

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Registered charity number 1088830

GOS WEB SITE: www.gwentbirds.org.uk

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Winter 2021

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THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2022

The Annual General Meeting of the Gwent Ornithological Society will be held via Zoom at 7.30pm on Saturday, 22nd January 2022.

A link to the meeting will be sent to all e-mail members 5 – 10 days prior to the day.

AGENDA

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of the meeting held on January 23rd, 2021 **(VOTE 1 to approve the minutes)**
3. Treasurer's Report (to be circulated to the e-mail membership) **(Vote 2 to approve treasurers report)**
4. Chairman's Report (to be circulated to the e-mail membership after the AGM)
5. Election of Officers:
Keith Roylance stands down from Chairman after 5 years in the role and Andrew Cormack is standing down from the Treasurer role after 10 years. The committee are therefore pleased to propose:
 - 5.1 To elect Iestyn Harrigan as Chairman, Proposed Keith Roylance, Seconded Trevor Russell **(Vote 3)**
 - 5.2 To elect Leesha Salamon as Treasurer of the Society, Proposed Andrew Cormack, Seconded Dave Brassey **(Vote 4)**
 - 5.3 Cath Gregory has agreed to continue as Secretary to the Society **(Vote 5)**
6. Election of Committee Members
To consider any nominations for committee members
 - 6.1 To elect James Graham as a committee member. Proposed Keith Roylance Seconded Blair Jones. **(Vote 6)**
 - 6.2 All other Committee members have agreed to stand for a further year and need to be re-elected for 2022. **(Vote 7 to approve all current committee members be re-elected for 2022)**
7. To consider any motions received by the secretary prior to the meeting.

8. The AGM will be followed by photo presentations via zoom by members* showing their memorable birding highlights from the year.

* Presenters are Blair Jones and Mike Pointon.



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2021

VIRTUAL MEETING VIA "ZOOM" 23TH JANUARY 2021

Those present: President Steve Roberts and 26 members

The Agenda for the meeting, The Treasurer's Accounts for 2020 and the Minutes of the 2020 AGM were distributed to each attendee via e-mail prior to the meeting. Meeting etiquette, including proposals and voting procedure, was explained by Keith Roylance on "Zoom" prior to the meeting proper. Keith also noted that the Agenda Item 6 b), "Treasurer: Marie Rose Pugh is proposed by committee", was withdrawn and that the recording of the meeting would be deleted after the minutes were written up.

The President, Steve Roberts, opened the meeting by extending a very warm welcome to "whoever is out there ... all ensconced in your various living rooms and lounges". Steve reminded everyone that keeping records is the most important thing that ornithological societies can do to give back to birds. "We take a lot from birds, we go out and enjoy them and wander round the countryside ... and submitting our records, however insignificant you might think they are, is a small thing that we can do to give back to birds". Records can be sent to Daryl spittle.

Spring Watch has been a positive thing for the county and the society. "I'm sure you know that I'm involved in Spring Watch ... because of Covid ... a lot of it was broadcast from Monmouthshire. ... So we had the benefit of Iolo, 4 nights a week for 3 weeks, saying "and now we go down to Monmouthshire" or "we go down to Gwent to" look at the Firecrest or the Kite or Long Eared Owl or whatever it was". The county gets a mention to millions of people. There's lots going on in the county and people may be encouraged to join the society.

Large, local landowners (including Llanover, who supplied wood for nest boxes) have taken conservation on board and have undertaken a lot more conservation work; tree planting and pasture management. Steph [Tyler] has been involved with advising on wild flowers and grassland.

Steve was very pleased to congratulate Steph Tyler on receiving an MBE. Steph is active in so many groups and committees; you can speak to any organisation and Steph is someone they know well and is an active member.

"I'd like to say, in the time that I've known Steph, which I don't know how long it is, but I can remember you at RSPB Steph, you know when you were still working there, when Iolo was still there ... thirty years at least, but everywhere I go in the county, if I speak to any organisation, whether it's involved in flowers or grasses or trees or birds or animals, Steph is someone that they know well and is often someone who is actually an active member of whatever organisation it is. She is so well known within the county and is such a stalwart of the county..."

"I just want to say on behalf of myself and I'm sure I speak on behalf of the committee and all the members of the society...that's [the MBE is] richly deserved ... and we'd like to congratulate you, very well done Steph"

APOLOGIES:

Richard Clarke, John Coleman

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS AGM:

The Minutes of the AGM held on January 25th, 2020 were distributed at the meeting. Acceptance of the report was proposed by Nick Beswick, seconded by Trevor Russell. Carried (1 abstention).

TREASURER'S REPORT by ANDREW CORMACK

Accounts for the year ending 31 December 2020

Income receipts	2020	2019
Subscriptions	3,230.00	3,589.50
Indoor meeting door takings	111.00	853.60
Raffles	24.50	196.58
Sales	1,311.53	1,711.51
Survey work	0.00	0.00
Donations	45.00	139.00
Grants	0.00	0.00
Interest	0.00	117.64
Gift aid refunds	534.59	578.30
Misc	0.00	1,053.50
Wood	0.00	0.00
Total receipts	5,256.62	8,239.63
Direct charitable expenditure		
Printing	2,224.78	2,212.69
Hall hire	865.40	588.00
Speakers	150.00	885.00
Survey work	0.00	0.00
Postage	693.82	574.28
Grants + Bursary	650.00	1,370.00
Goytre wood 2,662.38 0.00	2,662.38	0.00

Total charitable expenditure	7,246.38	5,629.97
Other expenditure		
Refreshments	0.00	12.79
Insurance	0.00	113.00
Library	25.42	0.00
Miscellaneous	476.37	2,663.62
Memberships	134.00	132.00
Equipment	0.00	0.00
PayPal charges 30.41 22.03	30.41	22.03
Total other expenditure	666.2	2,943.44
Total expenditure	7,912.58	8,573.41
Net receipts for year	-2,655.96	-333.78

Statement of assets and liabilities as at 31 December 2020

	2020	2019
Monetary assets		
Current account	2,054.54	6,010.04
Building society account	36,641.89	35,987.96
PayPal account	681.86	478.24
Total	39,378.29	42,476.24
Property		
Goytre wood	15,300.00	15,300.00

Liabilities

Uncashed cheques

The Society continues to be financially stable, with income covering our running expenses. A welcome source of income was £700 from the Publishers Licensing Society, who distribute fees from photocopying licences. Although it is not possible to identify which GOS publications were involved, our best guess is that this was related to submissions to the M4 enquiry. Thanks are also due to Aaduki Insurance, who extended our 2020 policy by three months.

