# THE DIPPER

THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Registered charity number 1088830

GOS WEB SITE: www.gwentbirds.org.uk

**Newsletter No. 136** **Autumn 2015**

**CONTENTS**

**COMMITTEE COMMENTARY** **Trevor Russell**

The condition of Goytre House Wood is once again causing concern. About a third of it has become inaccessible due to the rampant growth of brambles. This means that nest boxes have not been cleaned and path clearance and routine maintenance cannot be planned. We need to have a work party to blitz the bramble and clear paths to nestbox-bearing trees etc. Watch the Dipper and website for a date for the blitz. We will need your help. Please come and be a trailblazer!

On a more positive note, Steph Tyler was able to report that thanks to the influence of WOS (and GOS and others) NRW dramatically reduced the number of shooting licences issued to salmon fishermen to kill Goosanders and Cormorants. On the Usk, licences were issued to kill only 3 Cormorants and 2 goosanders in 2015, (12 Cormorants and 6 Goosanders in 2014) and on the whole length of the Wye, only 10 Cormorants were allowed to be shot. It was said that licences were only issued to reinforce scaring, where birds had become habituated to all the scaring methods used.

So that's alright then! Only a sceptic would wonder how many were actually shot...

There was little to report on the Tidal Power Lagoon project, apart from the encouraging news that RSPB and WOS are to take up a more prominent and assertive role in questioning the environmental impacts of such schemes.

A meeting at Llandegfedd reservoir to identify in detail the work required to improve birdwatching facilities there, stalled during the summer, but is scheduled to resume later this month.

You may have noticed that the last edition of The Dipper was rather thin, due to lack of inputs (how we miss Keith Jones' "Snippets"!). If you have any interesting articles, stories, book reviews, pictures etc. that you would like to share, please send them to the editor, Janet Cormack, newsletter@gwentbirds.org.uk

Contributions to the GOS Facebook site are also rather sparse, so please do make use of this facility. It was, after all, set up to meet a (supposed) popular demand!

A final plea is to ask if anyone would like to lead a walk around their favourite birdwatching patch. Perhaps you were a contributor to "Birdwatching Walks in Gwent", or would like to show how special your walk is? If so, please contact Dave Brassey, david.brassey@ntlworld.com

**Gwent UKBS Report for September 2015** **Chris Hatch**

## Highlights

A Wryneck was reported from Chepstow (3rd). Five Black Terns were present at Llandegfedd reservoir (15th). A Grey Phalarope was seen at Ynysyfro reservoir (15th to 16th). A Grey Phalarope (possibly the same bird) was recorded at Peterstone Gout (19th). Two Cattle Egrets were present at Newport Wetlands (27th), with a single Cattle Egret at Peterstone Gout (28th). Two Spoonbills were reported from Undy (30th).

## Newport Wetlands Reserve

A Curlew Sandpiper was recorded, (10th); other waders included up to two Spotted Redshanks (11th), three Little Stints (19th) and 39 Avocets (11th). A male Marsh Harrier was present for most of the month, whilst a female Hen Harrier was also recorded (20th). A Woodlark was reported (20th).

## Other sites

Two Hen Harriers were seen on Mynydd Llangatwg (1st). A Jack Snipe was reported from Peterstone Gout (3rd). Single Merlins were recorded at Peterstone (16th), Gobion (23rd) and the Black Mountains (26th). A Nightjar was reported from Maindee, Newport (17th)

---

## Swift survey in Abergavenny

On the 17thof June, the Swift survey team comprising Jonathan Baker, Ben Jones, Steve Butler and Andrew Baker met at Byfield Lane car park. Based on Steve's local knowledge, we surveyed the older part of the town near Brecon Road, splitting into two groups. While Steve and Ben walked a route, Andrew and Jonathan staked out the old workhouse, which seemed a dead ringer for Swifts with the multiple holes in its structure. As with many things, looks can be deceptive and we saw no Swifts entering the workhouse. Meanwhile Steve and Ben had a major success with a total of 11 pairs entering four houses.

For the second survey on the 24th of June we decided to try St Mary's church and the Town Hall. St Mary's proved fruitless but the Town Hall was excellent with six birds entering. A further bird, spotted by Ben Jones entered a building in Market Street. Whilst watching the Town Hall we witnessed the uplifting sight of a gathering of at least fifty birds overhead.

