

THE DIPPER



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Chair's Introduction

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Welcome to the summer edition of the *Dipper*. It's great to have a full newsletter this season and, in addition to our usual project and programme updates etc., I'm delighted to see articles by two of our members who write about their experiences of undertaking BTO surveys. The *Dipper* is your newsletter and I very much hope that more members will come forward in the future with articles. Why not get in touch if you have an idea for something we might include (dipper@gwentbirds.org.uk).

The Society has an enviable wealth of bird information that goes back decades. We are therefore starting a new column in the *Dipper* that draws from this and gives us a snapshot of what was new and newsworthy 10, 25 and 40-years-ago. It's a fascinating read of *compare and contrast* with today's Gwent birding and highlights the continued value of submitting your bird records.

Looking back to earlier in the year and post covid restrictions, it really was good to once again hold face-to-face indoor meetings. Our spring programme included popular talks by our President Steve Roberts on Northern Owls and by Chris Hatch on wildlife photography. How wonderful it was to see such good turnouts for both talks and to hear enthusiastic conversations between members and non-members alike. I hope that the non-members will be encouraged to join us again and to take up GOS membership.

There was also sadness earlier in the year with the passing of Andrew Cormack, our Webmaster and former Treasurer – a tribute to Andrew can be found below. We also heard of the passing of Graham Thorne, a long-time member and supporter of the Society and an enthusiastic recorder.

In my last message, I mentioned that understanding your expectations of the Society was a priority of the executive committee and since writing we have been in listening mode. One of the messages to come through was the need for the Society to offer more for its family members and in response to this we are holding our first *Family Day* event in early September. Given that we are well-blessed with members who are more than handy with a camera, we are also planning a GOS photographic exhibition in March next year. Further details of both these events follow.

We are also exploring how we can offer our indoor programme to as many members as possible and our autumn programme includes a mid-week indoor meeting away from Goytre Village Hall. In November, we will be jointly hosting with the Gwent Wildlife Trust a talk at Chepstow about the egrets and herons on the Somerset Avalon Marshes. Depending on how this event goes, we will look at possibly introducing other mid-week indoor talks at other locations in the county.

Enjoy your birding, I wish you all a great summer.

A Tribute to Andrew Cormack 1963 – 2023

It was with great sadness that we heard of Andrew's passing in April this year.

Andrew was an active member of the GOS Committee from 2013 and he very quickly contributed greatly to the running of the Society. He became the Society's Treasurer in 2014 and took to the role in a very positive and efficient way. Quietly and without fuss, he was always able to meet requests with rapid and successful implementation of whatever was necessary. He maintained a close control over both income and expenditure and reported reliably on the state of our finances at both committee and AGM level.

Andrew was an active birder and he readily undertook survey work, including the BTO's Breeding Bird Survey from 2016. He was also part of the team that wrote the systematic list of the Society's annual Gwent Bird Report. Amongst his many other interests, Andrew had an active role at the Gwent Wildlife Trust's Strawberry Cottage Wood reserve and he was also keen at "moth-ing", trapping in his garden.

Whilst continuing as Treasurer Andrew was a member of the sub-committee that took on the task of updating and upgrading our website. Andrew's background in digital security etc. was invaluable in helping us ensure that our website, which was based on an obsolete platform, remained secure. On 16th August 2019 the new website went live and Andrew became the Society's Webmaster. He relinquished much of the role of Treasurer in 2022 as his health deteriorated, but he still continued in the important role of Webmaster until the final few weeks of his life.

The Society owes Andrew a great debt of gratitude for the work he did so diligently and his expertise, knowledge and friendship will be greatly missed by the committee and members alike.

The joy and pain of Curlew monitoring - Verity B. Picken

Anticipation, excitement, joy, worry, pain. That just about sums up the 2023 Curlew breeding season in Gwent.

When and where would the first bird appear? This year it was on 2nd February, an unusually early date, at Blaentrophy in north Gwent; the second bird was picked up on nocturnal migration over Pontypool on 23rd and the third was seen on the flooded fields in Caerleon on the same date. Early reports are usually of passage birds on the way to their breeding sites. A couple more sightings in February were followed by virtually daily reports from all over the county from 1st March onwards. This would seem to suggest that Curlews are common, but they certainly aren't – far from it. They're at risk of becoming extinct as a breeding species in Wales within ten years, so we need to find and hopefully protect every single pair.

Luckily, Curlews are site-faithful so, having undertaken surveys in the last two years, we know where to look for them. Newchurch in the east, Trellech and Llanishen in the northeast, Llanwenarth, Blaengavenny, Brynygwenin and Llanvihangel Crucorney in the north, Trefil in the northwest, Markham in the west, and Llangybi in central Gwent – all soon held returning Curlews. And there are a couple of new locations this year. Local observers, birders and walkers as well as those who undertake more intensive monitoring are all relieved and delighted when the first pair is found back on site, when that magical bubbling song is heard and when birds are seen displaying.

Then, when the first signs of defensive action are seen, indicating a nest with eggs, comes more excitement. But it's shadowed by worry. When will mowing start? Are there foxes or badgers in the area? Crows are plentiful, gulls too, and sometimes Red Kites.

