

Vale of White Horse Local Group

A Happy New Year from the committee to everyone in the Vale of White Horse local group.

It has been a very wet and windy winter, but despite this there have been many interesting sightings recorded on the Oxon birding blog, such as Great White Egret, Cattle Egret (now breeding in Oxfordshire), Black Redstart, Purple Sandpiper, Dark-bellied Brent Goose and Hawfinch, elusive birds which are easier to spot in woodland when the leaves are fallen, and numbers are higher due to birds arriving here from continental Europe.



c Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Big Garden Birdwatch this year is the weekend **24-26 January**.

Have you heard about the Big Schools' Birdwatch? This is about recording birds on school grounds and takes place 7 January- 14 February. See rspb.org.uk for details and registration for these annual events.

Photo competition

Revised competition rules and an entry form are on the local group website www.rspb-vwh.org.uk

Entries should be emailed to Mike Haddrell (mikehaddrell@gmail.com) by 17 March. The images will be judged by Ben Andrew at the River Room meeting on 28 April.

Programme for January - May 2025

Meetings in January and February are on Zoom; an email link will be sent in advance by Tim Pett (timothygett@

gmail.com) 01235 526033 to members and also to any guests who pay £5 into the group's account and send him an email to say they have done so.

20 January

Ian Alexander: Camouflage without Spots

17 February

David Tolliday: The Wildlife and Sights of Shetland

17 March (a hybrid meeting with a Zoom link or in person at the River Room Sutton Courtenay)

John Tyler: The Ridgeway

Deadline for photo competition (see above)

Meetings in April and May are in person at the River Room.

28 April (please note the CHANGE OF DATE)

Ben Andrew: Photographing birds

Ben will judge the photo competition and announce the winners

12 May AGM and Members' evening (contributions welcome).

Field Trips

Please check our website for further information and updates as trips are weather-dependent. Transport is with our own cars; car sharing welcomed. Leader and contact: Martin Latham (martinj.latham@googlemail.com) 01235 851918

12 January Otmoor for starling murmuration (rescheduled)

26 January Radley Lakes

23 February Port Meadow

30 March Farmoor

27 April Greenham Common

25 May Otmoor

22 June (evening) Greenham Common for nightjars

Autumn field trip reports

By Martin Latham

Local group weekend away

This year's Weekend Away was an East Anglian adventure. Fourteen members met on Friday 27 September at Welney, an extensive wetland reserve run by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

One of the reserve's principal attractions is the wintering flock of Whooper Swans. We were a little on the early side for large concentrations of this species, but we were pleased to see that they had started arriving.



c Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Other wildfowl included Wigeon, Gadwall, Shoveler, Teal and Pintail. Cattle and Great White Egret were there in force and we had stunning views of Marsh Harriers. Swallows were surprisingly numerous and seemed to be determined to put in an appearance before departing for their winter quarters. The visitor centre was well situated for observing wildlife and it was very satisfying to sit back with a warm drink and watch the antics of Tree Sparrows on the bird feeders.

We spent the following day on the RSPB reserve at Titchwell. This visit is essentially a walk through the woods surrounding the visitor centre to an enormous sandy beach, via a complex of reedbeds, saltmarsh and freshwater lagoons.

Great White Egrets were again well represented and we were excited

to note newly arrived flocks of Pink-footed and Brent Geese. The marshes and lagoons were enlivened by an interesting range of waders, including Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Snipe, Redshank, Greenshank and, most exciting of all, a Black-winged Stilt. Golden Plovers and Lapwings put on a fine display, particularly when disturbed by a marauding Peregrine. The reedbeds proved their worth by offering multiple encounters with Bearded Tits.



© Rosie Dutton (rspb-images.com)

Despite many exciting records from the previous day, sea-watching produced very little other than a Red-throated Diver and several parties of Sanderling.

