

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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GOS WEB SITE: www.gwentbirds.org.uk

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AGM COMMENTARY 2015

The President, Steve Roberts, welcomed 44 members to the AGM, which held the promise of a short meeting because the Agenda held no controversial time-traps. And so it proved.

The Treasurer, Andrew Cormack, reported a very profitable year, thanks to sales of the book, Birdwatching Walks in Gwent, which has virtually sold out in little over a year. Postal charges are becoming increasingly expensive, so members who receive their Dippers through the post were urged to consider whether they could have it emailed to them – with pictures in colour! Maintenance of Goytre House Wood is an ongoing significant expense in order to keep it in a safe condition.

The Chairman, Verity Picken, reported a quieter year than last year with no conference to host or book to publish and launch. The Society had protested loud and long to the Natural Resource Wales because it had granted a licence to shoot 6 Goosanders and 12 Cormorants on the Gwent section of the river Usk in order to conserve salmon stocks for anglers. When the Welsh Ornithological Society learned that NWR had granted nearly 20 shooting licences across many Welsh rivers in 2014, they brought their influence to bear, the outcome of which is that for the Usk in 2015, NWR has issued a restricted licence for only a short section of the river.

GOS is also monitoring a proposal to build tidal lagoons along the Severn coastline to generate renewable energy. What isn't understood yet is the impact this will have on the

mudflats and saltmarshes which support waders and wildfowl.

We received the regrettable resignation of Field Secretary, Steve Butler, shortly before the AGM, but there were no other changes to the Committee and an updated list of Committee members appears on page 12.

The AGM was concluded in the record time of 23 minutes and was followed by the traditional Members Evening Buffet and a slideshow from seven members covering topics which took us from Australia to a GOS website teach-in, via Madeira, Africa, NWR and a cunning nest n'eggs quiz by Steve Roberts, which was won by Steve Carter. A great evening, see you there next year!

Chairman's Report 2014

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen

With no conference to host and no book to publish, 2014 was a somewhat quieter year for the Gwent Ornithological Society. Nonetheless, 13 indoor meetings were held here in Goytre and GOS was also invited to give two talks elsewhere: one at Chepstow, in association with the local branch of the Gwent Wildlife Trust, and the other at Blaenavon World Heritage Centre. Ten field outings took members to various parts of Gwent and neighbouring counties while the ever-popular annual weekend trip to Portland Bill was once again fully booked.

Fieldwork continued apace. Five BTO surveys were undertaken: Wetland Birds, Breeding Birds, Waterways Breeding Birds, the Heronries Census and a Peregrine survey. A number of

local surveys were repeated, some organised by the Society, others undertaken by members on a personal basis; these included Fish-eating Birds on the River Usk, Red Grouse on the uplands, Tree Sparrows on the Levels, breeding seabirds on Denny Island, breeding feral Greylag Geese, and Water Rail at Newport Wetlands.

Just one new species was recorded in 2014 but what a special one! The reeling Savi's Warbler found at Newport Wetlands in May brought the county total to 304. Marsh Harrier, though first recorded in Gwent more than 50 years ago, remained rare or scarce for many years, so its increasing presence in the county is interesting.

To conservation matters: the Society wrote objecting to the licence issued by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to cull Goosanders and Cormorants on the River Usk. The Welsh Ornithological Society supported our objection and as licences were approved for many Welsh rivers, they, too, are now pursuing the matter. Previously a licence was issued for the whole of the River Usk but this year (2015) the licence is restricted to certain sections only so our intervention has clearly met with some success. There is also a greater readiness by the licensing section of NRW to follow up illegal shooting incidents on the river.

The Society is keeping a close eye on Tidal Lagoon Power's proposal to build lagoons along much of Gwent's coastline and will be part of a multi-organisation response to the TLP scheme. Lagoons would obviously have a major impact on the ability of the mudflats and saltmarsh to support waders and wildfowl so we will monitor any developments very closely.

GOS also objected to the proposed Circuit of Wales at Rassau, as did other Gwent organisations, but unfortunately Blaenau Gwent Borough Council approved the application. With luck, difficulties in raising the necessary finance may still put a stop to this damaging development.

Keeping Goytre House Wood in good shape for both avian and human visitors is an ongoing responsibility. Maintenance work this year involved the removal of dead branches and the tops of fungus-infected trees though we were unexpectedly helped in the latter task by strong winds. As a public footpath runs through the wood this work is essential for safety reasons.

At the end of the year membership numbers stood at 313, just one more than in the previous year. Whilst we obviously want still more members, it's good to know that we've put a stop to recent declines. We attended five summer shows in 2014 and gained several new members as a result – proof that our attendance at these events is worthwhile.

