

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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NOTICE OF Annual General Meeting 2016

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday, January 16th, 2016, in the Village Hall, Goytre, starting at 7:30pm

A nomination to appoint GAVIN VELLA to the committee has been made by Verity Picken and seconded by Roo Perkins and Al Venables. Gavin's election will need to be approved at the AGM.

Whilst other Officers and Committee Members have indicated their willingness to stand for re-election IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT THEY CANNOT BE CONTESTED! New nominations for any and all positions are always invited and new faces would be a very welcome sight!

All nominations should be signed by both the Proposer and Secunder with the agreement of the nominee, or e-mail me with details. (see Contacts list for details)

Nominations must be received by January 1st 2015

In the event that a position is contested selection will be made by a show of hands at the AGM.

The formalities of the AGM will be followed by a Finger Buffet where the trick is to bring some finger food to be shared by everyone and then take the opportunity to select something that looks far more appetising than your own offering.

Following the buffet we will hold a Members Evening, where members will be invited to show some of their own slides. There may also be a bird quiz and who can forget Steve Roberts' fiendish Nest n' Eggs quiz which caught most of us stone cold last year? Start revising everything now!

Trevor Russell

Secretary

STOP PRESS!!

In order that we can all get home at a reasonable hour Member slots for the slide show are now full, so please do not bring any more slides to the meeting. Do try to contain your disappointment and let me know if you would like to make a 10-minute presentation next year.

Bramble growth in Goytre House Wood has reached epidemic proportions and needs to be controlled. Cattle grazing is inappropriate and a plea for a volunteer working party will be advertised for some Bramble Bashing on November 24th. The aim is to create pathways to nestbox-bearing trees to enable them to be serviced and cleaned in time for next year's breeding season. We also need to clear bramble and saplings from public footpaths.

Tribulations at Llandegfedd Reservoir continue but GOS member, Gavin Vella, is preparing to set up and top-up feeding stations throughout the winter period. He is prepared to write –up this work into a report that will be published in the Annual Report in due course. It will describe what birds visit, how many etc. This is exactly the sort of project that the Hamar Bursary is set up to support, so Gavin has been awarded the 2015 Hamar Bursary of £200 to assist with the cost of bird feed.

Gavin has also written a Proposal for Collaboration to support a Conservation Volunteer Group at the reservoir involving Welsh Water, GWT and GOS. His proposals include scrub management, maintenance of a sand martin nest bank, establishment of nest box monitoring and recording, repair of the Osprey platform etc. Watch for more detail in the Dipper, website and Facebook.

We learned that the WOS Conference, recently held in Carno, was the occasion where STEPH TYLER received a Lifetime Achievement Award for her services to ornithology! Huge congratulations from us all in GOS, Steph! Read her citation elsewhere in this edition.

Work continues to improve the GOS website though it is becoming increasingly apparent that we need to look for a new web management system that WE could manage but which a third party would understand, maintain and provide security coverage.

Indoor and Field meeting programmes have been drawn up for 2016 and the plan is to circulate it with this edition of The Dipper.

Finally, we learned that the tidal lagoon project in Swansea Bay has been delayed by at least a year due to financial difficulties. We also learned that Tidal Lagoon Power will require at least 3 projects to go ahead for financial viability. Stay tuned!

Welsh Ornithological Society (WOS) Annual Conference 2015

Andrew Cormack and Alan Williams

WOS went to mid-Wales for its 2015 conference to the little village of Carno in Powys. The well equipped village hall, due to the generosity of Laura Ashley, is centrally located in Wales and is one of the venues used by WOS as its policy of moving around Wales to hold this event. Apart from its two annual 'Birds in Wales' publications the conference is the Society's main event of the year. There is a theme for each conference and this year it was 'Inspiring the next generation'. The was

achieved by having mainly young presenters and targeting people in the 15-20 age group by letting them attend for free.

WOS president, Iolo Williams, described the 2015 conference as the most positive for years. WOS, like many other conservation organisations, has been concerned for some time about the next generation's engagement with nature. This year's conference therefore chose to highlight some of the great work being done in Wales both for and by young naturalists.