And now joy – the first chicks seen! So far this year three sets have been found in Gwent: 1, 3 and 1. So the joy is accompanied by pain because a single chick means it's more than likely that the other

April brought great excitement when a Curlew was caught, under licence, north of Pandy. The bird, a male and probable non-breeding individual, was colour-ringed and fitted with a GPS transmitter. Over the next 2-3 weeks it explored north Gwent but did not to stay. In mid-June it was observed on the River Severn near Lydney. Curlews are often site-faithful in their wintering areas as well as their breeding locations and, as this particular bird has already been seen on the River Severn near Lydney, it's likely it will spend the winter there.

two or three from the same brood have been predated or mowed. We suspect the first-found single chick has since been predated. Perhaps there was an unseen fourth chick hiding in the long grass when the group of three were seen. The parent birds were actively chasing off all predators so we are left with hope for this set.

Sadly, it seems all three pairs at Trellech have abandoned the area. Not all nest fields were located so it's not known if eggs were mown or predated. We have

great hopes for a well-grown chick in the northwest of the county – it's been seen wing-flapping and the bill has begun to curve downwards, indications that it will soon fledge; the male parent is fiercely defensive. There are still sites in other parts of the county where breeding outcomes are unknown so there may yet be more joy to come.

Swifts of Usk – Mark Mogford/Imelda McLoughlin

Swifts are truly magical birds, giving us a glimpse of what it means to have total command of the skies. Little wonder that they feature in anthologies like *The Lost Spells* by MacFarlane and Morris and short stories like *Vesper Flights* by Helen MacDonald.

For over a year, Swifts of Usk has been working to welcome Swifts home! Local residents have joined us for a series of nest box-building workshops. Thirty newly-installed nest boxes, fitted with electronic Swift calling lures, are dotted around the town and local area, ready to welcome new arrivals. Our guided Usk Swift walks attract locals as well as ornithologists and fellow Swift lovers from further afield.

By going into Usk college and primary schools in Usk and Llanfoist and giving presentations, we've been able to involve local young adults and schoolchildren in our mission to provide a warm welcome here in Usk and beyond for Swifts.

We're busy mapping nest sites (Swift Mapper) around town to monitor changes in numbers and patterns of nesting from year-to-year. This year we had the green light to survey Swifts at HM Prison, Usk. The last time this took place was in 2014. We are also pleased to say we are discovering new nest sites on each spotting expedition within the Usk area.

We have collaborated with other swift groups in the UK such as Bristol Swifts, Nibley Swifts, and Marlow Swifts in order to transfer data, share ideas and support.

We had the enormous pleasure of welcoming a guest speaker to Usk last month: Catherine Day, RSPB volunteer and leading expert on swifts. We cannot believe how much of a success the project has become with a fantastic team. We'll be building on this year's success and continuing our support for swifts and hopefully pushing our efforts further. We will:

- i) campaign for Swift bricks to be included in all new builds within Monmouthshire, and get Swifts listed as a priority species with the county;
- ii) Encourage the development of and give support to other Swift groups within Monmouthshire; and,
- iii) do all we can to encourage others such as schools, colleges, councils and churches to provide safe and plentiful nesting sites for Swifts.

Swift Nests Survey at Chepstow Castle – Rose Parkhouse

Over the years, people attending evening events at Chepstow Castle have been entertained not only by the concerts and plays on offer, but also by parties of screaming swifts inside the Castle, their calls amplified by echoes around the massive old walls. But as far as we know, in recent years, nobody has pinpointed an actual nest site. The Chepstow Swift Group wanted to do a special survey to see if any swift nests were there in 2023.

To stand the best chance of finding nests we needed evening access throughout the Castle in July, when, in reasonable weather, feeding activity tends to peak. This of course makes it easier to find the nests. Well, a bit easier anyway, as it's never easy to find Swift nests because they're so fast visiting them!

So once we'd got all the arrangements sorted out with Cadw, all we had to worry about was the weather. It hadn't been good leading up to the event, and the forecast kept changing! But there were no heavy showers due, so we decided to go ahead on the evening of 3rd July. The day itself brought some rain and rather unexpectedly stiff breezes, neither of which are good for Swift

spotting. Fortunately, by the evening the wind had dropped, it was dry and there was a beautiful sunset in the making.

We spent about two hours inside the Castle walls. Not long after arrival we saw one swift flying away from an internal wall in the lower part of the Castle, then out over an external wall. So, some of the group decided to watch that wall for the rest of the evening in the hope of seeing the bird return. This proved to be a very good decision. After a lot of waiting, very patiently, we were rewarded by the bird returning to its nesting hole which was indeed in the same internal wall. We also saw another Swift heading for what was, very probably, another nest nearby, but we were unable to locate it.

Delighted as we were to have found a nest, we were hoping to find more. Sadly, no screaming parties entertained us that evening. Indeed, the screaming parties seem to be in short supply in Chepstow so far this year. But we were pleased to record four Herring Gull nests and a couple of feral Pigeon nests elsewhere inside the Castle, as well as the one very precious Swift nest. All records are being submitted to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme and their help for the event via the local representative is appreciated.

Caerphilly County Borough Council's Swift nestbox project continues to be rolled out across the authority area and in its latest tranche, some 20 nestboxes have been assigned to Islwyn (Gwent). GOS is working with the council to identify suitable buildings where the nestboxes will be installed in readiness for the 2024 season.

The Chepstow Swift Group are very grateful to Cadw, Phil Brown and the team at Chepstow Castle for kindly making the inside of Chepstow Castle available to us privately for an evening.