We met again on the 14th July, and two new surveyors joined us. Unfortunately it was a very dark and overcast evening. We went to Maindiff Court initially and then to an area close to the Railway station, but barely saw a single Swift, let alone finding a nest which was very disappointing.

Our final meeting took place on the 21st of July, when we again surveyed an area close to Brecon Road. Despite seeing a thirty plus flock of swifts, we failed to locate any further nests. I was concentrating on a promising looking building when I realised that it was a refuge for women who had suffered violence complete with surveillance cameras. I moved on quickly before the security staff pounced on me! We did however find a few House Martin nests on the eaves of the old school.

**SWIFTS IN MONMOUTH 2015**

Survey Team: John Coleman, Trevor Russell, Roger Ruston, Steph Tyler, Peter Waghorn

**Monmouth Gaol and nearby property on Hereford Road**

17 June ca.30 Swifts flying around
5 nest sites located under the eaves of the south side of the Jail and 5 further nest sites in the adjacent house across the drive from the Jail to the south.

4 July: A max. of 11 swifts flying around with 11 visits to and from about 5 sites on the south side of the Gaol building. In the adjacent house opposite the front door of the Gaol 9 visits were made to 5 sites,. Another probable nest site is in the garage complex on the RHS of the drive; with three visits made by flying very fast and low (knee height) across the drive only to disappear somewhere in the dilapidated buildings. **10-11 sites**

**13th Century road bridge arch over Monnow**

17 June six nest sites in the road arch with a possible 7th. In subsequent days a further site on the Monmouth side of the bridge arch was found. **7-8 sites**

**Goldwire Lane**

2 possibly 3 on Goldwire Lane and another site in timbered house opposite the entrance to the caravan site. **3-4 sites**

**Carbonne Close**

Two birds seen by near Carbonne Close at 08.40 on 17 June but none later at dusk on 17 June One bird was subsequently seen entering a site in the eaves at an apex in late June. **1 site**

**Monnow Street**

Two birds entering eaves in Beaufort yard and one of a low-flying party went into somewhere on Agincourt St. Counts of 20 birds above Monnow Br/St Thomas's and18 flying around over the Glendower St car-park and adjacent areas. Possible nest sites would seem to be the back of the buildings on the south side of Church St, in roofs along St Mary's and Whitecross Streets or even over between Queen's Head and Nag's Head pubs and a possible nest in of the large houses on Beaufort Rd in

Osbaston. Two definite occupied nests found along the backs of the houses on the south side of Church St. **5-6+ sites**

**Brook Estate**

28 June the Brook Estate flock was in screaming mode and at 9.30 p.m. eight were circling the cottages at the end of the road. Two pairs may use the gable end of No 6, but where the others come from is unclear. **2+ sites**

**Old School building in Victoria Estate**. Believed to be nesting colony here.

**Total 28-32 sites**

**Other sites:**
Dingestow Church 3pairs
Skenfrith Church 2+
Tintern – 2 pairs in house near church
Rockfield Park – 2 pairs in roof

**Hawfinch - worth taking a closer look** **Jerry Lewis**

I've been catching Hawfinch, in the Wye Valley/Forest of Dean (WY/FoD), for just over 10 years, and it isn't a species that is commonly caught by other ringers. Each year, recently, I've caught a new "oldest" bird, and have gradually been extending the UK longevity record. The latest (near Monmouth this spring) was 8 years, 1 month, 22 days since first ringed, but this is likely to be extended in the future, as a bird of this size ought to live for well over 10 years. Like several of these old birds, this one was seen, and identified from its colour ring. Most birdwatchers would put Hawfinch fairly high up on their annual wish list, but how many really look to see if it has a ring on its leg. With over 1000 now ringed in the WY/FoD, there's a good chance of picking one up - so please keep a look out. A quick "record shot" is all that's needed to identify the bird. Some birds have also moved out of the area, to Somerset (seen in a churchyard), Hertfordshire (also churchyard), Dolgellau (garden feeder), and more locally, Goytre (also garden feeder). If you are putting out sunflower seed, or any other bird seed mix, there's a good chance one could be visiting your garden, though they don't hang about for long, so you'll need to be vigilant. It would be great to get a phone call from a GOS member who has spotted a colour ringed bird, and I'm sure you'd be just as pleased by the sighting.