We spent our final day at Lakenheath Fen, a reserve run by the RSPB since 1995. It is generally accepted that careful management has transformed the area from carrot fields to a haven for Bitterns. Unfortunately we didn't encounter any Bitterns on this occasion, but we did find a Kingfisher and a good range of ducks. Great White Egrets were accompanied by Little Egrets and Cetti's Warblers had plenty to say. The highlight of the day was surely those precious moments we spent watching a couple of Hobbies hawking dragonflies.

Our combined trip list is set out below.

Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Pink-footed Goose, Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Brent Goose, Egyptian Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Garganey, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Red-legged Partridge, Pheasant, Red-throated Diver, Little Grebe, Cormorant, Cattle Egret, Little Egret, Great White Egret, Grey Heron, Spoonbill, Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Kestrel, Hobby, Peregrine, Water Rail, Moorhen, Coot, Oystercatcher, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Ringed Plover, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Sanderling, Little Stint, Dunlin, Ruff, Snipe, Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, Redshank, Turnstone, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Feral Pigeon,

Woodpigeon, Stock Dove, Collared Dove, Kingfisher, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Skylark, Swallow, Sand Martin, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Stonechat, Blackbird, Cetti's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Bearded Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Jay, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow, Starling, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Reed Bunting (93 species).

October at Arne in Dorset

Three members attended our outing to the RSPB reserve at Arne on 27 October. On this particularly fine autumn day Jays were the most obvious sign of birdlife. We encountered them in the woods, over the car park, on the heathland and even close to water, darting here and there with their cargoes of acorns.



© Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

There were flocks of Meadow Pipit overhead and from time to time we picked out Siskins and Redpolls. We heard Water Rails calling on two occasions. Strangely this was from the depths of heathland vegetation rather than from a waterside location. Dartford Warbler were present at several spots and for the most part provided only brief views. Our patience paid off however, and we succeeded in observing a bird for several minutes as it posed on top of a gorse bush.

The most productive part of the reserve proved to be the channel in front of the hide at Middlebere. Here we caught up with Shelduck, Cormorant, Grey Heron and Little Egret. The latter is now a frequent and expected addition to day lists. Having bred for the first time in this country in 1996, it is now firmly established as part of our avifauna.

Also visible from the hide were flocks of Wigeon and Teal and a mixed congregation of waders. Oystercatcher, Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit and Redshank were busily making their way through the shallows, while Lapwings rested on the muddy islands exposed by the receding tide. Best of all, Avocets

were out in force.



© Robert Simmons (rspb-images.com)

There were at least 200 of these delightful birds. Whether swishing their way through the water with their curious upturned bills or flying from one feeding station to another, they are supremely elegant. Each time I see Avocets in flight I am intrigued by their aerobatic skills.

Other birds recorded in the reserve's wonderfully varied habitats include Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Pied Wagtail, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, bringing the day's total to 48 species.

November in Otmoor

This trip had to be cancelled due to a frightful weather forecast, and has been rescheduled on 12 January.

Members' Essays

The next few editions of the newsletter are featuring essays by local group members of some of their birdwatching experiences at home or abroad. Hopefully members will be encouraged to send in their own accounts or wildlife adventures, which can be domestic or exotic. Firstly, Martin Latham's life in Geneva.

Black Kites and a Fountain

Martin Latham

Last summer I revisited old haunts in France and Switzerland. One port of call is Geneva, a place of particular significance for me, as I spent many years working there. Visitors to Geneva are usually impressed by the Jet d'Eau, a massive fountain that erupts from the Lac Lemman (aka Lake Geneva) and dominates the skyline. Visiting birders generally remark upon the large number of Black Kites to be seen. Geneva and the surrounding area support one of the largest concentrations of this species in Europe. From early March to early August they are everywhere, rather like Red Kites in Oxfordshire in recent years.

