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Editor Felicity Jenkins

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2022

Vale of White Horse Local Group

Welcome to the Vale of White Horse Local Group summer newsletter for 2022.



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I'm compiling this newsletter somewhat apprehensively as today is the first red alert heat warning day in July; not the best occasion for future planning as weather patterns are so uncertain this year. Let's hope the swifts linger here for a while yet. House martins have been scarce this summer, but locally in Abingdon there are some swallows and swifts.

This newsletter is to announce the programme for the new autumn season starting 19 September, and also includes reports of the recent field trips. As usual we have planned both monthly indoor meetings on the third Monday evening of each month, and local field trips mostly on Sundays.

Indoor meetings

Indoor meetings will be held at the River Room, Sutton Courtenay. It is now possible to have refreshments and a raffle at meetings. Meetings will start at 7.30 pm, and finish by 10 pm. Some meetings in the winter will be on zoom as well, or even exclusively; a survey of members has indicated support for this. Details will be circulated nearer the time.

For those of you who have not visited the new venue, the River Room is a new well-appointed annex attached to All Saints Church.

The Church is on the village green between the George and the Swan public houses: 4 Church Street Sutton Courtenay OX14 4NJ.



© Malcolm Ross

The River Room is approached from the churchyard gate alongside the George. Parking for those who are less mobile is available alongside the churchyard wall (there is space for 5 cars). The public car park is signposted and situated on the far side of the green with further parking in the grounds of the Abbey nearby.

Contacts

Please see the local group website rspb-vwh.org.uk for up to date details of meetings and field trips. It is likely some meetings may be in the River Room and streamed on zoom as well. Zoom meetings have proved successful over the last two seasons; if anyone needs help with access Tim Pett is happy to advise (timothygpett@gmail.com). Members will receive an advance email for each event on the programme.

The contact for field trips is Martin Latham (martinjlatham@googlemail.com). Transport is in own cars, but car sharing may be arranged if requested. The field trips are to local destinations. Unfortunately there are no coach outings this season.

We now have two Facebook sites : the Friends of VWHLG group, where members and their friends can post their sightings and comments and the RSPB VWHLG page which is the official page for notices etc. To post here, please email mikehaddrell@gmail.com.

Programme for 2022-23

In addition we hope to arrange a

weekend away in March or April 2023.

Indoor meetings and field trips

19 September in the River Room

Fergus Mosey, warden at RPSB Otmoor, will update us on events and sightings at Otmoor, and there will be time for refreshments and chat afterwards.

25 September

Field trip to Farmoor reservoir. Meet at 10am on site Cumnor Road OX2 9NS.

17 October Rver Room and zoom

Land of the Somer People- a Year in the Somerset Levels by Mike Read. Mike is a freelance nature photographer based in the New Forest. He has travelled widely and last visited the local group in 2019.

This date is the deadline for entries to the photo competition (by email to patphillips384@gmail.com). See below for the rules of the competition.

23 October

Field trip to BBOWT College Lake Nature Reserve. Meet at 10 am at College Lake visitor centre Upper Icknield Way Tring HP23 5QG.

21 November River Room and zoom

A Guide to Gulls by Jim Almond. You may either love or hate gulls but they are fascinating and often attractive birds. A logical approach to identification of gulls and terns is covered utilising several key locations in the Midlands and further afield. Jim will judge the photo competition.

27 November

Field trip to Otmoor for the starling murmuration. Meet at 2pm on site Otmoor Lane OX3 9UR. Remember your RSPB membership card for free parking.

19 December zoom

South to the Falkland Islands: teeming with birds and wildlife by John Buckingham. John has been a widely published wildlife photographer and is a longstanding and popular lecturer with RSPB and other natural history and countryside groups. He has travelled widely and with his wife Sue has led bird, wildlife and botany holidays around the world. There will be a break in the middle of this talk.

1 Jan 2023 Outdoor meeting

Details to be announced.

16 January 2023 zoom

Life on a Volcano by Mary Braddock. A wildlife tour through the fascinating landscape of the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone National Park. This enigmatic place draws you by the power of the scenery, mammals and birdlife; the one place on earth where mankind can feel inferior to the power of life around us.

22 January

Field trip to Radley Lakes. Meet 10am at far end of Barton Lane (off Audlett Drive) OX14 3NB

20 February zoom

Birds of the Russian Far East by Chris Collins. After 17 years as a freelance ornithologist on a wide range of bird and wildlife-related projects around the world Chris now runs two wildlife tour companies. This talk is a comprehensive review of the birds and wildlife of this amazing but rarely-visited region. The lecture covers the Sea of Okhotsk, Sakhalin Island, the Kamchatka peninsula and further north (Koriak and Chukotka), and includes details of the nine-year search for new populations of the spoon-billed sandpiper. This is a 90-min talk, there will be a break in the middle.

26 February

Field trip to Port Meadow. Meet at 10am Walton Well Road car park OX2 6ED (charges apply).

20 March River Room

Zebras to Albatrosses: the wildlife of KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape by Ian Barthorpe, warden at Minsmere. There will be a break in the middle of this talk and a plant sale.

