducted a few years later.

The fact that the website has been developed and managed so well over the years – keeping on top of spam entries as well as all those Viagra adverts (!) - is testament to Phil's skills and his dedication to GOS, especially at arm's length from Delaware. Only in the past few months has he passed on the webmaster baton to Mark Newton.

As a token of our appreciation to him for his outstanding contribution to the society, the committee is unanimous in agreeing that we should grant Phil an honorary life membership of GOS.

### ***Bird journals for free***

**John Coleman**

I'm trying to dispose of two sets of the leading birding journals, *British Birds* 1972 to end 2010, and *Twitching/Birding World* (missing only first issue of *Twitching*).

These are in cartons and are offered free to a good home. Anyone interested please call me on 07768 762522.

**Saturday, January 15**

This trip was originally going to be to Whiteford Burrows, but due to bad weather, was changed to WWT Llanelli.

After meeting up with Wendell Thomas from the Carmarthenshire Bird Club, the five GOS members spent the day in and around the centre.

A wet and windy day produced the following birds:

Black-headed Gull, Chaffinch, Magpie, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Greenfinch, Blue Tit, Herring Gull, House Sparrow, Great Tit, Coot, Moorhen, Pintail, Teal, Mallard, Shelduck, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Wigeon, Greylag Goose, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Bullfinch, Blackbird, Dunnock, Starling, Siskin, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Robin, Song Thrush, Jay, Carrion Crow, Sparrowhawk, Woodpigeon, Curlew, Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Oystercatcher, Rook and Jackdaw.

A total of 44 species was not bad considering the awful weather!

**Saturday, January 29**

As the previous planned trip to Whiteford Burrows had to be substituted with WWT Llanelli, some members from GOS met up with the Carmarthenshire club to have another crack at Whiteford.

Despite being very cold, it was quite sunny and clear.

Making our way through the woodland we spotted Woodcock, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Song Thrush, Blackbird and Great, Blue and Coal Tits.

Going out to the sand dunes, we saw Jack Snipe and Common Snipe, Skylark,

Meadow Pipit, Wood Pigeon, Linnet, Robin, Rook, Carrion Crow, Magpie and Raven.

From the sand dunes looking across the beach onto the mussel beds and old lighthouse, we saw a good variety of shoreline birds: Common Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Cormorant, Great Crested Grebes, Grey Plover, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, thousands of Oystercatchers, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone, Knot, 40 Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Scoter, Brent Geese and Scaup. We were also treated to a very good display by three old Russian aeroplanes that flew over the beach.

Moving over to the hide, we saw four Slavonian Grebes, Little Egret, Buzzard, Peregrine, Goldeneye, Pintail, Mallard, Teal, Shelduck, Wigeon and 200 Lapwing.

Back at the car park, we saw House Sparrow, Collared Dove and Starling.

The trip yielded around 56 species. One of our group (yes, you know who you are) finished off the day by locking himself out of his car and having to get his poor wife to drive all the way from Newport to collect him. I think he got home okay!

**Saturday, February 12**

The trip to Cors Caron Tregaron, a national nature reserve also had good weather - again sunny but cold.

Setting off from Abergavenny bus station, nine GOS members headed for the bridge at Tregaron.

We spotted Sparrowhawk, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Skylark, Red Kite, Lapwing, Canada Goose, Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Teal, Wigeon, Greylag Goose, Grey Heron, Moorhen, Coot, Blackbird, Pied Wagtail, Linnet, Collared Dove, Rook, Jackdaw, Mistle

Thrush, Meadow Pipit, Greenfinch, Wood Pigeon, Carrion Crow, Jay, Song Thrush, Goldfinch, Stock Dove, Raven, Magpie, Nuthatch, House Sparrow, Robin, Dunnock, Chaffinch, Bullfinch, Treecreeper, Siskin, Marsh Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Willow Tit, Wren and Pheasant.

We moved on to Pont Rhyd-y-Groes, about 12 miles from Tregaron, to see the controversial Golden Eagle. An escapee? Well, who knows? It would be nice if it was a wild bird. Among the definite wild birds were Buzzard, Goshawk and Goldcrest.

Later on, Aberystwyth seafront had a good selection to offer: Purple Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Bull, Herring Gull, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Cormorant, Great Crested Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Peregrine - carrying prey – and Rock Pipit.

