

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
Registered charity number 1088830

GOS WEB SITE: www.gwentbirds.org.uk

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GOS has received a invitation from GWT to become a Wildlife Guardian. This would require GOS to commit to paying GWT a minimum of £500 per annum to create a fund to enable GWT to respond more quickly to environmental emergencies. Discussion concluded that such a request was more likely aimed at business enterprises rather than small charities like GOS. Furthermore it was felt that we had made substantial donations to GWT in the past – e.g. £5,000 to assist with the purchase of Magor Marsh - and so it was agreed we should decline their invitation to donate.

Having cleared access to nest-box bearing trees in Goytre House Wood, we now need to clean and assess the condition of the remaining nest-boxes. Many boxes have been lost on trees felled due to storm damage, so we will assess the cost of replacing them with woodcrete boxes.

We also need to arrange to have the bramble cut back again in the Autumn.

Tidal Lagoon Power has suspended work on the Swansea lagoon for a year because funding has been shelved. Lagoons planned for Cardiff and Newport have similarly been put on hold. Fortunately scoping studies on the likely impact of these lagoons is able to continue.

Llandegfedd Reservoir continues to give cause for concern as we observe water-sport activities extending well beyond the water-sports season with the consequent disturbance to both fishing and birdlife. The conflict is the revenue-generating sports activities versus maintenance of the SSSI status of the reservoir. We wait for Welsh Water to decide where their priority lies.

Jerry Lewis has mentioned elsewhere that we need more volunteers to cover the BBS squares lost due to the retirement of observers. In addition to this loss, the BTO has given us several more squares to be covered. We urgently need many more volunteers!! Please study the list of available squares and contact Jerry, if you can help.

At last we can conclude with some good news! Jerry reported that Beacon Hill, near Trellech, which was flailed last year (albeit at the wrong time of year) to eradicate the gorse and birch growth and allow the creation of a heathland habitat, has largely worked! Extensive areas of heathland are now growing successfully and so other areas will soon be flailed to further discourage re-growth of gorse and birch.

AGM COMMENTARY 2016

The President, Steve Roberts, welcomed those present and reminded us that the purpose of an ornithological society was not simply to preside over the decline of birds in Wales and do little to prevent it – a frequent criticism of the RSPB – but to submit records of our own observations.

The early days of GOS coincided with the publication of the first BTO Atlas, around 45 years ago, and GOS members (including Steve and his pals) enjoyed the challenge of roughing it as pioneers in order to submit sightings of birds from the blank areas on the birding map of Wales. That data is now being built upon and is

proving to be an invaluable resource, e.g., when contesting planning applications for new building developments in order to protect the birds and their habitats. When we submit Sighting Records we often don't know, or cannot begin to imagine, how the data may be used in the future but it *is* being consolidated - and used - so the importance of submitting Sighting Records cannot be exaggerated. He urged all those present to submit their Sighting Records to the County Recorder, no matter how trivial, small or insignificant they may seem today. Tomorrow they could make a vital difference.

The Treasurer, Andrew Cormack, reported that the Society's income and expenditure had returned towards normality and balance, following the unusual blips of costs incurred by publishing 'Birdwatching Walks in Gwent' in 2013 and the unusual income from sales of the book in 2014.

In her review of the past year, the Chairman, Verity Picken, noted that GOS members had been treated to varied and interesting programmes: Al Venables had used eight speakers who were new to GOS, and who brought new topics to those we have seen in the past, whilst Alan Williams had introduced a mid-week walk in a bid to attract members unable to attend the usual weekend walks.

Survey work, i.e. WeBS, Heronry Census, House Martin, Swifts, Nest Record Scheme and BBS continues to attract their devotees, though it is notable that we are losing surveyors due to retirement, particularly from the BBS survey, so new recruits are always required.

Sadly, Keith Jones had to retire as Librarian due to ill-health, despite being ably supported by his wife, Gill. Cath Medez and Sue Parsons have kindly volunteered to keep the library open during meeting hours.

Steph Tyler was awarded a WOS Lifetime Achievement Award, which was richly deserved.

We continue to monitor the potentially worrying developments in the county – Tidal Lagoon Power at Swansea, the M4 Relief Road, Llandegfedd Reservoir and the Circuit of Wales – all of which threaten to have an adverse impact on bird habitats. The 2014 edition of the Annual Report was the 50th Anniversary issue and contained more pages and more photographs than ever. Editor, John Coleman, was congratulated on such an excellent edition in addition to the excellent review the 2013 Report received from Birdwatch magazine.