Lucy McRobert introduced A Focus on Nature (www.afocusonnature.org): a network for 16-30 year olds. This age group are stuck between two problems: an interest in nature (or almost any other hobby) is likely to be seen as uncool by their own age group, but being the youngest in the room at existing conservation meetings and conferences is also scary. AFON provides opportunities to meet with peers and mentors, both online and in person, and develop interests in a supportive environment. WOS's offer of free under-25s places at the conference had been enthusiastically taken up. If you'd like to get involved as either a student or a mentor, get in touch through the website.

Emma-Louise Cole, who had just been presented with £200 for the Derek Moore award for student research, talked about her work on Welsh honey buzzards. Her study involves watching three years of nestcam footage, provided by GOS president Steve Roberts, to determine when and what chicks are fed. This has revealed that parents do not share roles equally and provide different prey species. Only males bring frogs to the nest – a finding confirmed by observations in the Netherlands. Holly Kirk described the results of nine years of seabird tracking by the Oxford University Navigation Group (oxnav.zoo.ox.ac.uk). Manx shearwaters are a particularly good subject as they return to the same burrow each year, permitting both short and long-term tracking. GPS devices can record the birds' foraging trips during the nesting season: the same waters in the Irish Sea are important for shearwaters from Lundy, Skomer and Rum. Geolocators reveal an even greater concentration in wintering location off Argentina: with 90% of the world population, these seas are clearly vital for the species' well-being. Depth loggers can reveal how birds forage: some shearwaters dive as deep as 14m below the surface. All of these devices are getting smaller. Even video recorders can now be attached to a bird's back, providing a real bird's eye view of flying, resting and fishing. Manxecam must surely be due for a starring role in a future Springwatch!

Viola Ross-Smith from BTO described her work on gulls on Flat Holm and elsewhere. Humans have affected gull populations for many years. In the 19th century gulls were shot for sport and for feathers; population growth in the 1950s seems to have been fuelled by an increase in landfill sites; this was followed by a population crash caused by botulism; gulls in the Netherlands are so dependent on fishing discards that chicks risk starvation at weekends. In the 21st century, both herring and lesser black-backed gulls are in serious decline: a Suffolk colony that had twenty thousand pairs at the millennium is now close to empty. Gulls' complex and varied behaviour makes it hard to identify the root causes. Even the two birds of a pair can behave very differently: Suffolk birds may get most of their food at inland rubbish dumps or out at sea; Skokholm gulls may winter in Lisbon or Cardigan. Long-term studies seem our best chance of understanding what is going on.

Carolyn Robertson (RSPB) reported research results suggesting that children in Wales have the lowest level of engagement with nature. This despite the wealth of birds, animals and plants that can be found even in urban Cardiff. A series of activities, largely funded by the carrier bag levy, have tried to do something about this. City primary schools were invited to “rewild” welly boots with native plants – these were first used to brighten up the boardwalk behind the millennium stadium and then to start gardens back in the school grounds. In the summer art groups created a web/cocoon among the trees of Bute Park as the focus of nature activities for all ages. More than seventy thousand people visited, spending time in a rich natural environment that many may only previously have regarded as a city shortcut. The programme has been so successful that “Giving Nature a Home in...” is being extended to cities around the UK.

James Vafidis showed that you can even do climate change research in the city centre. As part of the compensation measures for the Cardiff Bay Barrage, a reedbed was created in 2002 behind the St.Davids Hotel. This now has a thriving population of reed warblers. James has been studying how they use the reeds to understand why these migrants appear to benefit from climate change, while others such as pied flycatchers are declining and sedge warblers, with an apparently similar lifecycle, are showing little change. Reedbeds turn out to be a good place to live when the climate is warming: increasing temperatures here increase both the quantity of insect food and the time for which they are available. This contrasts with woodlands, where the peak availability of caterpillars is now earlier and no longer synchronised with migrants’ arrival and nesting. In winter, at the other end of their migration reed warblers, despite their name, are less dependent on wetlands and can feed in savannah; unlike sedge warblers whose population appears to be limited by winter droughts.

During the day we also had reports from WOS, BTO and RSPB on how Welsh birds had fared in the 2015 season. Our seabirds don’t seem to be suffering the same declines as elsewhere in the UK: numbers of guillemots on Ramsey and gannets on Grassholm are higher than ever and there is now a significant manx shearwater colony on Bardsey. Kittiwake numbers are still low, but productivity of chicks this summer was good. North Wales coastal reserves had 2650 sandwich terns, 600 common tern chicks and 135 pairs of little terns. On Anglesey there were the first records of booming bitterns and nesting marsh harriers for forty years, though neither was successful. A national total of 420 lekking black grouse males was more than a hundred higher than last year, though with 320 on a single estate the population is still at risk. Four pairs of ospreys produced a total of eleven fledglings. Peregrine nests have reduced by 12% since the previous survey, but this may be part of a national shift from upland to lowlands: across the UK numbers are still increasing. And a pair of long-eared owls in Gwent successfully raised six chicks, for the third year running.

