

THE DIPPER



THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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REMINDER: CHANGE OF SPEAKER DATE IN OCTOBER 2017

Tom Dalrymple's talk on Managing the Newport Wetlands Reserve will take place on Saturday, October 21st, not October 28th .

COMMITTEE COMMENTARY, APRIL MEETING

TREVOR RUSSELL

The important topic that dominated the meeting was, inevitably, the M4 Relief Road. GOS had submitted its Objection to the Black Route proposal and we have since received a Rebuttal from the advocates running to many, many pages including a multitude of cross-references to evidence supporting their cause. Their main approach seems to be that their proposed mitigation site will overcome all environmental objections, though we consider their suggested site to be quite inadequate in terms of both size and habitat. We were invited to submit our case in person (and thereby be subjected to a withering cross-examination by expensive WAG barristers), but we declined the ordeal. Instead, Steph Tyler prepared a written Closing Statement (see elsewhere in this edition) which includes the fact that the new road would disturb the site of the breeding cranes last year (*and which have returned to the same site to breed again this year!*) The public inquiry continues.

British Birds magazine recently invited GOS to be featured as their Bird Club of the Month in exchange for an advert in The Dipper offering reduced magazine subscription rates for GOS members. Once details of the advert had been negotiated an article was drawn up, together with photographs, and should be published shortly though we've not seen any sign of the advert yet. A copy of our submitted article appears elsewhere in this edition but if British Birds is new to you check out their website www.britishbirds.com for more information.

A primary school in the north of the county has asked GOS to help them with their project by giving them a presentation on Red Kites. We are now anxiously casting around for photographs, feathers, nesting material etc. to support this local success story but without disclosing breeding locations since it's a Schedule 1 protected bird. A school visit to the Gigrin Farm feeding area would surely be one of the year's highlights for them?

Thanks are due to Dan Webb and Gavin Vella who have installed a further 15 nest boxes in Goytre House Wood. These replace some of those lost over recent years due to storm damage and tree-fall.

Following recent postings on the Gwentbirders Facebook site which could reveal the whereabouts of Schedule 1 breeding birds, it has been agreed that such postings should be removed immediately, together with an explanation of the purpose of the Schedule 1 designation.

Capitalising on this success the Chairman was able to close the meeting in the record time of 1.5 hours, at 9pm!

M4 Relief Road - Public Inquiry. Response to the Developer

Our objection to the proposed Black Route was submitted to the Inquiry some time ago. Two weeks before it was considered we received what is known as 'A rebuttal to your objections'. This is a detailed response from the Welsh Government (the Developer) as to how they are proposing to overcome any or all of our objections. If we had appeared in person at the Inquiry we would have had limited opportunity to query some of their rebuttals, whilst potentially being cross examined on our original submission. As we chose not to appear in person at the Inquiry we have submitted a written response to the Rebuttal documents. This response is printed below.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY AND RESPONSE TO THE DEVELOPER'S REBUTTAL OBJ0297 OF THE EVIDENCE PROVIDED BY THE GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

This statement is brief because we realise that the inspector will have to read huge volumes of evidence. Also many of our continued concerns are being or have been addressed by others. We highlight however, several species of particular concern, most especially Cranes.

We would point out though that it seems ludicrous to us to suggest that the proposed motorway would not be in direct conflict with the aims of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Much habitat, including SSSIs, would be lost and adjacent habitats disturbed during construction and afterwards from noise. There is no guarantee that the mitigation area would provide similar habitat and would not be ready for some time.

Other specific points

Developer: 'Neither the Newport Wetlands National Nature Reserve and RSPB Reserve, nor the Magor Marsh and Great Traston Meadows Gwent Wildlife Trust Nature Reserves, would be significantly affected, although a small area of land owned by the Gwent Wildlife Trust would be acquired. Views of the new section of motorway from Magor Marsh Nature Reserve would be screened by the existing woodland and vegetation within and surrounding the nature reserve and residential properties within Magor'.

GOS Response: Indeed a relatively small area of Barecroft Common would be directly affected but the noise and disturbance to this wetland reserve and to the Magor Marsh Reserve would be considerable.

