

# THE DIPPER



## THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Registered charity number 1088830

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

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**Winter 2016**

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All photographs in this issue have been provided by Keith Roylance

# GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

## NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2017

**The Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday, January 21st, 2017,  
in the Village Hall, Goytre, starting at 7:30pm**

Chairman, Verity Picken, retires by rotation this year, after five years in office, and as we have only received one nomination, KEITH ROYLANCE will be proposed to succeed her.

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 1<sup>st</sup> 2017**

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 Gavin Vella will repeat the talk that he was invited to present at the WOS Conference last November, "Beware what you hear; how mimicry can influence breeding success"**

Trevor Russell

Secretary

This was the last Committee meeting to be chaired by Verity, who will retire by rotation at the January 2017 AGM after five years in office. The Committee thanked Verity very warmly for her diligence, management and administrative skills throughout her term in office. Keith Roylance has been nominated to replace her at the AGM.

We learned that STEVE ROBERTS was awarded a LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD for his services to ornithology at the recent WOS Conference, held in Myddfai, Carmarthenshire. The committee was sure that all GOS members would join them in sending Steve our huge congratulations. Read his citation elsewhere in this edition.

GOS has been invited to give its views on proposed changes to the Liverpool Bay SPA (Special Protection Area). The proposal, by NRW, Natural England and JNCC, is to ask the UK government to link the four existing SPA's into one, enlarged SPA in view of the nationally important breeding populations of ducks and waders in the area. We will respond supporting the proposal.

Following the series of complaints about public behaviour at Llandegfedd reservoir, the most recent frustrations occurred when trying to buy Birdwatching Permits at the Visitor Centre. However, following our letter of complaint at the lack of preparedness, permits have now been printed (£8pa) and keys have been re-stocked (£5).

The hedge at Goytre House Wood has been cut but we will want to run the brushcutter through again, as we did last winter, in order to keep pathways and access routes to nest boxes free of brambles.

WOS has asked GOS to email to their members their quarterly Newsletter to publicise their activities more widely. We have agreed to forward the Newsletter to all email subscribers, but at the same time give members the opportunity to decline to receive future Newsletters should they wish.

Marcus John of Gwent Birders, has kindly agreed to allow GOS to advertise its activities on the Gwent Birders Facebook site.

It was decided to change the GOS logo (see front page) on all GOS documentation.

Al Venables will step down as Vice Chairman at the 2017 AGM. It was decided not to fill the post because a substitute would be found within the Committee members present when that eventuality arose.

**We are still looking for a Dipper Editor**, so if anyone would like to receive details of what is involved to produce this newsletter four times per year, please contact in the first place, Trevor Russell. Meanwhile we are very grateful to Janet Cormack who is continuing to work as the Dipper compiler.

John Coleman is looking for **help in writing Species Accounts for the Annual Report**. Please contact John if you would like to help, training is available.

All Committee members have agreed to stand for re-election at the AGM, but if you would like to bring your experience and expertise to the committee and influence the way your Society is run, please contact Trevor Russell. Fresh faces are always welcome!

The Countryside and Landscape Services will be holding a Garden Birdwatch event at Pen-y-fan ponds Oakdale on January 28<sup>th</sup> between 10am and 2pm. Activities will include bird feeder making, bird ringing demonstrations, art and craft activities and guided bird walks. Further information is available from Ageliki Politis (01495 235219, [polita@caerphilly.gov.uk](mailto:polita@caerphilly.gov.uk) ).

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## **WOS Lifetime Achievement Award 2016**

### ***Steve Roberts***

Steve was introduced to a lifetime of ornithology by Bert Hamar, the founder of the Gwent Ornithological Society. Steve's father had died when he was young and Bert took him on his birdwatching walks. Bert showed him a Mallard's nest full of eggs and young Steve was immediately hooked. He has spent the rest of his time seeking out and researching birds and, particularly, their nests. His work has been mainly on the rarer raptors: Hobby, Goshawk and Honey-buzzard. Steve's long-term monitoring of these species has added considerably to the accumulated knowledge of what had been thought of as difficult birds to study.