The Society's activities were heavily curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with all indoor meetings cancelled. However our rule of thumb that individual programmes should be roughly self-funding meant that the loss of door and raffle income was matched by gain in not having to pay speaker fees or expenses. We are therefore in a sound financial position to resume activities gradually, whether face-to-face or online, in 2021.

Since it seems likely that at least some activities and communications will remain digital for some time, our membership secretary and chairman have attempted to find email addresses for as many members as possible, so we can keep in touch. This will reduce our ongoing printing and postage costs for The Dipper newsletter, though there will be a significantly higher-than-usual bill for posting out Annual Reports to all members in the New Year.

During 2020 we paid £2650 for survey and safety work in our Goytre House Wood reserve. A transfer from savings to current account has been scheduled (so as not to suffer an interest penalty) for Jan 2021 to cover this expenditure.

Andrew Cormack, Hon. Treasurer

Acceptance of the report was proposed by Trevor Russell, seconded by Blair Jones and carried unanimously.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by KEITH ROYLANCE:

This report for 2020 is dominated by the restrictions we have all had to face due to the Covid pandemic, although later in the AGM programme you will get a glimpse of what is 'on your doorstep' when it comes to birdlife.

During the year the website has proved itself in allowing members to highlight bird sightings on a regular basis even whilst the restrictions on travelling have been in place.

You will have seen in the Treasurer's report that a significant sum was spent on Health & Safety aspects within Goytre Wood, the tree surgeons we employed (from Cardiff) were so impressed by the wood that they have since visited it for social walks. It is an asset we should be proud of.

The original scheduled programme of 12 indoor and 13 outdoor meetings was seriously curtailed after the imposition of the first lockdown in March 2020. The result being that all the meetings from mid-March on had to be cancelled. We were fortunate that our premier event with Iolo Williams went ahead as planned in January. It was a sell out and well received by those present. I would like to thank Hannah Daniels for all her efforts in making the arrangements for that meeting. Unfortunately, Hannah has since resigned from indoor secretary for personal reasons, however we are fortunate to have recruited Robin Hall as her replacement. Robin will now be focusing on the programme for 2021.

The outdoor programme was cancelled from March onwards so only the trips to Tregaron and WWT Slimbridge took place. We are hoping to start outdoor walks again from April 2021, subject to any restrictions in place at the time.

National and local surveys usually undertaken by members were also severely affected. In particular the BTO surveys. The second year of the RSPB National Willow Tit Survey was cancelled, whilst the Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows survey was postponed. Local surveys affected included the visits to Denny Island by the Goldcliff Ringing Group to monitor Cormorants and Great Black-backed Gulls. The annual round up of Greylag Geese at Llanwern could not proceed. As some restrictions were lifted in the autumn, the winter survey on Gwent rivers and still waters looking for Goosander and Cormorants commenced. This GOS-led survey has had a fantastic level of participation with 60 people walking stretches of rivers and 30 people visiting still waters to survey for roosts. This survey will continue in 2021, restrictions permitting.

On the planning front, Andrew Baker has again done sterling work in reviewing a number of major plans submitted to local councils. Once again we objected to a proposal by Dwr Cymru to change the use of the Water Sports facility at Llandegfedd reservoir to an all-purpose facility that would include strong lighting and loud music. This project represents the most outrageous change to a wildlife site, especially because of its SSSI designation for many years. We await a decision from Monmouthshire CC in the near future.

We objected to a Solar Farm proposal at Wentlooge. Whilst we would encourage the use of

renewable energy our view on this application was that until the development can be considered in the context of its wider effect on the levels avifauna via a Gwent Levels Strategy and until further knowledge of the effect of solar arrays on avifauna are available we must object to the proposal. The proposal is going to a Public Enquiry early in 2021.

Other proposals were researched which were brought to our attention but were past the point that we could influence a planning decision.

The county bird list has increased by one during the year due to the split between Tundra / Taiga Bean Goose. Tundra Bean Goose is now on the Gwent list. Major news during the year was the successful breeding of two pairs of Bittern at Newport wetlands Reserve. This is the first confirmed breeding of Bittern in Gwent for over 300 years. Three Yellow-browed Warblers sighted in Gwent this autumn was also significant. One can only wonder what we missed during the lockdown periods.

Our newsletter 'The Dipper' was published electronically four times this year but only once was a printed version available for those members for whom we do not have an e-mail address. Efforts continue to minimise this number so that all members can be contacted regularly.

Darryl Spittle took on the role of Report Editor whilst retaining the County Recorder role. The fruits of his labour will be published soon. All eligible members will have the 2019 Annual Report posted to them when we have received it from the printers.

The committee has continued to meet remotely via video links, initially provided by Safran Group via our secretary Cath Gregory and more latterly via the GOS Zoom account. The committee has worked hard throughout the year in an effort to overcome the challenges of working through this pandemic. We offered an e-mail quiz for ten weeks thanks to Mike Pointon and have attempted to maintain contact with members as best as possible. Towards the end of the year, we agreed a plan to offer video style indoor programmes for 2021 using Zoom, the AGM being the first invitation event for members.