Waterways Breeding Bird Survey - Tadhg Burrell

Earlier this year, I signed myself up to the Breeding Bird Survey and to my delight and surprise I was allocated a 2.5km section of the Afon Lwyd; a place right on my doorstep where I regularly walk my dogs and watch birds. Before the survey even began, I was already visiting the river and the adjacent boating lake countless times on walks and already many of the star birds such as the Dippers, Goosanders and the odd Kingfisher were setting the scene for the survey to come in the following months.



On 1st May I conducted the first part of the survey: the 'Early Visit'. As predicted the Dipper (as pictured) returned promptly with a mate too and a female goosander was seen fishing in the fast-flowing river. This was the first time I had seen one in this area outside of winter (and a first for the survey) where they often fish on the boating lake so hopefully there was a chance of nesting outside of my transects. Other species on the early visit included Treecreeper, Grey Wagtail, Greylag Goose, Swallow, Buzzard, Jay, Mistle Thrush and, plentiful

singing Goldcrests and Wrens. In total I sighted 32 species, on par, I believe with the highest for this area.

For a further few hours in the middle of June I carried out part 2 of the survey: the 'Late Visit'. At this point the transects had lost much of the bird song of early May to the constant whirring and chirping



of newly fledged birds in the canopy. The boating lake was brimming with up to 80 Mallards going through their summer moult alongside a Mute Swan, Canada Geese, Coots and their young and, a first for the survey, a Cormorant. Sadly, this time the Dippers weren't present however, they did return a week later when I went out to take some photos. The highlight for me was the large family of Grey Wagtails that were extremely erratic as two adults attentively fed four juveniles amongst the fast-flowing water. A total of 28 species was sighted

so a little down on the early visit. Species on this visit included plentiful Lesser Black-backed gulls, House Martin, Song Thrush, Chaffinch and Goldfinch.

On the whole, I thoroughly enjoyed, and would extremely recommend the survey. This is because it provided me with a great way to escape the stresses of just under 20 GCSEs, that I sat this year, by allowing me to spend time in nature. Birdwatching rather than having my head in a textbook was very rewarding. I saw my first Dipper when I did the (optional) recce part of the survey and it gave me a chance to see a wealth of birds that I would've turned a blind eye to on my walks, when I only looked out for my favourite species. Again, I would genuinely recommend the survey and I look forward to many more visits in future years.

Breeding Bird Survey – Bob Potter

The approach to conducting a Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) is well documented on the BTO website. Basically, a 1-kilometre square is surveyed by following two 1km transects, each divided into five 200metre sections. An early start for each, between 6:00am and 6:30am, which was quite refreshing – little or no people, nor traffic. I occasionally used GPS on my phone to make sure of each 200m transect intersect (unless there were obvious visual features en-route).

Birds were noted by: sight; calling; singing or flying, either side of each 1km transect, in boundaries of 50m; 200m and over 200m. This effectively results in sampling the whole of a 1km square. Each 1km transect is surveyed over a 45-minute steady walk. Total time taken for the survey being around 90 minutes.

Habitat recording of each 1km is essential. This involves many choices, as detailed in BBS guidance notes. This is undertaken during a reconnaissance (Recce) visit in March. An Early visit was then made in April, followed by a Late visit, at least six weeks after that.

In preparation for these surveys, I'd obtained two CDs from the BTO: Lowland Birds; Upland Birds. I have listened to these many times over the last fifteen months and found them to be invaluable.

This spring I took on four squares, having previously surveyed one at Collister Pill in 2022.

Taking a steady walk along each transect, one cannot help being deeply focused on each bird seen; calling; singing or flying. Each bird is observed and written down using a two-character notation for each species. I soon found there was no time to make an ongoing memory count, until having entered this data into the online BTO summary sheets. I'm always surprised at quite how many I've recorded. (The survey does not count juvenile birds).

The four BBS squares covered:

- i) **West of Newchurch** (A new site for BBS). This is primarily farmland with grassland fields and some grazing of livestock including sheep, cattle and alpacas. Within this square is a dense 200m 'field' of bracken, high brambles, holly and hedgerows. For subsequent visits I was armed with tough gloves and a pair of secateurs. The square also includes narrow lanes with some high-sided banks topped with hedgerows and occasional mature trees. The Early visit revealed 24 species, the Late visit 25 species.
- ii) **East of Newchurch**. This site started off with a very steep-sided road, bounded by hedgerows and narrow strips of mixed woodland. This blended into a deep undulating valley floor, of grazed and un-grazed fields; damp meadow land; mixed woodland of varying ages; hedgerows; small streams; and some livestock: sheep, and later, cattle. A quaint isolated church and a few farmland properties. The Late visit revealed the damp meadowland to be a beautiful wild, hay meadow, which was breathtaking. Some of the stiles were rather poorly maintained. One required the use of secateurs to make my way through the overgrown hedge. The Early visit revealed 26 species, the Late visit 27 species.
- iii) **Great Barnet's and Cockshoot**. This was a familiar region for me. Mainly mature conifer and broadleaved woodland, some of which, is much used by the public. Within this square is a 400m transect consisting of a cereal crop field to one side, a hedgerow, with a bare earth field to the other. Passage through this field was accomplished by following a tractor track, so as to not damage any crop. Bird wise, this section revealed very little, until I reached the top end of the field corner where there was a very small copse and farm building. I was presented with a cornucopia of varied birdsong which included: Blue Tit; Blackcap; Goldfinch; Wren; Blackbird and Chiffchaff. The square crossed a road (with occasional high-speed traffic) into another small copse of mature conifer trees with no understory, alongside broadleaved woodland of varying age. This was also adjacent to a large field grazed by cattle. The Early visit revealed 22 species, the Late visit 26 species.
- iv) **Collister Pill**. Agricultural farmland separated from the sea wall by a reen with hedgerows (some with trees), on one side, and coastal saltmarsh with the Bristol Channel on the other. Many of the fields were of grassland, some grazed by cattle and large numbers of sheep. Bird numbers are affected by sea and shore birds as well as tide status. The Early visit revealed 30 species, the Late visit 28 species.