Little Egrets

The developers suggest that **the Little Egret colony** at Magor Marsh, only the second colony of this species in Gwent, would be screened by trees and therefore the birds would accept the noise and disturbance. GOS contends that this may not be the case. The colony is near the northern edge of the reserve where disturbance would be greatest. When a cycle route was proposed near Uskmouth, we were concerned about a colony of Grey Herons being disturbed. We were told that this would not be the case but in reality the colony was then deserted once the cycle path was open.

Cranes

One of our many concerns, if not the main concern, is the impact on Cranes. It was a momentous occasion when a pair of Cranes nested on the Levels in 2016, the first Welsh

breeding record for many centuries. This pair is already starting to nest in 2017 at the same site as in 2016.

The nest site of the pair of Cranes is within about 250m of the route and much closer to the area that will be disturbed during the construction process. The site is on private land where the public has no access. It is highly unlikely that the site will remain occupied during construction or even reoccupied subsequently. The Welsh Government acknowledge this concluding there will be significant impacts on Cranes during construction and not being able to rule out significant impacts on Cranes during operation of the road.

In the Ornithology Chapter on Cranes provided by the Welsh Government's consultants, they in their assessment of the magnitude of impact, in Paragraph 6.4.15, talk in terms of 'Minor Adverse' and 'Slight/Moderate'. Given that the impact may well be long-term and this is currently the only known pair in Wales (and one of only a handful in the UK), this seems to considerably underplay the impact.

There is an apparent further weakness of the government's position in the proposed Crane mitigation, in that what they have proposed to date is highly unlikely to attract and then hold breeding Cranes. To have any real prospect of success they would need to re-create the particular habitat requirements that drew Cranes to the site in the first place and which are essential for the birds to breed successfully. A sizeable managed wetland and then ensure much of it is free of disturbance during the breeding season. A 400-500 metre exclusion zone around the nest site would most likely be required. This isn't what seems to be being proposed. Cranes are highly susceptible to disturbance and likely to leave their nest if anyone approached within about 300m. By the adults leaving the nest and eggs untended, this means that the eggs are then highly vulnerable to predators.

Regarding mitigation in general, the whole plan seems very limited given the area over which impacts will occur. The Welsh Government accepts that noise and visual disturbance will have a measurable effect on breeding birds over an extensive area. For susceptible species like Lapwing, Crane and some other species, the area over which there are measurable negative impacts of road disturbance (on breeding success, etc.), is measured in 100s of metres from the carriageway. Even for less easily disturbed species, e.g. Cetti's Warbler, there will be a corridor of impact in which breeding success will be suppressed. In Section 6.4 of the Ornithology Chapter noise disturbance is discussed (though not visual disturbance, which, in an open landscape could be equally significant) but it does not seem to have been addressed by offering a suitable size of mitigation away from the road. This road scheme should have been accompanied by a mitigation plan for a significant amount of the remaining levels to come under sensitive management to offset the likely adverse impacts together with specific mitigation for the Cranes.

Gwent Ornithological Society, April 2017 British Birds Bird Club of the Month

British Birds electronic magazine highlights a 'Bird Club of the Month' and we are fortunate to have been asked to participate. A set of standard questions were sent to us and our responses are set out below. Do you agree with our choices of must see birds and our three sites? Please send your favourites to newsletter@gwentbirds.org.uk for inclusion in a future edition of the Dipper.

What area do you cover, when was the club established and how many members do you currently have?

Founded in 1961 as the Pontypool Bird Club it morphed into the Monmouthshire Ornithological Society in 1964 and following the local government reorganisation in 1974 became the Gwent Ornithological Society. Situated in south-east Wales, the recording area is bounded by the rivers Monnow in the north, Rhymney in the west, Wye in the east and the Severn estuary coastline to the outskirts of Cardiff in the south. The Gwent Levels SSSI runs down to the shoreline near Newport and is adjacent to the Newport Wetlands NNR. Inland there is an array of varied habitats, grouse moorland on the Black Mountains to ancient woodland in the picturesque Wye Valley with rolling farmland and heathland between.

Current Membership is 256

How frequently do you meet indoors/field trips?