I would like, in my final year as Chairman, to thank all the committee members who have given of their time and effort to the society during the year. Andrew Cormack for looking after both our finances and the website, to Dave Brassey for organising the outdoor programme, Andrew Baker, Darryl Spittle and Mike Pointon who have been mentioned earlier. To Janet Cormack who puts the Dipper together to Gill Jones who looks after the membership and sends out all those informative e-mails and to Cath Gregory for her role as secretary. No one could have envisaged this time last year the major changes and challenges we have had to face as the Covid pandemic spread throughout the country. We hope we have put in place actions that will see the society continue to function during 2021 and continue to be a voice for the avifauna of Gwent.

In closing I would like to offer our congratulations to Steph Tyler on being awarded the MBE in the New Year's Honours List for services to nature in the UK and Africa.

Thank you, the membership, for your continued support during these difficult times.

Keith Roylance, Chairman.

No vote on this item.

Steve Roberts added a big thank you to Darryl Spittle who organised the Honey Buzzard survey.

Election of Officers

All officers have agreed to stand for a further year and need to be re-elected. This was proposed by Nick Beswick and seconded by Robin Hall; carried unanimously.

Election of Committee members

Indoor Secretary, Webmaster

- a) Indoor Programmes Secretary: Robin Hall is nominated; already proposed by committee; carried unanimously.
- b) (The nomination for treasurer was withdrawn).
- c) Webmaster: Andrew Cormack is nominated; already proposed by committee; carried (1 abstention)

Existing Committee Members

All existing committee members have agreed to stand for a further year and need to be re-elected. This was proposed by Andrew Baker and seconded by Andrew Cormack; carried unanimously.

Any Other Business

None:

There being no further business the AGM was declared closed at 20.08

The AGM was followed by Zoom presentations by Blair Jones and David Brassey.

SUMMARY OF THE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 23RD NOVEMBER, 2021 ONLINE VIA ZOOM

GOS finance news: GOS has made a donation to the BTO Lost Seabirds appeal; printing has been paid for 2019 annual report; Publishers' Licensing Society has paid £104 to GOS in royalties (for photocopying from reports or similar).

Website news: Andrew Cormack has been working on the website to get it to the point where it will mostly run itself. It doesn't do back-ups automatically, as yet, and these take 2 hours each. It was agreed that GOS will pay £48 for the first year and around £96/year thereafter for automatic back-ups of the website, using Jetpack, which is part of the Wordpress family. The website was down for about 24 hours recently due to scheduled maintenance by "Heart".

Annual Report: The 2019 annual report is at the printers and should be available soon; to be distributed by post. Work on the 2020 report is in progress; there is a reduced volume of data due to lockdowns but there may be more garden bird data.

Events: Indoor meeting dates for 2022: Four of the meetings will be indoors at Goytre Village Hall; the last 2 of spring and first 2 of autumn; the rest will be by Zoom during the darker times of the year.

Newport Wetlands: NRW are going to do some felling of the mid shelter belt to encourage bitterns. See update from Kevin Dupé

Llandegfedd Reservoir: GOS are now the issuing authority for the birding permit on behalf of Llandegfedd, Welsh Water, but GOS won't take on liability from Welsh Water; instructions are only to enter the site 9am-5pm and not to give code to anybody.

Living Levels Project: Richard Clarke has been invited to a celebration next month and will find out more on further funding. There will be a report on what they've achieved so far and this will be widely circulated.

BTO Business: If you have not already submitted data (BBS WEBS) please get it in to Richard Clarke as soon as possible. Understandably, due to Covid there hasn't been the same level of coverage. RC will be pressing volunteers to come forwards and there will be another training workshop with Glamorgan colleagues. Come along and take advantage of the training. There will be an all Wales rookery survey next year.

Local Authority Biodiversity Meetings:

Newport Monmouthshire meeting: The build of the sand martin hotel at Tredegar golf course is going really well. Goldcliff Ringing Group will help with monitoring and it should be possible to visit on a walk in the spring. The "Road to nature" project at Coedkernew, has had success involving the council and had big clean-up of the so-called "road to nowhere" fly tipping area. They aim to make a nature reserve and are sending a plea to all wildlife related groups to become engaged.

WOS lifetime achievement award: Congratulations to Al Venables who has received a well deserved lifetime achievement award and was on the GOS committee for many years.

Chairman Elect: It was unanimously agreed that Iestyn Harrigan will stand as Chairman Elect at the AGM in January.

Thank you very much to Keith Roylance (outgoing chairman) for all his hard work, steering us through very difficult times over the past years. Thank you very much for everything.

And Thank you very much to Andrew Cormack for all his hard work as treasurer (also stepping down this year) and for his continued hard work on the website.

Leesha Salamon (Treasurer Elect) has access to the accounts; James Graham will be put forward as a committee member.

AGM Arrangements:

The AGM will take place at 7.30 p.m. on Saturday, 22nd January 2022

This will be by Zoom again.

Blair Jones is preparing a presentation for after the AGM business.

Newport Wetlands NNR

Water was pumped onto Fieldblock 03, visible from the Redhouse Hide, from Reedbed 11 during the end of September and the first week of October to get it near winter minimum water level. This was achieved on 8th October. Immediately mallard, teal and lapwing started to use it. Heavy rain in mid-October then got it up to maximum winter level and re-charged the reedbeds.

During early October, Kevin used NRW's amphibious reed-cutting machine, the Truxor, to cut the edges of the deep-water channels in the reedbeds and create more edge habitat for bitterns. There were several sightings of at least 2 bittern during October. A female otter and 2 large cubs appeared around the same time and are regularly being seen still in November. The starling roost is building up and was around 100,000 birds by 24th November. The male marsh harrier is roosting in the same reedbed as them and the murmuration is often attacked by sparrowhawks and a peregrine.

The reedbed path verges and bunds have been cut, and where possible bailed, in the 2nd week of October. This is primarily to benefit shrill carder bee by encouraging a wide diversity of nectar sources for them, but it also creates fire-breaks between the reedbeds and stops brambles from encroaching over the paths.

