

Vale of White Horse Local Group

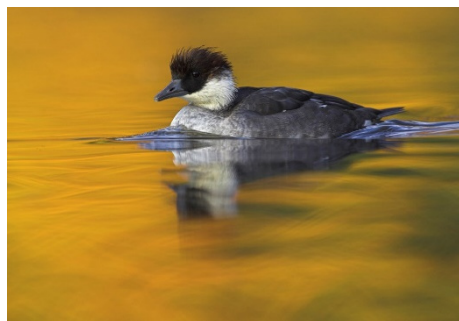
Welcome to the new season of the Vale of White Horse Local Group, with a special welcome to any new members. We hope you will enjoy the various activities organized for 2017-18 which are detailed in the programme with this newsletter.

New Season

We have the usual mix of Monday evening talks once a month on a variety of wildlife-related topics and weekend outings by coach or car. There is a plant sale, a photographic competition for members, and a regular raffle. Another ever-popular members' spring weekend away is planned.

Visit our website rspb-vwh.org.uk for up to date information.

Please note that the first outdoor event on 17 September, a coach trip to Middleton Lakes, is scheduled before the first indoor meeting on Monday 18 September. Middleton Lakes is near Tamworth and is good for wildfowl; there might be smew.



Female smew:
c Ben Hall rspb-images.com

If you would like to go on this trip please contact Martin Latham (martinj.latham@googlemail.com and 01235 851918).

We would encourage everyone to support the outings; there are always interesting birds to be

seen in a variety of habitats, with experienced people helping with identification, and it is a chance to visit nature reserves which may be unfamiliar. The cost depends on how many people come, and the outings need to be booked in advance, usually at an evening meeting.

Group Weekend Away

The weekend away is always well supported. Here is my report from the Group weekend on the Somerset Levels this March.

It is a surprisingly evocative of place to revisit old field notes. Trying to decipher my scribbled species list for the Group trip to Somerset I found myself once more passing a lively rookery, then down a wooded path towards a hide where we saw kingfisher nesting in a hole in the bank opposite while a couple of dabchicks dived in the pond. This was at Slimbridge; chiffchaffs and Cetti's warblers were calling and there were barnacle geese in the Severn valley. A spoonbill was feeding metronomically in a shallow pool and watching this, I scanned the meadow beyond; how had I missed them before?; there were five cranes, the species we had been hoping to see.

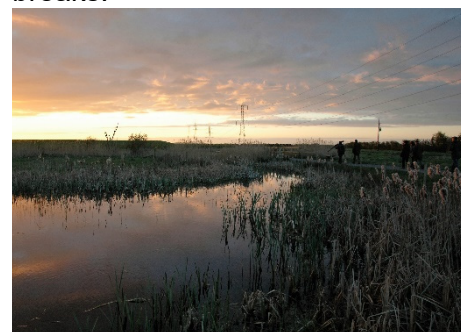


Common crane
c Andy Hay rspb-images.com

The Great Crane Project started in 2010 with the aim of re-introducing European common cranes to the UK. Eggs from wild German cranes were hand-reared at Slimbridge and the chicks released at RSPB West Sedgemoor in the Somerset Levels. Ninety-three birds were released into the wild by 2015. Cranes rarely breed before they are four years old; and in the last couple of years chicks have successfully fledged. In 2016 cranes attempted to breed on Otmoor. The Project continues see: <http://thegreatcraneproject.org.uk>

So from the colours on the ring of one crane, I discovered it had fledged in 2010. Hopefully it was breeding this year.

We stayed at Keenthorne near Bridgewater, and early morning walks were to Steart Marshes and Bridgewater Bay. Here is Steve Cload leading the way as dawn breaks.



Felicity Jenkins

Large numbers of shelduck dotted the mudflats and several members spotted normally elusive Cetti's warbler in scrub next to the sea.

The Saturday visit was to RSPB Ham Wall. Sitting gazing across the marshes towards Glastonbury Tor as returning hirundines swooped over the water and the spring sunshine blazed down was

very pleasant.



Felicity Jenkins

Bitterns boomed loudly from the reed beds; I had never heard them before, an astonishingly deep sound.



Felicity Jenkins

More intrepid members of the party were delighted to spot glossy ibis at Shapwick Heath nearby.

On Sunday we went to RSPB West Sedgemoor where we were told by the warden there are 19 pairs of cranes this year, but not seen that day. We did see raven, great egret and peregrine.

This was a very enjoyable weekend with excellent accommodation and good food. Twenty-six members participated. A special thanks to Steve Cload and Pat Phillips for their efficient organisation. Looking forward to next year!

News from the AGM

2017 marked a milestone for our Group as it has been in existence for 40 years. This was celebrated in April with an interesting talk by Peter Holden and a large birthday cake, which all present enjoyed. Nick Droy, Midlands reserve manager was also in attendance and gave an introductory speech.

Membership of our Group, despite being one of the highest in the Midlands region with an average of 63 members typically attending, is declining; this is a national challenge for local RSPB groups. In addition, the committee is still struggling for active support

with an increasing number of vacancies.

Posts of indoor programme secretary, membership secretary and sales organizer are vacant.

Keeping the Group going depends heavily on the current committee doubling up on jobs and the support of volunteers for providing refreshments at meetings.

Please consider whether you might be able to help in any way.

Steve Bastow, Group leader, thanked all the committee for their hard work and those stalwarts who have helped on the tea rota.

Recent meetings and outings

In May Leo Keedy gave an interesting talk on 'College Lake A Changing Landscape'. College Lake near Tring, a former chalk quarry and a BBOWT reserve since 1984, was landscaped to form a mosaic of habitats, including wetland, woodland, scrub, grassland, and farmland. It is part of the 'living landscape' of interconnected reserves with the upper Ray and upper Thames. The fossils found in the chalk at College Lake give the site its SSSI status. Chalk grassland flowers and butterflies, together with hobby, sandmartin, lesser whitethroat are seen in summer. Key breeding species are lapwing, redshank, oystercatcher, little ringed plover and common tern.



Little ringed plover
C Mike Langman rspb-images.com

In winter the lake is a magnet for wildfowl, with pochard, tufted duck, snipe, shoveler and black-headed gull. There is an education centre at the reserve, which is well worth a visit at any season.



Snipe Tom Marshall rspb-images.com

Trips in spring were in April to Beaulieu Road Station, where redstarts were seen in the New Forest, and some people spotted a woodlark. Heavy rain then cut short the visit, but shelter was available in the hide at Blashford Lakes, where people were gathered eager to view a local Bonaparte's gull which didn't show itself, but the first swift of the year appeared.

In May at Paxton Pits, which is famed for nightingales, the numbers of nightingales were sadly down.

In June, in the dusk, at Greenham Common at least four nightjars were heard churring, and one was seen. Also a great view of a roding woodcock.

Donation to the RSPB

Part of the remit of Local Groups is to support the work of the RSPB directly. We donated £700 to the RSPB last season.

Conservation News

Seven bee-eaters have been found at a quarry in Nottinghamshire, raising hopes that they might breed. Colourful and unmistakable, bee-eaters are rare visitors to the UK and normally nest in southern Europe. The last time they nested in the UK was 2015, when two pairs set up home in a quarry in Cumbria



Bee eater c Andy Hay rspb-images.com

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/>
Thanks to Steve Bastow and Gill Riches for contributions.

Felicity Jenkins