Steve, with others, has undertaken a long term study of Honey-buzzards, leading to two landmark papers published in British Birds in 1999 and 2014. For decades, the secrecy surrounding this special woodland raptor made it difficult to bring together such knowledge, yet understanding of the species' habits and behaviour during the breeding season is a critical step towards their effective conservation.

Steve has not worked alone. Jerry Lewis is often his collaborator and Steve has shared his knowledge with others willing to help, including WOS President Iolo Williams. Steve is an accomplished and apparently fearless climber. The work at the nest is almost always Steve's. This makes him a much sought-after specialist and he travels worldwide to climb to, study and photograph iconic species, however fearsome their reputation.

Steve is also an accomplished artist, having taught art at a local comprehensive school, and his line drawings and paintings appear in many bird reports and books. This award is to a man who has pushed the boundaries of our knowledge, usually from high in the canopy of a tree.

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## **Birds**

It has been a dry autumn and it seems as though most wildfowl have been slower than usual to find the flooded areas of the reserve. We often see lots of shoveler in autumn often as early as September. In 2015 the peak count was 184, so far this autumn it's only 74. Teal numbers are also quite low. Strangely it has been a very good time for wigeon. The autumn peak count is 1266 this is only about 100 birds of the peak count for the 2015/16 year.

Richard Clarke and Kevin have been monitoring water rail with a tape lure, so far the peak count is 59 which is about typical for the time of year.

There have been a number of unusual sightings this autumn including scaup in the reedbed ponds and 2 Bewick swans at Goldcliff the first for several years. A ring ouzel and a wryneck at Uskmouth, spotted crane, great white egret and pectoral sandpiper at Goldcliff.

## **Management**

Every year we aim to create some flooding in the fields in September for the early winter migrants. This is usually achieved by letting water from the reedbeds into the grassland ditches via a large pipe. Water is then pumped from the ditches onto the fields. This year because of the dry weather water was initially fed by gravity using the new pipe from reedbed 11 as well. A lot of this water was just absorbed by the dry soil, we compensated for this by attaching a pump to the reedbed 11 pipe and drawing the water faster.

By October we had still had no rain so resorted to pumping water onto another field block. Finally in November the heavens opened and all the fields are now flooded.

Salinities were low in the lagoons in September, so we winched open the tidal flap to let the sea in for 3 weeks. We have drastically reduced the amount of sea water we allow on the lagoons because of the huge volume of silt that is left behind.

In August Jamie Williams won a contract to cut bale and remove rush from 62 hectares of grassland. During September he came back and mowed the whole area again, hopefully this will knock it back. Rush mowing is an annual job, we will monitor to see how effective cutting twice a year proves to be.

Most hedges are cut on a rotation to try and ensure that there are always plenty of flowers and fruit in the hedgerows. In any year there are usually about 10km of hedgerow to trim. I prefer to cut hedges at the end of the winter but logistically this isn't possible. Hedges in the wetter fields have to be cut in early autumn, our colleagues from Operations Delivery spent 3 weeks this autumn hedge trimming.

Kevin organised a contract to hay cut and remove vegetation from 12 km of reedbed paths and 1.4ha in two separate areas of the wider reedbed area. The main reason for this is that it helps promote the flower rich habitat necessary to sustain shrill carder bees which are now a SSSI feature of the site. Cutting the paths back also helps to act as a fire break should we ever experience a fire in the reedbed again.

Encouraged by the obvious rudd population and the booming bittern last spring, we have cut more reed than ever before. The idea is to try to encourage fish deeper into the reedbed and create secluded areas where bittern can feed. We have cut 2.3 ha in total in reedbeds 4,5 and 6. These cut areas will hopefully benefit wildfowl as well as bittern.