The overall total was 55 Species: Canada Goose; Shelduck; Mallard; Pheasant; Swift; Woodpigeon; Whimbrel; Curlew; Black-headed Gull; Herring Gull; Lesser Black-backed Gull; Cormorant; Grey Heron; Little Egret; Buzzard; Peregrine; Great Spotted Woodpecker; Green Woodpecker; Jay; Magpie; Carrion Crow; Raven; Coal Tit; Blue Tit; Great Tit; Long-tailed Tit; Skylark; House Martin; Swallow; Chiffchaff; Reed Warbler; Blackcap; Goldcrest; Lesser Whitethroat; Whitethroat; Wren; Nuthatch; Starling; Mistle Thrush; Song Thrush; Blackbird; Robin; Stonechat; Wheatear; House Sparrow; Dunnock; Grey Wagtail; Pied Wagtail; Meadow Pipit; Tree Pipit; Chaffinch; Bullfinch; Greenfinch; Linnet; and, Goldfinch.

In undertaking these surveys at a steady pace, it became clear that some bird territories are quite short and distinct, the ubiquitous Wren for example, and the two Reed Warbler territories were just 200m apart, above the narrow reen.

Having completed four BBS surveys this spring has sharpened and increased my knowledge of wild bird songs and calls. I feel I have achieved a much deeper understanding of the species in these

areas, together with some consternation that there were only two Greenfinch and no Cuckoo, Yellow Hammer, game birds (except Pheasant) or Spotted Flycatcher.

The caveat being, these visits are what they say – surveys – a record in time. Another day there may be other birds not seen on these visit days and vice versa.

I thoroughly enjoyed conducting these surveys and look forward to next year's.



The Breeding Bird Survey is one of many different surveys that you can get involved in. Why not find out more and get in touch surveys@gwentbirds.org.uk

Outdoor Programme – Dave Brassey

Here's a summary of the outdoor programme so far this year. All photographs were taken on the actual walks/trips by Dave Brassey

Tregaron and Aberystwyth, 22nd January – Dave Brassey

After the usual 7.00am meet up at Abergavenny bus station for car sharing we set off to Tregaron. The viewpoint from the bridge over the Afon Teifi at the western edge of Cors Caron didn't let us down with good views of Red Kite, male and female Hen Harrier, Buzzard, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Lapwing and Redwing. This was followed by a walk into the reserve to the excellent hide where we saw a Merlin speeding through.



Red Kite



Later we went to Aberystwyth for the Starling murmuration but unfortunately whilst numbers were very high with many flocks between 500 and 5000 birds most went straight under the pier so we didn't see the usual spectacle. There were, however, good views of Rock Pipit followed by fish and chips to help make up for this.

Hen Harrier

WWT Slimbridge, 5th February – Dave Brassey

The now annual winter trip to Slimbridge never disappoints. We saw over 150 White-fronted Geese and a Ross' Goose with a couple of hybrid geese, which were causing much discussion. There was a hiding Scaup but excellent views of Snipe, two Water Rail and hundreds of Lapwing, Pintail, Wigeon and Black-tailed Godwits. Finally, there were good numbers of Bewick Swan seen flying in at the end of the day.



Bewick's Swan



Common Crane



Scaup



Snipe

Portland, 14th -16th April – Dave Brassey

This was the first time that I know of that we have had a spring trip as well as the annual autumn pilgrimage and an excellent weekend it was too as our group used all the beds available.

Amongst the usual warblers, finches and tits the outstanding bird in hand was a female Sparrowhawk. Around the obs. we had excellent views of Kestrel, Little Owl and many migrating passerines. The highlights, though, were a rather elusive Hoopoe and a very obliging Cirl Bunting.

Out on The Bill there were Fulmar, large rafts of Guillemot and Razorbill with Sparrowhawk and Peregrine patrolling the cliffs.



Cirl Bunting



Guillemot



Fulmar

Down in Weybridge the more productive of the reserves was Lodmoor, where amongst the regulars were Sandwich Tern, Mediterranean Gulls, Great Egret, Garganey, Marsh Harrier and at the back of the reserve a very confiding Pied Flycatcher.

On Sunday's return trip some of us popped into Ham Wall to round off a great weekend of birding with some participants getting over 100 'ticks'.



Mediterranean Gulls



Sparrowhawk

Garn Lakes, 22th April – Nicholas Beswick

Ten people joined Nicholas for a walk around the Garn Lakes and Waunavon Bog. A commendable tally of 42 species was seen including a party of three Red Kites with a Buzzard, pairs of Ravens and Wheatears and a Lesser Redpoll.

Goytre House Wood and Canal walk, 29th April 2023 – Andrew Baker

The walk took place on a warm, sunny morning and was attended by 14 people. Starting at Goytre Village, we picked up a few common species in the car park which included Rooks which nest opposite. We then followed the lane in the direction of the wood and saw Swallows near the farm. A pair of Canada Geese was spotted on the pond in the field opposite the wood.