Next year’s conference will be at Myddfai in Carmarthenshire on the 5th of November. Well worth putting in your diaries.

For more information on the WOS conference please visit <http://www.birdsinwales.org.uk/activities/conference15.htm>



WOS Lifetime Achievement Award 2015

Dr Stephanie Tyler

Until very recently, there were too few women in conservation or the natural sciences. Steph Tyler was one of the few, a pioneer. Today she stands down after eight years as a trustee of WOS and editor of our journal *Birds in Wales*. But this is just the latest chapter in a lifetime of championing bird science.

Growing up in Lincolnshire, a PhD at Cambridge took her to the New Forest where Steph discovered bird-ringing and fell in love with Grey Wagtails. In the 1970s, with her family, Steph lived in the Middle East then Ethiopia, where they were kidnapped and held hostage by rebels in Tigray for eight months. Since their return, home has been in Monmouthshire, from where Steph has worked hard for bird conservation in Wales, especially of river habitats.

Steph's professional career took her from Gwent Wildlife Trust to the RSPB as Wales Conservation Officer, but she has been involved with the Gwent birding scene continuously since 1981: on the Committee of Gwent Ornithological Society, as BTO Regional Rep, as co-organiser and author of both Atlases of breeding birds in Gwent, chairing the Monmouthshire Meadows Group and joint plant recorder for Monmouthshire and of course studying the county's birds, particularly Dippers and Grey Wagtails.

With Professor Steve Ormerod, Steph authored *the* standard volume on Dippers, and wrote numerous papers that highlighted the impact of acid rain and forestry on water quality, insects and Dippers in the Welsh uplands. That was a huge environmental issue in the 1970s and '80s, and Steph was central to gathering the evidence that brought about change for the better.

Steph is such a modest person, but has influenced conservation and many people, in Wales and in Africa, especially Botswana, and today joins the annals of those who richly deserve a WOS Lifetime Achievement Award.

I now know what I want for Xmas; a Tuareg Power Brush Cutter.

It was unable to join us on the arranged Bramble Bash Day and I had wondered what would be left for it to do after a large work party armed with petrol hedge trimmers, scythes, and other alarming weaponry had spent a very productive November morning cutting access paths to nestbox-bearing trees and opening up public footpaths.

Nestbox-bearing trees had become inaccessible behind head-high bramble and we need access to allow the boxes to be cleaned and serviced in time for the next breeding season, but the first trick was to find them! Many boxes had been lost on fallen trees and despite a 'box map' many others were hidden behind ivy and bramble. Nevertheless huge inroads were made despite it being a rather nasty job. We (including future Pied Flycatchers and Nuthatches, that is) owe a huge debt of gratitude to the "mechanical duo" Keith Bradley and Steve Roberts, and to the small-arms bearers Verity Picken, Alan Williams, Chris Field, John Coleman, Ceri Jones, Jerry Lewis and Trevor Russell. I think we all gained what is laughingly called in business parlance, "Job Satisfaction"

Then David Hathaway arrived a couple of days later with his Tuareg Brush Cutter. Resembling a beefed-up sit-on lawnmower it was wonderful to watch it scythe through the bramble, sycamore saplings and most anything else that got in its way, so that in a few hours it was Mission Accomplished, despite being bogged down in a quagmire requiring it to be winched out. Nevertheless, paths have been widened, others newly cut to give access to unfamiliar parts of the wood, nestbox-bearing trees were made accessible and tracks cut to more trees to await new boxes. It was a wonder to behold.

It'll be interesting to watch the degree of new growth next year, but David has generously offered to have another 'swing through' next year to discourage it a little more – I think he rather enjoyed it really!

Thanks again to everyone who took part, especially David Hathaway and his awesome machine. It was fun. Honestly.

Birds

The autumn has started well from a wintering bird perspective, with the reserve meeting its target of attracting 1% of the UK wintering shoveler population.