**NEWPORT WETLANDS SPRING & SUMMER 2015 TOM DALRYMPLE**

**Birds**

This year's breeding wader season was disastrous!

| | Avocet | Lapwing | LR Plover | Oystercatcher | Redshank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. Pairs | 42 | 16 | 2 | 6 | 28 |
| Fledglings | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |

There appeared to be little predation at egg stage, by far the most common predator seen was the buzzard. The trail cameras picked up no evidence of predators at all. Bearded tits fared much better, 6 pairs fledged at least 13 juveniles from the 1st brood. There were 6 breeding pairs of water rail this year, twice as many as last year.

**Management**

In order to access the first hide at Goldcliff it is necessary to cross over an old stone bridge that spans Mireland Pill. There are several bridges on Mireland Pill they might be over 300 years old. So it was with great care and the permission of CADW and the Council that Kevin O'Connor from NRW set about repairing the two bridges that visitors use at Newport Wetlands.

The Magor water voles, released by Gwent Wildlife trust are spreading ever closer to Newport Wetlands. Alice Rees the Water Vole Project Officer has been working with Kevin to set up baited apple rafts to monitor their progress.

Preventing rush from taking over the wet grasslands is a constant challenge. This year we wiped the rush with Round up in the spring. Obviously this can only be done in fields with no ground nesting birds. The results were far more effective than wiping done in autumn. Despite this, large areas had to have the rush mown, bailed and taken away as animal bedding.

This year was the first year of a new hay cutting regime. Farmers set aside more areas for a late hay crop and agreed to leave a strip of uncut hay in each field for the insects.

The Goldcliff lagoons are beginning to fill with sediment from the Severn, making water level control more difficult. This summer a contractor was employed to scrape some of the silt back from the northern edge of Monks Lagoon.

Nearly all of the fencing on the reserve was erected at the same time, as a result it is all starting to fail at the same time. Contractors have been employed to replace the

broken posts with chestnut posts which have the advantage of lasting a long time without the need for chemical preservatives. This means that when the posts reach the end of their lives they can be used as firewood to heat the workshop. The contractors have also replaced posts on the fox fence despite it being much newer. This is because the original posts were treated with the now banned copper arsenate which lasted much longer than the modern alternative.
We have lowered the viewing screens overlooking reedbed 5 as an experiment to see if we can improve the viewing experience without disturbing the birds. Friends of Goldcliff Lagoons, Volunteers from Newport City Council and our regular volunteers have all helped repair the viewing screens at Goldcliff.
Steve Chamberlain from Keep Wales tidy organised another beach clear up in March. Volunteers from RSPB, NRW and MacDonalds cleared a huge amount of plastic, dozens of wheels tyres and gas canisters from the foreshore. Newport City Council kindly loaded it all up for us and disposed of it, recycling what they could.
Ex IDB staff now NRW were able to help us by re-grading Fish House Lane, this has made it a much better surface for visitors to walk on.

## GOS POSITION ON WIND FARM DEVELOPMENTS

Cefncroeswindfarm1" by Blue73 at en.wikipedia

The scientific evidence that progressive and harmful climate change is taking place is compelling. In common with many conservation bodies and, in particular, those concerned with the preservation of biodiversity, GOS believes that climate change already poses an unprecedented threat to birds and other wildlife. It thus prompts questions about the longer-term effects on our own well-being and ultimately, perhaps, on our own species' survival.

In considering these threats, one response from the UK Government has been to give a commitment to generate 20% of the nation's electricity from renewable sources by 2020. GOS understands the need and recognises that the use of wind turbines, on both a local and a national scale, will be important in meeting the nation's 'renewables' target.

The GOS committee and its officers are often asked for their policy on wind energy and, more specifically, on wind farms. We believe that wind power has a significant role to play in limiting the rate of climate change, but this does not mean that we blindly support all proposals for the erection of wind turbines; nor should we blindly oppose them. It is important that in taking a position on any proposed developments, we attempt to assess the degree of risk that specific installations present to the local and national avifauna.

Such assessment is based on the fact that wind farms may cause harm to birds in three ways:

* First, research has demonstrated that birds, especially large low-flying species such as raptors and wildfowl, are killed in some numbers by turbines, so it is vital that wind farms are located in areas where populations of vulnerable species will not be threatened, especially on their breeding grounds or along known migration routes. GOS monitors bird populations and habitats in our area, so is well placed to assess the likely impacts of major infrastructure projects, including wind farms.