At this point we discussed the birds we might see, particularly our target species, Pied Flycatcher and an app was used to play the bird's song to familiarise. On entering the wood, we viewed Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Nuthatch and Speckled Wood butterflies. A singing Pied Flycatcher was heard some distance to the side of the path, so we carefully moved in that direction to investigate.

Pied Flycatcher

The far end of the wood was reached without seeing our quarry, but some of us were lucky to see three male Blackcaps fighting over a single female. Re-tracing our steps, the Pied Flycatcher was seen and proceeded to sing in full sunshine, giving all present an excellent view- it was suggested that I might have placed a mechanical bird in the tree for this purpose!

We moved out of the wood onto the canal heading north. A pair of Goldcrest was observed across the canal undergoing a mating ritual. The male flashed his crest at the female, showing a deep orange at the centre of the crest. We then walked to Goytre Wharf picking up Mallard and Moorhen along the way, as well as Brimstone and Orange Tip butterflies. We then shared a coffee, enjoying each other's company, before heading back to the car park. In total we observed 33 species of bird and three butterflies.



Wren

RSPB Carngafallt in the Elan Valley, 6th May – Jon Cryer

Following on from last year's success an intrepid group of a dozen 'Coronation dodgers' gambled on the awful weather forecast and were rewarded with a dry educational walk through this RSPB reserve. Jon Cryer of RSPB led us through three woods each of which had different owners that reflected their management strategies and also showed us examples of the various fungi that indicate a healthy wood. Good views of Pied Flycatchers, Redstart, Wood Warblers, Dipper, Common Sandpiper, Goosander and Great Spotted Woodpecker were had.

After a welcome break in the Visitor Centre Jon kindly offered to take us up onto the top of the hills where different bird species could be found. This area is quite boggy and after an hour the predicted rain finally came. However, the intrepid birders still had the chance to see Red Kite, Whinchat, and Sparrowhawk.



Pied Flycatcher



Whinchat



Great Spotted Woodpecker



Wood Warbler

Blaen Bran Woodland, 13th May – Keith Roylance

Twelve members turned up for what turned out to be a decidedly cooler morning than predicted which resulted in fewer sightings. No Cuckoo nor the expected Tree or Meadow Pipits. There were, however, good views of Whitethroat, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff amongst the rather low number of 23 species recorded.

Collister Pill, 21st May – Lyndon Waters

Ten members took the gentle walk from Undy down to the pill and saw 30 species including Shelduck, Pochard, Linnet, Whitethroat, Swift, Swallow, House Martin, Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Sedge Warbler, Chiffchaff, Pied Wagtail, Little Egret, Buzzard and Kestrel.

Lower Monnow, 28th May – John Coleman

A very pleasant 3-hour morning stroll for a dozen of us which, unfortunately, this year had to be confined to roads as the old route was currently impassable. However, there were still many good sightings, the highlights of which were Red Kite, Buzzard, Stock Dove, a family of Mandarin Ducks and a Yellow Wagtail. We also had a good view of the very attractive Beautiful Demoiselles.



Yellow Wagtail



Beautiful Demoiselle

Wentwood Forest, 2nd June - Gavin Vella

The usual high turnout for this walk had to use their ears more than their eyes on a cool night that kept the moths down. Whilst we were treated to Gavin identifying the many bird songs in the wood the birds themselves were difficult to see. Songs and calls included Chaffinch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wood Warbler, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest and Firecrest and possibly the loudest Song Thrush we'd ever heard.

While we were waiting for the surprisingly quiet Nightjars, a Woodcock flew over and then we finally heard one Nightjar which made a very short flight very close to us. Unfortunately, that was the only sighting of the night, but we did hear Tawny Owl on the way back to the carpark.

Blaenavon, 9th June – Nick Beswick

Another good turnout for our second evening walk looking for Nightjar but ,alas, a worse fate than the previous week in that although we could hear one churring the lack of flying insects kept it perched. This was a shame as the evening had started well with the sight and sound of about 20 Swifts screaming around Blaenavon town centre.

Trellech Heaths, 17th June – Steph Tyler



Steph led a successful walk around the Heaths and Cleddon. Many species were seen and heard including Bullfinch, Siskin, Linnet, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Redstart, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Garden Warbler and Blackcap with the highlights being close displays of Tree Pipit parachuting. There also sightings of Fallow Deer, Broad-bodied Chaser and Emperor dragonflies and we had the added bonus of Steph's botanical knowledge.

Tree Pipit

Book Reviews – Andrew Baker

Rebirding (James Rebanks) & Rewilding (Isabella Tree)

These are the most inspiring conservation books I have ever read, and they give me hope that the big declines of our birds and other taxa can be reversed. Reading at least one (I would pick *Rebirding*) should be mandatory for all people involved in nature conservation.

The books address the declines in our birds that has seen large numbers of species being added to the red and amber lists, which they blame mostly on starvation, caused by modern farming methods. Pesticides and herbicides have reduced insects and weeds, and anti-worming products used in livestock cause their dung to be poisonous to the attracted beetles and flies.

The theory that Britain was formerly covered with continuous cover woodland is challenged and disproved, as the former takes no note of the large herbivores that were present at the time such as Aurochs, Tarpan (wild horse) and Wild Boar, which would have suppressed scrub and tree growth. This resulted in the dominant habitat being Wood-Pasture a mosaic of scrub, wetlands, grasslands, and trees of varying ages, within which our birds evolved.