In a year that saw over 200 species recorded in the county, the highlights were a the first sighting of a Black Guillemot off Goldcliff, a second record of Barred Warbler and a Stone Curlew, seen for the first time in 17 years.

Gavin Vella has been awarded the £200 Hamar Bursary 2015, to assist his work with setting up a feeding station at Llandegfedd Reservoir.

Gavin was also elected to the GOS Committee, with Alan Williams and Dave Brassey elected as Indoor and Outdoor Secretary respectively.

The AGM was followed by the traditional and mouth-watering Members Evening Buffet and spell-binding slideshows from four members: Tom Chinnick, who took us to Georgia and The Caucasus, Adrian Plant on Visible Migration, John Coleman with excellent birds ~~shot~~ photographed across Africa and a tricky bird quiz hosted by Dave Brassey, won by John Walsh.

Another great evening, see you there next year!

Firecrest Survey at Wentwood 2015 – Barry Embling

The regular occurrence of Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus* at Wentwood seems always to have been known about, but only limited attempts have been made to get an idea of breeding numbers. Firecrests are a summer visitor to Wentwood, with birds arriving mid-March and lingering into September, and singing quite late into the summer. Working for Coed Cadw (the Woodland Trust in Wales) since 2011, I had always been delighted to hear the odd Firecrest singing at Wentwood whilst going about my business, but the sheer extent of Wentwood and time commitments had never allowed me to get past getting to know a few individual birds on territories. However, I was always under the impression that a larger population may exist beyond what I was seeing (or rather hearing) each year.

Wentwood is comprised of around 1200 ha, with three owners, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) being by far the largest, followed by Coed Cadw with 354 ha, and a private landowner with about 60 ha. All the ownerships are very much intermixed with each other. Wentwood is mostly comprised of exotic conifers that were planted mainly in the mid-20th century, at a time when perceived utilitarian needs of the nation came first; it now seems, with hindsight, a most inappropriate management on this, the largest ancient woodland in Wales. The plantations comprise mostly Larch *Larix* spp., Douglas fir *Psuedotsuga menziesii* and Norway spruce *Picea abies* in approximately equal thirds. Since 2013, and the arrival of the tree disease *Phytophthora ramorum*, much of the larch has been removed and replanted with native broadleaves by both NRW and Coed Cadw.

It was obvious that more boots on the ground were required to discover more about the Firecrests, and this is where the GOS came in, with Tom Chinnick, offering his services and those of his friends, Chris Jones, Matt Meehan and Darryl Spittle. Armed with maps, we decided to carry out a coordinated survey on a few dates through April and May. Teams took their respective patches and everyone fed back information on birds they'd encountered with grid references, singing, calling, breeding behaviour, weather etc noted. The commitment of the group was never in question, that was until a Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* arrived in Somerset! News filtered through to us at Cadira Beeches car park via Twitter as we were about to embark on our survey. Despite abandonment of the Firecrest survey that particular day, we had a couple of very productive sessions as a group, supported by many individual casual observations, surveying around 400ha between us.

After all our observations were collated, we recorded 22 territory-holding birds. Some territories were repeat visited by surveyors whilst others were visited only once. This is likely to be well below the total number of birds present at Wentwood in 2015. I got the impression that 2015 wasn't actually a great Firecrest year, as some of the most reliable haunts from previous years were vacant, including the usual singing bird at Cadira Beeches car park.

Our first survey was a chance to make a start and get familiar with the site, and get a sense of the surveying task. For 2016 we all agreed we'd like to have another coordinated effort. Next time we'll give all surveyors their own designated patches to check and carry out repeat visits at their convenience, perhaps combining this with a search for Nightjars if we carry out evening after-work visits. If anyone is confident of

their Firecrest song identification and would like to participate next year, please contact Tom Chinnick at countyrecorder@gwentbirds.org.uk for survey maps and instructions.

BTO surveys this breeding Season

The second phase of the **House Martin** survey involves regular counts at a colony, one that is convenient for you to visit (so if you're lucky to have one on your own, or a neighbour's house, that would be perfect). Visit bto.org/housemartins-2016 for details of how to get involved.

The **Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)** is the main method of tracking the fortunes of our common breeding birds. It involves walking a 2km route (through a 1 km square), twice during the breeding season, and counting everything you see and hear. It would involve only about 2 hrs per visit. There are always some squares available, but this year, several long term participants have had to give up their squares (an effect of an aging population of volunteers). The majority of the birds that you will record will be common species (though there may be the occasional more unusual one), so there should be no problems with identification (and I could let you have a cd of bird song to refresh your memories). As well as getting you out into some interesting countryside, the main benefits, comes from tracking the year to year changes in your chosen square. In addition this year, the BTO have allocated 20 new squares for 2016, so there should be a few that are convenient for you to visit. I hope you can give BBS a try this year, and help with this important survey. I have grouped the available 1 km squares around five general regions of the county (to give you a better idea as to which may be close to where you live), as follows –

Newport area - ST2396, ST3482, ST2497, ST2689, ST2385, ST2097, ST3491, ST2785, ST2693, ST2292, ST3593.