**This winter in addition to our WeBS counts and our own high tide counts we are assisting the BTO low tide counts of the reserve and estuary. We wouldn't be able to do all this monitoring without the help of our volunteers.**

**Highlights**

A Cory's Shearwater was seen offshore at Peterstone (9th). A Wryneck was present at Newport Wetlands (9th to 15th). A Pectoral Sandpiper was also present at this site (14th to 18th). A Quail was seen on the Skirrid (14th). A Bittern was reported from Newport Wetlands (20th). (Wyvern photographs Keith Roylance)



## **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

Up to three Spotted Redshanks were present (2nd), with three Little Stints also present (3rd). A female Marsh Harrier was present for most of the month, whilst a male also made an appearance (15th). A male Hen Harrier was also reported (22nd), together with a female Merlin (17th). Two Egyptian Geese were recorded (8th). Wader numbers remained high throughout the month, with wildfowl numbers starting to build.

### **Other sites**

Female Marsh Harriers were seen at Caldicot Pill (6th) and Llandegfedd reservoir (12th). A male Hen Harrier was reported from the Blorenges (11th). Two Sandwich Terns were recorded at Llandegfedd reservoir (8th), with a number of Arctic and Common Terns also passing through this site during the month. A Barn Owl was reported from Bulwark (15th).

## **Gwent UKBS Report for October 2016**

**Chris Hatch**

### **Highlights**

Two Great White Egrets were reported from Newport Wetlands (7th), with a Cattle Egret present at the same site (15th). A Spotted Crake was also recorded at Newport Wetlands (16th). Single Yellow-browed Warblers were reported from Llandegfedd reservoir (8th) and Newport Wetlands (22nd). A Great Grey Shrike was seen at Mynydd Garn Clochdy (27th). A pair of Common Cranes nested on the Gwent coast and successfully raised one chick.

## **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

A female Marsh Harrier was present throughout the month, with a juvenile Hen Harrier also reported (9th). A late Hobby was recorded (12th). A Short-eared Owl was seen (22nd). Other sightings of note included a Ring Ouzel (25th) and a Merlin (26th). Wader numbers remained high throughout the month, whilst wildfowl numbers began to build.

### **Other sites**

A Jack Snipe was reported from Mynydd Henllys. Three Brent Geese were recorded at Peterstone Gout, with a single bird at Collister Pill (22nd). A female Merlin was recorded at Peterstone Gout (5th). A male Hen Harrier was seen on the Coity mountain (20th). A Brambling was reported from Brynmawr (23rd).

## **Highlights**

A Lapland Bunting flew over Peterstone Gout (8th), whilst a Great Northern Diver was seen offshore at the same site (18th).

## **Newport Wetlands Reserve**

Male and female Marsh Harriers were reported on several dates throughout the month. A female Hen Harrier was also recorded (23rd). Up to four Spotted Redshanks were present (4th). A Water Pipit was reported (5th to 12th). A Jack Snipe was seen (5th and 19th), whilst two Egyptian Geese (5th) and two Bewick's Swans were also recorded (5th). A Scaup was reported (16th) and a Short-eared Owl was present (20th). The Starling murmuration had built to several thousand birds by the end of the month.

## **Other sites**

A female Hen Harrier was reported from Mynydd Llangatwg (6th). Four Common Scoter were present at Llandegfedd reservoir (8th). Three Scaup and two Common Scoter were seen from Peterstone Gout (18th).

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## **Report of Recent Indoor Meetings**

**Andrew Cormack**

Mark Hebden launched our autumn season with a description of an intensive fortnight's birding in Texas. In a 4000-mile journey that crossed the state twice, habitats ranged from the coastal marshes of the Gulf Coast to the desert mountains of the Big Bend via the East Texas woods. The range of birds was likewise spectacular, from avocets and pelicans to roadrunners and swallow-tailed kites. Candidates for most bizzare sight include spoonbills perching in trees, the bill of the black skimmer, and the less-than-camouflaged Montezuma quail. Bad weather meant the number of migrants on the coast was less than they had hoped, but a trip total of over 300 species still represents nearly half of the Texas list.