* Second, for the construction and operation of large-scale wind farms an extensive civil engineering infrastructure is required. This means the installation of access roads, hard standings, security fences, lighting, drainage and so on, while on-going operations, including the need for regular repair and maintenance, can generate significant disturbance. Thus in both the construction and operational phases, considerable alterations to the local habitats occur and so it is important that wind farms are not sited where their development will damage key breeding or feeding ecosystems, uncommon habitats or important migration 'stop-off' sites. Obviously, these considerations are of particular significance where rare, declining or protected species are involved.

* Third, potential for killing birds and damaging habitats is not limited to the immediate vicinity of the wind turbines, since the power generated by the turbines must be distributed to the national grid. This almost always requires new pylons and power lines, often extending over very long distances. These pose a well-known collision hazard for birds, with larger species again being the most vulnerable and so the routes of power lines associated with wind farms also have to be considered with care, ahead of any final decision to build.

It will be apparent from the above that GOS does not have a preconceived position either for or against wind farms. We are supportive of the drive to use more renewable resources in power generation and recognise the important role of wind turbines in the achievement of that aim, but at the same time we will seek to mitigate their adverse effects and will oppose all ill-conceived ventures where there is, in our view, an unacceptable risk to wildlife and, in particular, to birds.

---

# GOS policy on Solar Energy

**Summary**
Climate change is one of the greatest threats to birds, wildlife and people worldwide. The Gwent Ornithological Society therefore strongly supports the use of renewable energy to reduce the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. This policy summarises our position on solar energy, focusing on large solar Photovoltaic (PV) arrays in the non-built environment ('solar farms'), including floating solar farms. We support appropriately sited and managed solar farms, and encourage all developers to proactively manage such sites to benefit wildlife. Where the development of a solar farm would have a significant and detrimental impact on biodiversity, however, we would oppose it.

**The Gwent Ornithological Society's policy on solar energy**

In principle, we support all forms of solar energy technology. Given the absence of significant ecological impacts caused by PV arrays on roofs and within the built environment we believe such installations should be maximised. Large PV arrays mounted in agricultural fields (or other non-urban / unsealed areas) are unlikely to be a concern from a nature conservation perspective provided they are developed in suitable locations. However in order to confirm this, and also to inform proposals for enhancement/ mitigation/ compensation we consider it necessary for an 'Ecological Impact Assessment' (EcIA) to be carried out on any proposed development site. There is no evidence that solar farms displacing agricultural production is a concern at the current scale of deployment. Furthermore, solar farms can in fact provide complementary opportunities for agricultural activities such as conservation grazing, and may also benefit future production by effectively letting land lie fallow whilst the installation is in place.

**Rationale for Policy with reference to impacts on wildlife, mitigation and enhancement**

**Impacts on wildlife**

The wildlife impact of a ground-mounted solar array scheme will be largely determined by location. Where proposals are not within or close to protected areas and functionally linked land, it is unlikely that we will have major concerns. However, this will depend on the ecological characteristics of the site and its sensitivity to the proposed changes. In all cases, we should seek to ensure implementation of appropriate mitigation and enhancement measures (see the following section for suggestions).

***(i) Direct impacts on birds***

There is little scientific evidence for fatality risks to birds associated with solar PV arrays. However, birds can strike any fixed object so this lack of evidence might reflect absence of monitoring effort, rather than absence of collision risk. Structurally the risk is broadly similar to many other man-made features. Developments will need to be connected to the grid, and there would be concerns where overhead wires and supports pass through areas used by birds susceptible to collision risk or electrocution. We would like to see investment in monitoring and developing our understanding of the collisions risks associated with solar PV.

***(ii) Impacts on other wildlife***

Insects that lay eggs in water (e.g. mayflies, stoneflies) may mistake solar panels for water bodies due to reflection of polarised light. Under certain circumstances insects have been found to lay eggs on their surfaces, reducing their reproductive success and food availability for birds. This 'ecological trap' could affect the population of these insects, so it may not be appropriate to site solar arrays close to water bodies used by rare or endangered aquatic invertebrates, or where such insects are an important food source for birds using the locality. There is evidence that this potential effect can be mitigated by white grid partitioning on solar panels to reduce or eliminate their reflection of polarised light.

