

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

Trevor Russell

The June meeting welcomed **Lesley Watson** as an observer to the proceedings. Many will be interested to learn that Lesley is the daughter of the late Dave Wood, who was a very popular GOS member who will always be remembered for his fiendishly difficult but uproarious Christmas quizzes! We hope that Leslie enjoyed the experience and perhaps will want to join the committee permanently.

A winter feed crop has been sown in front of **Goytre House Wood**. A generous grant from Environment Wales, administered through Monmouthshire County Council and Gwent Wildlife Trust, has paid for the ground to be cultivated and the seed purchase.

Meanwhile - and despite all this activity - a Pied Flycatcher has nested in one of the nest boxes and fledged young, while several other boxes were occupied by Tits. Jerry Lewis and Steph Tyler have surveyed the wood prior to drawing up a management plan.

Headlines from **NWR** in March reported a collapse of Cetti's Warbler and Water Rail numbers, attributed to the harsh winter, although it was hoped that Bearded Tit numbers would be unaffected due to the abundance of reed seeds.

By April, there were hopes of good breeding success of Avocets (13 nests) though Lapwing obviously struggled, despite eight of the nine nests having hatched. Six broods were seen, but none survived despite a lack of evidence of predation. On the grassland, two of the five Lapwing nests had been predated and an incubating female killed at night. It is hooted that an owl is helping with enquiries...

By April, the low rainfall was giving cause for concern due to the increasing salinity of the lagoons. The drying mud was making it uninhabitable for the larvae that wading birds depend upon, and extreme remedial measures were being contemplated. It is clearly a very complicated and delicate balancing act that Tom Dalrymple and his team have to achieve to optimise the conditions for so many different species.

A project to build a gravel bank to encourage the breeding of Little Ringed Plovers at **Blaen y Cwm Reservoir** is still being delayed by unbelievable bureaucracy and inertia between Environment Wales and Welsh Water, despite money being available to pay for the work. Similarly, **Llandegfedd and Ponthir Reservoirs** also continue to cause concern with access difficulties at Ponthir and maintenance issues at Llandegfedd.

The Dipper appeal for your favourite birding sites to include in a **Where to Watch Birds in Gwent** publication for our anniversary year in 2013 produced a few responses, but not nearly enough. Please give Andrew Baker details of your favourite birding hotspots.

GOS will attend the following **SUMMER SHOWS**: **Newport Wetlands** July 10; **GWT Magor Marsh** on July 16; and we have an invitation to an event at **Greenmeadow Community Farm, Cwmbran** in September.

This edition of *The Dipper* will be the last one edited by **Jackie Huybs** after four years and the committee expressed their heartfelt thanks and appreciation for her very professional contribution. Keith Jones has been groomed to pick up the baton (eraser?) for future editions

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Walk at Blaen Bran Community Woodland, Cwmbran Saturday June 18

Keith Roylance

A heavy rain shower at 8am delayed the start of this walk. After 45 minutes sheltering, the decision to call it off was imminent, but a break in the clouds and reduced precipitation encouraged the 10 who had met up to continue with the walk led by Mick Bailey and Keith Roylance.

Heading up from the newly opened car park, the well laid tracks were followed up to the old colliery area where the remains of the colliery buildings can be seen. The adit from which coal was obtained has long been filled in and nature has taken over. The path leads through Beech woods, overlooking the old reservoir where Mallard and Grey Wagtail were in evidence. As you reach the highest point of the walk, mixed woodland takes over on the right with moorland stretching up Mynydd Maen on your left. This habitat is ideal for warbler species, Treecreeper, Tree Pipit, etc.

Entering through a kissing gate, the walk continued through the Community Woodland with conifers to the left and mixed woodland with open areas to the right. After about a mile, a right hand track led us down towards the Blaen Bran Brook and back via the old coal workings to the car park.

It was an enjoyable three-hour walk with only sporadic light showers after the initial downpour that had delayed the start. Many thanks to the participants for being so patient and tolerant of the weather.

Species noted were: Mallard, Buzzard, Wood Pigeon, Collared Dove, Cuckoo, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, House Martin, Tree Pipit, Grey Wagtail, Wren,

Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Wood Warbler, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Jay, Crow, House Sparrow, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Linnets and Bullfinch.