Alan Williams used three different species as examples of how different techniques are shedding light on migration and the balance of risks it involves for birds. White storks are a large, obvious species, so easy to observe visually. Traditionally they have nested in Europe and migrated to tropical Africa for the Northern Hemisphere winter. Over the past 30 years large numbers have stopped making the risky crossing of the Gibraltar Straits, instead finding sufficient food on landfill sites in Spain. Improved human rubbish disposal is likely to reduce this food source in future, raising the question of whether, faced with starvation, storks will resume their ancestors' habits or if this option will have been evolved away. Technology now plays a significant role in migration studies, with geo-locators revealing that Manx Shearwaters fly a complete circuit of the North and South Atlantic between their nests on the Pembroke islands and their wintering area off southern Argentina. These tiny devices need to be recovered from the birds to allow data to be downloaded, so

are most effective on species, like the shearwaters, that return to the same nesting area each year. Where this is not possible, satellite trackers can transmit data throughout the bird's travels, but these are heavier (though still only 5 grams) so can only be used on larger species. A recent BTO project to track cuckoos has discovered that, like storks, these use different routes to cross the Mediterranean in autumn. Worryingly it appears that birds travelling via France and Spain are more likely to be lost en route, perhaps because those countries are suffering increasing droughts so there are insufficient insects for cuckoos to eat. Birds that cross further east, from Italy or Greece, have a higher likelihood of surviving the journey.

Al Venables described a two week, thousand-mile, tour of Namibia, encountering 160 species of bird and 38 mammals. Habitats ranged from inland savannah, through the oldest desert in the world, to the coast where a cold offshore current provides a rich source of food for wildlife and humans alike. In the desert, bird watching can be as simple as providing a bowl of water and waiting to see what arrives to enjoy this rare bounty. Underground streams may be out of reach, but lines of trees reveal their course. Some birds leave very obvious traces: ostrich eggs are so hard that abandoned clutches remain for years as nothing can break the shells. Elephants, too, can leave very obvious signs – telegraph poles have to be surrounded with piles of sharp rocks to stop the animals using them as, very short-lived, scratching posts.

Rob Thomas, from Cardiff University, described a number of studies suggesting how bird behaviour might help them to adapt, or not, to a warming climate. Although we think of evolution as a very slow process, taking millions of years, behaviour can change surprisingly quickly: in just 30 years, 12% of blackcaps nesting in Germany have re-directed their winter migration to the UK rather than Spain. Indeed all the millions of birds that migrate across the Sahara have developed that behaviour in the ten thousand years since the area was covered with savannah and huge lakes. Experiments suggest that reed warblers should benefit from global warming, as higher temperatures make both reeds and insects grow faster. Thus the birds can start nesting earlier. If provided with extra food in spring, to simulate the expected effect of climate change, reed warblers feed this to their chicks, decreasing incubation time and increasing fledging success by around one chick per nest. Indeed this species is already showing population increases, perhaps due to these effects occurring naturally rather than experimentally. Wheatears use supplementary food in a different way: adults eat it themselves, permitting earlier nesting and the chance of a second brood. Or well-fed wheatear males may be able to provide for two females, thus increasing their own productivity but not that of the females. Pied flycatchers suggest, however, that these benefits of warming may be short-lived. Warmer years result in a higher peak of insect food, but also a narrower one. In one Welsh oak wood, caterpillar numbers increase twenty-fold, but only for about twenty-five days. For flycatcher chicks that rely on caterpillars, their parents' ability to time egg-laying to synchronise with this peak is critical. Although part of the recent decline in flycatcher numbers may be due to bad nest timing, more seems to relate to drying and human exploitation making their winter habitat less suitable. Migrant birds, in particular, must cope with changes in all the locations they rely on throughout the year.