This theory has been tested in a number of re-wilding projects across Europe where large herbivores have played a role in the creation of wood-pasture habitat. In contrast, simply abandoning the land can take many years to re-establish dynamic, biodiverse ecosystems. The Knepp Estate in Sussex was an intensive arable farm that was struggling financially and decided to take the radical approach of removing internal fences and re-introducing grazing animals- proxies of missing megafauna and other keystone species like Beaver. The grazing animals were types that were closest to their wild forbears - Longhorn cattle, Dartmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs, all of which live wild with no intervention. In effect, all the management beyond this is left to nature, which is a tiny fraction of the cost incurred by the RSPB on many of its reserves.

The results have been incredible with an explosion of insect numbers, 34 singing Nightingales and 16 pairs of Turtle Doves from zero, along with high densities of other declining *farmland* birds. White Storks have been introduced and are thriving. Purple Emperor butterflies have appeared and flourished to the extent that they form the biggest colony in Britain.

We have been guilty of looking to only recent history to deduce optimum habitats for birds - these numbers suggest that many farmland/woodland birds (and butterflies) are in fact wood pasture birds. Similarly, Whinchat which is thought of as a mountain bird in Britain is common in rough pasture in much of Europe - British birds seem to have been pushed into marginal habitats in our denuded countryside.

Rebanks gives a vision of landscape-scale wildernesses managed in this way, in for example the Brecon Beacons National Park, allowing recovery of those species still present followed by re-introduction of Wryneck and Red-backed Shrike when the habitat recovers. Sheep are not native to British grasslands and don't increase our native tree and plant diversity as our native herbivores once did, but actively degrade and prevent it - they would need to be removed.

Rewilding could be done at huge scale in the Scottish Highlands if deer estates (which make little money) could pool their land to make a national park larger than Yellowstone. The massive area and lack of roads would lead to an area teeming with native wildlife, and allow the re-introduction of Beavers, Elk and Lynx. Their income would come via ecotourism. This process is already happening in the Affric Highlands.

Rewilding of the landscape in this way has turned conventional conservation on its head; a cost-effective way of restoring the biodiversity of our countryside is now a possibility; a possibility we must grasp.

Bert Hamar Bursary

Do you need some help towards a bird study? A bursary (currently worth £200) is available annually to help fund research into birds within the county.

Over the years the bursary has been awarded for a variety of projects; these include studies of the breeding population of Cetti's Warblers at Newport Wetlands Reserve, Hawfinches in the Lower Wye Valley and Dippers on the River Monnow, the Afon Honddu, the White Brook and the Angidy stream. A condition of the grant is that a short article on the project should be written for the Annual Report.

Applications, including details of the project, estimated expenses and any other funding should be submitted at any time to secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk.

Recent Interesting Sightings in Gwent – Chris Hatch

March

Highlights: an adult Spoonbill was at Newport Wetlands on 3rd and 4th, with an immature bird also seen on 21st. A Great White Egret flew over Magor on 19th. A Great Grey Shrike was at the Deri, Abergavenny on 25th; and, a pair of Garganey was reported from Newport Wetlands on 27th.

Newport Wetlands Reserve: a Spotted Redshank was reported on several dates; up to 43 Avocets were recorded on 3rd; a Firecrest was present on 25th; and, a number of reports of Marsh Harriers were received.

Other sites: a Barn Owl was at Chepstow Park Wood on 4th. Single Firecrests were reported from Portskewett on 10th and Black Rock on 22nd. Approximately 20 Gannets were offshore at Sudbrook on 13th. A pale-bellied Brent Goose was reported from Collister Pill (18th). A flock of Common Scoters flew over Redwick on 25th. There were several reports of Wheatears from other sites, with a notable count of fourteen birds on Mynydd Llangatwg on 19th. Other summer migrants began to arrive, with many reports of Chiff Chaffs, Blackcaps, a few early Willow Warblers, Redstarts, Swallows and Sand Martins back at breeding sites.

April

Highlights: a Ring-necked Duck was at Parc Bryn Bach on 5th and a Great White Egret was at Newport Wetlands from 15th to 26th.

Newport Wetlands Reserve: a pair of Garganey on 4th; three Spotted Redshank from 15th; a Hobby on 20th; a Short-eared Owl and 25 Whimbrel on 21st; and, two Barnacle Geese on 26th.

Other sites: a Firecrest was reported from the Black Mountains on 7th. A Merlin was at The British on 8th. An unconfirmed report was received of two Serins present in the Grwyne Fawr valley on 9th. Single Ospreys were recorded at The Bryn on 15th and Pantygoetre on 17th. An Egyptian Goose was also reported from The Bryn on 19th. Ring Ouzels were seen at Pwll Du on 25th and Trefil on 27th. A Hobby was present on The Bloreng on 28th.

Migrants were back in good numbers, with many reports of Wheatears, Whinchats, Wood Warblers, Grasshopper Warblers, Sedge and Reed Warblers, Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts received.

May

Highlights: all were from Newport Wetlands with a Wood Sandpiper present on 2nd a Spoonbill on 15th and 16th; and, a Black Tern on 30th.

Newport Wetlands Reserve: 20 Avocets and six Ruff on 6th; 155 Black-tailed Godwits on 16th; a Little Stint on 22nd, a male Garganey on 16th and a pair of Garganey on 31st.

