

Vale of White Horse Local Group

This is the spring newsletter, but spring is late coming this year and a chilly wind was blowing again over the Easter weekend. Despite this, early butterflies like brimstone and small tortoiseshell are emerging, bumblebees are about, and chiffchaffs were heard singing in Oxfordshire in late March as usual.



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Committee news

As most of you will know, Steve Bastow our Group Leader is moving from the area this month. So we have a vacancy on the committee for a Group Leader, as well as for indoor meetings and sales organizers. If we can't fill these positions, the viability of our group is seriously in question.

Please consider joining the committee.

Further to this is the perennial need for volunteers to help with tea and coffee at meetings. It need only be an occasional task; thanks to those who have signed up on the rota and please add your name if you can for future events.

There are also changes at the Banbury office, which is relocating to Birmingham this spring and Anna Keen, Volunteer Development officer, is leaving.

Forthcoming events indoors

The 16 April meeting will be the rescheduled presentation 'Birds Behaving Badly' by Dominic Couzens. A bird's life is never easy. There may be hard winters to endure, long journeys to make, feathers to replace and territories to defend.

Please bring green contributions for the plant sale.

AGM

On 21 May the AGM takes place at 7.15pm. Please note the earlier start. Any items for the AGM should be sent to Jane Rudd. (henry.rudd@sky.com)

Roger Wyatt's wide-ranging talk on 'Birding in the Outer Hebrides, Spain and Oxfordshire' will follow. Local rarities will be highlighted.

Outdoor excursions

Coach trips need to be booked at the meeting prior to the outing; the cost depends on the number of participants. For car excursions we meet at the venue at the time specified; car sharing and lifts can be organised. Contact Martin Latham (martinj.latham@googlemail.com) or 01235 851918.

A coach trip with the Oxford Local Group to Durlston Country Park and Studland Heath national nature reserves is planned for Sunday 29 April. Please note the new pick up point at 7:20am at Curie Avenue on the Harwell Campus. There is plenty of parking space near the shops to leave your car all day. These Dorset sites are wonderful for seabirds including offshore skuas,

black terns, little gulls and Manx shearwaters.

On the cliffs nesting guillemots, razorbills, fulmar, shags and swifts are found. Wild flowers including orchids carpet the downland and the reserve is famed for insects, including butterflies like green hairstreak and grizzled skipper which fly in April. Studland Heath is a great site for reptiles, including sand lizards.



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On Sunday 20 May another coach trip with the Oxford Local Group is to Highnam Woods and Nagshead. This might be an opportunity to spot a hawfinch at last, as they are resident in these woods all year round. Although hawfinches have been sighted locally and nationally in good numbers this winter, some of us still haven't spotted one.



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Finally on 9 June there is the annual summer car trip to Greenham Common, Newbury in the hope of seeing nightjars, which usually make an appearance there at dusk. The white spots on their long wings are clearly visible

and they have a characteristic flapping action. There is a chance of spotting woodcock too. Details for meeting to be advised in due course.



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Review of winter field trips

Starling murmuration at Otmoor. Seven people braved the December weather and we managed to see 100,000 starlings come in to roost in the reed bed. They looked like a black carpet sitting on top of the reeds. A large flock of lapwing and golden plover were feeding in a nearby field whilst marsh harrier was quartering the reed bed.

Other highlights were kestrel, yellow hammer and lots of reed buntings.

Jane Rudd

Greenham Common in February

Ten members turned up on a wonderfully bright and sunny but very chilly morning. A woodlark was singing as we arrived, but by the time we had assembled in the car park it had decided that it had done its bit for the day and remained silent and invisible for the rest of the morning. Equally frustrating was a Dartford warbler that permitted a brief glimpse and then called tantalizingly from dense cover.



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However, despite the best efforts of Greenham's birds to keep their heads down, the group managed to put together a combined list of 37 species, including cormorant, red kite, sparrowhawk, buzzard, kestrel, stock dove, green woodpecker, meadow pipit, mistle

thrush, stonechat, chiffchaff, goldcrest and bullfinch.

Martin Latham

Great bustard reintroduction project Salisbury

We were made very welcome by the project team and taken on a bouncy land rover ride across some very muddy fields to a sturdy hide from which we managed to observe 13 magnificent male bustards, several of which were displaying. We didn't see any females. Maybe they were watching the show while remaining under cover.



© Jane Rudd

Other birds seen included red kite, buzzard, red-legged partridge, field fare, lapwing and many corn buntings.

Martin Latham

Review of Indoor Meetings

The December meeting took us to Caribbean islands with Steve Holliday who has been involved in conservation work with the RSPB there. Hurricanes, feral non-native predators and loss of habitat threaten a wonderful variety of bird species in dry scrubland, tropical rainforest and off shore. But initiatives by locals have proved very successful in many places, eg St Lucia. Magnificent frigate birds, mangrove cuckoo, tropic birds, flycatchers, and the delightfully named bananaquit were all illustrated in their habitats; a most interesting evening. Everybody enjoyed mince pies and Jane's fiendish bird quiz was won by David Lovegrove.

In January Jim Almond spoke about his mammoth task of sighting 300 British bird species in one year. Members enjoyed his well-illustrated talk and humorous commentary.

In February chairman Steve

Bastow described his tour to the Donana reserves in Andalusia in January 2017. Based at El Rocío, they visited wetlands, inland steppe, salt marshes and coastal sites, seeing a wide variety of amazing species including a Lynx. Flamingos, glossy ibis, bluethroat, calandra lark, imperial and booted eagle, black stork, griffin vulture and purple swamp hen were some of the notable birds spotted. And a flock of 900 cranes.

Finally, in March we were birding in Israel with Mike Alibone. Israel is perhaps not so well known as it might be as a prime birding venue but being a country of diverse habitats and a key eastern Mediterranean flyway, has a huge number of species and is wonderful for spring and autumn migration. There are major radar tracking sites for raptors, which have provided detailed scientific data for many years. The numbers are staggering. 500 million birds pass through Israel each spring and autumn, storks, white pelicans, cranes, eagles, harriers, buzzards, vultures and many more.

Conservation news

Last year our Local Group visited reserves in the Somerset Levels, so it is interesting to hear some news from RSPB Martin Harper.

'All in all it's been another good year for cranes with the first ever chick fledging from West Sedgemoor. Another four fledged from the reintroduced population at the same reserve and an additional 18 fledged from the native population in East Anglia (Broads and Fens), Yorkshire and NE Scotland. Great white egret numbers continue to grow at Ham Wall where little bitterns also bred again alongside seven pairs of cattle egret and night herons which nested successfully for the first time in the UK. This is now the seventh species of heron breeding on the Avalon Marshes.'

Omission from January 2018 newsletter. The photograph of Margaret Meardon is the copyright of Colin Wilkinson (RSPB Banbury office)

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