For our final meeting of the autumn, Steve Williams described a birding activity that can be combined with Christmas shopping! Town centres and retail car parks, as well

as industrial estates and urban parks, are often used by gulls. Many of those gulls now have colour rings, designed to be read or photographed with modern optics, though a small amount of stale white bread may help. Reporting sightings of colour-ringed bird contributes to our knowledge of their lives and habits. From my own experience (see [www.gwentwildlife.org/blog/twheatear/2016/07/17/holiday-science](http://www.gwentwildlife.org/blog/twheatear/2016/07/17/holiday-science)), it can also be a fascinating opportunity to participate in a field that otherwise requires a licence and years of training. Once you have recorded the colour and letters/numbers on the ring, which leg it was on, and what the bird species was, the volunteer website [www.cr-birding.org](http://www.cr-birding.org) should identify the leader of the relevant ringing project. Most of these will be happy to e-mail a list of where “your” bird was ringed and where it has been seen since then: a few countries, such as Norway, provide this information through a website. Many of the birds Steve has spotted in Gwent seem local – ringed by projects in Bristol, Gloucester or the Cotswold Water Park. But thanks to colour ring sightings, we know that some of them spend their winters in Spain or Portugal. Birds can show remarkable site-fidelity: the same black-headed gull was by Newport’s Waterfront Theatre in November 2013 and October 2015; a colour-ringed redshank was on the same patch of mud there every winter from 2012-2015. Cameras are now sufficiently good that it may even be possible to read traditional metal rings from a distance though, as these numbers go all round the leg, the bird needs to cooperate in being photographed from different angles. So keep an eye out for colour-rings this winter and report those you see.

### Future Indoor Meetings

<b>Saturday 21 January 2017</b>	<a href="#">AGM + Mimicry in birds</a>	Gavin Vella
<b>Saturday 04 February 2017</b>	<a href="#">Morocco: coast, mountains and desert</a>	Tom Chinnick
<b>Saturday 18 February 2017</b>	<a href="#">Wildlife photography for beginners</a>	Dave Brassey
<b>Saturday 04 March 2017</b>	<a href="#">Beneath the dark canopy</a>	Mike Leach
<b>Saturday 18 March 2017</b>	<a href="#">A sortie in Spain and Portugal</a>	Phil Mugridge
<b>Saturday 01 April 2017</b>	<a href="#">Lifting the lid on Lundy</a>	Jackie Garner
<b>Saturday 30 September 2017</b>	<a href="#">Geo-locating Greenshank</a>	Nick Christian
<b>Saturday 14 October 2017</b>	<a href="#">Forest Eagles</a>	Steve Roberts
<b>Saturday 11 November 2017</b>	<a href="#">Saving near-extinct birds in the Seychelles</a>	Al Venables
<b>Saturday 25 November 2017</b>	<a href="#">W Papua &amp; Halmahera - Painting Birds of Paradise in paradise</a>	John Gale
<b>Saturday 09 December 2017</b>	<a href="#">The Denny - Gwent's Bird island</a>	Richard Clarke
<b>Saturday 20 January 2018</b>	<a href="#">AGM and Members' Evening</a>	GOS members

### Ynys-y-fro Reservoirs

Some people have been asked to show their permit at Ynys-y-fro Reservoirs so please ensure you have your permit with you, if you want to leave the public footpaths and access the banks of the lower pool.

## Llandegfedd Reservoir keys and permits

During the winter months (from 1 October to 1 March) a permit is required to access the north end of the reservoir. This may be bought at the Visitor Centre near the dam at the south end of the reservoir (ST328986) at a cost of £8. Keys to the gate, which is locked during this period, are now available again and may be also be obtained here – a key costs £6. Centre Opening Times are available from Welsh Water on 01495 769281.



Llandegfedd Reservoir Keith Roylance

### Recent Additions to the Library

The GOS library is open during all indoor meetings.

*Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* by Chris Packham has recently been donated by Keith Roylance and the Society has received copies of the 2015 Bird Reports for Avon and Glamorgan.

## GOS CONTACTS

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until AGM

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***WITH BEST WISHES FOR CHRISTMAS  
AND THE NEW YEAR***