To finish off a good day, we saw tens of thousands of Starlings coming to roost under the pier. Around 64 species were seen in total.

Many thanks to all who led walks in 2010.

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## ***The Cuckoo (Cuculus canorus)***

**Ed Hutchings**

Cuckoos - wandering voices of the summer - are brood parasites, laying their eggs in the nest of other species, which raise their young for them.

When the young Cuckoos hatch, they push out any other eggs or young they find in the nest, becoming the sole occupant. Cuckoos usually choose the nests of the host species that brought them up, and their eggs will usually closely resemble the eggs of that species.

Young Cuckoos bear a close resemblance to Sparrowhawks, and even have the same white nape patch; this may be a disguise which helps to protect them from enemies.

Cuckoos are more often heard than seen, and most views are of a slim grey bird flying away and directly into a tree or bush. Male and female are alike, but the female can occur in a rare chestnut brown or 'hepatic' colour form.

Cuckoos feed on hairy caterpillars that are poisonous to other birds. Their stomachs are protected from the irritating hairs of the caterpillars by a protective lining which can be shed and renewed.

Cuckoos start calling soon after their arrival in late April. They continue for another six weeks or so before becoming silent. By July, adult birds are beginning to contemplate the return trip to their wintering grounds.

- Cuckoos are slender, with pointed wings, a long tail and a low, direct flight with shallow wing beats. They are often confused with hawks.
- Adult males are grey above and white with dark barring below. When perched, they tend to hold their tail above their wingtips.
- Juvenile Cuckoos are dark grey-brown or rufous above, with dark barring and a white nape patch.
- The male keeps its bill closed, waves its tail from side to side and sways when calling.
- The male's familiar call and the less well known bubbling chuckle of the female are often all that indicates their presence.
- The young Cuckoo will eject other eggs or young from the nest.

Nightingales have acquired a place in British folklore - not for their looks or familiarity, but for their voice alone. One of the earliest outdoor radio broadcasts included a Nightingale from a Surrey wood.

In fact, they can be extremely difficult to see as they are generally skulking birds whose brownish plumage hides them well in the dense vegetation they prefer. Very much a species of South East England, Nightingales are scarce in the west and north - even as migrants.

Returning as a summer migrant from wintering grounds south of the Sahara, the bird's far-carrying, rich and varied song fills some English woods from mid-April onwards, peaking during the first half of May.

Contrary to popular belief, the Nightingale does not only sing at night. Indeed, as a songster it is equally vocal in daylight and can often appear to survive without sleep, as the singing will continue day and night during warm spring periods. By early June, it is more sporadic and the brief song period comes to an end.

Although the plumage lacks distinctive features, when the bird is seen clearly the contrasting rusty-red tail, often held in a cocked position, is characteristic and gives the general impression of a rather outsized Robin.

The similar red tail of the Redstart differs in having dark central feathers. Plainness in looks can be easily forgiven, though, when the bird has such a wonderful voice!

- An extremely difficult bird to see, the uniform plumage blends with the shadows when well hidden in foliage. Watch for movement and look for the distinctive large black eye.
- There is a small breeding population in our neighbouring county Gloucestershire, most notably at RSPB Highnam Woods. But Gwent is now on the extreme western fringe of the Nightingale's breeding range in Britain - since 1960, there have been only 36 records.

## ***Memoirs of an island (part one)***

Keith Jones

When I was a teenager - still in school - I met a lad called David Eynon, who was a keen birdwatcher. Eventually, during 1963, he tempted me to a day out birding - although not too far from home. The plan was to walk over the mountain from Maesteg to Eglwys Nunydd Reservoir and then thumb a lift back home - a distance of about 10k - across Mynydd Margam, down to Margam Park and on to the reservoir.

There were three of us: David, Peter Combes and myself, with just two pair of binoculars. Two highlights stand out from that first day - rafts of Pochard on the reservoir, and a Coot running along the water. That was it - I was hooked. I saved up all my newspaper delivery money and

in a few months was the proud owner of a Regent 10x50 pair of binoculars which cost all of £10. At £10, I couldn't see much through them, but I was happy. With a copy of Roger Tory-Peterson's book, I was a proper birdwatcher.

