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Editor Felicity Jenkins

# NEWSLETTER

Summer 2021

## Vale of White Horse Local Group

Welcome to the Vale of White Horse Local Group summer newsletter for 2021.



© Robin Carter RSPB Swallow

### Covid

The rain is hammering against my window and dark clouds are scudding by; it doesn't feel much like July. But although some Covid restrictions are still in place nationally, an easing is expected before the end of the month.

However the activities of our group will still be affected, as Didcot Civic Hall is being used as a vaccination centre until the end of this year. So the autumn programme will continue to be held via Zoom.

Zoom meetings have proved successful for the group, with good attendances and few technical hitches.

### Autumn Programme 2021 via Zoom

(Tim Pett will send the link ahead of the meetings on the third Monday evening of each month). Meetings in the Civic Hall are planned to restart in the new year.

**20 September:** A Photographer's Wild Britain by Nick Martin. From reptiles on the Dorset heaths to the sea bird colonies of the Shetlands, we travel around Britain describing some of the wild places and the special animals and birds that live there. Enjoy stunning images from

swirling flocks of waders to lekking black grouse and basking adders.

**18 October:** Champions of the Flyways by Gary Prescott. The biking birder returns to tell us about the green birding team who entered the 2017 bird race in Eilat Israel. A bird race with a difference which was not without adventure.

**15 November :** Birding in Northamptonshire by Mike Allibone. Mike has for 20 years been reporting on the birds to be found in Northamptonshire. A past county recorder he will share his extensive knowledge of the sites and birds to be found in the county.

The photographic competition will be held this evening and Mike Allibone will judge the entries. Competition details are below, and on the website.

**20 December:** Mediterranean Magic by Steve Lovell. Steve will talk about Mallorca and Menorca, their scenery, wildlife and some of their lesser known residents.

Speakers for 2022 will be announced at a later date.

### Field trips 2021-22

We are pleased to announce that local field trips will be starting again this September. The organizer is Martin Latham

([martinjlatham@googlemail.com](mailto:martinjlatham@googlemail.com)).

**Sunday 26th September.** Little Wittenham/Day's Lock. Meet at Wittenham Clumps car park at 10 am.

**Sunday October 24th.** Farmoor Reservoir. Meet at the reservoir car park at 10 am.

**Sunday November 21st.** Otmoor. Meet at the RSPB car park at 2pm (late start with a view to observing

starling murmurations). Bring membership card for parking.

**December.** Date to be arranged. Radley Lakes. Meet at 10 am at far end of Barton Lane (off Audlett Drive).

**Sunday January 23rd.** Port Meadow. Meet at 10 am at Walton Well Road car park (charges apply).

**Sunday February 20th.** College Lake Meet at 10 am at College Lake car park (HP23 5QG).

**Sunday March 20th.** Greenham Common. Meet at 10 am on site (more details later).

**Sunday April 24th.** Wytham Woods. Meet at 10 am on site.

**Sunday May 22nd.** Shotover Country Park. Meet at 10 am on site.

### Photographic Competition rules

The competition is open to local group members only. Images should be new to the competition, and be of wild birds, mammals or insects with the name of each species given. Maximum three entries per person to be sent to [Patphillips384@gmail.com](mailto:Patphillips384@gmail.com) by Monday 18 October 2021, with a telephone number. The entry form is on the website.

### Bird Watching Thoughts During Lockdown

By Martin Latham

The Newsletter has not had any field meeting reports during lockdown, but I thought it might be interesting to write a few comments on local bird watching experiences.

For some people lockdown has helped rekindle an interest in nature. Newspapers and television and radio broadcasts abound with stories of people finding solace in their daily walks, whether in

nearby woods, along riverbanks or field paths, or even in town parks. It is wonderful that many people now have an enhanced appreciation of the world around them. Personally I can't claim to have experienced any such awakening. In common with many other birdwatchers and nature lovers, I was already converted. I merely carried on doing what I usually do.

So business as usual, but with certain constraints. No field meetings. No long-distance travel. In fact, very little travel at all - just the odd outing for exercise during the most strictly controlled weeks of lockdown. Given such restrictions, I found myself reflecting more and more on the changing fortunes of birdlife within a limited area, namely anywhere within easy walking distance of my house in the south Oxfordshire parish of Blewbury. I have known the area since 1989 and have been able to note changes over that time. I sought out my old notebooks with a view to comparing past and present. How had things changed and how did such changes fit into a wider picture?



© Paul Chesterfield RSPB Collared Doves  
Early March. I awake to the cooing of collared doves. Outside my window a blackcap balances on the birdfeeder alongside a party of house sparrows. Red kites soar overhead. A short walk around the village produces a buzzard and a couple of little egrets. These are all species that have changed their status in recent years.

When I first took an interest in birds, collared doves didn't even feature in my books. They bred for the first time in the UK in 1955 and were still considered exciting newcomers in the 1960s. By the 1970s they were common throughout the country. Blackcaps have been common summer visitors for as long as I can remember, but nowadays they are also widespread during the winter

months. Studies show that two distinct populations are involved. Our summering blackcaps winter in southern Europe and north Africa. Our wintering birds come to us from central Europe. House sparrows, once very common, went through a period of steep decline and are now beginning to recover.