26 March

Field trip to Wytham Wood Oxford. Meet at 10 am on site OX2 8QQ (access through Wytham Village not

via B4044).

17 April River Room

Speaker to be arranged.

23 April

Field trip to Otmoor. Meet 10 am on site Otmoor Lane Oxford OX3 9UR.

15 May River Room only, not streamed online

AGM and members' evening

28 May

Field trip to Withymead Nature Reserve, near Goring. Meet 10am on site Bridle Way, Goring RG8 0HS.

?June

Evening field trip to Greenham/Snelmore Common for nightjars, meet 8.30pm on site. Details to be confirmed later.

Photo 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 by 17 October 2022, with a telephone number and entry form. The entry form is on the website; there is no charge for entry. Entries will be judged and results announced by the November speaker.

Review of Field Trips of the Year by Martin Latham Port Meadow in January



© Felicity Jenkins: Port Meadow on 13 January

Six members turned up at Port Meadow on 23 January for our first field meeting of the year. It was an overcast and generally dull morning, but it was dry. In fact, the water level on the meadow was rather lower than that normally expected for the time of the year. There was, nevertheless, sufficient water to form Port Meadow's customary 'winter lake', a focal point for visiting wildfowl, gulls and waders. Wigeon provided the most obvious

sign of life. There were several hundred of these attractive dabbling ducks, their whistling calls audible far and wide. From time to time, disturbed by walkers or dogs, they would take to the air and swirl round in musical waves before splashing down again. Teal were also present in good numbers. Some were mixed in with the wigeon, while others chose to form discrete flocks of their own. Wigeon and teal were not the only ducks. In addition, we were pleased to find a couple of shelduck, four pintail and some 20 shoveler.

The meadow also hosted small parties of pied wagtail and a flock of lapwing and golden plover. The only other wader was a solitary redshank. We were surprised how bright its legs appeared against the predominantly grey surroundings.

The nearby Burgess Field proved rather quiet, the most conspicuous species being redwing. We obtained excellent views as these birds foraged on the ground and flitted through the bushes. Other hedgerow birds included greenfinch, goldfinch, song thrush, blue tit and great tit. We were intrigued by a fly-catching (or more probably gnat-catching) chiffchaff. Such a sighting would once have been a sign of spring. In recent years, however, wintering chiffchaffs have become much more commonplace

Greenham Common in March

Nine people turned up at Greenham Common on 20 March for the group's first visit to this site in three years. The morning was bright and sunny, as evidenced by the large number of family parties and dog walkers. The common has clearly become a very popular venue for a Sunday stroll.



© Felicity Jenkins

Would the birds be out in force too? There was certainly plenty of birdsong - wrens, dunnocks, robins, blackbirds, blue tits, great tits, greenfinches and linnets all seemed to have plenty to say. Chiffchaffs were active, mainly in the bushes and trees bordering the heathland. These were our only summer visitors, although nowadays it is difficult to be sure. Many chiffchaffs now overwinter in this country, so how

many of these, if any, were recent arrivals?

Red kites and buzzards soared overhead and throughout our visit we caught intermittent snatches of woodlark song. Unfortunately, despite much scanning, they remained frustratingly invisible. Another aerial songster - the meadow pipit - was much easier to track down. Several individuals obligingly performed their song flights and treated us to their parachute-like descents. One of the most conspicuous birds of the day was the stonechat. Close inspection of gorse bushes frequently paid off and it is heartening to think that this is a species that is doing very well here.

It has often been said that if you see a stonechat among the gorse you have a good chance of finding a Dartford warbler as well. This indeed proved to be the case. We were delighted to find a stonechat and a Dartford warbler sitting practically side by side in the same bush. For most of us this was the highlight of the day.

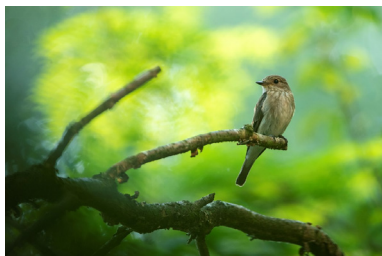


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Shotover Country Park in May

Our May outing was to Shotover Country Park, a former royal hunting ground. Situated near Headington, the site comprises a grassy plain and a mature mixed woodland with steep-sided valleys and gullies. There are sizeable clearings and also patches of dense undergrowth. The whole area is criss-crossed by walking trails, presenting something of a maze - a fact subsequently appreciated by our group, since we inadvertently set out as two smaller parties that never managed to make contact with each other.

Birding highlights included a very vocal cuckoo, spotted flycatcher (well done, Tim!), nuthatch, several goldcrests, roving family parties of



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

long-tailed tits, half a dozen singing garden warblers, a singing stock dove (a new sound experience for some members), and an exuberant whitethroat that alighted, somewhat uncharacteristically, at the top of an oak tree, where it posed for a series of photographs.

We were a bit on the late side to appreciate the best of the bluebells for which the site is renowned, but we enjoyed multiple sightings of speckled wood butterflies. We also encountered several orange-tips, a green-veined white and a mother shipton moth.