We visited the local hotspots, including Kenfig Pool, Eglwys Nunydd and Sker, and explored areas around the Llynfi Valley - but we wanted more. David suggested we visit Skokholm, mainly to see Puffins and other sea birds. So we booked a week there in late March 1964, catching the milk train from Bridgend to Haverfordwest.

On the boat over, we were just feet from my goal - Puffins. Yet the quest was not



finished; it had only just started. Because that week shaped me into the 'birdwatcher' I am today.

On the island, we slept in the male dormitory - no showers or running water; just a bowl and large jug of cold water. The daily routine was much the same: after breakfast, a circuit of the island, birding and checking traps, having been given small bags in which to place birds.

Seeing a bird in the jaws of the trap, we would flush it into the narrow recess, pull a lever and the outdoor would close, leaving the bird in a narrow netted tunnel. Just ahead, the bird sees one avenue of escape - a small gap. It flies straight into a small box with a glass window. Pulling another lever, the box closes and the bird is trapped and extracted through a cloth sleeve attached to the box. The bird is immediately taken to the ringing room and if nobody is about, placed into a box, with a red lever elevated to indicate its presence.

My first experience of ringing was a 'Willow-Chiff' - or so I was told. Confused, I was shown the wing formula, which confirmed it was a Chiffchaff. Measuring, weighing, ringing and logging followed. A Starling was next, and I can still hear its continuous screams to this day.

After lunch, it was a spot of sunbathing and swimming in South Haven with fins and a borrowed pair of goggles to admire the local sea life. We would listen to Radio Caroline, which would play the number one hit of that week every half hour or so. It was the Beatles' *Help*, which dates that memory to 1965 - and every time I hear it, I'm transported back to the island.

The evening routine was another walk around the island at dusk and then sitting in the common room with its well-stocked library, reading. It was there I read one of my favourite books *Portrait of a Wilderness: The Story of the Ornithological Expeditions to the Coto Donana*.

Reading was a pleasure, due in part to the quality of light. We were used only to domestic electric light, or neon strip lights

from school. This was something different, with the light from numerous hurricane lamps - a clean, white exceedingly bright light. Hot cocoa was served, and a quiet voice would ask: "Has anyone seen any divers today?" It was the warden, completing his daily log. Eventually, it would be: "Any Ring Ouzels?" with the reply: "Yes, an adult male at the Neck this morning," as I mentioned another lifer for me on the island. But much more was to follow.

Eventually, the highlight of the evening started, as a cacophony of the most weird bird calls imaginable was heard. Quiet and rather distant at first, but then building up to the most fantastic sound - a loud strangled wailing and chortling chorus. We rushed outside with hurricane lamps and torches, and close encounters with the bird followed. "Watch your feet!" - the birds were everywhere. Calls continued just overhead, with a flash of white as they flew past. Manx Shearwaters by the thousands.

We returned to the male barracks happy, and mesmerised by the din, with the song quietly fading away. Chatting in bed about all the excitement of that particular day, we were eventually lulled to sleep by yet another strange sound - the purring Storm Petrels nesting in the attic just feet above our heads. This was a magic place.

One day, it was our turn to do the breakfast washing up. And considering the amount of grease in a single bowl of hot water from a dozen or so Full English, I opted to wipe. As a result, I was 10 minutes or so behind my partner. But following our usual route, I failed to find him. Walking up to the high ground, I scanned the island - nobody. Returning to the buildings, it was like the Marie Celeste with nobody about. Back up to the high ground, still nobody; I even called in at the lighthouse - silence. I had never felt isolation like that in my life. The island was desolate, and remained so for the next three hours. It transpired that all were on the far side of the Neck and Head, on a sea watch. (***Continues in the June Dipper***)

**SIGHTINGS, DECEMBER 2010****HIGHLIGHTS**

A Dartford Warbler was reported from Newport Wetlands (from 12<sup>th</sup>), with a Bittern present at the same site (from 17<sup>th</sup>). Waxwings were reported from Chepstow, Ebbw Vale, Brynmawr, Usk, Magor, Risca, Monmouth and Newport.

**Newport Wetlands Reserve**

A female Marsh Harrier was seen (4<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>), with a ringtail Hen Harrier also present (31<sup>st</sup>). A Merlin was recorded (20<sup>th</sup>) and two Bearded Tits (17<sup>th</sup>).