Lake Geneva can be considered the lungs of the city. People go there to relax, swim (some of them all year round), meet their friends and even watch birds. Throughout the year it attracts Great Crested Grebes, Goosanders and Red-crested Pochards and in the winter large flocks of Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. Birds of passage include Osprey, Knot, Sanderling, Little Stint, Whiskered and Black Terns and Little Gull. Sometimes I was fortunate enough to observe Arctic Skuas here and, on one occasion, a Long-tailed Skua.



© Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

My office was in a high-rise block situated not far from one of Geneva's parks. This provided a great deal of opportunity to catch up with the local birdlife. Serins and Black Redstarts were particularly common around the building and in some years I was treated to the sight and sounds of a Hobby family in a tree just a stone's throw from my office window. The Black Redstart has the distinction of being one of the few birds that I have identified over the telephone. A colleague rang me and asked me to identify a bird he heard singing outside his window. He attempted to describe the sound, but to no avail. Suddenly inspired, he said 'I'll put him on' and dangled the receiver out of the window. It worked perfectly.

Black Redstart had now joined the ranks of Starlings in Leicester Square and Kittiwakes in Scarborough.

My office window sightings are many and varied (I did work some of the time, honestly). Memorable sightings include White Stork, Ruddy Shelduck, Golden Eagle, Goshawk, Alpine Swift, Crag Martin, Golden Oriole and Hawfinch.



© Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

Undoubtedly, the most enjoyable of these experiences came one autumn as I was battling away at the computer. I heard a strange bubbling sound coming from the direction of the staff car park. Bee-eaters! I dashed to the window. A flock of 30 or so of these colourful birds were swooping and swerving over the hot asphalt. What they found to feed on I don't know, but they put on a good show for a few minutes before making off in a generally southerly direction.



© Mike Edgecombe (rspb-images.com)

I often encountered Goshawks in the city parks, but my most exciting observation of this species involves a disused quarry (now a lake in a nature reserve) on the outskirts of Geneva. I was sitting in a hide, looking at the many ducks and grebes and hoping to find something unusual. I had been aware of a Goshawk somewhere in the distance. The bird now drew closer and began quartering the lake. It then closed its wings and plunged into the water. Moments later, it emerged, vigorously shaking its head like a soggy dog. It proceeded towards the shore, executing what looked like a butterfly stroke. It scrambled on to dry land dragging with it a hapless Moorhen.



© Katie Nethercoat (rspb-images.com)

The park adjacent to my place of work was a haven for such birds as Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Redstart and Melodious Warbler. Sometimes Middle Spotted and Black Woodpeckers put in an appearance, two species that have increased considerably in recent years. On one occasion I was intrigued to watch an elderly gentleman feeding the birds. He carried a large bag of nuts, which he inserted here and here in

the various cracks and crevices of a gnarled oak. Blue and Great Tits were quick off the mark and rapidly polished off his offerings. There was a Nuthatch waiting in the wings, calling incessantly. I expected it to follow the tits' example. But their benefactor obviously had something else in mind. One by one he launched nuts as far as he could into the air. At each throw the Nuthatch would sally forth flycatcher-like and snap up each morsel in mid flight.

The Geneva area is well placed for observing migration. One species I looked forward to catching up with each year is the White Stork.



(© rspb-images.com video still)

My most memorable encounter came following an early morning phone call. I was tipped off that there was a large flock of Storks in a field not far from where I lived. A few minutes later I was at the site and counted 84 birds. They had evidently spent the night in the vicinity and were pecking around prior to resuming their migration. Storks make great use of thermals (rising currents of warm air) and these birds were waiting for the ground to warm up and provide the right conditions. Eventually, one bird took to the air. It circled round several times, checking out the air currents. The birds on the ground watched it intently, apparently awaiting a signal. Suddenly, the pioneer made its decision. It was off. The remaining birds took flight en masse. After several laps of the field, the entire flock was gone, as if launched by an enormous catapult.

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Local group website

www.rspb-vwh.org.uk