As always, we kept members and the public informed of what is happening in the county through our publications and website. For the second year running the *Gwent Bird Report* featured a national rarity on its front cover – the Penduline Tit found at Newport Wetlands Reserve. The appeal of the cover was matched by the content with a particularly meaty and interesting systematic list. As usual, *The Dipper* alerted members to birding news on a quarterly basis while the website was clearly seen as a vital source of information. An analysis of statistics shows that in December alone, the website was visited over 22,000 times by 5,350 people, the

sightings page being particularly popular. So far this month the site has been accessed on average over 900 times a day. Website improvements continued, though more slowly than we would like, but the county list is now bang up-to-date and the new downloadable Recording Form and Rare Species Description Form are easily accessible. Everyone is urged to use these to submit their 2014 records.

Sales of *Birdwatching Walks in Gwent* have been extremely successful – by the end of December we had sold 794 books. We now have fewer than 100 copies left in stock so if you haven't yet bought one, do so quickly!

As in 2013, no applications were received for the Bert Hamar bursary which is given to help with out-of-pocket expenses incurred when doing field work. We hope it will be taken up in 2015.

There were two changes to the committee during the year: after 12 years of organising walks for our outdoor programme, Steve Butler retired as Field Secretary. His energy and cheerfulness will be missed, the more so since we do not yet have a replacement. However, Alan Williams has kindly made a start on planning outings. Keith Jones stepped down after nearly four years of editing *The Dipper* but happily he and Gill continue to run the library. Janet Cormack kindly took over the editorship of *The Dipper*.

Many people give generously of their time to the Society – walk leaders, speakers, those who help at indoor meetings and summer shows, and, of course, the committee. I thank them all wholeheartedly. But to function well, to maintain and improve the services we provide, we need *more*

people. Many tasks are organisational or administrative so don't need birding expertise. If you can offer help in any way – at indoor meetings, planning rotas, as a committee member or with the website – please do so. It will be much appreciated and will enable the Society to have another successful year.

Committee Commentary Trevor Russell

The February meeting focused on two main items of concern: the construction of tidal power lagoons in the Severn estuary and Llandegfedd reservoir.

The Tidal Lagoon Power company has received permission to go ahead with the construction of a lagoon around Swansea Bay, with completion planned for 2017. Whilst renewable energy might be a laudable aim, our concern was that approval seems to have been given based on theoretical evidence - computer modeling, inappropriate data and hypothetical assumptions. Worse, the company seems to be racing ahead with plans to build a lagoon around Cardiff Bay with several more planned to will reach up to the Severn crossings together with a lagoon around Bridgwater Bay on the southern side of the estuary. The anxiety is that they are all using the same dubious, hypothetical data, rather than waiting to see the *actual* effect of the Swansea Bay lagoon on tidal scarification, mud re-deposition – and the effects on wader-feeding habitat - and the impact on other effects, for example, tourism, fishing etc. Our attitude is that TLP should wait to use real data from the Swansea experience before submitting more planning applications.

It was agreed that we should join forces with more influential groups to

make our views felt. The RSPB has indicated its willingness to co-operate.

Llandegfedd reservoir gives cause for exasperation once again. Neglected and deteriorating birdwatching facilities and habitats cause us to wonder if Dwr Cymru is deliberately trying to lose its SSSI status to enable more lucrative

activities to take place on the water. We will be writing to Natural Resource Wales and Dwr Cymru to ask whether conservation quality standards are slipping and ask that the reservoir be re-assessed *now* to test whether the Water Framework Directive is being infringed, especially at this time of re-development at the reservoir.

A surprise find: Savi's Warbler at Newport Wetlands Reserve, Uskmouth – a first for Gwent

Mathew Meehan

On spring weekends my usual mooch around the reserve starts at Goldcliff Lagoons to check through the waders for any unusual arrivals, followed by a walk round the fringe habitat in search of migrants that may have dropped in overnight. The morning of Saturday 24th May 2014 was not dissimilar, and after a few enjoyable hours of birding but not discovering anything new, my focus switched, as usual, to a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich back home! Somehow though, due to the weather conditions (slow moving thunderstorms from the east) and the high number of freshly arrived hirundines, something prompted me to up-sticks and make an effort to walk the reedbeds at Uskmouth ... who knew, maybe a smart male Bluethroat was waiting to be discovered!