**Other sites**

Single Jack Snipe were recorded at Gobion (1<sup>st</sup>), Brynmawr (5<sup>th</sup>) and The Moorings (9<sup>th</sup>). Six Whooper Swans were seen at Peterstone (7<sup>th</sup>), a single Bewick's Swan was present at Ponthir Reservoir (8<sup>th</sup>), while 55 Bewick's Swans were present at Llandegfedd Reservoir (23<sup>rd</sup>) with 19 present at Peterstone (30<sup>th</sup>). Single Barn Owls were reported from Magor (1<sup>st</sup>) and Gilwern (15<sup>th</sup>). Raptor sightings included a Marsh Harrier at Peterstone (15<sup>th</sup>), a ringtail Hen Harrier at Caldicot Pill (26<sup>th</sup>), a Merlin at the same site (26<sup>th</sup>) and Red Kites at Catsash (3<sup>rd</sup>), Abergavenny (7<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>) and Brynmawr (7<sup>th</sup>).

Other sightings of note included 52 Bramblings near Pontypool (20<sup>th</sup>), a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker at Llanwenarth (26<sup>th</sup>), two Water Pipits at Black Rock (26<sup>th</sup>) and a Mediterranean Gull at Llandegfedd Reservoir (27<sup>th</sup>).

**JANUARY 2011****HIGHLIGHTS**

A female Marsh Harrier frequented Newport Wetlands (from 4<sup>th</sup>), with a female Hen Harrier present at the same site. Waxwings were reported from Cwmbran (50+ from 4<sup>th</sup>), Croespenmaen (50+ on 5<sup>th</sup>), Monmouth (eight on 14<sup>th</sup>) and Newport (three on 19<sup>th</sup>).

**Newport Wetlands Reserve**

A Scaup was reported (22<sup>nd</sup>), while other sightings of note included a Spotted Redshank (1<sup>st</sup>).

**Other sites**

Two Mediterranean Gulls were present at Ynysyfro reservoir (4<sup>th</sup>), with a single bird at Ponthir reservoir (27<sup>th</sup>). Four Bewick's Swans were reported from Peterstone (from 8<sup>th</sup>), with eight birds at Llangybi (9<sup>th</sup>). Female Merlins were recorded at Leechpool (9<sup>th</sup>) and Peterstone (21<sup>st</sup>). Red Kites were reported from Abergavenny (11<sup>th</sup>), Gilwern (23<sup>rd</sup>) and Tredegar (two on 26<sup>th</sup>). Up to three Short-eared Owls were seen at Waunafon Bog (from 16<sup>th</sup>), a Barn Owl was reported from Cleppa Park (14<sup>th</sup>), a Ring-necked Parakeet was present at Llantarnam (from 16<sup>th</sup>) and two Water Pipits were reported from Peterstone (18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>).

## **FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHTS**

A Great Grey Shrike was at Wentwood (5<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup>).

### **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

Two Kittiwakes were reported offshore (5<sup>th</sup>). Ten Avocets were present on the reserve (20<sup>th</sup>). A Barn Owl was recorded (18<sup>th</sup>).

### **Other sites**

Waxwings were reported from Chepstow (20 on 2<sup>nd</sup>) and Cwmbran (20 on 4<sup>th</sup>). A Tree Sparrow was seen at Monmouth (2<sup>nd</sup>). A Gannet was reported from Redwick (6<sup>th</sup>). The Ring-necked Parakeet was still present in the Cwmbran area (6<sup>th</sup>), while an Eagle Owl was reported from Newport (9<sup>th</sup>). Two Bewick's Swans were present at Peterstone Gout (11<sup>th</sup>), a male Mandarin was seen at Wentwood reservoir (13<sup>th</sup>) and 86 Goosanders and nine Goldeneye were recorded at Llandegfedd Reservoir (13<sup>th</sup>). Other sightings of note included a Red Kite at Magor Marsh (18<sup>th</sup>), two Short-eared Owls at Waunafon Bog (20<sup>th</sup>), a Mediterranean Gull at The Moorings, Newport (22<sup>nd</sup>) and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at Wentwood (26<sup>th</sup>).