A personal perception of the Big Garden Birdwatch (or dancing Pandas in the garden)

Keith Jones

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch I had heard about - but it was not for me. I see myself as a proper Bird Watcher, a member of the BTO. I have been involved in several of its investigations, including the first Atlas, a common bird census in two counties, and Birds of the Estuary enquiry, plus various individual bird surveys. No - for me, the garden scheme is for the less serious individual, a simple delight of birds, members of the RSPB.

That, honestly, was my perception - until the evening when Mick Bailey gave his talk. Mick and I had collaborated way back in the early 1970s. I respect and admire his skill and level of commitment. So was he losing his grip?

After the talk, although I had concerns over its validity, I could see something in the scheme - particularly with the number of gardens in the country, getting the fringe birders into the scientific side of birding, and as income generation - all very logical.

On Christmas Day, I opened a present from my wife - membership of the scheme! Reading the material, I still had many questions, but started looking at any birds in my rather poor garden (poor as in not very large or rural, and with a number of cats). Very close views of birds such as a male Blackcap, Goldfinches and Goldcrests followed, and I finally grabbed the nettle the second week in January. My verdict is I am really enjoying the scheme! But I still have concerns.

The first few weeks I was watching for long periods at different times of the day. Although I quickly found birds were more or less always there, early in the morning and late afternoon seemed the most productive. Late morning and midday to early afternoon tended to be rather quiet. Nothing new there. But what was very noticeable was the longer I watched the garden, the more species I saw, and in much higher numbers.

Trial periods included 20, 30, 40, 60 and 90 minutes at a time, and on one particular day, I watched the garden for four hours at various times of day, and still numbers fluctuated. This was my main concern with the scheme. It's the TV Kit Kat advert all over again. A photographer waits for hour outside the Panda enclosure for that special shot, but nothing shows. Frustrated, he turns his back to take a break to have a Kit Kat, the pandas appear and dance around but retreat to their hide by the time he returns to his camera!

After a few weeks of fluctuating numbers, and the various species seen, things seemed to settle down. Numbers reached a maximum count and then went no higher, reaching a stable population. January Starling numbers, for example, varied from two, to eight up to 35, but no higher.

As far as Starlings are concerned, I quickly learned to put a pile of mealworms on the bird table, and wait for a few minutes - that always gave me my maximum population! The key approach, then, is to choose the right time to observe the garden - but we do not know what this is.

The only alternative is to give adequate time, and I am fairly confident now if I count early morning for one hour twice a week, that seems to give me stable numbers. If I miss a particular species one week, I usually pick it up the following week. I do accept, however, that if the RSPB started laying down ground rules to increase or extend the observation time, it would run the risk of loss of interest in the scheme.

I also noticed bird populations change depending on the season. In January, Long-tailed Tits were often in the garden, but trailed off at the end of February to the beginning of March. No doubt, as spring advances, wild food becomes available and numbers drop.

What is really noticeable as a result of the scheme is watching birds - really looking at them, not just identifying them - and ticking them off. As a result, I now see behaviour I have never noticed before: Blackbirds are very tolerant of each other in the winter, with up to four feeding in the garden at the same time. But by spring, if just two males are in the garden together, a territorial fight occurs.

Other delights include very close views of courtship between Great Tits and fights between Dunnock. This is certainly very different bird watching, and wonderful.

Yet, as seasons advance, other concerns occur. Jackdaws are often at the bird table during the winter, but not in the spring. So although I notice no Jackdaws in the garden, close fly-by birds are regular, and often perch on the chimney of my house. Not technically in the garden, but do I still count them? Following the logic of the scheme I do not, but I do not feel comfortable with this.

Also during winter, two male Blackbirds arrive in the garden, and leave together. At the exact moment they fly over the hedge, a female Blackbird drops in, and I am told to count two not three. Does this not skew the results? Perhaps some of these concerns are irrational - after all, what is one small garden in the whole scheme of things? With all the gardens combined, would many of these issues be resolved?

In the final analysis, with the delights and logic of the scheme against some of the concerns I've listed, perhaps the RSPB needs to address some of these items.

The scheme has been going now for 16 years, and perhaps some of these worries have been explored in the RSPB magazine for Garden Birdwatchers, *Bird Table*. The delight of birds, description of the scheme, results of the scheme, attracting birds to the garden, concerns, validity issues etc - would this not make for a very good book?