Other sites: Firecrests were recorded at a number of sites, as were Grasshopper Warblers. A female Merlin was seen on the Bloreng on 28th.

June

Highlights: all were from Newport Wetlands with a Cattle Egret on 2nd; two Spoonbills; a Wood Sandpiper on 18th and five Great White Egrets on 27th.

Newport Wetlands Reserve: a Spotted Redshank on 25th; 34 Little Egrets on 27th; Marsh Harriers were recorded on a number of dates; and, 150+ Black-tailed Godwits were seen on 27th.

Other sites: 400+ Shelduck were at Collister Pill on 8th, as were 30+ Ringed Plover. A Yellow-legged Gull was at Monmouth on 20th, whilst a Mediterranean Gull was reported from the second Severn crossing on 25th. Finally, 25 Little Egrets, together with 11 Grey Herons were at the Nedern on 30th.

Birds of yesteryear – trawling GOS' records – Richard M. Clarke/Chris Jones

This is the first in a new series of articles that looks at what was recorded in Gwent's birding past. Future editions of the *Dipper* will include a seasonal look back at what was happening locally 10, 25 and 40-years-ago. We hope you enjoy it.

	Summer 2013
10 years ago	<p>The summer was mostly dry and settled with low rainfall and July was especially warm and sunny. Things changed in August, when regular showers and windy conditions settled in.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Firecrest were noted as breeding in good numbers and at numerous sites in the county, a similar situation as we find it currently.• Mandarin Duck was now classed as an uncommon resident breeder with widespread records of small numbers especially on the Wye and Monnow. Breeding was recorded at Llandegfedd Reservoir for the first time. Fifteen years earlier, it was classed as a scarce resident with just two records in the year.• Two summer plumaged Curlew Sandpipers, two Spoonbill and two Little Tern were all reported from the Goldcliff lagoons early in the month. A storm in mid-June produced a Pomarine Skua several records of Arctic Skua, a single Great Skua and an incredible 3,400 Manx Shearwater past Peterstone.• There were 125 reports received of Red Kite during the year. A remarkable increase compared to the single record 15 years earlier.• Several records of Marsh Harrier were noted during August from the Newport Wetlands Reserve.• Records of Pectoral Sandpiper at Goldcliff lagoons on 8th and 30th July.• On the last day of August, Wrynecks were found at both Peterstone Gout and at the NWR.

<p>25 years ago</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Summer 1998</p> <p>The summer was unsettled and wet at the start and it wasn't until August that there were real signs of the season.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of most significance was the discovery of breeding Dartford Warblers. This was the first time in Wales that the species had been confirmed as breeding. Unfortunately, despite several subsequent breeding records, the species is now only recorded in Gwent as a winter visitor. • Another significant breeding record at the time was that of Rock Pipit which was confirmed at Goldcliff Point. • July noted the arrival of the first of the Autumn's little egrets, described as being "almost expected". At this time birds were noted only as scarce passage migrants/summer visitors, whereas today they are a breeding resident. • Scarcer species noted included, a Black-necked Grebe at Llandegfedd Res. (LR), up to 1,180 Manx Shearwater, two Storm Petrel, up to 14 Fulmar and 13 Gannet past Goldcliff during June, an Osprey at LR and Gobion, a Stone Curlew at Redwick, Arctic and Great Skua at Caldicot and Goldcliff. Finally, there was a Ruddy Duck at Nash Pools, a species now unlikely to be encountered given the UK cull of this feral American duck from 2005. This action was taken to save the globally threatened European White-headed Duck, which was being lost through hybridisation.
<p>40 years ago</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Summer 1983</p> <p>The summer was warm and prolonged that led to a third brood of Swallow at Llandenny, which fledged 4th October.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breeding raptors were reported as doing fairly well, with a record four sites for Peregrine, confirmed breeding of Merlin (there have been no recent breeding records in Gwent) and probable breeding by Hobby (now a regular but uncommon summer visitor and breeder in the county). • Green Woodpecker were showing signs of recovery following the losses during the hard winter of 1981-82 and Siskin were recorded on a number of dates, which was suggestive of breeding (now a widespread breeding resident of the county). • A Nightingale sang at Nash during much of May (sadly the last record of the species in Gwent was in 1998). • Wentwood was reported to have been finally abandoned by Nightjar, which is in sharp contrast today where we find a healthy breeding population. • Yellow Wagtail were reported breeding from the Wentloog Levels and the Usk and Monnow valleys but was noted as being '<i>apparently absent from seemingly suitable habitat on the Caldicot levels</i>'. This was possibly an early sign of things to come with the species now being an uncommon breeding summer visitor. • Tree Sparrow was at the time reported as being a '<i>widespread breeding resident</i>' in stark contrast to today, with it having recently been lost as a breeding species within Gwent and is now rarely encountered at all. • Scarcer species during the period included: a Black-necked Grebe (1st record since 1976) at LR; several Garganey, three records of Scaup and up to seven Common Scoter at Peterstone during August; a Quail at Raglan; Great Skua past Peterstone (4th County record) in June, a maximum of 11 Turtle Doves noted from the Wentloog levels on 8th June, Hoopoe at Tregate in August and a Marsh Warbler near Caerleon for 2 days in June.