Chepstow area - ST4698, ST4896, ST4585, ST4497, ST5290.

Monmouth area - SO4817, SO5414, SO5119, SO5117, SO4502, SO4708.

Abergavenny area - SO3228, SO3621, SO3929, SO3707, SO3011, SO3726, SO2318, SO3624, SO3307, SO3519, SO3728.

Western Valleys - SO2000, SO1902, SO2604, SO2303, SO1402, SO2901.

Existing routes have already been established through some of these squares (but could be amended if you wish), but others are new and have never been surveyed before. Please get back to me if you think you might be able to help, or want more information, or visit bto.org/bbs for more details and see a map of all the squares.

The **Waterways Breeding Bird Survey (WBBS)** is the equivalent of the BBS involving walking several 500m sections of a waterway. The only WBBS available (at the time of writing) is along the R Ebbw, at Cross Keys, where a long term participant has had to relinquish his route.

Jerry Lewis 01873 855091 or jmsl2587@yahoo.co.uk

WINTER 2015-16

Birds

The winter bird period September to February inclusive has been a bit of a mixed bag this year. The Severn Estuary SPA migratory species have generally not done as well as the 5 year average. Whimbrel, spotted redshank and ringed plover are all down compared to the 5 year average. Redshank stayed the same and dunlin are up with a peak count of 3069 not that far off the UK 1% figure of 3500. Diving duck numbers are lower than the 5 year mean, I think this is related to fewer waterfowl using the reedbed pools this year, although I can only speculate as to why this should be. Gadwall, shoveler, grey plover, wigeon and teal are all above the 5 year mean peak count. The shoveler peak count was 188, 8 more than the UK 1%. Pintail and Shelduck are down on the 5 year mean, but the High tide and WeBS counts for February have not been taken into account yet.

Tidal Lagoon scoping studies

Tidal Lagoon Power have commissioned scoping surveys to find out more about the Severn Estuary bird features which may be impacted by the building of the Cardiff tidal lagoon, see map below.



The scoping work that has involved Newport Wetlands staff have been low tide counts organised by BTO, GPS tagging waders organised by BTO and GPS tagging wildfowl contracted to WWT by BTO and finally sound recording. The GPS tagging

involved cannon netting for curlew, redshank, shelduck and shoveler mainly in the Peterstone area. See photos below of net and decoys.





The curlew were attracted to a high tide roost with decoys, see left. The net (top picture), was fired over the top of the birds heads using the cannons above.

The birds were quickly extracted and put in a specially created dark quiet place before being measured, ringed and tagged.

15 curlew were caught and tagged in this catch.

The picture below shows a GPS tag fitted to a curlew. The tag will be shed at the first body moult.



The GPS tag records its whereabouts and when a bird wearing one of these tags comes within a couple of hundred meters of the data stations this information is downloaded. The data can then be used to create a map showing the movements of that tag. The photos below show a data station on the reserve.



The data stations will pick up data from the BTO redshank tags as well as the curlew and the WWT shelduck tags. WWT is currently trying to catch wigeon on the reserve to tag. The information received so far has shown some surprising use of the reserve grassland fields by curlew and redshank at night time as well as the more obvious high tide



Clarke Saunders Acoustics have been appointed by Tidal Lagoon Power to record background noise levels around the proposed lagoon areas. They have installed apparatus similar to that shown in this picture on the reserve

Winter management work

The fox fence has had some posts and some insulators replaced. Wires were tightened and netting patched to get it through another breeding season.

Kev has been out in the amphibious reed cutting machine again this year. He cuts the deep water reed to encourage fish into shallower water where bitterns may more easily catch them. He also keeps the pools and channels within the reedbed open to maintain the habitat diversity that benefits many species.

roosts and daytime foraging areas. Our volunteer team have been helping to prevent the reedbed slowly becoming a woodland, by coppicing willows. The coppice stools become a useful habitat as does the piles of willow branches.

The NRW Operations Delivery Team helped us this winter by cutting back some of the hedgerows and bramble bushes that were beginning to encroach some of the paths, particularly at Uskmouth, Farmfield lane and Saltmarsh lane.