On arrival the weather worsened and I again pondered the bacon sandwich; nevertheless I grabbed my binoculars and headed up to the reedbeds. After a birdless couple of hours there was no sign of that majestic Bluethroat anywhere, nor even a new Redstart; the reserve was totally devoid of birds apart from the Swallows, martins and Swifts swooping low over the reedbeds.

On reaching the lighthouse in pouring rain for the final leg back across the 'bouncy' bridge my vision of a hot tea and bacon sandwich quickly faded – a high frequency electronic-like 'suurrRRRRrrr' was rising from the reedbed on my left!! I knew instantly that this was a *Locustella* warbler singing and my mind's search quickly assigned it to Savi's Warbler having seen and heard them a few years ago in Hungary. Now what? Action stations! Equipped with just my 'bins' I had limited means of capturing this record if the bird made only a fleeting appearance. OK, calm down, don't panic – or at least panic slooowly! Get confirmed views. Call people to 'put the news out'. And then get some sound recordings onto the smartphone.



Photo: Darryl Spittle

Fortunately I surprised myself converting all of these in quick succession. I then waited a long, long 20 minutes for the cavalry to arrive to verify the sighting. The reedbed specialist continued to perform wonderfully, uttering its strangely pitched song and affording decent views for such a normally skulking species. Finally a few fellow birders arrived and I relaxed, soaked up the occasion, smiled to myself and

Photograph: Darryl Spittle

thought, given the choice, I would have traded all the bacon sarnies in the world that morning for this chance find! Not quite the majestic Bluethroat I imagined – that's still out there – but still a 'good bird' as they say!

Summary of Recent Indoor Meetings – January – February 2015

Andrew Cormack

Following the Society's Annual General Meeting, six members accepted the challenge of presenting a short illustrated talk. The results took us around the world in sixty minutes, with John Coleman avoiding crocodiles in Northern Australia, Richard Dowle working out the pecking order of vultures in Africa, Dave Brassey finding a mix of familiar and unfamiliar birds on Lesvos, Keith Roylance on GOS and other trips in the UK, and John Marsh digiscoping at Newport Wetlands. Our president, Steve Roberts, rounded off the evening with a fiendish nest identification quiz. We are likely to repeat this successful format next year, so start preparing now. Putting together a talk may well be easier than learning nests!

Our first formal presentation of the year was by Andrew Baker, who reported on a road trip along the coast of Texas, from Houston to the Mexican border. The wide range of habitats, from swamp to near-desert, produced a similarly wide range of birds and bird names: from the mundane cowbird to the exotic pyrrhuloxia. The highlight of the trip was successfully tracking down a fall of migrant warblers refuelling after crossing the Gulf of Mexico: even hungry warblers couldn't eat every biting insect, but that seemed to have been a price worth paying. The talk even featured a rare Goytre Hall appearance by two film stars: coyote and roadrunner.

Chris Sperring discussed the challenges of maintaining a sustainable population of a bird whose natural life-cycle varies dramatically from one year to the next. In consecutive years the same, well-managed, Somerset farm produced respectively two and forty-two barn owl fledglings. This variability is largely due to fluctuations in the population and availability of the owls' main prey - field voles. In a year when bad weather means there are few voles, or rain or snow prevent the owls hunting efficiently, then they may not breed at all: with a good supply of voles they are capable of nesting successfully and repeatedly in almost any month of the year. The key to barn owl conservation is therefore to provide good habitat for voles and, in particular, to ensure that habitats are connected so that when population growth is possible, it is not limited by man-made barriers. Narrow strips of rough grassland along walls and hedges may be all that's needed; fortunately many farmers are willing to leave these, even when grants are not available, provided there is some recognition of their efforts to help an iconic farmland bird.

Rob Thomas introduced us to the remarkable European Storm Petrel, and how long-term studies may teach us more about the ocean environment where it spends most of its time. Storm petrels are the smallest Atlantic sea bird - about the size of a sparrow - but migrate annually from their breeding islands in north-west Europe to spend the winter in the seas off southern Africa. Despite what seems to us a hostile environment, birds can live for more than 30 years. Studying petrels is a challenge because, even when they do come to land, they nest in crevices in cliffs, walls and buildings - the beehive huts of the Skellig Michael monastery have a large population - and only emerge at night. Studies of breeding in Shetland suggest that success is higher in years when productivity of plankton in the surrounding seas is high, as might be expected. However Dr Thomas's study of petrels attracted to sound recordings on the Portuguese coast found that migrating adults are significantly lighter in good years for plankton production. It seems that the birds eat more, and build up more fat reserves, when food is hard to find. But petrels don't eat plankton: from DNA in their faeces, it seems that those caught in Portugal have mostly been eating sardines! It seems highly unlikely that such a small bird could catch a live adult fish, so whether the DNA comes from fish eggs, discards from fishing boats, or somewhere else, is one of the many puzzles about these tiny birds.