Our 3 barn owl boxes were checked and cleaned out in November. All 3 boxes were kindly made and donated by Richard Clarke (Goldcliff Ringing Group). The box above our offices at Redhouse Barns was only installed in 2020, but was used this year and 4 chicks successfully fledged. The box near Fish-house Lane at Uskmouth almost certainly fledged 3 chicks. The box on the Swapland, however, contained 2 un-hatched eggs and the remains of a $\frac{3}{4}$ grown chick. On the ground near the box were the plucked feathers of a full grown barn owl. The pair here had not laid any eggs when the box was checked in June, so this must have been a very late brood. A kestrel box and 2 little owl boxes, again made by Richard Clarke, have also been put up on the reserve this year.

Our first high-tide count of this winter took place on 22nd November. Headline numbers were: black-tailed godwit 54, curlew 111, dunlin 310, grey plover 20, lapwing 305, little egret 10, mallard 58, oystercatcher 39, redshank 13, shelduck 233, shoveler 116, teal 486, water rail 2, wigeon 663. Duck numbers had generally increased since the WeBS count which took place on 7th November. Then wigeon had been 513, teal 302, shoveler just 3 and shoveler 30. Mallard then had been higher at 156 though. In contrast, wader numbers were generally much higher for the WeBS count, with 156 redshank, 102 oystercatcher and 351 curlew. Lapwing were lower with 272, as were black-tailed godwit with just 9. This is all probably a reflection of a much bigger tide for the WeBS count as well as the advance of winter. Low numbers of water rail are recorded on both WeBS counts and our high-tide counts. However, Richard Clarke and Kevin Dupé have been carrying out winter water rail tape lure surveys, once a month for several years. On the latest one in November, Richard had 58 at Uskmouth, whilst Kevin had 11 on the wet-grassland and 4 at Goldcliff Lagoons, giving a total of 73 for the reserve as a whole.

2 female bittern nested in our eastern reedbeds for the second successive year. One female was observed to fly west to catch fish to feed her young, ie to the 6 created reedbeds which were stocked with rudd. The other female always headed east and was seen twice this year on our wet-grassland and also, in 2020, at Redwick fishing in a reed. This seems odd behaviour when there are abundant fish in the reedbeds to the west of the nest site and it is perhaps no surprise that the female heading east failed to fledge chicks 2 years running, while the female heading west was successful in both years. One possible problem is the tall trees growing between the nest sites and the westerly reedbeds. This winter Cardiff Conservation Volunteers and contractors will be cutting down trees growing in the ride between the 2 plantations. 4 or 5 tall, Italian Alders are in particular blocking a clear flight-path between the western and eastern reedbeds. It will be interesting to see if this alters the bittern's behaviour and whether we can have 2 successful broods of bittern next year! Interestingly, the marsh harriers nest in the same reedbed and very close to the 2 bittern nests. Both species will eat the young of the other!

On the trail of the nomad

Richard M. Clarke

When the call came in from John Calladine at BTO Scotland via Kelvin Jones BTO Cymru for help in locating an Icelandic ringed short-eared owl on the Severn estuary, both Jerry Lewis and I were up for the challenge.

John Calladine, the Senior Research Ecologist who leads the BTO's short-eared owl tracking project had been following a female bird by satellite and its latest signals were from the water's edge near Caldicot, a short distance downstream from Pont Tywysog Cymru/The Prince of Wales Bridge.

The bird had been tagged at her breeding ground by Gunnar Þór Hallgrímsson of the University of Iceland on 22 June close to Kleppjárnshrekkir in Borgarfjörður, West Iceland (about 60 km NE of Reykjavik). In addition to being ringed, a state-of-the-art solar powered GPS tracking device had been fitted to follow her. The route she had taken before arriving in Gwent was therefore well documented.

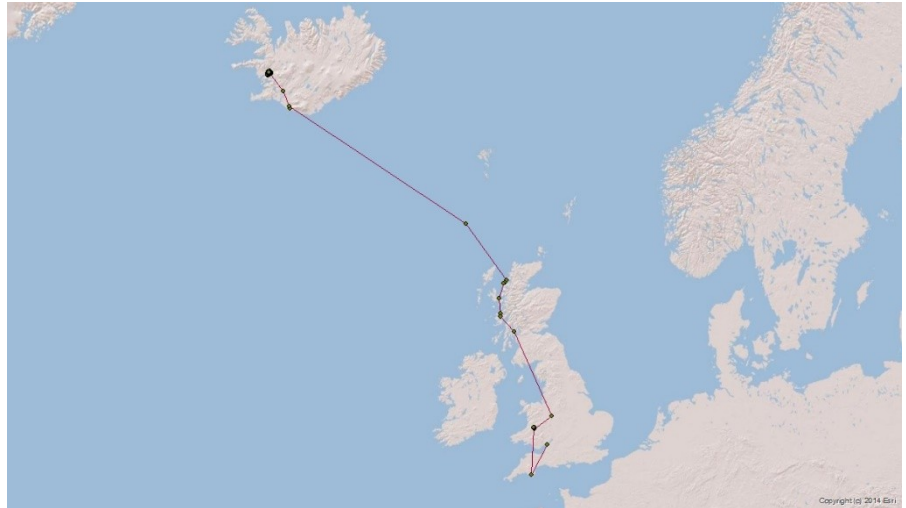


Named 'Anna' by Gunnar, she was thought to have failed in her breeding attempt when most likely on eggs. Despite this, she remained in the same area, with a home range of some 12 km wide, until 11 October. Soon after this however she started to move and was in South Iceland on 14 October at 07:15 and 24 hours later (on 15 October) she was well on her way to Scotland being roughly half way between Lewis and the Faroes and by 19:15 on the same day was on Priest Island (Loch Broom, Wester Ross).

She continued her journey south and was first recorded in England near Telford on 21 October and from 23 October to 15 November was in Wales for the first time, near the Elan and Claerwen valley reservoirs.