Judy Rosser

Helen Jones

We are sorry to announce that Judy Rosser died on April 28, following a short illness. The funeral service was held on May 11.

Judy joined GOS in 1994, after attending Al Venables's bird identification classes. She was a very active member of the society, attending walks and indoor meetings, where she was a regular helper in the kitchen.

She went on many of the foreign bird watching trips led by GOS member Chris Hatch, as well as other organised wildlife trips.

An announcement was placed on the GOS website, although many of you would not have had access to that information. If anyone would like to make a donation, a cheque made payable to Cancer Research UK may be sent c/o Tovey Bros, 9/11 Cardiff Road., Newport. NP20 2EH.

Countryside Council for Wales Newport Wetlands events

Kevin Dupé

Sunday July 10, 11am-4pm: Newport Wetlands Open Day

A range of stalls, guided walks, refreshments and children's activities. Stalls and displays by Countryside Council For Wales (CCW), RSPB, Gwent Wildlife Trust, GOS, Newport City Council, Swan Rescue, Gwent Badger Group, Gwent Amphibian and Reptile Group, and more. FREE bus leaves Newport bus station at 10.30am and 1.30pm; returns at 2pm and 4pm. Free event.

Wednesday August 17, 10am-12noon: Monmouthshire Moth & Butterfly Group/CCW - 'Moths in the morning'

Come to the Visitor Centre and see the moths that came to the moth trap put out the previous night, then go on a leisurely walk to see day-flying moths. Leader: Kevin Dupé, Reserve Manager Newport Wetlands. Free event.

Wednesday August 24, 2pm-4pm: CCW – 'Damsels and Dragons'

A walk to see these fascinating insects that have been around since before the dinosaurs. They are voracious predators, yet can't bite or sting you! We'll be pond-dipping to find their nymphs as well. Leader: Kevin Dupé. Meet Newport Wetlands Centre. Free event

Saturday September 3, 9am-11am: CCW – 'Birds and migration'

A morning walk to the Goldcliff Lagoons to see birds on their way south for the winter. Leader: Reserve managers and voluntary wardens. Meet Farmers Arms, Goldcliff. Free.

Sunday November 6, 3pm-5pm: CCW

A walk to explore the reedbeds in winter. Listen out for the residents such as Cetti's Warblers and Water Rails and see over-wintering wildfowl such as Tufted Duck, Pochard and Gadwall. Leaders: Reserve managers and voluntary wardens. Meet Reserve car park. Free event.

Saturday November 19, 10.30am-3.30pm: CCW and Cymdethias Edward Llwyd – 'Wildlife in Welsh'

A guided walk looking at the birds at Uskmouth in the morning, followed by the birds at Goldcliff in the afternoon. Conducted in the Welsh language, suitable for both beginners and fluent Welsh speakers. Come for the whole walk, or leave at around 12.30pm. Bring a packed lunch if you wish. Leader: Gareth Beynon, Cymdethias Edward Llwyd. Meet Visitor Centre entrance. Free event.

Thursday February 2, 2012, 3.30pm-5pm: CCW - World Wetlands Day

A walk to explore the reedbeds in winter. Listen out for the residents such as Cetti's Warblers and Water Rails and see over-wintering wildfowl such as Tufted Duck, Pochard and Gadwall. Leaders: Reserve managers and voluntary wardens. Meet Reserve car park. Free event.

Can I manage the walk?

Most walks will involve a distance of between three and four kilometres on surfaced tracks suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs. Walks at Goldcliff involve unsurfaced paths and steps to viewing platforms. If you need advice on the suitability of a walk, please telephone 01633 636363. Appropriate clothing and footwear is strongly recommended for these events. Dogs, except guide dogs, are not permitted to any of the walks as they could disturb the birds and other wildlife that we are trying to see.

We are grateful to John Collingbourne for providing parking facilities at the Farmer's Arms for our events at Goldcliff.

OUTDOOR WALKS PROGRAMME 2011

Rob Parsons

Trip to Craig Cerrig Gleisiad, Saturday April 16

After a change in meeting point, an eager group of GOS members met outside Libanus, hoping to gain the bogey bird - the Ring Ouzel missed out on the last trip. And with sunny weather, hopes were high.