Indoor meetings are held every two weeks from September to Easter and this year's programme includes mimicry in birds, adaptations in rainforests, where to go for accessible birding holidays, how to photograph birds, managing a Wetland Reserve and how Field Guide illustrators paint their subjects. Fingers crossed we'll even see (pictures of) a Phillipine Eagle later in the year!

About a dozen field trips explore different local areas each year including an annual weekend pilgrimage to the Portland Bird Observatory.

Our own woodland reserve Goytre House Wood, a 12-acre site of mainly semi-natural woodland is monitored on a regular basis.



Do you publish a newsletter and/or annual report?

The GOS newsletter, *The Dipper*, is produced four times a year, with colour photographs (for e-mail subscribers) throughout its 16 pages. A Gwent Bird Report is published annually and the 2015 Report, published late last year, ran to 138 pages of which 40 were in colour and received an excellent review on the BirdGuides website. The Report is free to members (membership costs £15 pa each or £18 pa per family).

Other recent publications include *Birdwatching Walks in Gwent* (paperback, sold out but check on Amazon/eBay) and the highly acclaimed *Birds of Gwent* (hdbk).

For birders visiting your area what are the top three sites you would recommend?

- Newport Wetlands Reserve (NWR) – the best location for birding in the county, both for the variety of species likely to be seen and the likelihood of finding something out of the ordinary. NWR is divided into a series of sub-sites that comprise the wader hotspot of Goldcliff lagoons in the east and Uskmouth reedbeds to the west linked by the Saltmarsh grasslands.

Llandegfedd Reservoir – located eight miles north of Newport, the county's largest inland water body covering 434 acres. During passage Osprey and terns are regularly seen while the site is also important for wintering wildfowl such as Wigeon and Teal.

1. Peterstone Gout/Sluice – during its heyday this was Gwent's premier birding site. The tidal mudflats and associated gout and sluice still attract large numbers of wintering wildfowl on passage.

What has been the club's birding highlight in the last year?

On 12th May 2016 an immature Lammergeier was sighted and a video grab taken, by a non-birder at Sudbrook, the first record of this species for the British Isles. The bird is likely to have originated from the Alps where a reintroduced population has been established. In conservation terms, the headline was the news that Common Crane bred successfully on the Gwent Levels for the first time in 400 years. Unfortunately, the site of this breeding pair is threatened by the proposed M4 relief road and may yet be buried under six lanes of tarmac.

What are the top three 'must see' species in your area?

- **Avocet** – Goldcliff lagoons are the first and only breeding site in Wales for this species.



- **Bearded Tit** – The Uskmouth reedbeds is the only reliable breeding site in Wales.
- **Goshawk** – The woodlands of Gwent hold a significant population of Goshawk which can be seen all-year round but are more likely to be observed whilst displaying in February and March.



How should readers get in touch if they wish to know more about your club?

Full details are on the Club's website, www.gwentbirds.org.uk , which gives the contact details of committee members, a Latest Sightings page, forthcoming events and latest news.

Photos: Avocet Family - Goldcliff Lagoons, Newport Wetlands Reserve. Dave Brassey

: Bearded Tit - Reedbeds, Newport Wetlands Reserve, Tom Chinnick

: Goytre House Wood – a nature reserve owned by GOS, Keith Roylance

Special Offer

GOS is *British Birds* Bird Club of the month and the magazine is offering a subscription at a special rate to members. If you wish to subscribe, please use the following link

<http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/gwentos>



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Dipper foster parents

Steph Tyler

As usual friends and I have been busy checking Dipper and Grey Wagtail nests on tributaries of the lower Wye this spring. Compared with last year when the cold spell in April delayed Dippers laying their clutches, this spring has been more 'normal' with first eggs laid in several clutches in mid-February. At the time of writing (24 April) 29 broods of dippers have been ringed with a few more first broods still to do and the first of the second broods by the end of the month.

