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The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

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Editor Felicity Jenkins

# NEWSLETTER

Summer 2023

## Vale of White Horse Local Group

Welcome to the Vale of White Horse Local Group summer newsletter for 2023.

There are unprecedented heatwaves in southern Europe, causing drought and fires; as a consequence there have been more Mediterranean birds heading for the UK this summer: Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis, Bee Eaters. The RSPB Notes on Nature in May reported sightings of Lesser Kestrel, Alpine Swift and Black-winged Kite.



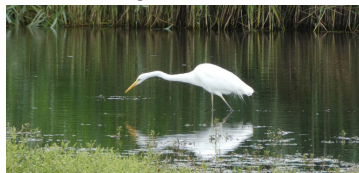
Lesser Kestrel © George McCarthy [rsbp-images.com](https://rsbp-images.com)

In Oxfordshire, Martin Latham writes: 'On 29 May I was visiting the disused gravel pits at Appleford with a view to observing the local Hobbies. They had recently been showing well. Sometimes there were half a dozen in the air together, busily hawking dragonflies. Today was no exception and they were joined by other aerial feeders. There were Swifts galore and a fair number of fluttering Sand Martins. Red Kites, Buzzards and gulls were also in on the act. Swirling round in a wide arc, they gave the impression of an airborne carousel.

Suddenly I was aware of something rather different in the mix. It was enormous, dwarfing gulls and raptors alike. It was largely white with a lot of black on the wings. It had a long neck, a long red beak and long legs. The bird was unmistakably a White Stork. I had often seen this species abroad, but this was my first UK sighting. The bird continued to circle, soaring higher and higher, before making off in the general direction of Didcot.

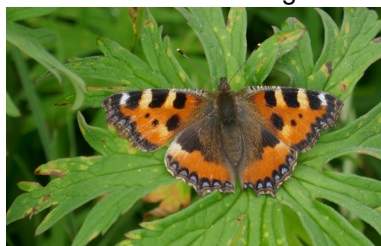
Apparently, there have been two other sightings of the bird overhead, but so far nobody has managed to see it on the ground. It is well worth keeping an eye open for anything unusual in the county's fields and meadows.'

The Oxon birding blog reported a sighting of a Black-crowned Night Heron in July in Sutton Courtenay. Cattle Egret and Great White Egret, once infrequent visitors, are regularly to be seen at Otmoor.



Great White Egret © Mike Haddrell

Currently (July), Oxfordshire is squally and cooler than the rest of Europe, but as soon as the sun appears there are at last some summer butterflies around. Here is a small tortoiseshell from Barton Field in Abingdon.



© Felicity Jenkins

### Programme

This newsletter is to publicise the programme for the new autumn season and also includes reports of recent field trips and of the AGM. As usual we have planned both 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 or on Zoom, starting at 7.30 pm and finishing by 10pm.

Please see the full programme below, or the website [rsbp-vwh.org.uk](https://rsbp-vwh.org.uk) or Facebook Friends of VWHLG for

details of meeting venues.

The River Room is the annex of All Saints Church, 4 Church Street Sutton Courtenay OX14 4NJ. The River Room is approached from the churchyard gate alongside the George. There is public parking close by.

Winter meetings will be on Zoom. If anyone needs help with Zoom access Tim Pett is happy to advise ([timothygpett@gmail.com](mailto:timothygpett@gmail.com)). Members will receive an advance email for each event on the programme.

### Programme of Indoor Meetings 2023-24

**18 September 2023**  
**(live in River Room)**

Nick Williams, video editor RSPB

65 years of Film at the RSPB

After studying for an MA in Wildlife Filmmaking with Bristol UWE and the BBC Natural History Unit, Nick has worked in the world of natural history filmmaking since 2016. Shoots have taken him across the globe, from the jungles of Borneo and the mountains of Slovakia, to the wetlands of Thailand and the wild west coast of Scotland. Nick now works in the Strategic Communications team at the RSPB where he has been a video editor since 2020.

**16 October 2023**

**(River Room with Zoom link for those who prefer not to travel this time of year)**

Deadline for photographic competition entries by email to

[mikehaddrell@gmail.com](mailto:mikehaddrell@gmail.com)

The competition rules and entry form are on the local group website

[rsbp-vwh.org.uk/photoentry](https://rsbp-vwh.org.uk/photoentry)

**SPEAKER TO BE ANNOUNCED**

**20 November 2023 (hybrid)**

David Boag: The World of a Wildlife Photographer

David is an author and wildlife

photographer who regularly lectures to groups and on cruise ships, and has spoken at RSPB and BTO conferences. His website is

[www.NaturalFocus.co.uk](http://www.NaturalFocus.co.uk)

This will be a hybrid presentation: David will Zoom in to the River Room for the talk, and will judge the photo competition; the trophy will be awarded at the River Room.