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### **Newport Wetlands**

**Tom Dalrymple**

### **DECEMBER 2010**

#### **Birds**

The freezing weather continued throughout the month. The only wildfowl in significant numbers were 700 Wigeon that fed on the edge of the foreshore, thawed by the Severn. In the reedbeds, the Starling roost rose in number to about 40,000.

Notable bird sightings this month were as followed: six Whooper Swans flying through on the 4<sup>th</sup> and another on the 8<sup>th</sup>; female Goldeneye in the reedbed ponds on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Jack Snipe on the 8<sup>th</sup>. The Bittern was seen from the 17<sup>th</sup> onwards, including several sightings on the edge of the saline lagoons! Dartford Warbler on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Management**

The freezing weather prompted Kevin to brave the cold and feed our Bittern with sprats. He was rewarded one morning when the Bittern stood waiting for him. The tidal flap was opened this month to allow an exchange between the saline lagoons and the sea. The incoming tide also had the effect of temporarily thawing areas, which benefitted most of the water birds.

Some monies become available to us late this year that will allow us to purchase five much-needed hides for the reserve. Planning permission was submitted at the beginning of December. If the planning application is successful, the hides could be put up after the breeding season.

We have employed Mott MacDonald to design a pipe and valve system and safe access to the bottom of an enormous 1970s sluice structure, measuring approximately six metres high by 40 metres long. Access is needed to allow us to construct and then operate a pipeline taking water from a reservoir on the reserve to the wet grasslands.

Kevin and Haf Leyshon, our graduate conservation trainee, had the unenviable job of clearing up another fly tipping incident. This time there were 18 black bags of domestic rubbish.

## Events and visits

Kevin, assisted by volunteers Julia James and Sheila Dupé gave a guided walk of the reedbeds on the 5<sup>th</sup>. The event was called 'Reedbeds in Winter', and was attended by 35 people.

## JANUARY 2011

### Birds

The brief thaw at the beginning of the month provided welcome respite for the birds. Flocks of wildfowl and waders returned to the previously deserted grasslands. The usual wintering scene of thousands of grazing Wigeon and great flocks of Lapwing were short lived as the grasslands froze over again in the middle of the month.

The weather turned mild again in time for the January WeBS count, but wildfowl numbers were roughly two thirds of what we might expect.

Notable bird sightings this month were as follows: a female Marsh Harrier was seen throughout the month; two female Goldeneye were seen on the 6<sup>th</sup>; Hen Harrier on the 6<sup>th</sup>; Water Pipit on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

### Management

Water levels were maintained at maximum level through out the month. The tidal flap was kept open to allow the high tides on to the Saline lagoons. By the end of the month, the ridge and furrow field between the saline lagoons was looking ready for the Lapwing. Sheep had been allowed to graze late into the winter, creating a very tight sward and the repeated dousing from the tides has created bare ground in the furrows.

During the cold weather we made an unsettling discovery. We found evidence in the snow of how a fox forced itself through the 3" gaps in the fox fence netting. The bottom of the fence will have to be reinforced with chicken wire. In the meantime, the electric wires have been tightened and further support to the 8' straining posts provided where necessary.

Bryn and Richie have made several improvements to the Redhouse work base, including installing a viewing platform in the barn made from scaffold and timber left over from previous work. The viewing platform will make it far easier to get accurate winter counts of the grassland without disturbing the birds. They have also put up a safety barrier between the workshop and the ditch, as suggested in our latest safety audit.

We were able to recycle three unwanted ship containers left over from the early days when the reserve was being established. The containers have been sent up to North Wales to be used for storage on the National Nature Reserves.

Staff from Newport City Council, CCW and RSPB met with local land owner Mrs Perry to walk the proposed route of the Coastal Access Path from Nash village through the west end of the reserve to the visitor centre, to iron out any issues.

## FEBRUARY

### Birds

The first signs of breeding behaviour became evident in mid-February. Great Crested Grebes have begun their elaborate courtship display in the reedbed pools. A Snipe was seen drumming over the saline lagoons. It's too optimistic to think that this rare sight might herald the first year that Snipe breed on the reserve.

Lapwings have also begun their aerobatic displays - six males in total, five of them on the recently flooded field within the fox fence. Avocets have returned, with as many as 10 being seen on the lagoons. The female Marsh Harrier has been seen regularly again this month.

