

Vale of White Horse Local Group

A Happy New Year from the committee to everyone in the Vale of White Horse local group. We hope you are managing to keep safe and well in these challenging times.



© Ben Andrew

The committee has been meeting regularly via zoom in these months of tiers and lockdowns, to keep the group going virtually as far as possible. Speaker meetings on zoom have been successful and will continue throughout the spring.

We have earned welcome publicity from a mention on the national RSPB Notes on Nature email (2 January) - which is received by over 800,000 people - about how local groups find new ways to connect: 'Vale of White Horse group's photo competition was judged by their online speaker for December - renowned wildlife photographer Andrew Cleave!'

Congratulations to the winner Derrick Stow for his magnificent purple sandpiper.



© Derrick Stow

Congratulations as well to Bill Lester for second and third places for his sparrowhawk and bearded tit.

Winter birdwatching

Field trips have had of necessity to be cancelled. So here are some snippets of peoples' local birding experiences.

Jane Rudd took this photograph of a great bustard. 'It has been in a field near Wantage for several weeks now. It is a bird that has come from Salisbury Plain and has a ring on its leg. It appears not to mind visitors viewing it.'



© Jane Rudd

My own local lockdown walks are by the Thames in Abingdon and I've been delighted by how many redwings are around this winter, often on hawthorn hedges, and earlier on in my garden on the Irish yew, although those berries were stripped quickly.

Not everywhere for walks is as accessible as earlier on. The floods have swamped many footpaths; fields are lakes full of floating black-headed gulls. Otmoor is still open, but not the hides, but Farmoor reservoir had to close. Tim Pett went to Farmoor on the day before it was closed: 'I was surprised to see the car park fuller than I had ever seen it before. Nevertheless I didn't see any evidence of people failing to obey the social distancing rules. My

main reason for going was because it's a good place for a walk but also to see the scaup. There was a male and two females on F1. (I didn't take a photo).'

For Didcot walks and sightings, Sue Buzzacott recommends the Facebook page, Wild in Didcot. 'I know not everyone has Facebook but this page has photos of local walks, sightings including birds, butterflies, moths, plants and people often ask if anyone knows what a moth, caterpillar, flower or bird they have seen is. They gave me helpful information on building a pond last summer.'

Big Garden Birdwatch

Big Garden Birdwatch 2021, for many of us a fixture on our sadly - depleted calendars, is the weekend 29-31 January. It's always exciting to see a species in our own garden not featuring in the top twenty. But where does the local sparrowhawk go for Birdwatch weekend? And the elusive blackcap which pops up occasionally on freezing mornings?

Last year's results, published by the RSPB show that throughout the UK 485,930 people counted a staggering 7,833,350 birds. Once again house sparrow took the top spot, with blue tit in second place and starling next; the previous year their rankings had been reversed. While house sparrows and starlings may be the UK's most commonly sighted birds, a closer look at the data shows that numbers have in fact dropped dramatically since Birdwatch began in 1979. House sparrows are down 53%, while starlings are down 80%. It's a pattern echoed by two more garden favourites, with blackbirds and robins down 46% and 32% respectively.

The reasons behind these declines are complex and continue to be investigated, but fewer green spaces, pollution and a changing climate are just some of the challenges faced by garden birds.

Both national and Oxfordshire results showed few changes in species ranking;



© Chris Gomersall
in Oxfordshire long-tailed tit was three places higher, and chaffinch had fallen by four places.



© Ben Hall
The top twenty in order for the county were: house sparrow, blue tit, starling, woodpigeon, blackbird, great tit, goldfinch, long-tailed tit, robin, collared dove, jackdaw, chaffinch, dunnoek, magpie, coal tit, carrion crow, feral pigeon, greenfinch, wren and great spotted woodpecker.

Review of autumn meetings on zoom

In September Dr Mark Eaton gave an interesting and informative presentation on Saving Nature through Science. Mark is a principal conservation scientist and a lead author of the 2016 State of Nature report.

The RSPB Centre for Conservation

Science employs sixty scientists of all disciplines who monitor which species are in decline by organising surveys such as the breeding bird survey (in collaboration with the BTO) and the state of nature reports, listing birds of conservation concern, and identifying habitats that are under threat. Their remit is to identify causes for these problems and apply solutions, which in many instances have proved successful. Many species are declining due to intensive management of agricultural land.



© Ben Andrew
For example skylark populations have plummeted ever since wheat has been planted in the autumn rather than spring. Nesting skylarks need fields with short vegetation, and should raise three broods per year, but now the crop has grown too tall by April. A solution is for farmers to make bare plots for the skylarks among wheat fields, about 1% of the total area. It works! Numbers are increasing again where this has been trialled.

Golden plovers are suffering from climate change because hot dry summers reduce the number of crane fly larvae they eat. Solution: block upland land drains in their habitat to raise the water table, maintaining the crane fly population and also acting as flood control in the moorland.

