

Vale of White Horse Local Group

A Happy New Year from the committee to everyone in the Vale of White Horse Local Group.

Upcoming Talks

On **14 Jan** Mike Read returns to the Group to talk about Corsica, visiting a nature reserve in a high mountainous area home to alpine choughs, lammergeiers and golden eagles.



C Ray Kennedy rspb-images.com

There are lovely wild flowers in spring.

On **18 Feb** we have Conor Jameson 'Looking for the Goshawk' in remote UK forests and some of Europe's most populous cities.



C Louise Greenhorn rspb-images.com

Please bring goods for the bring and buy sale (books, gifts, etc).

On **18 Mar** we will be exploring 'Wonderful Wetlands' with Chris Ward.

Spring Weekend

The annual members' spring birdwatching weekend away is being organised; details to be announced (contact is stephencload409@btinternet.com)

Reminders

We are still short of a Group leader; please consider applying for this vital role.

Some of you are yet to sign up for membership which can be done at the meetings or contact

bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk.

And another request for volunteers to help with tea and coffee at meetings. Thank you to those who have already signed up on the rota.

Forthcoming Outings

On **20 Jan** there is a coach trip with the Oxford Local Group to London Wildfowl and Wetland Centre leaving Oxford 8.30am. For further details contact

martinj.latham@googlemail.com

or 01235 851918.



goldeneye Ben Hall rspb-images.com

The next two half-day outings are by car, meeting on site: On **24 Feb** a local trip to Radley Lakes, meet 9.30am and on **24 March** to Cotswold Water Park, Lower Moor Farm Nature reserve, meet 9.30am (SU007939).

Review of autumn field trips

College Lake and Wilstone Reservoir

Nine members attended this field trip in October. We met at College Lake, near Tring. This nature reserve, a former chalk quarry, is now managed by BBOWT as an important wetland and grassland site. It is equipped with a number of hides, cafe, visitor centre, toilets, second-hand bookshop, picnic tables and various natural history, geological, historical and agricultural exhibits. The most obvious signs of birdlife were flocks of coot and a range of ducks: wigeon, teal, gadwall and tufted duck, with the occasional pochard and shoveler thrown in here and there. Other species included heron, green woodpecker, meadow pipit, pied wagtail, long-tailed tit, bullfinch, reed bunting, a flash-by kingfisher, a squealing water rail and a flock of newly-arrived redwings.

The second part of call was the nearby Wilstone Reservoir. Our immediate impression was of far more birds. There were flocks of cormorant, wigeon, shoveler, teal, gadwall and coot mixed in with great-crested grebes, herons, little egrets, the odd pintail and a very impressive gathering of lapwings and golden plovers. The star of the show was undoubtedly a great white egret, which seemed determined to give us the best possible views.



c Mike Langman rspb-images.com

It left us wondering how on earth a bird could have a neck so long and bendy!

We finished the day with a combined list of 55 species.

Martin Latham

Otmoor in November

Unperturbed by a rather unenthusiastic forecast, eight members turned up at Otmoor on this dull, misty morning. The wind was keen, but at least the rain kept away. Our overall impression was of birds on the move. Gaggles of grey-lagged geese were our constant companions, drifting over the marsh and fields like studies for a Peter Scott painting. Flocks of lapwings and golden plovers were in very restless mood and showed no inclination to settle on the reserve. Fieldfares and redwings repeatedly dashed overhead or along the hedgerows, so we were delighted when one very obliging fieldfare decided to join the gathering of tits and finches at the bird feeders.

An impressive congregation of dabbling wigeon, teal and shoveler added a splash of colour to the wetlands facing the observation screens. Also recorded here were herons, coots, reed buntings, squealing water rails and, very fleetingly, a couple of kingfishers. The track and bushes alongside the reed beds produced some interesting sightings. Long-tailed tits were very entertaining to watch and conveniently uttered a distinctive trilling alarm call, thereby alerting us to the presence of a hunting sparrowhawk.

Although Otmoor is probably best known for reed beds, its meadows also merit investigation. In one field we spotted a brown hare crouching almost flat in the grass. In another a mixed party of carrion crows, magpies and a red kite were heartily tucking in to a dead sheep. Probably the most dramatic sighting concerned two raptors. A peregrine falcon materialized as if from nowhere and proceeded to dive bomb a red kite.

Other birds seen include kestrel, raven, green woodpecker (two observed at close quarters from the comfort of the hide), snipe, redpoll,

bullfinch, linnet and yellowhammer, bringing the total up to 55 species.