Red kites were unknown here before the Chilterns reintroduction project was launched in 1989. By the mid 1990s they were clearly expanding their range and I occasionally saw them on my local walks. Now they are among the most conspicuous birds here and certainly the most abundant raptor. Buzzards were a welcome yet uncommon sight when I first knew the village. Today there must be several pairs within a short distance of my house.

Once rare vagrants, little egrets first set up home in the UK in 1996, in Dorset.

They can now be seen in most parts of the country, Oxfordshire included. There are usually two or three birds in the village during the winter months, a group of six being my highest score so far.

The raven is another addition to the local avifauna, or rather it has returned after a long absence. In contrast to many parts of the country, yellowhammers and corn buntings seem to be doing well, especially on the nearby downs. Stonechats are increasingly common as winter visitors.



© Ben Hall RSPB Stonechat  
However, it is not all good news. Many species are in decline. Among these are lapwing, cuckoo, little owl, swallow, house martin, spotted flycatcher and bullfinch. Willow warblers are now scarce breeders and are best described as passage migrants.

Sadly, some species should perhaps be confined to the pages of history.

It has been some time since I last encountered turtle dove, lesser spotted woodpecker, marsh tit or tree sparrow.

I wonder to what extent my experiences mirror those of other observers. What about your local birds? How are they faring?

## AGM and members' evening 17 May 2021

### Review of the year

Bob Knight, group leader, welcomed all present via Zoom. Members had received copies of the review electronically and by post. Once again COVID 19 had dominated the Group's activities; indoor meetings were held via Zoom, and outdoor meetings and the weekend away were cancelled. However we had a wide range of talks, and the photo competition was held successfully. We hope to resume normal activities in the autumn, but have asked speakers for September to December to be able to use Zoom if necessary. The group leader thanked the Committee and members for keeping the group active in these difficult times. In particular many thanks to Jane Rudd and Gill Riches, who remained in post as indoor meetings organiser and treasurer respectively during the 2020-21 season.

### Committee members for 2021-2022

Group Leader	Bob Knight
Treasurer	Sue Buzzacott
Secretary	Vacant
Indoor Programme	Vacant
Outdoor Programme	Martin Latham
Membership Secretary	Tim Pett
Newsletter	Felicity Jenkins
Committee Member	Steve Cload

### Non Committee Members

Webmaster	Malcolm Ross
Sales Organize	Gillian Taylor
Social Media	Alice Drysdale

Once again we appeal to all members for someone to come forward to fill the vacant committee posts so the group can continue. Job descriptions can be found on our website under 'volunteering'.

If you feel you can help please



contact Bob Knight by email at

[bob\\_knight@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk)

### Subscriptions for 2021-2

The committee agreed to keep subscriptions at £14 (£4 for single meetings), payable by bank transfer.

Following the AGM, there were two presentations by members which were well received.

### Medical Detection Dogs

by Danielle Mills

Dogs' noses are remarkable, they can smell and exhale simultaneously so have continuous smelling activity. One third of their brain is devoted to smelling, and they have 300 million scent receptors (sixty times more than humans). Did you know that each disease, for example different cancers, Parkinson's, diabetes, Covid has its own signature odour! Medical alert assistance dogs are partnered to individual adults and children, and can give a warning of an oncoming medical crisis. Biodection dogs are trained to work with clinical samples and there are dogs already employed in airports as Covid detectors; trials have proved successful. Danielle is a fundraiser for this charity, and further details of this valuable work can be found on their website [medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk](http://medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk)

### Birds of Chile

by Pam Jones

Pam gave an interesting and well illustrated presentation on the Birds of Chile. In 2017 she had visited Santiago, Patagonia and Torres del Paine. Awesome landscapes and Andean condors were highlights of this trip.

### The Last cuckoo of the year?

By Felicity Jenkins

'The cuckoo comes in April, sings his song in May, in June his voice begins to crack and July he flies away'. With this traditional ditty in mind I was surprised to hear a cuckoo calling in July on Otmoor. It was early morning, mild with no rain and few people yet. I strolled along the puddled track for a while then stood still and enjoyed the soundscape. As well as the distant

cuckoo, there were sedge warblers, reed warblers, goldfinch, Cetti's. And a strange low pitched vibration which I couldn't recognize. Looking up, there was a snipe displaying. Round and round it flew, drumming or vibrating its outer tail feathers as a territorial or mating display. I'd never seen this before. I watched entranced for about five minutes.

There was plenty to see that morning. Lapwings and little egrets in the flooded meadows, swifts low overhead, a marsh harrier flying up from the reedbed, butterflies in the long grass as the day warmed up, common lizards basking. And the ones which got away: two bitterns were spotted but I missed them, and garganey at the first screen. I'll return soon.



© Felicity Jenkins

Note: if visiting Otmoor don't forget your RSPB membership card to display in the car park, otherwise there's a £2 charge. At this time of writing you need to wear a face mask in the main hide.