Give Swifts a helping hand this summer

GOS plans to undertake Swift nest surveys in Monmouth and Abergavenny this summer as well as repeating last year's survey of Usk. **Volunteers are needed!** The task is very straightforward – you would be asked to watch a particular building or walk a short circuit, noting any nest sites visited by Swifts; the surveys would start at about 8.45pm and finish at around 10pm.

The data gathered will be sent to SEWBReC so that it can be used in the planning screening process to guide future development and ensure the long-term conservation of this spectacular but declining species.

If you can help on even one evening please contact one of the following local organisers:

Monmouth	Steph Tyler	01600 719890	steph_tyler2001@hotmail.com
Abergavenny	Andrew Baker	01873 830539	andrew@bakerglan.fsnet.co.uk
Usk	John Bennett	01291 672054	jrb.usk@virgin.net

Tidal Lagoon Power – a proposal for energy generation on the Severn Al Venables

Tidal Lagoon Power (TLP) is a company that is planning the construction of a series of impounding lagoons in the Severn Estuary in order to generate electricity. The principle of the lagoons is broadly similar to that of the proposed Severn Barrage; the barrage would have been built across the estuary between Lavernock Point and Brean Down, thus impounding the high tide waters above this point and generating power on the ebb tide as the water flowed out through turbines.

TLP envisages the impoundment of the high tide in 4 separate lagoons situated within the estuary. These would be located at:

1. Swansea Bay, for which planning permission has already been granted;
2. Cardiff and Wentlooge coast as far as Uskmouth;
3. Caldicot Level coast, stretching from Uskmouth to Caldicot;
4. Bridgewater Bay, Somerset.

The scale of the lagoons is enormous and their construction would undoubtedly bring about large-scale changes to the hydrology and ecology of the estuary and perhaps also to surrounding coastal grazing marshes and rivers and streams feeding into it. The precise nature of such changes, and their likely consequences for birds that use the estuary, cannot be predicted with any confidence as there are no appropriate precedents that might provide some guidance.

Unsurprisingly, GOS is viewing the proposals with some concern and will be attempting to use its influence to ensure that thorough environmental impact assessments, based on up-to-date and reliable data, are carried out. In order to get our voice heard more effectively, we have been in discussions with RSPB and they have agreed to represent our interests as part of their own submissions.

At present, GOS is neither for nor against the tidal lagoons project. Its implementation would definitely have a big impact on the birds of the estuary, perhaps producing major changes in species composition and how they use the estuary. Whether the overall effect would be positive or negative cannot yet be predicted, so GOS will be putting its efforts into trying to ensure that the necessary research is carried out.

NEWPORT WETLANDS WINTER 2014 TOM DALRYMPLE

Birds

Winter bird counts were quite good despite the mild weather; more species had peak counts higher than the 5 year average than below it. 5 species were recorded in numbers higher than the GB threshold.

Up to 3 cranes have been seen on several occasions throughout the year, most notably a pair displaying in late February. Fingers crossed for the coming weeks!

Richard Clarke kindly carried out a tape lure survey for water rail again this year. 60 individuals was recorded, slightly down on previous years.

Management

A project to use RB11 to store water in times of drought has now been completed. RB11 was built in the 70's to store fuel ash from the power station. The reservoir has a concrete sluice 40 metres long and 5 meters high at one end. We've installed a penstock to control the water level and a pipe and valve system that allows us to store excess water from the reedbeds, as well as being able to feed the grasslands by gravity and even get fresh water to the saline lagoons some 2.5 km away.



The project will pay for itself in reduced licence and equipment maintenance costs.



Kevin has been using an amphibious reed cutter to create more edge habitat in shallower parts of the reedbed to create more suitable hunting areas for bittern.

Live trapping and poisoning brown rat with Barn Owl Trust approved non-toxic bait may well have been one of the factors that lead to a successful breeding season for all wader species last year. In addition this year we

will use trail cameras to monitor nests and crèche areas for wader chicks and numbered pebbles that allow us to monitor nests from a distance more easily.

20,000 visits and counting!
Chris Field

In February the GOS website was visited nearly 20,000 times by over 4000 different visitors – around ten times our membership. We had over 500 visits through links on other birdwatching websites and, in the opposite direction, 150 visitors used links listed on our site to reach other birdwatching sites. The figures for the last three months for the various web pages are given in the table below. Visits by ‘robots’ and ‘crawlers’ just trawling for information have been excluded.