By the end of February, there were still plenty of waterfowl around, and the Wigeon count on the 20<sup>th</sup> was 1,293. Notable bird sightings this month were as followed: three Goldeneye were seen on the 18<sup>th</sup>; and a female Scaup on the lagoons on February 26.

### **Management**

Reinforcing the fox fence was the major undertaking this month. Volunteers Sheila, Rhys, Richard, Jean and Fiona have made thousands of pegs from straining wire. The pegs are used to keep the chicken wire close to the ground so that the fox cannot push underneath.

The tidal flap was closed as soon as the big tides started to dwindle with the waning moon. The flap will be kept shut now until the last of the wader chicks have fledged at the end of the summer.

Lucy Roberts from the Abergavenny team came to assist us; her superior chainsaw skills were required to coppice a particularly awkward Willow. The tree was an excellent vantage point for predatory Crows overlooking the saline lagoons.

As a pleasant relief from peg making, the volunteer team treated themselves to a few days scrub clearance in the reedbeds.

### **Events**

Kevin led the World Wetlands Day walk around the reedbeds. Unfortunately, the weather was terrible, but 12 people turned up and braved the rain.

### ***Where to Watch Birds in Gwent***

**Andrew Baker**

Do you regularly birdwatch a specific patch?

If so, would you consider helping your society by telling other people about your favourite birdwatching haunt(s)?

The committee has decided that GOS should produce a guide to the best birdwatching sites in Gwent, entitled *Where to Watch Birds in Gwent* (or similar), to commemorate our 50-year anniversary in 2013.

Initially, we are hoping to draw up a list of about 50 sites. If you regularly bird an area or are aware of any hidden gems, it would be very helpful if you could send a few brief details such as location, habitat and bird species. The committee can then assess the site and determine whether it should be included in the book.

Please send any suggestions by e-mail to: [andrew@bakerglan.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:andrew@bakerglan.fsnet.co.uk), or by post to: Andrew Baker, 8 Glanmoor, Gilwern, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire NP7 ODT - or hand to a committee member at any indoor meeting.

The society is hoping to be represented at the following shows in 2011:

- Saturday June 9 – Caerphilly 'Go Wild' event at Pontllanfraith
- Sunday June 26 – Garn Lakes Country Fayre, Blaenavon
- Saturday July 16 – GWT Magor Marsh Open Day, Magor
- Sunday July 17 – Newport Wetlands Open Day
- Saturday September 10 – Usk Show
- Sunday September 11 – Greenmeadow Farm Open Day, Cwmbran

If you can help in manning our stand, we would like to hear from you. At present, we have one volunteer for Garn Lakes. Unless we can be assured of at least three volunteers per show, we would have to reconsider our presence.

We supply a 3m square gazebo, display boards and a table for displaying GOS information.

When we can, we also prepare a bird identification quiz for the public to participate in. No prizes - although any children taking part are given a certificate if they obtain a reasonable score.

Please contact [secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk](mailto:secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk) or [treasurer@gwentbirds.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@gwentbirds.org.uk) if you are able to give of your time for any of the above events.

### ***Seeking Gwent's roosting Goosander***

**Richard Clarke**

On the evening of February 13 this year, 23 different sites across Gwent were visited by local birders to look for roosting Goosander.

This coordinated effort had been organised to try to establish the total size of the wintering population in the county and to determine which of Gwent's water bodies were being used by roosting birds.

The survey was very productive, with nine sites holding a total of 136 roosting Goosander, comprising 92 redheads and 44 males. A further five sites held birds initially, but they left with the onset of dusk - and at one further site, birds were seen passing in flight.

Llandegfedd Reservoir held most with 86 birds, followed by Garnlydan Reservoir with 17, and then 16 at Pant-yr-eos Reservoir.

Other sites with roosting birds included Gobion, Ponthir Reservoir, the Warrage, St Pierre, Cwmtillery Reservoir and the River Wye at Monmouth. In addition to Goosander, other wildfowl were recorded at all 23 sites.

A follow-up survey is now being planned to cover the winter period November 2011 to February 2012. Four visits during this period have been suggested to coincide with WeBS monitoring dates – November 20, December 18, January 15 and February 12.