### Recent Local Observations

Bob Knight has been photographing orchids around Didcot. It's been a good year. Bee and pyramidal orchids (top) were seen at West Hagbourne. Common spotted orchid and a marsh orchid (bottom) at Mobray Field Didcot.



© Bob Knight

### Upcoming National Events

#### Big Butterfly Count

16 July-8 August 2021

The Big Butterfly Count, organised by Butterfly Conservation, is a nationwide citizen science survey aimed at helping us assess the health of our environment.

We count butterflies because they are vital parts of the ecosystem as both pollinators and components of the food chain. However, they are under threat. Numbers of butterflies and moths in the UK have decreased significantly since the 1970s. Butterflies are key biodiversity indicators for scientists as they react very quickly to changes in their environment.

#### How to take part

Simply count butterflies for 15 minutes during bright (preferably sunny) weather during the Big Butterfly Count. Records are welcome from anywhere: from parks, school grounds and gardens, to fields and forests.

If you are counting from a fixed position in your garden, count the maximum number of each species that you can see at a single time. For example, if you see three Red Admirals together on a buddleia bush then record it as 3, but if you only see one at a time then record it as 1 (even if you saw one on several occasions) – this is so that you don't count the same butterfly more than once. If you are doing your count on a walk, then simply total up the number of each butterfly species that you see during the 15 minutes. You will be able to submit records throughout July and August.



© Felicity Jenkins Small tortoiseshell

We have provided a list of target butterfly and day-flying moth species in your area we'd like you to count. If you have spotted additional species you can record these using the iRecord Butterfly App. Download our handy identification chart and further details from our website

<https://bigbutterflycount.butterfly-conservation.org/>

## **Big Green Week 18-26 September 2021**

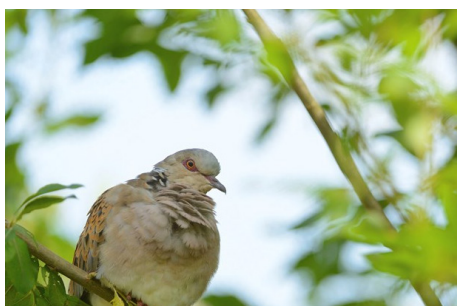
<https://greatbiggreenweek.com/events/oxfordshire-great-big-green-week/>

The Great Big Green Week will take place 18 – 26 September 2021, and will be the largest event for climate and nature ever seen in the UK. Thousands of events will celebrate how communities are taking action to tackle climate change and protect green spaces, and encourage others to get involved too. Together we will call on politicians to raise their ambition and champion action on climate change. These will range from art installations, to concerts to community stalls, to climate cafes, and everything in between; hosted by teachers, bus drivers, sport clubs, artists, community groups, places of worship, builders and anyone who cares about climate change.

This year, we in the UK have a huge opportunity to raise the ambition of plans to tackle climate change at home and abroad. The UK will host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) at the Scottish Event Campus (SEC) in Glasgow on 31 October – 12 November 2021.

The climate talks will bring together heads of state, climate experts and campaigners to agree coordinated action to tackle climate change. As COP26 Presidency, the UK is committed to working with all countries and joining forces with civil society, companies and people on the frontline of climate change to inspire action ahead of COP26. More information on the website [ukcop26.org](http://ukcop26.org).

## **National Conservation News About turtle doves**



c Ben Andrew ([rspb-images.com](http://rspb-images.com))

Turtle doves used to be seen each summer at Otmoor; including last year. It is astonishing that this declining species is still hunted in some European countries. But it is wonderful to hear that recently Spain has banned hunting of turtle doves.

The article below is by Samuel Wrobel from RSPB Volunteering newsletter June 2021 (*Edited*)

With turtle doves experiencing one of the harshest population declines of any UK bird (98%), a ban on hunting them across Spain could not be more welcome. This was the news recently announced by Spanish authorities that they will not be authorising the hunting of turtle doves for 2021, saving almost one million birds, some of whom will be migrating to the UK.

The summer months see an influx of migrant species using our habitats to forage and breed. The reason they come is simple: food. As their winter grounds further south become cooler, the tasty insects and flowering annual plants are just waking up in the UK and they're worth making the thousand-mile trip, sometimes more.

Turtle doves were once a staple of the British countryside with their iconic, name-sake call echoing from our landscapes, "turrr-turrr". Sadly, following industrialised agriculture and increasingly fragmented habitats their populations have plummeted. There are now only estimated to be 2 turtle doves for every 100 that were here in 1970. But it isn't just their summer breeding grounds that are cause for concern. Each year they migrate to and from West Africa, a 3000km journey, travelling through numerous countries, many with their own ideas on conservation priorities. Despite their well-documented decline, some countries still permit them to be shot as part of their annual shooting quota. Spain is a crucial "land-bridge" between Europe and Africa for UK migrating turtle doves. The news that Spain will introduce this hunting ban is a big step in the right direction.

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[rspb-vwh.org.uk](http://rspb-vwh.org.uk)