The number of visits per month is impressive and it is interesting that at each visit an average of four or five pages are viewed. Some of the figures are affected by specialist searches, which are evident only for one or two months. The high Gallery count in December was the result of preparatory work for the AGM. The frequent trawls by Google and Yahoo amongst others for new web pages are not included in the figures. Mark Newton, our webmaster, says it is the most used site of those that he manages.

	No. of times visited		
	Dec 2014	Jan 2015	Feb 2015
Total visits	22,272	26,703	19,616
Unique visitors	5,359	5,731	4,370
Links in	416	523	548
Links out	60	111	156
<i>Pages by topic</i>			
Indoor meetings	588	148	428
Outdoor meetings	640	72	412
Sightings page	14,420	26,946	15,255
Submit sighting	618	1,094	452
County list	3,488	2,406	600
Recording Excel file	118	157	49
Rarities Word file	32	32	13
Forum	2,686	2,222	2,012
Gallery	7,418	1,094	2,670
Total pages	164724	229863	187416
Total hits	498580	676631	563540

A visit can be equated to a “session” and for the analysis program used on our site it lasts an hour. So all pages looked at from one visitor within the hour counts as one visit. The Unique visitor count is reset on 1st of a month and counts each new address opening any page on the website.

The Outdoor and Indoor page counts are high partly because the summary page and the individual meetings pages are tallied separately. Even so it does show that many birders look to see what is on. The Sightings page count includes each page visited, though probably most regular visitors only check the latest couple pages. So a guess would be about 4000 to 5000 visits to the Sightings pages a month. The large

Submit –Sighting numbers seem odd – why would anyone view the form if he or she does not intend posting a sighting? This is probably due in part to the structure of the form – the several different elements are completed in turn and counted anew at each stage. Pleasingly, the County List page shows a good number of copies of the new recording spreadsheet was downloaded. The Forum must be a disappointment to visitors as there were around 1000 visitors each month with nothing new seen or contributed for months. The Gallery was well visited.

On other websites, the Number of Hits is often the only number quoted as it is the largest one! However, these numbers are not really significant as they include counts of all the individual files that go to make up a page even if the viewer only visited that page for one item. For reference the Number of Hits on the GOS site was Dec 2014 – 498580, Jan 2015 – 676631, Feb 2015 – 563450.

It is excellent that the website is used and valued by so many people and feedback is welcomed to improve the design and content. For the society it would be even better if those who contribute to the website, particularly with Sightings, would consider joining if they are not already members.

Forthcoming Indoor Meetings

Saturday 28 March	<u>Saving our Swifts - helping Swifts survive the 21st century</u>	Edward Mayer
Saturday 11 April	<u>Reasons to like your neighbourhood gulls</u>	Viola Ross-Smith

Forthcoming Outdoor Meetings

Monday 06 April 2015	<u>Lower Monnow Valley</u>	John Coleman
Saturday 25 April 2015	<u>The Blorengge - Grouse Walk</u>	Andrew Baker
Saturday 16 May 2015	<u>St David's Vale</u>	John Davies
Tuesday 09 June 2015	<u>Blaenserchan</u>	Roo Perkins
Sunday 05 July 2015	<u>Goetre House Wood</u>	Alan Williams
Friday 14 August 2015	<u>St Brides Wentlooge</u>	Al Venables

GOS COMMITTEE MEMBERS 2015

PERMANENT MEMBERS

President	Steve Roberts
Vice President	Al Venables
Vice President	Alan Williams

HONORARY OFFICERS (elected annually)

1 Chairman	Verity Picken
2 Secretary	Trevor Russell
3 Treasurer	Andrew Cormack

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS (elected annually)

4 Conservation Officer	Andrew Baker
5 County Recorder	Tom Chinnick
6 Librarian	TBA
7 Newsletter Editor	Janet Cormack
8 Field Secretary	TBA
9 Indoor Secretary	Al Venables
10 Membership Secretary	Lesley Watson
11 Report Editor & Publicity	John Coleman
12	Adrian Plant
13	Chris Field
14	Dave Brassey
15	Rupert (Roo) Perkins

CO-OPTED TO THE COMMITTEE BY THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1	Al Venables (as Vice Chairman)
2	Chris Hatch
3	Chris Jones
4	Jerry Lewis
5	Rob Parsons
6	Steph Tyler
7	Steve Williams

GOS CONTACTS

Chairman

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Membership Secretary

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Newsletter

Janet Cormack

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