Subsequently the tag only transmitted intermittently and the next contact was in south Devon on 23 November. From the west country she then returned to Wales and was along the Severn estuary near Caldicot from 27 November.

When transmissions continued from Caldicot into early December, John Calladine sought help to look for Anna and we made plans to search the area.



From the initial information, it was not possible to determine the status of the bird. Establishing whether she was still alive or not was the first priority. I walked the coast from West Pill to Caldicot Pill in the afternoon of 6 December. The estuary at this point is skirted with spartina, a band of resilient grassland that is submerged twice a day with the estuarine tides. The coastline in the Caldicot Levels area has previously attracted several winter records of short-eared owls in recent years.



Severn estuary saltmarsh and below the author at Anna's final resting place

Despite my searching and staying on until the light faded there was no obvious sign of the bird. I did note however that the area offered a number of good perches from which an owl might hunt, with the foreshore being littered with tree trunks deposited on the saltmarsh during past high tides.



It was also the case that the transmissions aligned with the flotsam/jetsam tide line, the bolder sea defences and furrows in the saltmarsh where a dead bird/tag could easily be washed up and become trapped.

A second visit to the area was planned a couple of days later to follow after the predicted storm Barra had passed. Jerry Lewis then joined me on the morning of 9 December to search the foreshore. By this time John had received a further transmission and this

showed very little movement since the previous one. There seemed little doubt that what we were looking for was most likely to be a dead bird or a detached satellite tag.

Searching for such seemed somewhat daunting, especially considering that there was a time lag between when transmissions were available after being made. Nevertheless, the tag was able to record a location to within an accuracy of some ten metres. Our search therefore focused on the flotsam tide lines in the area of the latest transmissions. There were two discreet lines that we worked separately by flicking and turning the thick layers of dead spartina grass stems. This was slow and hard work, but remarkably within the hour we had found Anna. Sadly, however she was no longer alive and her remains were headless and already decomposing.

Although the outcome of the Gwent search was disappointing, it did provide closure on what had happened to Anna. It also drew attention to the incredible benefit of the use of satellite technology, that can record precise and regular location fixes and give other information in unprecedented detail. A better understanding of the species' ecology and requirements is invaluable to future conservation efforts.



The BTO website states that there is the suggestion that the short-eared owl population has declined, perhaps by as much as 50%. Because of the recent decline of the breeding population and breeding range, the short-eared owl remains on the Red List of species of conservation concern in Wales (Johnson and Bladwell 2016).

Satellite views of Anna's breeding grounds and visit to mid Wales

County estimates suggested a breeding population of 20 pairs in 2018 and just half that in 2019 with the range limited to the uplands of Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire, Meirionnydd and Denbighshire, and the Pembrokeshire islands (*The Birds of Wales*, Pritchard et.al. 2021). In winter, birds favour lowland habitats and the resident population is boosted by birds from Fennoscandia and Iceland.



In Gwent, the status of short-eared owl is that of an uncommon winter visitor and passage migrant only. Birds occur annually mostly on the coast between November and February where they hunt on the saltmarsh and foreshore (*The Birds of Gwent*, Venables et. al. 2008). The presence of Anna at Caldicot was therefore not unusual.

The BTO's short-eared owl tracking project has already revealed valuable information about the habitat requirements, behaviour and migratory strategies of this at-risk species. For example, of birds tagged in Scotland, two have passed through Wales. One arrived via Ireland, crossing from County Wexford to Ramsey Island in October 2019, it then passed through Gower before travelling to Devon and then on to France where it was

found dead presumably following a vehicle collision.

The other bird travelled widely around Britain and Ireland, but briefly passed through South Wales in October 2020 on her way between Cornwall and Ireland. She bred in Perthshire in 2021 and subsequently travelled extensively around Scotland and northern England. At the time of writing, it was in County Clare, Ireland.

Further details of this exciting BTO project can be found on the Trust's website at: [Short-eared Owl Tracking | BTO - British Trust for Ornithology](#)

Acknowledgments: thanks go to John Calladine for providing the detailed life history of this bird and for providing her photograph, route map and satellite images.

Sand Martin Hotel

Richard M. Clarke

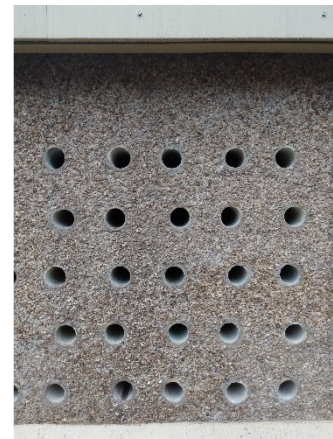
Floods in February 2020 washed away a section of the Ebbw riverbank at Newport and destroyed sand martin nesting habitat. To help address this, Newport City Council, along with a structural engineer, ecologist, GOS/Goldcliff Ringing Group and



Natural Resources Wales have worked together to provide a custom-built sand martin hotel to house up to 100 nesting pairs. Work has been funded by a grant from The Heritage Fund and is due to be completed shortly in good time for the 2022 breeding season.

The hotel has holes facing the river, which emulate real nest

tunnels in a riverbank. Each hole leads to a sandy nest chamber that has an accessible box for monitoring the nest. The structure is rodent proof with an anti-climb baffle to protect nesting birds. It also incorporates a green roof to support bees and other pollinators. The hotel will be monitored by the GOS/Goldcliff Ringing Group. Would you like to find out more and perhaps help with future monitoring? Why not come along to the GOS outdoor meeting on 30th April when there will be an early opportunity to see inside the hotel and to hear more about the project.





Winter 2021update

Richard M. Clarke
BTO Regional Representative - Gwent
bto@gwentbirds.org.uk



Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows

A big thank you for those who took part in the survey.