All the rain in early February has had a diluting effect on the saline lagoons. We have had to open the tidal flaps to allow saltier water in. In previous years we have held the tidal flaps open for long periods to allow invertebrates to be washed in. However we have decided to keep this to a minimum as the silt load has built up to the extent that it is now necessary to remove additional silt that settles out. This is too expensive to continue on an annual basis.

Reports on Recent Indoor Meetings

Al Venables did his best to dispel the unseasonably warm late-November weather with a talk including snow, ice and, yes, reindeer. Spitzbergen is about as far north as you can get on land and the birds, animals and plants need to be adapted to a harsh climate. However the seas around the archipelago are particularly productive so species that can survive can exist in very large numbers. Cliffs provide safe nesting places for Brünnich's guillemots, kittiwakes and the barnacle geese that spend the winter with us in the relative warmth of the Solway Firth. Up to a million little auks, one of Al's target species, nest under boulders on scree slopes. On land the vegetation looked familiar to me, with dwarf willow trees just a few centimetres high, but in the UK you need to go four thousand feet up on the Cairngorm plateau to find them: in Spitzbergen they're at sea level. In the sea, walrus and beluga whales are definitely unfamiliar, while you may be lucky enough to see a fin whale off the UK. Some adaptable arctic wildlife has even worked out how humans can help – in Longyearbyen eider ducks nest close to the sled dog pound to be safer from predatory arctic foxes.

For our final talk of 2015 a break in a long series of gales let us welcome the wardens of the Skokholm bird observatory at the start of their winter break on the mainland. When the observatory was created in 1933 it was the first place in the UK where daily recording and ringing of migrant birds could take place. By the mid-1970s more than quarter of a million birds had been ringed. However the development of mist nets meant that ringing could be done in places without permanent traps and a change in the owners' policy led to the closure of the observatory. In 2006 the island was bought by the Wildlife Trust and an active friends group restored the observatory buildings and rebuilt the traps on their original sites. In 2014 observatory status was regained.

Skokholm is still a birding hotspot – 27 species of wader were seen at the island's pond in 2015. The long series of consistent observations from the same location are particularly valuable for research, for example an increase in the number of willow warbler sightings over the observatory's history seems to indicate that migration routes have moved further west over that time. Ringing also shows that many more individual birds visit the island than is apparent – a bird may be sitting in the same bush where it was trapped yesterday, but if it doesn't have a ring then it's not the same bird. And the island's research facilities are being extended to include a storm petrel bank: here's hoping some birds will take up residence in 2016 and increase our knowledge of this species.

GOS President Steve Roberts gave our first indoor talk of 2016, on nest finding in Northern Scandinavia. His visits to Finland, Sweden and Norway have concentrated on two groups with very different nesting strategies: waders and owls. Most waders nest on the ground, so behave in ways that make the nest hard to find. Many avoid flying to or from the nest, instead they land some distance away and walk through vegetation where they cannot easily be followed. Some species where male and female take turns to incubate the eggs can be found thanks to their calls when the changeover takes place but others, such as spotted redshank, leave brooding to one parent, which will sit silently even when humans walk close by. In complete contrast most owls leave no doubt at all when you are close to their nesting trees, calling loudly and even flying out to attack if you get too close. With a great grey owl weighing around 1.5 kilograms with sharp talons an attack can be serious. The two groups also differ in their incubation: waders need all the chicks to leave the nest at once, soon after hatching, so only begin incubation once all the eggs are laid. By contrast most owls incubate from the first egg, so chicks hatch one or two days apart and are very different in size. In times of food shortage the largest chick feeds first and smaller siblings may starve. Just to prove that there are no firm rules, pigmy owls (weighing about 50 grams) follow the wader strategy so their chicks are equal in size. These collect large caches of voles and shrews to see them through any food shortages.

Malcolm Walker

It is with sadness that we report the death, on December 21st 2015, of Malcolm Walker, a staunch supporter of the Gwent Ornithological Society in earlier years.

For most of his career he was a meteorologist, working in the Maritime Studies department of Cardiff University and he and his wife Diane joined GOS in 1973 becoming regular attenders at both indoor and outdoor meetings.

Malcolm became a member of the Annual Report editorial committee during 1976-84, and for several years, making use of his expertise, he authored the section on Arrival and departure of migrants linking these to the prevailing meteorological situations.

From 1979 until 1994, he co-tutored with Al Venables, an annual, week-long, Weather and Bird Migration residential course at Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory in Lincolnshire. Malcolm covered the weather aspects and Al the birding content. In

1995 the course ran for the last time when Malcolm and Al led the week observing bird migration on the Rock of Gibraltar. Malcolm and Al gave a couple of talks to GOS on Weather and Bird Migration which, over the years, resulted in several GOS members attending the Gibraltar Point course.