After car sharing, we moved on to the start of our walk at Forest Lodge. Early sightings in the woodland beside the farm included Wood Warbler, Redstart, Song Thrush, Robin, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Goldcrest, Treecreepers and Nuthatch.

A very obliging hare was then spotted wandering around the nearby fields with not a care in the world. Moving along the old Roman Road of Sarn Helen, Wheatears were our next tick, as a small group of four fed below hedgerow trees. Overhead, Buzzards, Wood Pigeons and the sound of the Welsh uplands - the Raven - were all in fine voice.

Now surrounded by open fields and wide views towards Sennybridge, our collective ID skills were put to the test when a Goshawk flew over.

Discussions then ensued within the group as to its correct ID, when it carried on flying towards Mynydd Epynt, was seen catching a thermal with a Buzzard - and was then agreed to be a Gos!

The route was now beside a large conifer plantation, and a whole mix of calls were heard including Blackcap, Siskin, Tree

Pipit, Redpoll and Meadow Pipit flying in and out of the plantation. In the rougher grassland, Stonechat, Skylark and Linnet were calling well.

Nearing the halfway point of Cwm Ddu, we chanced upon a real find of a pair of male and female Cuckoos, easily seen from the track and their calls echoing around the valley.

Other birds sighted by the stream included Pied Wagtail, Carrion Crow, Blackbird and Dunnock.

Sitting down for a well earned rest, we were serenaded by a male and female Peregrine flying overhead.

On the return journey, an eagle-eyed Andrew Baker called a 'what was that?' moment. After a few minutes of scouring the hawthorn and ash scrub, a small black bird with a white bib appeared - yes, it was our bogey bird, a Ring Ouzel.

It then continued to give us the run around, flying in and out of the scrub and between the ground and the canopy. Even with the use of modern technology, basic skills of field craft of standing and waiting paid off as all members of the group were treated to good views.

With all the excitement of the day over and done with and good ticks all round, we turned tail and headed for the cars with a Mistle Thrush feeding in the farm woodland ending our trip.

“A Goshawk, a Goshawk, my kingdom for a Goshawk”... or a report on a trip to Ruperra Castle, Saturday May 14

With an “Oh, my God, this is early” start, a group of intrepid GOS members filled the small car park within the Ruperra Castle grounds. This began as my kind of bird watching - sitting with a cup of coffee, and the birds just calling or flying in around us.

The list started with Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Canada Goose, Mallard, Herring Gull and Chiffchaff. Not a bad start from the car park.

The site was one of the residences of the Morgan Family and has recently been taken over by the Ruperra Trust, which is gradually bringing the pleasure grounds back to life with conifer felling and opening up of old views from around the site.

Walking slowly up the hill to the Morgan’s summerhouse along the main route, members were calling out sightings and calls for Wren, Bullfinch, Blackcap, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Wood Pigeon.

As we moved into a more open area below the old summerhouse, Garden Warblers were in full song, with Goldcrest and Long-tailed Tits flitting through the trees. This more open area gave us cracking views of Tree Pipits and their parascending flight, and the scratchy calls of the Whitethroat.

With wild gesticulation resembling a windmill, a very out-of-breath member reported the sighting of a Hawfinch, which was a very good tick for this rarely visited site.

Moving down towards the rambling grounds of the castle, Linnets were seen calling and flying through. A Cuckoo was heard in the distance, and the dense woodland surrounding the greenhouses gave calls of Tree Creeper, Goldfinch and Robin.

Other birds seen around the small collection of houses were Swallow, House Martin, Stock Dove and Pied Wagtail. Turning up onto the hill fort path and after a short climb, we arrived at the recently restored wooden arbour, where a rest was gratefully received. The more sharp-eyed members of the club sighted a Lapwing among a small flock of Crows in the newly ploughed fields below.

Suitably refreshed, we headed up to the summit where the summerhouse used to be. With scopes and eyes eagerly scanning the skies, clear views of Newport, Cardiff central and the Quantocks could be seen.

It was not long before a battle between a Peregrine and a passing Goshawk was played out in front of us. Looking well into the distance, we were able to see a number of large flocks of racing pigeons that had obviously learned from past experience and flew well over the next valley to avoid being Peregrine Fast Food.

As the wind was beginning to pick up, we decided to move on and in the descent, sightings of Raven and Sparrowhawk pleased many.