The final data submissions for 2021 were received in mid-November and the data preparation and analysis is now well underway. Data were submitted for 1871 sites across the UK in total, comprising 818 new sites (mainly those where agri-environment management has been undertaken) and the others having been covered previously. Coverage, in 2021, of sites from the earlier surveys was very good with 56% of 1982 sites, 68% of 2002 sites and 80% of 2009/10 sites receiving visits. Full results will be available by spring 2022 and at least one peer-reviewed paper will be submitted in 2022 as well as a summary article in BTONews - Summer 2022.

BBS - Breeding Bird Survey



Despite the ongoing Pandemic, good progress was nevertheless made on the survey. Data for 34 sites surveyed in Gwent in 2021 have been uploaded. This comprises 58% of allocated squares for early survey visits and 56% for late visits. There is still time to submit data if you have not done so already. Some early results follow:

Most numerous species for BBS

Gwent in 2021

Species	Individuals	Squares	Percentage of all squares surveyed
Blackbird	506	34	100%
Woodpigeon	450	33	97%
Wren	419	34	100%
Carrion Crow	353	34	100%
Robin	351	34	100%
Jackdaw	267	23	68%
House Sparrow	243	25	74%
Blue Tit	236	31	91%
Blackcap	214	31	91%
Chaffinch	208	33	97%

There are a number of squares available in the county and anyone interested in either taking part in the survey for the first time or who would like to take on a new square, please do get in touch.

Free BBS (Gwent/Glamorgan) Training Day - there will be a free training day for anyway considering taking on a BBS square for the first time. The event will be held at Rudry Village Hall on 20th March 2022. Places are limited so early booking is essential if you wish to attend.



WeBS – The Wetland Bird Survey

Al Venables retired as the Gwent WeBS local organiser earlier in the year Kevin Dupé and I have taken on the role between us (very big shoes to fill following Al's departure!). This is being organised on the basis that Kevin is overseeing the Severn estuary and the inland Gwent waters fall to me, but we will be working very closely together on the survey.

There are several inland waters (small pools in the Newport area) needing a surveyor and if you think you can help, please get in touch. Details about the survey can be found on the BTO website or if you would prefer just drop me a line.

Richard M. Clarke - bto@gwentbirds.org.uk
Kevin Dupe - kevin.dupe@btinternet.com

Ringling & Nest Recording Scheme (NRS)

The 2021 preliminary breeding season results have just been published which includes both CES ringing and NRS in the trends this year. As always, BTO are hugely grateful to all of the ringers and nest recorders who spend so much time and effort generating the data behind these results.



Results show that it was a delayed breeding season for many, including migrants such as Reed Warbler and Pied Flycatcher, which started to breed almost a week later than the typical date. Breeding success was well below average pretty much across the board thanks to the late spring and early summer weather, with birds either failing to fledge young or fledglings succumbing to the cold, wet conditions after leaving the nest. Of the 24 species monitored by CES, 18 produced significantly fewer young than normal in 2021.

[Click here to read the full report online.](#)

Avian Influenza

There has been some recent guidance from BTO concerning Avian Influenza which is included here for member's information.

We'd like to give you an update on the avian influenza spread that we are seeing across the UK this winter. In terms of outbreaks in domestic flocks, this has already been the worst winter on record for avian influenza. There have also been some severe outbreaks in wild birds, with the Solway being particularly badly affected – there are estimates 4,000 Svalbard Barnacle Geese (10%) have died. The standard advice (summarised on the [BTO page](#) and the [government website](#)) remains the same but it may be worth reminding ourselves of key points:

1. Carcasses should not be touched and should be reported to the Defra helpline (03459 33 55 77) in Great Britain and the DAERA helpline (0300 200 7840) in Northern Ireland. A sample of reports will be collected for testing.
2. Care should always be taken to avoid disturbing the birds. In areas where bird flu is suspected and birds are stressed, it is perhaps worth being extra cautious to avoid disturbance.
3. Biosecurity precautions (e.g. cleaning boots) are advisable. Bird keepers (whether they have pet birds, commercial flocks or just a few birds in a backyard flock) are required by law to take a range of biosecurity precautions due to the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone in place across the UK.

Can you help **LOOK 4a ROOK?**

Welsh Ornithological Society (WOS) - All-Wales Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) survey 2022/23



This is going to be a simple survey in which most people can participate and contribute to a better understanding about the decline in our rook population. I hope that all GOS members will consider taking part in the survey.

Details of the areas to be surveyed are currently being refined, but we know that the survey will be run over the next two spring periods when observers will be asked to visit specific tetrads to look for and to count the number of nests at rookeries. Counts can be made on a single visit between 1 March and 15 April, before the leaves on trees fully emerge.

Some counties in Wales are already considering going beyond the identified tetrad survey squares and complementing this by undertaking a county-wide rook survey. We would like to do this for Gwent, but it will depend upon having sufficient people coming forward to take part. Can you help?

At this stage we are looking for expressions of interest only, so please get in touch if you think you can help. Either e-mail me at surveys@gwentbirds.org.uk or telephone on 07977 698255.

A full report on the project is available on the WOS website at [All-Wales Rook Survey 2022-2023 – WOS \(birdsins.wales\)](https://birdsins.wales)

Dr Al Venables – WOS Lifetime Achievement Award

Dr Al Venables, former Chair of GOS has been awarded WOS Lifetime Achievement Award



Dr Al Venables has been involved with the Gwent Ornithological Society for 49 years, as Chairman for a five year spell and for much of that time as a Committee member. He has given many talks to GOS over the years especially on weather and birds and on some of his birding trips. He was a mainstay of the GOS first Atlas (The Gwent Atlas of breeding Birds published in 1987), acting as local organiser, carrying out much fieldwork and he was on the editorial committee and one of the four authors. Subsequently he spearheaded the second atlas which also included comprehensive accounts of all species recorded in Gwent as well as breeding distributions and changes since the earlier Atlas. He was lead author of the resulting publication 'The Birds of Gwent', published in 2008

He has been BTO WeBS organiser for the county for many years and was on the RSPB Wales Committee in the 1990s.