Management

Water levels have been raised as usual in most field blocks this autumn, see photos below. However in order to help us control rush we have not flooded fields where rush is a real problem



Field block 3 mid-July



Field block 3 mid-September

We have trimmed the hedges in front of Redhouse hide to improve visibility and added brush to the screens.

Livestock have been left on the fields deep in to November, this is because the warm weather has meant that the grass is still growing. It is important that we have a short sward in some areas over the winter, this provides suitable nesting conditions for lapwing the following spring.

In early autumn we appointed a contractor to de-weed choked sections of the transfer ditch. The transfer ditch must be kept open as it is used to transport water from the reedbeds to every other part of the reserve. Whilst it was on site we used the excavator to de-weed ponds in the grasslands that had become choked with reed. These islands have been a favourite nesting spot for ducks but they do need to have open water around them. Willow saplings were removed from the islands using the excavator as they make useful perches for predatory crows in spring.



Restored grassland island

We are trialling an ingenious method of holding matting together on our reedbed board walk. Volunteer Richard Garman came up with the idea of threading brown electrical sheathing through the mats. The sheathing is strong but also flexible enough to allow the mats to move, unlike the cable ties we had been using. I think the idea came to him after kneeling in the rain replacing cable ties for the third time. “Necessity is the mother of all invention!”

All the reedbed tracks, the reservoir bund and a sort of hay field that we have made on the fuel ash were cut again in late October this year. All of these areas receive a late hay cut to promote the flowering plants essential to shrill carder bees who are still on the wing into October. This cut also allows the reservoir to be inspected and provides fire breaks in the reedbeds, which would be essential to get people out in a fire. One of the local farmers will cut some of these areas for nothing if we can remove any ragwort before mowing.



Reedbed "hay field"

We managed to save a couple of hundred meters of marsh mallow from being mowed by our flood defence colleagues this October. Good news for this important plant of the SAC salt meadows but also good for the mallow moths that depend on them.



Mowed flood bank with marsh mallow plants

First million vismig records through Gwent'

Adrian Plant

Between autumn 2011 and November 2015 a total of 1,008,668 birds have been logged as moving through Peterstone Gout or Pen-y-Lan. Although the majority of these (777,926, 77%) were Woodpigeons, the remaining quarter of a million birds comprised 130 different species averaging over 46,000 birds/year during the period. Some of the more numerous species were Swallow (43,350), Fieldfare (14,422), Chaffinch (14,422), Goldfinch (15,086), Linnet (7,700), Siskin (2,735) and Meadow Pipit (31,736). The Gwent coast also had significant passage of Grey Wagtails (712) and Tree Pipit (236) but many rarer species such as Pomarine Skua, Tree Sparrow and Woodlark were only logged in single figures.

Llandegfedd Reservoir Wildlife

Gavin Vella

Llandegfedd Reservoir Wildlife is a designated Facebook Group that was set up in 2013 to help publicise the planned new Visitor & Watersports Centre while reminding people of the importance of the wildlife and SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) requirements. The purpose of the Group is to educate the public and promote wildlife. I encourage people to post their sightings, photographs and paintings, and to write about their experiences at the reservoir but also urge them not to disturb the birds or other wildlife at any time, but particularly during the spring breeding season and when wintering wildfowl are present. The Group now has over 451 subscribers and continues to grow on a weekly basis. While Facebook isn't for everyone, it is undeniably the best way to interact with people and by far the fastest method of getting up-to-date information. All are welcome to join.

Future Outdoor Meetings

Date	Title	Speaker/Leader
Sunday 14 February 2016 - Sunday 14 February 2016	Peterstone Gout	Roger Price
Saturday 12 March 2016	Ty-yn-y-Coed, Mynydd Llangatwg	Nicholas Beswick
Saturday 19 March 2016	Bargoed Woodland Park	Lee Taswell

Date	Title	Speaker/Leader
Sunday 24 April 2016	Collister Pill	Lyndon Waters
Saturday 07 May 2016	King's Wood	John Coleman
Saturday 21 May 2016	Mynydd Maen	Keith Roylance
Saturday 28 May 2016	Goetre House Wood	Alan Williams
Saturday 04 June 2016	Clytha Hill	Mark Stevens
Sunday 12 June 2016	Garn Lakes	Steve Williams
Saturday 17 September 2016	Llanthony Wood and Valley	Keith Trott
Saturday 19 November 2016	Ynysfro Reservoirs	Ian Walker

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