The path off the hill now passed through old conifer plantations and Crossbills, Jay and Coal Tit were heard. A Spotted Flycatcher was heard nearby and an advance party decided to ‘seek and find’, but were soon thwarted by dense undergrowth.

With the conifers thinning out and a small patch of heathland, birch and hazel woodland starting up, this site may hold many more surprises. Returning to the car park, Buzzard, Jackdaw and Stock Dove were ticked off.

More - car park - bird counts included: Pied Wagtail, Black-headed Gull, Swift, Moorhen and finally, Feral Pigeon. The main reason for this unusual mix of species available from the car park is that it faces onto a large open farm pond and the River Rhymney.

As many of the group had never visited this site previously, and with its rich range of birds, I am sure that many will return in the coming months.

Ed Hutchings on Birds

Arctic Tern

Few birds exceed the elegance of the Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) – yet few exceed its vehemence in defence of its eggs and chicks.

For many people, a memorable experience is a visit to the Farne Islands, where the Terns are almost tame enough to be touched; yet, should someone venture too close to the colony, they are quite ready to dive down and draw blood with that dagger-like bill.

A few pairs are scattered among nesting Common Terns on southern coasts, but most are in the innumerable small colonies and a few very large ones around the Scottish and Irish coasts, especially Orkney and Shetland. For several years in the 1980s, the largest Shetland colony failed to rear chicks due to a lack of sand eels of a suitable size to feed them. Orkney colonies suffered a similar fate, but eventually had a good year to make up the losses.

Arctic Terns nest as far north as any bird, but move so far south that a few get caught up in the strong westerlies of the South Atlantic and end up in Australia. They undertake one of the most enormous migrations of any bird.

- Summer adult has blood-red bill, a little shorter than Common Tern's and with no black tip; head smaller and more rounded, on short, thick neck. Wings longer and tapering to more pointed tip.
- Calls similar to the Common Tern's, but Arctic have a more whistling, upward inflection to some notes at colony.
- All Arctic Tern's flight feathers are pale and translucent from below (not just a central patch), and the dark trailing edge is thin and tapered.

The Crossbill

The Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) is the most specialised of all the finches. Most obvious are the crossed mandibles, which enable the birds to extract seeds from pine cones. Other adaptations include particularly strong asymmetrical jaw muscles which assist the twisting movement necessary to extract the seed. In normal circumstances, the feeding activity follows a regular routine.

The cone is broken from the tree, usually requiring a considerable effort, with the bird apparently making use of every muscle. It is then carried to a convenient branch, where it is held firmly by the feet while each seed is extracted in a systematic manner.

The numbers and distribution of Crossbills in Britain vary greatly from year to year, for this is an 'invasion species'. Factors as varied as food supply and prevailing weather conditions will control the number of migrants reaching Britain in the autumn, and in many cases the subsequent size of the breeding population early the following year. The Scottish Crossbill (*Loxia scotica*) is a different but very similar species, found only in Scottish pine woods.

- Adult males are often a bright brick-red; females and young are usually a yellowish-green, with a yellower rump.
- In flight, the short, deeply forked tail - together with the heavy neck and bill, and distinctive call - readily identify the Crossbill.
- Scottish Crossbill is a separate species with a larger, blunter bill and larger body; it is Britain's only unique species.

Memoirs of an island (part two)

Keith Jones

Continuing Keith's adventures on Skokholm

On one memorable morning, we bumped into the deputy warden watching a small family sloop sailing into the South Haven with - it seemed - the intention to land.

But no vessels are allowed on the reserve, so the deputy warden chased down - and we followed him. The party had moored and as the warden approached, about to give the island rules and request they leave, a man thrust his hand out and said simply: "Lockley."

That one word was enough - it was RM Lockley and his family, and I guess the rules 'No day visitors' did not apply to the man who first put the island on the birding map. Needless to say, we spent a fascinating time with him over some lunch.

MP Harris, of *Puffins* fame, was warden on the island with his wife Ros during our first visit. He had already begun his work on *Puffins*, which he later published in 1984.

Noticing how keen we were, he informed us that if we caught any Puffins, we could ring them. But hanging over a cliff on the end of a rope with a net to catch passing birds didn't appeal, so he gave us a long bamboo pole with a narrow metal hook on the end.