For floating solar farms, we may have concerns if developments are sited in ecologically sensitive locations. In particular, if located within an area of multiple water bodies, some of these bodies may be designated and others not; this may mean that undesignated bodies are developed upon yet perform an important supporting role to the designated site. Development proposals will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Security fencing around PV arrays could become a barrier to the movement of wild mammals and amphibians, and represent a collision risk for some bird species. Loss of habitat for rare arable weeds, invertebrates etc. may be a concern at some sites.

***(iii) Impacts due to land use change***

Ground-mounted solar arrays could result in:

- direct habitat loss;
- habitat fragmentation and/or modification; and
- disturbance / displacement of species (e.g. through construction/ maintenance activities).

If the site has low wildlife value e.g. intensive arable or grassland, the impacts are unlikely to be significant and may be positive. Some sites may have strong potential to become more valuable for wildlife e.g. land behind sea walls identified for future managed realignment; land suitable for entry into agri-environment schemes; and strategic parcels of land for landscape-scale conservation initiatives. Realising this potential can in some cases be compatible with solar power development, but in other cases such potential may render sites unsuitable for development. If the site is already valuable for wildlife, particularly if it is in or near a protected area, the scheme will require greater scrutiny as there is potential for significant impact.

Suitable sites for large PV arrays are limited in terms of climate, topography, access, existing land use (usually lower-grade agricultural land), shading and proximity to grid connections. Therefore, proposed developments are likely to cluster together and potentially give rise to concerns about cumulative environmental impacts. Ideally, cumulative impacts should be assessed at the district or county level, to inform site selection.

**Mitigation and enhancement**

If correctly sited (so as not to impact on sensitive sites and species) and with appropriate land / habitat management and other mitigation measures employed, the deployment of solar could be of benefit to wildlife and the wider countryside. The following are suggestions for mitigation and enhancement measures that can be adopted by solar developers to reduce their environmental impact and enhance biodiversity on solar sites. A more extensive document – produced by the BRE National Solar Centre in conjunction with the RSPB and other conservation organisations – is available. It is important to note, however, that mitigation and enhancement should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and not all of these measures will necessarily be relevant to any particular case.

***(i) Mitigation***

- Avoid legally protected areas (SACs, SPAs, Ramsar sites, SSSIs etc.), and other ecologically sensitive sites such as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and some freshwater aquatic features.
- Landscape features such as hedgerows and mature trees should not be removed to accommodate panels and/or avoid shading. If removal of a section of hedge is essential, any loss of hedges should be mitigated elsewhere on the site.
- All overhead power lines, wires and supports should be designed to minimise electrocution and collision risk (for example, bird deflectors may be necessary).
- Power lines passing through areas where there are species vulnerable to collision and/or electrocution should be undergrounded unless there is adequate evidence that mitigation measures will reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

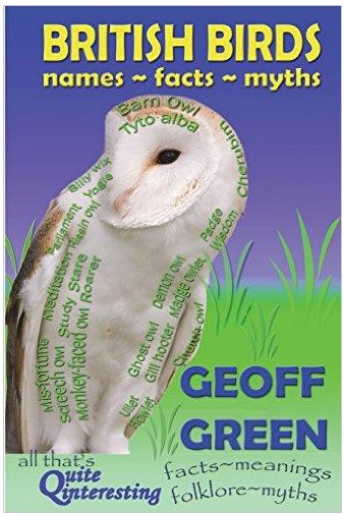
• Time construction and maintenance to avoid sensitive periods (e.g. during the breeding season).
• Whilst solar farms generally do not have moving parts, any risk to grazing animals or wildlife from moving parts that are present must be avoided.
• White borders and white dividing strips on PV panels may reduce attraction of aquatic invertebrates to solar panels (Horváth *et al*. 2010).

Vegetation will grow under the solar panels and this will require management. Grazing by sheep, chickens or geese should be acceptable, and are preferable to mowing, spraying or mulching. Ideally sites should be maintained without chemicals, fertilisers and pesticides. In terms of future management, it is important the current interest is maintained or enhanced in line with national and local planning policies. So whilst grazing may be appropriate, there may be more appropriate management options for arable wildlife and farmland birds that could be incorporated.