The Centre also works internationally and is involved, for example in captive breeding and release into the wild of vultures in India.

In October, Edward Towne told us about the Birds of the Medway Estuary, where he has lived and volunteered for the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts for 30 years. Medway is opposite Canvey Island; the river mouth is at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey which has a huge container port, and it debouches into the Thames opposite Southend.

The Isle of Grain power station is on its bank. This varied natural tidal and busy industrial landscape has reserves on the marshes and



© Rolf Williams
islands in the river, with RSPB Cliffe Pools on worked out gravel pits on the Hoo Peninsula. The bird life here is particularly good in winter with hundreds of dark-bellied brent geese from Siberia, knot, grey plover, godwit, whimbrel and other waders. Raptors include marsh and hen harrier, merlin, peregrine and short-eared owl, and osprey on migration. In spring nightingales breed at RSPB High Halstead.



© Kelly Thomas
In November we travelled to Northern India with Andrew Cleave MBE, which after his talk became a dream destination for some of us. Andrew, who has worked in India, and travelled there extensively, is an author of over 20 natural history books and a wildlife photographer whose pictures have been used worldwide in field guides, magazines and newspapers. So the photographs in his presentation were of course stunning, featuring a huge variety of animals, notably tigers. Interesting tiger facts: in India there are many more leopards than tigers, which number about 4000. Tigers and elephants dislike each other. The nature reserves featured in the talk were Bharatpur wetlands (formerly a duck-shooting reserve) for birds, Bandavgarh for tigers, and Corbett Reserve in the foothills of the Himalaya.

In December Peter Cranswick of the Wetland and Wildlife Trust gave an enthusiastic presentation on Saving the World's Rarest Birds which provided food for thought in a number of ways. The rarest birds in question are Madagascan pochard. Once thought extinct, just 20 birds survived on one small lake in the remote highlands of Madagascar; the challenge was to remove some, establish captive breeding and reintroduce birds into the wild to a different lake deemed more suitable. No-one in Madagascar knew how to rear birds, nobody had successfully reintroduced a diving duck to the wild and there were huge problems with the terrain as the road to the lake was barely passable for three months a year. The situation in Madagascar was heartbreaking to hear. It is a very poor country whose natural landscape is being devastated by slash and burn agriculture. The lakes are degraded and used unsustainably by local communities for fishing. Conservation here is closely linked to development work. Peter described his sense of guilt as he travelling with truckloads of expensive digital kit through villages rife with poverty. But over time the project engendered local approval and pride and provided employment, together with money for infrastructure, and conservationists were able to help promote sustainable fishery. And they did achieve reintroduction of pochards to the wild, where they are thriving.



Talks to come 2021

15 February Birds of Mountains and Moors Andre Farrar RSPB

15 March Birdwatching in Andalucia Robin Nelson

19 April to be arranged

17 May AGM and members' presentations. Hopefully we might be back in Didcot Civic Hall by then.

AGM held on Zoom 21 September

Group leader Bob Knight reviewed the year 2020: the coming of covid 19, the suspension of meetings from March onwards, and cancellation of the weekend away.

Financially, we save on hall hire and speakers' travelling expenses, but lose on raffles, teas, plant sales; socially, we miss out on the friendly social events that our meetings are, with opportunities to catch up with friends over tea and coffee – we hope to be back to normal soon.

We hope to expand the membership, especially to a younger audience, and welcome Alice Drysdale as our social media volunteer to promote the group on Facebook and other social media channels. Please visit the page if you can, at www.facebook.com/rspbvwh, and invite your friends and relatives, too!

He announced that the RSPB support to local groups has changed and the Midlands area is now Central & Eastern which is covered by RSPB England HQ in Birmingham. Regional offices are disappearing.

We have a new Local Groups Officer, George Lee-Harris. George has initiated regular zoom conversations with group leaders, and is on hand to answer questions, and provide support for local groups.

Finally, Bob thanked by name the dedicated team of committee members and helpers to whom the group owes its existence.

Reminders

Committee vacancy

A reminder that we still need an indoor meetings organiser; please think of volunteering for this vital role.

Subscriptions

Thank you to all who have already renewed their subscriptions for 2021. See the website for details if you still would like to do so

rspb-vwh.org.uk.

The website is regularly updated with news about future meetings and covid-related events.

Zoom meetings

If you haven't yet been able to join any of the zoom speaker meetings and would like some technical assistance or advice, Tim Pett membership secretary is happy to help.

timothygpett@gmail.com
or phone 01235 526033

The meetings so far have proved successful and have attracted a good proportion of the current membership.

Announcement

Finally we are sorry to announce the death recently of Brenda Ross, local group member for many years and a previous newsletter editor.

Felicity Jenkins

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