The plan was crawl to the Puffin nesting slopes where the birds, used to people, would allow you to get very close. We

then had to slide the pole over the ground and then, with the hook on the end of the pole alongside the Puffin's leg, just twist and pull - and we hooked the bird.

We got quite skilled using this technique, and caught a dozen or so by this method. But I found holding the Puffins rather difficult.

Although I could just about hold the bird with one hand, I was concerned that the pressure used to subdue the bird would be too much. I had to use two hands, but that then allowed the bird to peck the back of my hand. Never mind - it was a privilege to be attacked by such a lovely creature!

It was getting towards the end of our stay, and although we had heard Storm Petrels, we had not seen any. Fed up with our nagging, on a still evening Mike erected the mist nets just before dusk. Several Storm Petrels followed in the hand, which was close enough for all of us.

My last visit to the island was 1965. Mike had left, and Chris Perrins was the warden that year.

We shared the Dale taxi with a man and two young boys. Introductions followed, and he turned out to be Dr David Lack with his two sons.

Dr Lack was the Director of the Edward Gray Institute for Field Ornithology at Oxford, and the author of numerous books including: *Evolutionary Theory and Christian Belief - the Unresolved Conflict*, *Darwin's Finches*, *Life of the Robin*, *Swifts in a Tower*, *Enjoying Ornithology*, etc.

I had read his book *The Natural Regulation of Animal Numbers*, so was already a partial convert. We spent several hours in

his company during the week, usually on cliff tops watching Gannets fishing.

His enthusiasm was infectiously expansive, and he informed us of the importance of keeping detailed notes.

It was Dr Lack who encouraged me to start my first Common Bird Census at Stormy Down, with some very sound advice. That, though, is another story!

Gwent UKBS report

Chris Hatch

SIGHTINGS, MARCH 2011

HIGHLIGHTS

Two Great Grey Shrikes were present in Wentwood throughout the month. Single Firecrests were reported from Newport Wetlands (13th) and Peterstone (27th). A Green-winged Teal was present at Peterstone Gout (from 25th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

A female Marsh Harrier was seen on a number of occasions throughout the month. Up to 43 Avocets were reported (25th). Three Spotted Redshank were present (4th), while other sightings of note include two Ruff (12th) and a Bearded Tit (23rd).

Other sites

A male Hen Harrier was seen at Mynydd Llwyd near Pontypool (15th), while a female was seen near Langstone (18th). On the coast, two Dark-bellied Brent Geese were seen at Collister Pill (12th), with a Pale-bellied Brent present at the same location (25th) and a Scaup at Peterstone Gout (25th).

The usual rush of expected spring migrant sightings was reported from all over the county, but of particular note were two early Cuckoos at Brynithel (18th) and a Ring Ouzel near Monmouth (27th). Single Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers were recorded at New Inn (9th) and Llanwenarth (23rd). Red Kites were reported from a number of locations throughout the month, two Short-eared Owls were present at Waunafon Bog, (13th) while other sightings of note included a Barn Owl at the Second Severn Crossing (3rd), a putative Mealy Redpoll at Ebbw Vale (5th), eight Crossbills at Garnlydan (11th) and 24 Golden Plover at Cefn Manmoel (23rd).

APRIL

HIGHLIGHTS

A Black Redstart was reported from Peterstone Gout (2nd). Single Ospreys were recorded at Newport Wetlands (10th and 17th). A Great White Egret was seen at Collister Pill (19th). Two

Spoonbills were reported from Newport Wetlands (12th), with a single bird remaining there until the end of the month. An Iberian Chiffchaff was reported from Usk (29th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Up to 37 Avocets were present on the reserve (10th). Two male and one female Marsh Harriers were present (9th). Single Merlins were reported (10th and 16th). Other sightings of note included a Sandwich Tern (2nd) and three pairs of Bearded Tits (2nd).

Other sites

Three Ring Ouzels were reported from Trefil (8th), while three were also recorded on the Bloreng (23rd). An immature Marsh Harrier was seen at Peterstone Gout (27th). Red Kites were reported from a number of locations, while other sightings of note included a Hobby at Dingestow (24th) and a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker at Cwmbran (24th).