Greenham Common in June

Our final excursion of the season, on 18 June, was an evening visit to Greenham Common. Four members turned up, any other potential participants having decided, quite reasonably, that the weather forecast was anything but favourable.

Blackcap, garden warbler, chiffchaff, blackbird and song thrush were all singing strongly in the area around the carpark. However, the common itself was rather quiet. We caught brief snatches of song from woodlark, Dartford warbler and lesser whitethroat, but all these species remained frustratingly invisible.

A glance at the darkening sky suggested that it would be a race against time if we were to escape the approaching storm before catching up with our main target species. A short, sharp whistle, followed by a strange croaking sound, alerted us to the first of these - a roding woodcock. The bird circled round us several times on broad, flickering wings, its long bill pointed downwards.



© Mike Langman rspb-image.com

We were then aware of one of the most unusual bird sounds to be heard in this country. Out of the darkness came the unmistakable churring of a nightjar. This song has been likened to a number of things, including a distant motorbike!

We made our way back to the car park, very wet but cheered that we had managed to experience something of two very special birds. The unanimous verdict was that the evening had been a partial success.

AGM Review of the Year 2021-22 by Bob Knight

Continuing Covid restrictions meant that normal indoor meetings were not possible in 2021, but in 2022 we were able to try a hybrid format with in-person speakers and a small audience, and a Zoom link. Thanks to Malcolm Ross we were able to hire the River Room at Sutton Courtenay; this is smaller than Didcot Civic Hall, with a capacity of about 50 seats, but has excellent catering facilities and accessibility, and is less expensive than the Civic Hall.

We hope to continue in-person meetings this season, but may revert to the hybrid model in the winter - we welcome members' comments on this suggestion.

Membership has fallen to around 70 this year, but the reduced group income has been offset by reduced hall hire and speakers' travel costs. Without raffles, plant sales or other sources of income we have ended the year in about the same financial position as we started, but have not been able to make a donation to RSPB funds.

Talks have been wide-ranging, with our usual mixture of local and exotic topics including Mediterranean Magic, Birding in Panama, The Lower Windrush Project, Northamptonshire Birding, Senses and non-senses of birds. Some outdoor events were cancelled because of illness and severe weather, but we made trips to Wittenham Clumps, Farmoor, Greenham Common, Otmoor and Port Meadow, and are visiting Shotover Country Park on 22 May. The visit to Wytham Woods will be rescheduled for the 2022-23 season.

The photo competition was judged by Mike Alibone: winners were 1st - Woodpecker and Starling - Tom Bowtell

2nd - Great Bustard - Jane Rudd
3rd - Great White and Little Egret - Derrick Stow

A special presentation of an avocet print was made to Jane Rudd in recognition of her many years' Committee service as secretary, meetings organiser and interim Group Leader.

Once again, a weekend away was not possible, but we hope to arrange one in 2023.

The group has continued through the dedication of the committee, helpers and members, and special thanks are due to Pat Philips for

organising the photo competition; Alice Drysdale for setting up and running our Facebook page; Felicity Jenkins for the newsletter; Malcolm Ross for managing the website, arranging the new venue and engineering our Zoom connection, and all our members for their continuing support.

We still need a Secretary, Indoor Meetings Organiser, and Assistant Group Leader - and welcome any member who would like to contribute by joining the committee.

I hope to see you all at the River Room in September – meanwhile have a good summer!

Local group committee members for 2022-23

Group Leader	Bob Knight
Treasurer	Sue Buzzacott
Secretary	Vacant
Indoor Programme	Vacant
Outdoor Prog	Martin Latham
Membership Secretary/	
Zoom host	Tim Pett
Newsletter Editor	Felicity Jenkins
Committee Member	Steve Cload
Non Committee Members	
Webmaster	Malcolm Ross
Sales Organizer	Gillian Taylor
Social Media Volunteer	Mike Haddrell

Many thanks to Alice Drysdale for her work as Social Media Volunteer. The membership fee this season is £15 per member for the year and visitors pay £5 per meeting, to include zoom meetings. Payment can now be made online.

Once again, we appeal to all members for someone to come forward to fill the vacant committee posts. Job descriptions can be found on our website rspb-vwh.org.uk under Volunteering.

Please consider helping on the committee so that the Group can continue. If you feel you can help please contact Bob Knight by email at bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk

Members' News Wildlife in Sweden by Mike Haddrell

'I went out with the Medelpad's Ornitologiska Forening the other day, monitoring tarns for red -throated diver breeding - this has already successfully thwarted plans to increase the number of windmills which are cropping up all over. We found no new locations but I attach a picture of a red-throated diver with a chick from a known site. And below: is

Today's excitement! I'm pretty sure it's a Three-Toed Woodpecker for the life list, but I'm awaiting confirmation from the locals'.



Oxfordshire Butterflies by Bob Knight

Comma, small tortoiseshell and gatekeeper



Felicity Jenkins
fmjenkins@talktalk.net