I report on one incident that perhaps may make readers smile. On 8 April Olly Maciver and I were checking nests on the Trothy near Monmouth. At the first site - a nest by a stream under the dual carriageway near Jingle Street that had earlier had a clutch of four eggs on this visit had just one egg and one newly hatched nestling. We continued downriver and checked a nest under the bridge near Troy Recycling Centre and sadly the contents - an egg and three recently hatched nestlings were stone cold. Presumably the female had been killed soon after the young had hatched. I removed the contents and was about to throw them away when we realised that two of the 'dead' nestlings were moving. I warmed them up a bit and they then could almost raise their heads. What to do with them? We quickly decided a real foster mother would be better than a human carer so we raced back to the first nest and popped them in with the single Dipper chick there to give them the possibility of surviving. I didn't rate their chances highly as they were so weak but thought that at least if the female brooded them they would warm up and stand a chance of being strong enough to gape for food.

To my delight when I returned to the nest on 15 April there were three healthy chicks big enough to ring. In the wider scheme of things this is irrelevant - many nests inevitably fail for various reasons but faced with the situation where you can help a bit it seemed heartless not to try. The two nestlings would otherwise certainly have died as had their sibling already, had we not visited the nest that morning.

Gwent UKBS Report for February 2017

Highlights

A Bittern was present at Woodstock Ponds Betws (1st to 22nd). Eight Waxwings were reported from Cefn Ila near Usk (13th to 28th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

1,200 Lapwing were recorded (1st). Male and female Marsh Harriers were seen (19th), whilst a female Hen Harrier was also recorded (28th). A female Scaup was reported (19th).

1. Other sites

Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers were reported from Malpas (2nd) and Chepstow (13th). Seven Water Pipits were present at Sluice Farm/ Peterstone (13th). Four Bewick's Swans were seen at Llangybi (13th). A female Scaup was present at Peterstone Gout

(16th to 19th). A Yellow-legged Gull was reported from Newport (19th). A Willow Tit was seen at Wentwood (20th) and a Hawfinch was recorded at Caldicot Castle (21st).

Chris Hatch

Gwent UKBS Report March 2017

Highlights

A Red-rumped Swallow was seen at Newport Wetlands (30th). A Cattle Egret was also present at Newport Wetlands (18th-31st). Single Black Redstarts were seen at Porton (6th) and Newport Wetlands (15th). An Iceland Gull was reported from St. Brides (21st). An Osprey was observed at Peterstone (27th). A Spoonbill was reported from Newport Wetlands (25th-29th). A Great Grey Shrike was present at Blaenserchan (11th -27th). Two Common Cranes were reported from Newport Wetlands (12th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Up to 76 Avocets were present (11th). A male Marsh Harrier was seen (11th -16th), with a female bird also present (18th). A male Hen Harrier was reported (12th). A Ring Ouzel was recorded (16th).

Other sites

Up to 23 Water Pipits were recorded in the Peterstone area (2nd). Two Jack Snipe were also seen at the same site (2nd), as was a female Scaup (4th). A Mediterranean Gull was reported from Newport (6th). A Short-eared Owl was seen at Caldicot Pill (9th). 150+ Bramblings were reported from Blaenserchan (12th). Two Garganey were present at Magor Marsh (25th-29th).

Chris Hatch

Swifts in Chepstow

If there any members living in or near Chepstow who would be prepared to locate breeding swifts in late May/June, could you please contact Steph Tyler (Email: Steph_Tyler2001@hotmail.com). The Chepstow Group of the Gwent Wildlife Trust are keen to help swifts in the town.

Review of Recent Indoor Talks

Andrew Cormack

On a dark February evening our county recorder, Tom Chinnick, took us on a tour of Morocco. A ten-day, 2300km circuit included habitats from the Atlantic coast to the desert, via grasslands and the Atlas mountains. The range of birds was similarly wide, from marsh owls on the coast to larks, wheatears and sandgrouse inland. Even relatively familiar species occur in unfamiliar numbers: 250 hawfinch or 300 black-

necked grebes. From a life tick (house bunting) at the airport, the species list grew to 190 – the same number as his Gwent list for the whole year.