MAY

HIGHLIGHTS

A Hoopoe was present at Llandegfedd Reservoir (26th). A White Stork was seen at Chepstow (1st). Single Spoonbills were recorded at Newport Wetlands (3rd) and Undy (5th). Two Wood Sandpipers were reported from Newport Wetlands (2nd), while a male Garganey was also recorded at the same site (7th), as was a Little Tern (22nd). A Quail was heard calling at Blaenserchan (19th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

A female Marsh Harrier was present (from 2nd). Two Spotted Redshanks and a Curlew Sandpiper were reported (from 2nd). Two Barnacle Geese were recorded (3rd). Seawatching produced a single Guillemot, 11 Gannets, 76-plus Manx Shearwaters and three Arctic Skuas (22nd) and a single Arctic Skua (29th).

Other sites

A Grasshopper Warbler was present at Waunafon Bog (1st). A Mediterranean Gull was recorded at Peterstone (2nd), with two at the same location (10th). Four Common Scoters were seen at Peterstone (14th), with 39 Manx Shearwaters at the same location (23rd). Seven Kittiwakes were reported from Sudbrook (23rd), while other sightings of note included a Merlin at Trellech (18th) and a Nightjar at Llantilio Crossenny (30th). Red Kites and Hobbies were reported from a number of locations.

Newport Wetlands

Tom Dalrymple

MARCH 2011

Birds

The early signs are that Cetti's Warbler and Water Rail breeding numbers will be down on last year. This is not really surprising, given the hard winter. Hopefully, Bearded Tits will be unaffected due to the ample supply of reed seeds for them to eat. Steve Davidson spotted a Bittern in the reedbed this month but unfortunately, no booming has been recorded.

Some of the Lapwing are still hanging around in flocks, so it's too early to tell whether there

are fewer pairs this year. The good news is that we have four nests all within the foxproof fence. The maximum count for Avocet was 42 on the 25th of the month, but it's too early to see how many pairs there are. A flock of 140 Black-tailed Godwit was still with us at the end of March.

Management

The big news this month is that our first hide is now finished; it gives views over the reedbed closest to the copse. The hide was constructed by a company called Coed Dinefwr from Carmarthenshire. The other four hides mentioned in the December report have been delivered and will be erected after the breeding season.

CCW commissioned Mary Knight, a PhD student from Bristol University, to carry out a disabled access audit of Newport Wetlands, as well as 13 other NNRs over the next two years. We await the results.

March was very dry this year, with only 21.4mm of rain. Despite this, the water levels in the wet grasslands remained high throughout the month.

Events and visits

I gave a talk to Herefordshire Nature Trust on the 3rd and Kevin gave a talk to the Uskmouth branch of the Gwent Wildlife Trust on the March 8.

APRIL

Birds

By mid-April, the situation on the lagoons was as follows: 35 Avocet with 13 nests; 24 Lapwings, nine nests and four chicks; 39 Redshank (total number of nests uncertain), 11 Oystercatcher.

By the end of April, the Avocet remain unchanged. No Redshank chicks have been seen and the Oystercatchers are incubating three nests. Eight of the nine Lapwing nests are thought to have hatched. The one failed nest was predated around midnight. Six broods of chicks were seen, but by the end of April, all had vanished with no evidence of predation.

On the grasslands, there have been eight pairs of Lapwing plus a non-breeding flock of 18. So far, only five nests have been identified - two of them predated. The incubating female was also killed on one of these nests overnight. Interestingly, the nest was completely surrounded by damp mud and no tracks could be found, suggesting an avian predator, possibly an

Owl. The third nest hatched and one chick survives.

There is one Oystercatcher nest and three pairs of Redshank, although only one nest has been identified.

Notable birds this month include: Spoonbill seen at the saline lagoons periodically, Osprey flying over the lagoons on the 10th, Grasshopper Warbler heard two or three times this month.

Management

Very low rainfall is becoming a great concern. Only 31.6mm of rain has fallen on the reserve in March and April. The salinity of the lagoons is becoming too high and exposed mud is beginning to dry out, making it uninhabitable for the chironomid larvae wading birds depend on for food.

The cattle have been moved from the lagoons to prevent them crossing to the islands where they may trample wader nests. The downside to this is that the vegetation may get too long in their absence to allow Lapwing to re-lay.

If there is no significant rainfall this weekend, water will have to be pumped from the wet grasslands through the fox fence into the lagoons. This is a last resort as it will cause quite a lot of disturbance and increase the risk of predation.