**18 December 2023**  
**(Zoom link only)**

Nicholas Watts: Farming and Wildlife

Nicholas has farmed at Vine House Farm since 1964. He was awarded an MBE for services to farming and conservation in 2006, and regularly collaborates with RSPB and BTO on conservation projects. The farm supplies bird seed to conservation organisations including the Wildlife Trusts.

**15 January 2024**  
**(Zoom link only)**

Professor Andrew Gosler, University of Oxford Department of Biology: A Guided Walk from Ornithology to Ethno-ornithology

Andy studies human engagement with birds, especially in the context of nature conservation and policy. He is a council member of BTO and a Vice-President of the Oxford Ornithological Society.

**19 February 2024**  
**(Zoom only)**

Mike Pollard: Curlew Recovery in the Upper Thames

Breeding curlew numbers have fallen dramatically in recent years. Mike led a project to halt the decline of curlews and other waders across the Upper Thames, involving many organisations including RSPB, BBOWT, Natural England, the Environment Agency, River Thame Conservation Trust and Banbury Ornithological Society.

**18 March 2024**  
**(hybrid)**

Ian Barthorpe: The Pantanal Tropical Wetlands

Last year, Ian entertained us with his travels across southern Africa. This year, he's off to the Pantanal wetlands of South America, and will Zoom in to tell us about it.

**15 April 2024**  
**(live in the River Room)**

Jerry Pride: The World of Swifts

Swifts can fly up to 800km a day, and spend almost their entire life on the wing, sometimes flying non-stop for three years. It wouldn't be summer

without them, but these remarkable birds are in serious decline.

**20 May 2024**  
**(live in the River Room)**

AGM and Members' Evening

Members' contributions are requested.

**Field trips 2023-24**

The contact for field trips is Martin Latham

([martinj.latham@googlemail.com](mailto:martinj.latham@googlemail.com)).

Transport is in own cars, but car sharing may be arranged if requested. Poor weather may force cancellation of trips; if so you will be notified by email, so please check ahead of trip.

**22-24 September 2023**

Weekend away in Lincolnshire.

There are still some places available, anyone interested who has not yet signed up please contact Tim Pett for more information

[timothygpett@gmail.com](mailto:timothygpett@gmail.com)

**22 October 2023**

Day's Lock.

Meet outside St Peter's Church, Little Wittenham

**26 November 2023**

Farmoor Reservoir.

Meet at 10am on site Cumnor Road OX2 9NS.

**21 January 2024**

Port Meadow.

Meet at 10 am at Walton Well Road car park (charges apply).

**28 February 2024**

Radley Lakes.

Meet 10am at far end of Barton Lane (off Audlett Drive) OX14 3NB.

**24 March 2024**

Arne RSPB Reserve.

Meet in reserve car park BH20 5BJ.

**21 April 2024**

Otmoor RSPB reserve.

Meet on site Otmoor Lane OX3 9UR. Remember your RSPB membership card for free parking.

**26 May 2024**

Whelford Pools, Cotswolds Water Park Gloucestershire.

Meet in reserve car park GL7 4EH (OS ref. SU 172995).

**9 June 2024**

Greenham Common

for nightjars and woodcock.

Meet at 8pm in Bury's Bank car park at the junction of Greenham road and Pinchington Lane.

## Review of Field Trips of the Year by Martin Latham

### Wytham Woods in March

Undeterred by a dismal weather forecast, eight members set off on our Wytham Woods walk on 26 March. Much to our relief, the driving rain that we had experienced on our way to the site eased off, leaving us to contend with nothing more serious than a light drizzle.

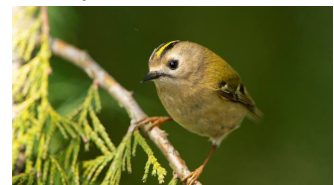


Great Tit © Paul Sawyer [rspb-images.com](http://rspb-images.com)

Wytham Woods are owned by Oxford University and cover 426 hectares. Comprising a range of woodland habitats, limestone grassland and ponds, the area is famous for a variety of research activities. These include plant and insect surveys, bird and badger studies and the collection of climate change data. Indeed, Wytham Woods have the distinction of being one of the most extensively studied woodland areas in the world.

One of the best-known research projects is the Great Tit Population Study, which began in 1947 and is still thriving. Great Tits were certainly in evidence during our visit. We were aware of their see-sawing songs long before we managed to see any. Also in song were Blue and Coal Tits, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Chaffinches and, above all, Chiffchaffs. The latter seemed to be everywhere. A few years ago we would probably have assumed that there had been a recent mass arrival from their wintering grounds. Nowadays, given the increasing tendency of this species to overwinter in this country, it is difficult to know whether or not we are dealing with migrants or residents.