After taking early retirement from the University in 1998, Malcolm became the Education Officer of the Royal Meteorological Society in Reading, living in South Oxfordshire. In 2007 he retired to Devon where he and Diane lived very busy lives until ill-health compelled him, in early summer last year, to withdraw from active life.

GOS COMMITTEE MEMBERS 2016

PERMANENT MEMBERS

President	Steve Roberts
Vice President	Al Venables
Vice President	Alan Williams

Honorary Officers (elected annually)

1	Chairman	Verity Picken
2	Secretary	Trevor Russell
3	Treasurer	Andrew Cormack

Executive Committee Members (elected annually)

4	Conservation Officer	Andrew Baker
5	County Recorder	Tom Chinnick
6	Newsletter Editor	Janet Cormack
7	Field Secretary	Dave Brassey
8	Indoor Secretary	Alan Williams
9	Membership Secretary	Lesley Watson
10	Report Editor & Publicity	John Coleman
11	Website Manager	Chris Field
12		Adrian Plant
13		Rupert (Roo) Perkins
		Gavin Vella

Co-opted to the committee by the Executive Committee

1	Al Venables (acting as Vice Chairman)
2	Chris Hatch
3	Chris Jones
4	Jerry Lewis
5	Rob Parsons
6	Steph Tyler
7	Steve Williams

Future Outdoor Meetings

Date 	Title	Speaker/Leader
Saturday 12 March 2016	Ty-yn-y-Coed, Mynydd Llangatwg	Nicholas Beswick
Saturday 19 March 2016	Bargoed Woodland Park	Lee Taswell
Sunday 24 April 2016	Collister Pill	Lyndon Waters
Saturday 07 May 2016	King's Wood	John Coleman
Saturday 21 May 2016	Mynydd Maen	Keith Roylance
Saturday 28 May 2016	Goetre House Wood	Alan Williams
Saturday 04 June 2016	Clytha Hill	Mark Stevens
Sunday 12 June 2016	Garn Lakes	Steve Williams
Saturday 17 September 2016	Llanthony Wood and Valley	Keith Trott
Saturday 19 November 2016	Ynysyfro Reservoirs	Ian Walker

Future Indoor Meetings

Saturday 19 March 2016	BirdTrack	Ian Spence & Anne Brenchley
Saturday 02 April 2016	The BTO in Wales	Kelvin Jones
Saturday 16 April 2016	Wildlife through the lens	Chris Hatch
Saturday 01 October 2016	Texas birds	Mark Hebden
Saturday 15 October 2016	Birds and climate change	Rob Thomas
Saturday 29 October 2016	Bird migration - why and how	Alan Williams
Saturday 12 November 2016	Birds and other wildlife of Namibia	Al Venables
Saturday 26 November 2016	Morocco: the coast, mountains and desert	Tom Chinnick
Saturday 10 December 2016	Ring reading: an exercise in citizen science	Steve Williams
Saturday 21 January 2017	AGM	GOS members

GOS CONTACTS

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Gwent Bird Report 2014

Errata

Please note that:

1). Re. Gadwall:

In the species account for Gadwall, in the recently published Gwent Bird Report, the table of monthly maxima is incorrect. The corrected version of the table (included with the full account for context) is as follows -

Gadwall

Apart from the two main sites of NWR and Llanwern, numbers were generally lower than last year. Monthly maxima at sites with records in at least 3 months are tabulated below.

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
NWR	65	74	34	26	35	12	6	29	56	53	105	62
Llanwern Steelworks	23	20	12	14	6	14	5	17	34	24	34	1
Nedern Brook Wetlands	2	2	5	4	1	1						
Peterstone Pill		1			1							2

Otherwise there were scattered records of very small numbers at another six sites: Wentwood Reservoir, up to 6 in Jan/Feb; Ynysyfro Reservoir, 2 in Dec; The Warrage, 2 in Aug; Magor Marsh, 3 in Jan and 2 in Apr; Collister Pill, 2 in May, 3 in Sep; Llandegfedd Reservoir, 2 in July (AA, DMS, SJT, BB, C&DJ, SRS).

Breeding: At least 3 pairs bred successfully at Llanwern Steelworks (PO'D), and one pair at NWR (ND).

2) Re. Grey Heron

In the **Grey Heron** species account, the record of 28 at West Usk lighthouse on 16th Feb, is incorrect. The sentence containing this reference should be removed in its entirety.