He had a long career as a microbiologist at Cardiff University, but during this time carried out numerous studies on birds such as a 'Census of breeding birds at Bryn Bach Park' for the Planning Department of Gwent County Council. With Colin Titcombe he surveyed breeding birds on the Caldicot Levels in 1980. He has been very active within the county and always has been available to offer advice. He is a very well-respected member of

GOS but sadly, as of 2021, Al has stood down from the Society because of deteriorating health. WOS hopes he is able properly to celebrate his well-deserved Lifetime Achievement Award.

Gwent UKBS Report for October 2021

Chris Hatch

Highlights

A Pectoral Sandpiper was reported from Newport Wetlands (3rd). Seven juvenile Spoonbills were recorded flying over Newport Wetlands (7th), whilst a single juvenile Spoonbill was present at Peterstone Gout (8th to 17th). Three Great White Egrets were reported from Newport Wetlands (10th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Single Merlins were seen (8th and 14th). Marsh Harriers were reported on several occasions during the month. A Barn Owl was seen (3rd).

Other sites

Two Ring Ouzels were reported from Mynydd Llangatwg (22nd). A Hawfinch was seen at Llangybi (30th).

GOS trip to WWT Slimbridge

Keith Roylance

Five GOS members joined Keith Roylance for a walk around the grounds of WWT Slimbridge on Sunday 28th November.

A gentle stroll around the ponds and pens gave us views of a variety of birds in the WWT collection including Smew, Bufflehead, Goldeneye, Barrows Goldeneye, Red-crested Pochard as well as the usual multitude of Moorhen and Coot.

A Bittern had been sighted on a regular basis from the Zeiss hide but as we arrived we learnt that it had not yet been sighted that day. Significant numbers of woodpigeon seemed to be the only observable bird from the hide at the time. A short walk took us to the Kingfisher hide from where a Bittern was clearly visible although it quickly disappeared amongst the reeds. A little while later it reappeared to show itself in the sunlight. Also viewable from this hide were White-fronted Geese, Lapwing and Dunlin. A Grey Heron took offence at a Little Egret invading its space and launched itself in pursuit of the Egret.



After a short break for lunch a walk to the Tower Hide gave views of two Common Cranes along with Teal, Shoveler, Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Canada geese. Returning from the Tower Hide stopping at one of the viewing points a Water Rail was busily feeding under a birdfeeder which was being frequented by various finches.



Mute Swans were in evidence around the visitor centre but only a few Whooper and Bewick Swans were noted.

Reports from our Autumn meetings held on Zoom

Andrew Cormack

In a highly appropriate talk for lockdown, James Lowen reminded us of the wildlife spectacles that are available without leaving the British Isles. His talk was structured as ten weekends, spread throughout the year. We were just back from one of his locations – Suffolk – though at the wrong season to see wrestling adders on the Sandlings. North Uist and West Norfolk brought back happy memories of pre-COVID visits. But there were also ideas for the future: I've never been to Spurn and, in Wales, although I have seen the artificial spectacle of kite feeding stations, I've not seen the frenzy of gannets, shearwaters and others just off the beaches of Cardigan Bay. All of these were described and illustrated with great enthusiasm: inspiring stuff!

Keith Offord gave a fascinating, and beautifully illustrated, talk on flight, and the different ways birds have evolved to exploit it. Migration is familiar, and the possibilities this opens up for using parts of the globe that are only suitable for life during part of the year. But the related power of colonisation may be less noticed: as our most mobile group of fauna, birds are pretty much everywhere. Even migration has different techniques and matching body forms, from godwits that fly fast and direct from Alaska to New Zealand to storks and honey buzzards that use the sun's heat to soar the length of Europe and Africa (for whom crossing the thermal-free Straits of Gibraltar may be more of a hazard than the Sahara), to passerines too small to soar that find safer migration conditions overnight. Birds use flight for nearly every aspect of life: only aerial egg-laying has proved too much of a challenge for evolution. Swifts do everything else on the wing; peregrines and some pelicans turn potential energy into kinetic when hunting; hummingbirds developed a figure-eight wing beat giving them helicopter maneuverability and the ability to feed from plants that couldn't support even their tiny weight; ravens, hen harriers and hoopoe larks use display flight skills as a sign of breeding quality. And then there are birds optimised for flight in a different medium: auks and dippers have evolved to fly best in water, at the cost of making flight in the thinner medium of air very strenuous. Penguins, of course, abandoned air travel entirely.

John Miles finished our 2021 season with an introduction to the Solway. This will be familiar to many birders as the bit of muddy water on the left as the M6 crosses the Scottish border, but both English and Scottish shores are well worth a visit in their own right. All that mud, and the surrounding marsh and grazing fields, are ideal for winter geese: 40000 barnacles come here from Svalbard; a similar number of pink-feet stop off on their way south and north. Smaller numbers of white-front, brent and graylag can be found, and it's always worth looking out for rarities among the flocks. Sadly an outbreak of bird flu is causing considerable mortality at the moment. Deeper water has sea ducks and divers, as well as cormorants and seals, which find rich feeding grounds in the no-fishing grounds around wind farms. In summer, cliffs have nesting auks, including black guillemot; best sites are St. Bees on the English side and the Mull of Galloway, though small colonies can be found elsewhere. There are obvious sea-watching possibilities at the extremities of the Firth but, more

surprisingly, also at its inland end. The builders of Hadrian's Wall recognised the Solway-Tyne line as the narrowest point of the UK; migrant skuas and divers also know this. And only a short distance from the salt water, there is an amazing variety of terrestrial landscapes and birds, including western oakwoods, moors with black and red grouse, and higher ground with hen harriers, merlin and even golden eagles. One warning if you are tempted to visit – there are a lot of duplicate names: at least two Rockcliffes and nearly a hundred miles between Wigton and Wigtown. **Double-check!**

Snippets: Extract from PROM, the magazine of Aberystwyth University provided by Keith Roylance

NEWS

New health research to help save African penguins from extinction

Research involving Aberystwyth University academics is investigating the part that disease and pollution are playing in the decline in the African penguin population, a species which faces extinction within the next thirty to eighty years.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of this species of penguins was estimated at more than three million.