***(ii) Enhancement***

Because panels are raised above the ground on posts, greater than 95% of a field utilised for solar farm development is still accessible for plant growth and potentially for wildlife enhancements. Furthermore, solar sites are secure sites with little disturbance from humans and machinery once construction is complete. Most sites have a lifespan of at least 20 years which is sufficient time for appropriate land management to yield real wildlife benefits.
• Biodiversity gains are possible where intensively cultivated arable or grassland is converted to extensive grassland and/or wildflower meadows between and/or beneath solar panels and in field margins. The best results are likely to come from sites that contain both wild flower meadows and areas of tussocky un-cropped grassland.
• Planting wild bird seed or nectar mixes, or other cover crops could benefit birds and other wildlife. For example, pollen and nectar strips provide food for pollinating insects through the summer period, and wild bird seed mixes provide food for wild birds through the winter.
• Bare cultivated strips for rare arable plants, and rough grassland margins could also be beneficial. For instance, small areas of bare ground may benefit ground-active invertebrates.
• It may be possible for panels to be at a sufficient height for regular cutting or grazing to be unnecessary. Rough pasture could then develop, potentially providing nesting sites for birds.
• Boundary features such as hedgerows, ditches, stone walls, field margins and scrub can provide nesting and foraging areas, as well as a means for wildlife to move between habitats.
• A variety of artificial structures can be built to provide suitable habitat for nesting, roosting and hibernating animals such as hibernacula for reptiles and amphibians, log piles for invertebrates, and nesting or roosting boxes for birds and bats. Built structures such as control buildings can be designed to promote access e.g. by providing access to loft spaces.
• 'Community benefit' funds may provide money for local environmental enhancement such as energy conservation measures or nature conservation initiatives.
• Biodiversity enhancements should be selected to fit the physical attributes of the site and should tie in with existing habitats and species of value on and around the site.

**Book Review – 'British Birds – names, tools, myths' by Geoff Green**




There has been a plethora of county avifauna in the wake of the BTO's mammoth Atlas project, so it was a surprise and a pleasure to find this offering from the Devon Bird Club. There have been quite a few other books relating to birds' scientific and vernacular names, some more successful than others, so having bought this book I settled down to read it with keen interest. As I got into it, I did wonder for a while about the 'Qi ' format, which for a while I found mildly irritating – though, to be fair, that did wear off – and the treatment of some species is a little fragmented at times; but this is an entertaining book and deserves to succeed.

The book delves into the wealth of local and dialect names that have been given to birds over the centuries, before moving on to tackle our present day vernacular names, scientific names and some of the better known bird-related tales of ancient mythology. It's written in an accessible and easy style and I do not believe there will be any reader who does not find some new and often extraordinary facts to ponder. And there is quite a bit of dry humour, too.

For instance, before reading this book I had never realized that 'owl' was derived from 'howl'; or that Robins appear on our Christmas cards because Victorian postmen wore red tunics and were known as 'redbreasts'; or that in the 19th century, there was an annual Coot Custard Fair in Norfolk, where Coots and their eggs were well-known dietary supplements. Today (I hope) we draw the line at eating Coot, but in centuries past people were more omnivorous – I was fascinated to learn that Wheatear were popular fare and were trapped for food, with a shepherd trapper at Beach Head once catching 1,200 of them in a single season. There were many equally absorbing titbits culled from today's more scientific studies of birds. In autumn I often watch my local Jays ferrying acorns off to stash them for the coming winter; but who would guess that each Jay, on average, moves 4,500 acorns, some of them up to four kms from the original tree, flying up to 175kms per day in doing so? And while I had known of auto-cannibalism in relation to Bar-tailed Godwit migrations, it was interesting to find it set out in this volume.
Names are well dealt with in the book, though the sheer volume of alternative dialect names for birds made me heartily glad of the modern trend for standardization. I am not sure I could cope with over 40 different names for Chaffinch; and how many people would know off the cuff what a 'scammell' was? Or a 'round berry bird' or a 'shreak'? I smiled when I read that an alternate name for the Cuckoo was 'Welsh ambassador' but couldn't then decide whether this was an ancient insult or a compliment. I laughed too at the tale of a Victorian vicar's attempts to persuade his congregation to behave more like the humble Dunnock, for he might have had second thoughts if he had know of that species' habitual polygynandry!

There is much to please, inform and amuse in Geoff Green's book. It is not without some errors – the Rook is not a vegetarian, it's an omnivore, for example; and the Hooded Crow has long since ceased to be regarded as a sub-species of Carrion Crow. But these occasional quibbles do not detract from the book's overall appeal.