Martin Latham

Review of Autumn Indoor Meetings

In Peru, a country with 1800 bird species, Barry Oxley visited Cusco, Machu Pichu, Puerto Maldonado and the cloud forest. It sounded amazing. There are 400 species of tanagers, butterflies as yet unnamed, Inca orchids, hoatzin, giant otters, tapirs and many other wonders.

The historic Oxford swift project story was amusingly told by the keeper of the swifts, George Candelin. Access to the University Museum tower was more exciting in the days before health and safety regulations. We learnt too many interesting facts about swifts: their angled claws, long migrations (Beijing swifts fly to Namibia), ability to moult on the wing, and that young fledged swifts might not land on the ground until ready to breed at 3 years old. Their decline in recent years is likely due to the catastrophic decrease in general insect populations.



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The Biking Birder

Gary Prescott cycled (twice) to all RSPB and WWT reserves in the UK, including Fair Isle, raising money for the RSPB and other charities and becoming the 2016 green big year record holder with 307 species. 'There's a Tapir at the Door' was the title of his hilarious talk, regaling us with tales of his most recent birding adventure cycling and rafting in Peru, where he supports a project educating indigenous children in the Manu rainforest. Gary even got us singing.



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In December we explored New Zealand's natural history with Andrew Cleave, and enjoyed Jane Rudd's quiz, and mince pies.

Obituary

We are sorry to record the deaths this summer of Group member Christine Loder, a regular attender at the indoor meetings, and of the VWH Local Group founder Dudley Iles who wrote about the group's foundation in Didcot in 1977 for our 40th anniversary celebration newsletter. Dudley also founded the Wantage Field Club and was active in conservation all his life. Here are some extracts from the obituary by his wife Penny from the Hanney News, reproduced with her permission.

Dudley was born in Yorkshire and although he spent most of his life in Hanney, remained a true Yorkshireman. He became interested in birds at a very young age and kept his bird diaries from the age of 13 until his last year. He studied Biology at Leeds University, and in 1960 he became Head of Biology at King Alfred's School, Wantage. He led field trips to Europe for students and during the school holidays led Natural History trips for a more mature clientele. He also did a lot of lecturing locally, on aspects of Natural History. Early retirement enabled him to concentrate on work in the village as well as travelling. This culminated in two years in Zanzibar with VSO in 1993, where he trained young Zanzibaris to be environmental officers, not a common concept in Africa. He was known to all as 'Baba Ndege' - Grandfather Bird. Many long holidays, to Africa, India, South America among others meant lots of new birds to add to his lists. He and Penny organised ornithological tours to Texas which were a great success, then in 2004 he started giving lectures on cruises which again took him

to amazing places round the world. He was part of the BTO's Bird Atlas project, counting birds regularly, as he also did at Chimney Meadows, a BBOWT reserve. He was instrumental in establishing the Community Woodland and Dudley Iles Nature Trail in Wantage. Throughout his life he enjoyed painting the birds and other wildlife seen on his travels, especially in Africa. Dudley was a man with many talents and gifts who had the ability to share them freely with whomsoever he came into contact. He will be greatly missed by all his family and friends.

Big Garden Bird Watch 2019

The RSPB is eagerly anticipating who will be top of the pecking order for a very special anniversary of its' world famous Big Garden Birdwatch from 26-28 January.

Just one hour every year, for the last 40 years, has made the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch the largest garden wildlife citizen science project. During that time, hundreds of thousands of people have volunteered their time providing the RSPB with over 8 million hours of monitoring garden birds.

Results from 2018

Yet again, the house sparrow was at the top spot,



C Ray Kennedy rspb-images.com

followed by starling, blue tit, blackbird, woodpigeon, goldfinch, great tit, robin, long-tailed tit and chaffinch. There were more frequent sightings of siskin and brambling, and it was a good year for greenfinch.



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They had a 5% rise in sightings, a great sign as they've decreased by 60% since the Birdwatch began in 1979. It appears this rise is due to

good conditions during their breeding season in 2017. There was a drop in the recorded sightings of blackbirds (down by 18%) and robins (down by 12%), maybe because the mild winter meant there was more food available in the countryside, so that they didn't need to rely on gardens for food; also unlike smaller birds such as goldfinches (also increasing) and greenfinches, blackbirds and robins didn't have such a good breeding season. Frogs were seen in more than three-quarters of UK gardens. But that's 17% fewer regular sightings than in 2014, and toads have been seen at least once a month in just 20% of gardens – an alarming 30% down on four years ago.



C Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Sightings of hedgehogs have increased in 65% of gardens this year, and so have foxes. (from rspb.org.uk)

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