However, excessive egg and guano collection and, more recently, lack of fish due to industrial fishing and environmental changes, has decimated the population. Today, there are fewer than 20,000 pairs.

While many key threats to the penguins are well known, and huge efforts made to address them by government and private agencies, little is known about health and disease threats to the species.

A group of international partners, called 'African Penguin Health', are conducting research in five areas in an effort to discover the health causes of the population decline.

That work includes conducting a health survey of the penguins by examining wild birds, taking a range of samples for analysis, looking for toxic chemicals in dead birds, monitoring coastlines and colonies using citizen science and drones, stakeholder assessments and modelling population changes.

More information about the project can be found at:

<https://africanpenguinhealth.co.za>



African
Penguins in
Namibia
©J Kemper

GOS INDOOR PROGRAMME 2022

Please note that meetings will be via Zoom or live at Goytre Village Hall. All meetings commence at 7:30 pm.

See comments column for location.

Zoom connection information will be sent to email members within 7 days of the date of the meeting.

DATE	TOPIC	SPEAKER	COMMENTS
JANUARY 29TH	Swifts – The Bird You Can Help	EDWARD MAYER	ZOOM MEETING
FEBRUARY 19TH	Japan: Birding in the Land of the Rising Sun	NEIL GERTSHORE	ZOOM MEETING
MARCH 5TH	China – Off the Beaten Track	NICK SMITH	GOYTRE VILLAGE HALL MEETING
APRIL 2ND	To Be Confirmed	PAUL BOWDEN	GOYTRE VILLAGE HALL MEETING
SEPTEMBER 17TH	Sri Lanka	ASHLEY GROVE	GOYTRE VILLAGE HALL MEETING
OCTOBER 1ST	Wader Quest	RICK SIMPSON	GOYTRE VILLAGE HALL MEETING
OCTOBER 15TH	New Zealand: Endemic Birds & Natural History	JOHN BUCKINGHAM	ZOOM MEETING
OCTOBER 29TH	Russian Far East	CHRIS COLLINS	ZOOM MEETING
NOVEMBER 12TH	Britain's Coastal Birds and Their Secretive Lives	SIMON GINNAW	ZOOM MEETING
NOVEMBER 26TH	Birding Israel	MIKE ALLIBONE	ZOOM MEETING
DECEMBER 10TH	A Year In the Life of a Bird Tour Guide	NEIL GLENN	ZOOM MEETING

OUTDOOR PROGRAMME 2022

Charges may apply at some reserves. at outdoor events is undertaken at your own risk.				Attendance			
Date	Time	Walk Area	Description	Meeting Place	Leader		
16/01/2022	7.00	Tregaron & Aberystwyth	Full day - Raptors and Starling murmuration	Abergweuny Bus Station. Car sharing.	Dave Brassey		
30/01/2022	9.00	NWR Uskmouth	Bird ringing with Goldcliff Ringing Group as part of the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch weekend. Weather dependent.	NWR Uskmouth RSPB centre	Richard M. Clarke		
13/02/2022	9.15	Slimbridge	Full day - Winter visitors inc Bewicks and Whoopers	Slimbridge Car Park. Charge for non WWT members	Dave Brassey		
19/03/2022	9.00	Mynydd Llangatwg	Moderate Walk 2 - 3 hours - Wheatear, Red Grouse and Golden Plover	SO202124 (NP23 4GU)	Nick Beswick		
23/04/2022	9.00	Brynmawr, Beaufort and Garmydan	Moderate walk 2 - 3 hours	Aeda Brynmawr car park	Nick Beswick		
30/04/2022	9.00	River Ebbw Tredegar Park	Easy Walk 2hrs with opportunity to look inside the newly built Sand Martin hotel	South bound layby on A467 (Forge Road - ST282860)	Richard M Clarke		
07/05/2022	9.30	RSPB Gwentffrwd-Dinas	Full day with RSPB staff guides - Hawfinch, Pied Flycatcher etc	Gwentffrwd-Dinas but car-sharing to be arranged	Dave Brassey		
15/05/2022	8.30	Lower Monnow	Easy walk 3 hours	On road by Osbaston School SO507137 - NP25 3PU	John Coleman		
28/05/2022	9.00	Collister Pill	Easy walk 3 hours	Undy Church	Lyndon Waters		
10/06/2022	20.00	Wentwood Forest	Easy evening walk to look for Nightjar and Firecrest	Cadira Beeches	Gavin Vella		
11/06/2022	8.30	Blaen Bran Woodland	Moderate walk 2 - 3 hours	Blaen Bran Woodland car park ST272968	Keith Roylance		
18/06/2022	8.30	Trellech Heaths	Moderate walk 2/3 hrs	Ninewells Car Park	Steph Tyler		
26/06/2022	7.30	NWR Uskmouth	Warbler ringing with Goldcliff Ringing Group. Booking essential (surveys@gwentbirds.org.uk) Weather dependent	NWR Uskmouth car park	Richard M Clarke		
23/07/2022	9.00	Ham Wall	Easy walk Full day	Ham Wall Car Park ST 449 396 (Charge for Non-RSPB members)	Dave Brassey		
24/09/2022	9.00	Steart	Full Day in this large improving reserve	Car Park ST 25208 44210	Blair Jones		
07/09-Oct		Portland	Bookings taken from 1st July - take sleeping bag and food. book - email Dave Brassey david.brassey@ntlworld.com	Observatory	Dave Brassey		
22/10/2022	8.00	Allt-y-ym NR and Tyny-y-fro Reservoir	3 hours walk - some gradients and steps	Fourteen Locks Car Park (E1 charge)	Dave Brassey		
26/11/2022	9.00	Ullandefield Reservoir	Easy Walk around the reservoir	Fisherman's car park at north end of reservoir SO332007	Keith Roylance		