Committee News

The committee met on 21st June and a summary of the key discussion points follows:

1. The committee received the provisional results of an external review of the 2022 financial accounts undertaken by GOS member Steve Roderick. A final report would be available for the committee's September meeting, when a decision would be taken on any required actions arising.
2. Proposals were tabled for the development of a risk register and it was agreed that work on this should continue and a draft should be presented to the September committee meeting.
3. The Chair reported his initial findings of a Governance review of the Society. Work was continuing and various actions had already been undertaken to ensure compliance. Some revisions were recommended to the Society's governing documents and proposals for these would be brought before the next AGM.
4. GOS had been invited by Action for Climate Emergency, to take part in an event at the Monmouth Cattle Market on Sunday 24th September. It was agreed that this was a good opportunity to again promote the Society, but members help was needed to assist with the stand on the day (please contact chairman@gwentbirds.org.uk).
5. The Brecon Beacons National Park was introducing new grazing plans for land management. The Conservation Officer applauded the approach and it was agreed that the Society should contact the Chief Executive to offer support/welcome the initiative.
6. It was noted that continuing work pressures on the editor and other members of the editorial team, meant that progress on the next bird report was slower than anticipated. Discussions were held around how a sub-committee might support work going forward.
7. The establishment of a new sub-committee was agreed to help plan the future management and maintenance of the Society's website.
8. Plans for both a GOS Family Day and a Photo Exhibition were discussed, and arrangements agreed for taking matters forward.
9. Several issues concerning the Society's Goytre House Wood were discussed including the deeds for the wood and the policy for and approach to ash die-back.
10. The Committee reaffirmed that in planning and promoting its outdoor programme it would always consider nesting birds and how best to conduct walks, especially where sensitive species were likely to be encountered. Guidance would be developed for walk leaders and the proposed draft outdoor programme would be discussed and agreed with the Committee before being finalised.

What's Coming UP

Get your cameras out it's time for " Pictures @ an Exhibition"

In celebration of ***The fabulous birdlife of Gwent*** we are holding an exhibition of GOS members' photographs at the Riverfront Theatre, Newport in March next year. We are looking for over 30 photographs to exhibit that capture the diversity of birdlife that we find in our recording area. All current GOS members (2023) can submit their work - it's free to enter. We'll provide details of the categories you can enter later, but it will include one for our younger members (18 or younger on 1st January 2023) and you will be able to submit up to x2 photographs in each category. A panel will be asked to make the difficult decision on selecting the very best photographs for exhibition. Further details (including information about how, where and when to submit your photographs) will be published on the GOS website and in the next edition of the *Dipper*.

Come and find us at the **Go Wild** family nature event at Park Bryn Bach, Tredegar on 29th July (10am to 4pm) or at Action for Climate Emergency's event at Monmouth Cattle Market on 24th September.

It's time for flapping good fun at the GOS/RSPB Family Day Come join us on 2nd September for all things BIRD!

Build a nestbox for your garden

Pull-apart-a-pellet and find what Barnie the barn owl had for dinner

Have fun with our photo **bird quiz**

Explore and marvel at our table of **Nature's Treasures**

Get spotting with experts on our guided **bird walks**

Join us for **What's that Bird?** An illustrated talk on bird identification.

Get bird arty and **Make and Paint**

Go dipping and find **beasties in the ponds**

And, if that's not enough – come and get your **face painted!**

Date: Saturday 2nd September

Time: 10:00-16:00

Venue: education room, RSPB Centre, Newport Wetlands Reserve





Gwent Ornithological Society presents:

Solomon Islands & the Australian Gold Coast Rainforest

- an illustrated talk by Ed Drewitt

Join us for an excursion into the rainforest before venturing in and around the pristine and rarely visited Solomon Islands. From exotic birds to whales, dolphins, coral reefs and much more.

30th September, 7:30pm,
Goytre Village Hall, NP4 0AR
Admission £2, payable at door
(includes refreshments)

Everyone welcome



Your chance to get involved – can you take up the challenge?

Did you know that there are loads of rewarding opportunities available in the Society whether that be through bird survey work, leading walks, giving presentations, or helping with the running of the Society? Some of the things you might get involved in are listed below. Why not find out more and have a chat with one of the named contacts?

Role		Who to contact
Website management	Could you be our next webmaster or someone who can help with updating and maintaining the GOS website?	Blair Jones secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk
<i>Dipper</i> editor	We are looking for someone to take on the role of editor of the quarterly <i>Dipper</i> .	Richard M. Clarke Dipper@gwentbirds.org.uk
Committee Member/Trustee	Could you help manage the Society and/or take on a trustee role?	Blair Jones secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk
Represent the Society at public events	We get invitations to a number of events each year and need people to be part of a team to help organise our involvement, setting up our stand and talking to people about birds and promoting GOS.	Richard M. Clarke chairman@gwentbirds.org.uk
Lead a walk	We are always looking for new people to lead a walk and share their bird knowledge.	Dave Brassey outdoor@gwentbirds.org.uk
Undertake surveys	Breeding Curlew monitoring BTO bird surveys	Verity Picken Curlew@gwentbirds.org.uk Richard M. Clarke BTO@gwentbirds.org.uk
Goytre House Wood	Practical tasks at our nature reserve: nest box checking, scrub bashing, surveying etc	Andrew Baker feedback@gwentbirds.org.uk
Give a talk	We are always looking for new speakers to share their bird experiences.	Marie Rose Pugh indoor@gwentbirds.org.uk
Librarian	Manage the GOS library at indoor meetings.	feedback@gwentbirds.org.uk