Mike Leach described his experiences of many years' filming and photographing wildlife in the tropical rainforests. Subjects ranged from mountain gorillas, who adopted Mike as an honorary member of their tribe, to a newly-discovered species of inch-long bats that roost, in status order, on thin twigs over water. Animal behaviour is a particular interest, including a young orangutan who pulled a plank out of a jetty to make a bridge to a canoe containing bananas. These rainforests – which contain 50% of the world's species, despite only occupying 4% of the planet's surface area – are threatened both by gradual expansion of surrounding farms and by exploration and exploitation of mineral resources. Mike's photographs and accounts stress the importance of protecting them.

Phil Mugridge introduced us to the many excellent birding locations in Portugal and Spain that are easily accessible on short breaks from local airports. Many birds seem very tolerant of human presence: in the Algarve purple gallinules can be seen on golf course ponds, in Extremadura picnic areas are good for azure-winged magpies, while in Andalucia re-introduced bald ibis appear to have chosen to nest closer to a main road where there are fewer predators! Other species require more preparation: commercial hides were used to photograph lekking little bustards and lynx, while access to a lammergeyer feeding station in the Pyrenees required a licence from the local monitoring project.

Our spring programme was completed by Jackie Garner, who provided a portrait of Lundy in photographs and paintings. Although only three miles long by half a mile wide, the island features ten different habitats, and a correspondingly wide range of birds. The island list has 300 species, with around 140 seen in a typical year. Auks and seabirds are common, but the location in the Bristol Channel makes it good for migrant land birds too. One species that was nearly lost was the puffin, after which the island is named. In 2000 there were no successful nests, but following eradication of rats, the population has now recovered to 300 pairs. A special feature of Jackie's talk was the insight into how she captures landscape and wildlife in paint, from pen and water colours in the field to finished acrylics in the studio. Most of us would be more than satisfied if we could produce what she counts as preliminary sketches.

Llangybi Park Wood

Six GOS members explored a part of the county new to five of us, enjoying birds, butterflies, bluebells and excellent views. From Porth-Long, and the first of several drumming woodpeckers, we climbed north-east through hill-top fields with a panoramic view of the hills of Gwent from Mynydd Maen to Wentwood. Linnets in the field and a sunlit red kite overhead were bird highlights. Then a change of scene and sound as we dropped down through Coed y Fferm, loud with chiffchaffs, blackcaps and song thrushes. A pair of redstarts gave an excellent excuse for a biscuit stop, with the tree tops also providing siskins and goldcrests. Cae Cnap wood was good practice for those of us revising bird calls in preparation for Breeding Bird Survey visits in the next few weeks, though a passing curlew added an unexpected note to the woodland soundscape.

The planned return through Llangybi Park Wood was diverted to avoid disturbing a field of cows with calves, taking us instead up a woodland track with nearly as many butterflies as birds. Holly blues, green-veined white, orange tip and speckled wood gave varying views - some were in just too much of a hurry to settle down. The final climb back to the cars added raven and stock dove to our final total of thirty bird species. Thanks to Verity for introducing us to a new area, and yet another example of the variety Gwent has to offer.

Outdoor Meetings

<u>Date</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Speaker/Leader</u>
Saturday 20 May 2017	Garn Lakes	Nicholas Beswick
Saturday 10 June 2017	Blaen Bran Community Woodland	Keith Roylance
Saturday 01 July 2017	Goytre House Wood	Alan Williams
Saturday 12 August 2017	Mynydd Glanlochdy	Richard Dowle

Indoor Meetings

<u>Date</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Speaker/Leader</u>
Saturday 30 September	Geo-locating Greenshank	Nick Christian
Saturday 14 October	Forest Eagles	Steve Roberts
Saturday 21 October 2 (Change of date)	Managing the Newport Wetland Reserve	Tom Dalrymple
Saturday 11 November	Saving near-extinct birds in the Seychelles W Papua & Halmahera - Painting Birds of Paradise in paradise	Al Venables
Saturday 25 November	The Denny - Gwent's Bird island	John Gale
Saturday 09 December		Richard Clarke
Saturday 20 January 2018	AGM and Members' Evening	GOS members

GOS CONTACTS

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Field Secretary Dave Brassey outdoor@gwentbirds.org.uk	Membership Secretary Gill Jones / Lesley Watson membership@gwentbirds.org.uk	Newsletter Janet Cormack newsletter@gwentbirds.org