If you would like to take part in the Gwent Goosander winter roost survey, then please contact Richard Clarke ([chykembro2@aol.com](mailto:chykembro2@aol.com))

By the time you read this, the final winter period for the three year *BTO Atlas* will be over. Everyone who has contributed (through doing timed tetrad visits, submitting 'roving records' or by keeping your birding records on Birdtrack) has done a really fantastic job of detailing the current state of our birds during the winter period.

The birds themselves seem to fall into three broad categories: the common and widespread, the rarities, and those that are between these two extremes.

For the common and widespread species, it looks as though there are still a few gaps in the expected distribution. The most obvious omissions and 10km squares are listed below, and I would be grateful if anyone could fill any of these gaps.

Mute Swan - SO10, SO20, SO32, ST49	Canada Goose - SO20, SO21, SO32, ST29
Little Grebe - SO32, SO40	Peregrine SO32
Coot ST29	Lapwing SO20
Woodcock SO10	Common Gull SO10, SO20, SO32, SO41
Herring Gull SO41	Barn Owl SO20, ST39
Tawny Owl SO32, ST49	Kingfisher SO10, SO20
Marsh Tit SO10, SO20, ST28, ST29	Linnet ST49
Lesser Redpoll SO40	Brambling SO32
Crossbill SO20, SO30, ST38	Yellowhammer ST29, ST38, ST39, ST49, SO30
Reed Bunting SO31, SO32, SO40, SO41	

Most rarity records will have been sent to the society for inclusion in the Gwent Bird Report, but may not have been sent to the Atlas as well. If you birded any of the county's rarities in the last three winters, please check the Atlas website [www.bto.org/atlas](http://www.bto.org/atlas) where you can see the full list of species recorded in each 10km square, and if something is missing, please add it as a roving record. To check which species have already been recorded in a square, click on 'any square summary', enter the details of the 10km square (omitting the tetrad letter eg, SO31 or ST49), click on 'winter' and then 'go'. A list of species will appear on screen.

The other thing that everyone could usefully do is to look back through their records of unusual species (in areas away from your normal birding/Atlas patch), and to submit them as roving records (view species list for each square as above). Sightings from any time during the last three winters (November-February inclusive) would be welcome. Could everyone get any winter season records to me (or entered online) as soon as possible so that I can complete validation before the final breeding season starts?

At the same time as the Atlas has been going on, the annual **Breeding Bird Survey** has been taking a bit of a back seat (but still ticking over). With the end of the Atlas fieldwork in sight, now may be the time to think about taking on one of these squares. At the moment, just nine are available - SO4817, SO3504, SO3304, SO2214, SO3621, SO3613, SO5117, SO3011 and SO4502.

The survey involves a maximum of three visits: the first to become familiar with the route and record the habitat (once you are familiar with the square this can usually be combined with the early season visit), an early season visit in April to mid-May and a later season visit in mid-May to June. None of the visits should last more than a couple of hours.

Please get back to me if you have any queries - [jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk](mailto:jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk) or phone 01873 855091.

## Chairman's Chatter

Dave Brassey

Elsewhere in this newsletter you will have seen the tribute to Phil Thompson, and I'd just like to add my own personal 'thank you' for the work he has put in over the years.

It did, however, make me realise just how much clubs and societies like ours depend upon a small number of their members who willingly give their time for the benefit of all.

All organisations can never have too many of these volunteers and I know many of our members would like the chance to give a little bit back. So if you know of anyone who would like to get more involved and needs to be asked, then please let me know.

On another note, the first Swallow has already been seen and a new season begins. Let's hope the severe winter was not too unkind to some of our breeding birds.

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## RSPB Farmer & Volunteer Alliance survey training event

Trevor Russell

I've been conducting these local farmland surveys for the past few years because I've been fascinated by what might be found in areas either unknown or otherwise difficult to access. It requires three visits to your assigned farm and discussion with the farmer to enable you to plot your route.

If this floats your boat, more details will be explained at a training event to be held at the NWR on April 7, starting at 10am (coffee from 09.45am), finishing at 2pm. Eats and drinks will be provided. If you would like to express your interest and get more info, contact organiser Mark Vercoe at [mark.vercoe@rspb.org.uk](mailto:mark.vercoe@rspb.org.uk), or tel 01248 672864 by March 28.