All tenants had turned their animals out on to the reserve this month, but with the very warm weather, we could have done with the stock even sooner.

Bryn and Richie have taken advantage of the dry weather to weedwipe rush on the grasslands wherever the grass is low enough.

Events

Kevin and volunteers Sheila Dupé, Chris Hurn and Keith Thomas led a guided walk to see the breeding waders at the saline lagoons on the 16th and a guided walk around the reedbeds to celebrate the Newport City Council Walking festival on April 30.

May

Birds

By the end of May, the situation on the lagoons was as follows: 28 Avocet, seven nests, one chick; 10 Lapwings, two nests and three chicks; 18 Redshank, at least three chicks; four Oystercatcher, one nest, three chicks.

A total of 90% of the Lapwing first nest attempts within the fox fence successfully hatched, compared with 25% outside. Unfortunately, all the Lapwing chicks on the grasslands and the lagoons have disappeared.

Predation has been high on the lagoons for all wader species. The Avocet had no chicks alive from the original 13 nests, but eight have re-laid. Predation seems to be the cause and the main culprits appear to be Crows and large Gulls - but I'm sure the Heron is getting his share.

Notable birds this month include: Spoonbill remained throughout the month, spending time at the saline lagoons and the grasslands, Little Tern over the lagoons on May 22, male Garganey on the wet grasslands on the 7th & 8th and two Wood Sandpipers on the Lagoons on May 2.

Management

Despite the fact that more rain fell in May than the previous two months put together, the parched soil and warm winds meant that the saline lagoons were in danger of drying out. Water had to be pumped onto the lagoons from the grasslands for five days at the end of the month.

However, water levels remained low and therefore there was a risk that cattle would get over to the islands, where the majority of the nests were. Vegetation around the lagoons was getting very tall by mid month, as there were no waders nesting anywhere except the islands by the 23rd, I made the decision to let sheep on to graze.

We've been experiencing problems with a bull getting out this month. He's been determined to get to the cows and believes he's capable of jumping five bar gates to get there. Unfortunately, he can only get his front legs over and when the rest of him follows, the gate gets pulverised. Extra tall gates are on the way, but in the meantime he's got his way - he's in with the cows.

The volunteers have been busy repairing footpaths and cutting back overhanging vegetation, in addition to their usual butterfly counts.

Events

The RSPB trustees and management board visited Newport Wetlands on May 8. They were greeted at the visitor centre by the Newport Male Choir in full voice. Alan Morris, Lorraine Leicester, Lewis James and Sue Howard were all present to show the visitors around the visitor centre and reserve.

On May 1, Gwent Ornithological Society member Darryl Spittle kindly ran our Dawn Chorus event for another year.

BTO NEWS

Jerry Lewis, BTO Regional Rep

We are now well into the final breeding season for **Atlas** fieldwork, and all your hard work and observations will become another landmark publication in due course. Priorities for this final month of fieldwork should be as follows: firstly, to ensure that the species list for every 10km square is as complete as possible; and secondly, to record the highest level of breeding evidence for every species in each 10k square.

The Atlas website has a number of features to help you. Log in to Data Home and use My Local Gaps, Any Square Summary or Priority Squares to help you find squares where more effort is needed. My Local Gaps will show the 10k squares around the square where you have already provided most records, the % figure in the top left of each square gives an indication of how many species have NOT YET been confirmed breeding (orange if there are lots of species, blue if less than 50% still need confirmation of breeding). You can get details of these species by clicking on the % value, or on the magnifying glass icon.

Any Square Summary will give you a list of species so far recorded in any square in the country, very useful if you are planning a trip somewhere, but also to determine what species look to have been missed locally (you will of course have to look through the list and decide which species ought to be there but missing). To give you a better idea of what might be missing, use Priority Squares - this gives you a list of species not yet recorded in your main square, but which have been recorded in adjacent squares.

There are also likely to be a few of you who have not submitted any records to the Atlas, but there is still an opportunity for you to help. Check the website www.bto.org/atlas and look at the species list for any 10k square, if you have seen a species that has not yet been recorded (during the winter period or during the breeding season), or have improved breeding evidence, from any time during the last three years please submit the record now.

If you have any queries please give me a ring 01873 855091, or email me at jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk

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