Most of our records were of birds heard rather than seen, the list including yaffling Green Woodpeckers and drumming Great Spotted Woodpeckers.



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



We did, however, succeed in obtaining close-up views of Goldcrest and Treecreeper.

Among other species encountered were Grey Heron, Pheasant, Red Kite, Stock Dove, Pied Wagtail, Mistle Thrush, Fieldfare and Nuthatch.

In our three-hour visit we had enjoyed only a small sample of the 32 km of Wytham's walking paths. There remained a great deal to investigate in a subsequent visit. Clearly, Wytham is about more than just Great Tits.

### Otmoor in April

Five members turned up for our April outing to Otmoor. We might well have had more attendees had the weather forecast been more positive. In the event, the predicted 50% probability of rain dropped to 5% shortly before we set out and we remained dry throughout our visit.

The overall experience was one of wrap-around sound. Curlews and Redshanks were busily and tunefully displaying, while Reed and Sedge Warblers belted out their songs from practically every ditch and patch of vegetation.



*Sedge Warbler* © Mike Haddrell

Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Whitethroats were also present in good numbers and we heard the rattle of at least two Lesser Whitethroats. At times we were soothed by the gentle whispering notes of Willow Warblers and at times challenged by loud explosive outbursts from Cetti's Warblers. Perhaps the most eagerly awaited sound of spring is the song of the Cuckoo. We were not disappointed, being lucky enough to hear and observe this remarkable bird at close quarters.



*Cuckoo* © Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Occasionally the sound track was punctuated by the far-carrying oomph of a booming Bittern.

A major highlight of the day was the sighting of a couple of Cranes. Recently back from the brink, these extraordinary birds are now a regular feature at Otmoor. It was a good day for raptors too. In addition to Otmoor's customary Red Kites, Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Kestrels, we also encountered a Peregrine and our first Hobbies of the year.

Other species included Great Crested Grebe, Little Egret, Barnacle Goose, Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wheatear, Bullfinch and Reed Bunting. We completed our visit tired and happy, with a trip list of 64 species.

### Withymead in May



*Withymead* © Felicity Jenkins

Ten members attended our meeting at Withymead nature reserve on 28 May. It was a bright sunny day, ideal for showing off the potential of this intriguing site. Managed by the Anne Carpmael Charitable Trust, the reserve is situated beside the Thames and incorporates reed fen, water meadows and woodland (willow, hazel and alder on the wet lower ground and ash, oak and sycamore on the higher ground).

We were delighted, although a little surprised, to find Loddon Lily still in bloom.



*Loddon lily* © Felicity Jenkins

Other characteristic flowers were Yellow Iris and Comfrey. Insect species included Banded Demoiselle damselfly, Thick-legged Flower Beetle and Orange Tip, Brimstone, Red Admiral and Peacock butterflies.

Although we observed Red Kite, Buzzard, Kestrel, Swift and Swallow overhead and Mute Swan, Mallard and Moorhen on the river, our birding

experience was largely an aural one. The woodland was alive with the sound of such species as Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Stock Dove, Wren, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Great Tit, Jay and Chaffinch, while the reedbeds contributed Reed Bunting and also Cetti's, Reed and Sedge Warblers to the general chorus.



*Reed Bunting* © Mike Haddrell

A Whitethroat was busy in the scrubland bordering the reeds and from time to time we picked out the song of a distant Cuckoo.

Other birds seen or heard on the reserve included Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Magpie, Jackdaw and Greenfinch, bringing the trip list to 39 species.

### Greenham Common in June

Ten people turned up at Greenham Common on the evening of 30 June for our final excursion of the season. This was our second attempt this summer, bad weather having put paid to our earlier plans. In the event, we were greeted by a calm, dry evening with plenty of birdsong (Woodpigeon, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Greenfinch and Linnet being the most vocal).

We left the car park and made our way across the common, stopping frequently to inspect the gorse and scrub for signs of life. Linnets and Goldfinches were among the most obvious species. We were treated to very satisfactory views of Stonechats and we paused to listen to a Meadow Pipit in song flight. Jackdaws were a common sight and from time to time the odd Red Kite, Heron or Stock Dove drifted overhead.

We arrived at the wooded boundary to the common. It was here that we stopped and waited. As the daylight faded we heard the first of our special target species. A strange chirrup and grunt announced the presence of a flying Woodcock. A bird sped along the treetops and circled round in a wide arc. It repeated this procedure several times. We assumed it was the same individual, but it is sometimes hard to tell with

Woodcock. Observers are often not sure whether they are dealing with one or several birds.