It is, as one would expect, a bird book to dip into, rather than to devour in one sitting and most keen birders will know some of the facts that it contains, but its strength is that all readers will be entertained and informed by it. It contains a great wealth of fascinating facts – and history and mythology – about our birdlife and it's a good read, not just for hardened birders, but for anyone who has any interest in birds. So let me end with a broad hint; this is a book any such person would love to find tucked into their Christmas stocking!

John Coleman

A copy of '*British Birds – names, tools, myths'* is now available in the GOS Library

---

**An excerpt from "*The Adventuring Pilgrim*", the first volume of the autobiography of Sir Jasper Parry-Manlikeen John Coleman**

Occasionally one finds a travel book or biography which has the potential to be life-changing. The following is as good an example of how to capture the romance of mountain regions as I have seen. It is an extract from Sir Jasper Parry-Manlikeen's[1] autobiographical book "*The Essence of Hazard: A Lifetime of Wilderness Walking*", written in 1883. I first discovered it in my teenage years, when I was given a very battered second-hand copy and that book has remained a firm favourite of its genre ever since. Just to give a flavor, the following [slightly abridged] account of his discovery of the breeding grounds of the magnificent Aromatic Duck may be of interest. It certainly inspired me…

"I crossed the last high mountain pass at 07.00 precisely on a clear May morning that, to my delight, was calm and still after the tumult of the storms experienced during our three day climb to the passhead. Though the temperature remained cool, at minus 10°C, the gales that had dogged my passage through the northernmost mountains, on the approach to the Shaohi Pass, had died away.

As I reached the highest point of the pass, stamping up the last few yards in the deep virgin snow, a most glorious view opened abruptly before my eyes. All around, in every direction, the massive snow-covered peaks and pinnacles of the Jung Li range glistened, inexpressibly majestic and serene. It was truly breathtaking and it occurred to me that, much as our dear Queen might love her Scottish mountains and Balmoral, her preference might well change if she could stand where I was now standing and see the magnificence of the Jung Lis, as I was now seeing them. Catching my breath, I recognized at once that, directly ahead of me and far below, the distant greenery of the Oonli Klee valley as it opened out, dropping away far to the south. Though still too far away to discern details, I could see that it was, as legend had it, greener by far than the arid regions I had left on the other side of the mountains.

[1] Born 1848 in Lucknow, died 1935 in Chepstow.

I felt relief and an unexpected surge of emotion surged in my breast at the thought that I would soon be walking downwards, through its primeval forests of panda-gnawed bamboo and the giant Am Fettaminee trees, whose nuts are so highly regarded by the primitive natives of this area, for their allegedly aphrodisiacal properties. Being a lone traveller I had no intention of experimenting to either prove or disprove the foundations of this belief.

I lingered to admire the splendid views, as well as to give my guides and porters time to catch up, for though they were native to this mountain area they had, as I had foreseen, proved no match for an Englishman of my stamina and determination. Indeed, with the combination of high altitude, extreme cold and strong, bitter winds I believe that my ability to cope with all that Nature in her untamed fury could throw at me – without, I might add, any seriously detrimental effects on my well-being – thoroughly impressed them. As I urged them ever higher towards the pass, I often heard them rather endearingly murmuring about me, my name being easily distinguished.

After some three hours we left this wintry scenery behind and the temperature rose to such a degree that I began to perspire gently as I marched.

Upon reaching a convenient outcrop I paused, by now some way ahead of my party, to survey what lay ahead. It was a supremely beautiful landscape. In the broad valley bottom, I perceived large remnant patches of what I surmised could only be snow. These caught my eye, forming curious patterns on the verdant green sward of the new season's grass. Since the phenomenon was still more than one thousand feet below my position and at least two miles distant, I could form no idea what as to what these white swirls might be and inquiries of my stalwart little band produced no intelligible data. Thus it was not until some hour or so later that I discovered the true identity of the many snow-like patches I had viewed.

Having descended a good deal further, by around 10.00 or a little after, I began to experience occasional faint wafts of the most exquisite scent. A slight breeze got up and blew towards me, up the valley; it was this which was bringing the scent to me, but I was at a complete loss as to what might be generating such a strong yet pleasant perfume – so strong indeed that it removed my ability to smell my small tribe of helpers who now arrived around me as I paused to think and to scribble a few notes into my leather-bound diary, which I had entrusted to the care of my head guide. Although I racked my brains, I could think of no likely origin for the olfactory delight that now enveloped me other, perhaps, than that it stemmed from some vast quantities of some splendidly exotic spring flowers. Taking a deep breath, I hurried forward eagerly, a sense of discovery welling up within me. As I lengthened my stride, leaving my party far behind me again, the scent grew stronger until, cresting a slight rise, all was revealed to me. I stopped in absolute and total amazement.