A rather frog-like 'cooic' was the sign that our second target species was in the vicinity. A Nightjar emerged from the gloom, swiftly followed by a second. We watched them in flight and alighting in a tree. When it grew too dark to observe comfortably we made our way back across the common where we heard the sound that is most commonly associated



with the Nightjar.

©Mike Langman rspb-images.com

Their far-carrying churring song, rising and falling in pitch and varying in intensity, has been likened to a number of things, including a distant motor bike! We returned to the car park in the dark, our mission accomplished.

## AGM Review of the Year 2022-23 by Bob Knight

Bob Knight, Group Leader, welcomed all present.

With the group now only about 70 strong, the move from Didcot Civic Hall to the River Room, with its excellent IT resources and kitchen, has led to successful hybrid and in-person meetings. Zoom allows us to meet virtually in the winter, avoiding the need for night driving, and lets us book speakers who are based too far away for travel to be possible (or affordable). We plan to continue in the same vein and hope that members will attend the in-person meetings.

This year's speakers have included Fergus Mosey, the warden at our nearest RSPB reserve, Otmoor, and a team from Withymead reserve with photographer Simon Booker. Subjects have ranged from the Somerset Levels to the Falklands, by way of Yellowstone and the Russian Far East, as well as a detailed study of gulls.

Martin Latham has run a series of outdoor meetings at local reserves, with some impressive species counts and one or two rarities.

The photo competition was judged by Jim Almond. Winners in order were: Sparrowhawk by Bill Lester; Sperm Whale by Peter Williams; Gannets by Jane Rudd. The photographs are on the local group website.

For the first time in recent years we have some member contributions in our members' evening (following the AGM):

Birding in Malaysia by Mike Haddrell and Wildlife on Sri Lanka by Peter Williams.

We hope for more in the future: all you have to do is plug your laptop in to the projector. If you'd like to contribute, please let any member of the committee know; as there will be a members' evening in May 2024.

Many thanks to Sue Buzzacott, who will be leaving as Treasurer at the end of the 2023-24 season. The group cannot exist without a treasurer, and we are looking for someone to take up the post; no formal qualifications are required, but the Committee's recommendation has to be approved by the RSPB – please contact any committee member if you are interested. In addition, we still need an indoor meetings organiser, and assistant group leader and welcome any member who would like to contribute by joining the committee.

We have a new RSPB Local Groups co-ordinator, Michelle Barrett, based in Birmingham. She hopes to visit us next year.

As always, 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 – a role she has now passed on to Mike Haddrell; Felicity Jenkins for the newsletter; Malcolm Ross for managing the website, and all our members for their continuing support.

Thanks to Jane Rudd for arranging publicity, Jane Rudd and Gillian Taylor for Christmas card sales.

I hope to see everyone at the River Room in September. Meanwhile have a good summer!

## Any Other Business

Meeting times and formats: Tim Pett has asked members for their preference of meeting starting times and found that 7.30 pm remains the most popular. Winter meetings will be held on Zoom.

The meeting approved the Committee's recommendation of no increase in annual membership of £15 and single-meeting visitor fee of £5.

Steve Cload was recognised as an Honorary Life Member of the group with gratitude for his many contributions during past years

## Big Garden Birdwatch 2023

Over half a million people took part in the birdwatch in January, and House

Sparrow was again top bird. Surprisingly, it has been the most frequently seen bird in gardens for the last 20 years, although numbers are very much lower than in the past, when we were worried that House Sparrow were becoming so scarce in urban and suburban neighbourhoods.

I've listed the Oxfordshire top 50 species in order, some seem rather surprising.

House Sparrow; Blue Tit; Woodpigeon; Starling; Blackbird; Goldfinch; Robin; Great Tit; Jackdaw; Long-tailed-tit;

Collared Dove; Dunnock; Magpie; Chaffinch; Carrion Crow; Feral Pigeon;

Coal Tit; Greenfinch; Wren; Red Kite;

Blackcap; Great Spotted Woodpecker;

Song Thrush; Rook; Pheasant; Black-

headed Gull; Pied Wagtail; Redwing;

Nuthatch; Common Gull; Fieldfare;

Tree Sparrow; Jay; Herring Gull;

Green Woodpecker; Buzzard; Mallard;

Sparrowhawk; Stock Dove; Goldcrest;

Bullfinch; Moorhen; Mistle Thrush;

Marsh Tit; Grey Wagtail; Lesser Spotted

Woodpecker; Grey Heron; Siskin;

Kestrel; Raven.

## Committee Members 2023-24

Group Leader	Bob Knight
Treasurer	Sue Buzzacott
Secretary	Peter Williams
Indoor Programme	Vacant
Outdoor Programme	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

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