Before me, in the clear morning light, lay one of the most riveting sights that it had ever been my good fortune to behold. It is true that there were spring flowers, in splendid God-given abundance and an extraordinary variety of hues, yet it was not these that caught my eye and held it.

Just before me, a great sea of white surged and danced across the grassy floor of this wide valley, and in its dancing, dividing to swirl between the scrubby bushes and stunted trees, only to re-unite, whenever space permitted, into a great carpet of surpassing elegance and beauty, made up in its entirety of tall, white ducks. Their long necks seemed to twist in unison as they hopped, skipped and scampered over the grass. The brilliant yellow of their bills and the bright blue of their feet flashed in the warm sunlight and, to my delight, the uncountable flock kept up a low but melodious murmuring, a sound somewhat reminiscent of the buzz of a multitude of nearby insects or perhaps, if it is not too fanciful, the distant hum of a million friendly conversations.

I watched entranced. The sweet perfume I had experienced in my descent into the valley was now strong, yet at no time did it cause me discomfort. Rather, it entranced me, as might the most wonderful of potpourris, for the origin of that heady perfume scent was now revealed, as indeed was the chief reason for my trek to this most inaccessible area of China. I had done what no man had ever previously accomplished - I had crossed the Jung Lis and was now in the presence of a gargantuan flock of the legendary Aromatic Duck. I gazed in wonder, I laughed like a schoolboy, I even in one glorious moment of abandon, threw me hat into the air. I scrambled to the summit of a large rock, that I might gain a better vantage point and, standing with my face in the breeze, I sniffed extravagantly, taking in great lungs-full of the intoxicating aroma while gazing all the while at this incredible sight. The realization was borne in upon me that at last I had found the object of my quest. Then, quite unable to contain my mounting joy, I flung my hat in the air for a second time, momentarily startling the nearer ducks and yelled with that rarest of all our noble British emotions, untrammeled exuberance. I sprang from my rocky vantage point and, before my hat had even descended to the ground, I rushed down the grassy slopes to immerse myself, to lose myself, to surrender myself in the sight, sound and, above all, the glorious *scent* of the Aromatic Duck".

Sir Jasper continued at great length with his account, but this short excerpt gives a flavour of his writings. Though now – sadly – the Aromatic Duck (*Anas eureekus*) is extinct in the wild, the passage above still sums for me not only the sheer excitement of wilderness travel but the joy of discovery in the natural world. It also serves as a timely reminder of the effects of over-consumption of our world's precious resources.

---

## Forthcoming Outdoor Meetings

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Sunday 04 October 2015** | MinnettsWood | Lyndon Waters |

**Forthcoming Indoor Meetings**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Saturday 10 October 2015** | Wild Birds and Disease | Daria Dadam |
| **Saturday 24 October 2015** | Birding in Madagascar | John Clarke |
| **Saturday 07 November 2015** | Shropshire Wildlife | Jim Almond |
| **Saturday 21 November 2015** | The High Arctic: birds and other wildlife in N Spitsbergen | Al Venables |
| **Saturday 05 December 2015** | Re-establishing Britain's first bird observatory | Richard Brown & Giselle Eagle |

**Reminder: Woodland Trust APPLE DAY AT CEFN ILA, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18TH**

The Woodland Trust is holding Apple Day at Cefn Ila, near Usk, on Sunday October 18th, from 10 – 5pm. Shuttle buses will run from Usk throughout the day.
Other attendees/activities will include the Monmouthshire Bat Group, Scouts (be prepared to build a den) and apple pressing.

## GOS CONTACTS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Chairman** | **General Secretary** | **County Recorder** |
| **Verity Picken** | **Trevor Russell** | **Tom Chinnick** |
| Chairman@gwentbirds.org.uk | 01600 716266 | 07982719881 |
| | Secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk | countyrecorder@gwentbirds.org.uk |
| **Field Secretary** | **Membership Secretary** | **Newsletter** |
| **Dave Brassey** | **Lesley Watson** | **Janet Cormack** |
| | 01633 859434 | |
| outdoor@gwentbirds.org.uk | membership@gwentbirds.org.uk | newsletter@gwentbirds.org.uk |