

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 everyone is managing to keep well as we try to resume something approaching our pre-covid lives.

This newsletter will publicise what is planned for 2022, but of course some uncertainty remains because of possible social restrictions, virus variants and other vagaries of life.

Please consult the website www.rspb-vwh.org.uk for up-to-date information.

Throughout the last year speaker meetings on zoom have been successful with good attendances. If you haven't yet been able to join any of the zoom meetings and would like any technical assistance or advice, Tim Pett membership secretary is happy to help: timothygpett@gmail.com or 01235 526033. He sends an email link ahead of the meetings, which are on the third Monday evening of each month as usual.

Although it is hoped to be able to start meetings in reality before long, our speakers are willing to speak virtually if necessary, so the programme can be flexible in presentation. So meetings may be hybrid, combining a face-to-face meeting with a zoom link for members who do not wish to meet in person. Face-to-face meetings will be subject

to Covid regulations (please attend if vaccinated, and not if you or contacts are unwell, wearing a mask is optional, hand sanitiser available, regret no raffle and no refreshments).

New venue for meetings

This year we have a new venue for VWH local group meetings at the River Room, the new annex attached to All Saints Church Sutton Courtenay.

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

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.

Programme for January - May 2022

17 January The Lower Windrush Valley Project by Lucy Kennery

Lucy Kennery is the project manager for the Lower Windrush Valley project. The Lower Windrush Valley includes the floodplain from Witney to Newbridge, and the project is run by Oxfordshire County

Council and seeks to balance the landscape, wildlife and mineral extraction needs of the area. Lucy's talk will be about 40 minutes long, and will be followed by presentations (including the photo competition trophy).

Photo Competition

The photo competition was judged by our November speaker Mike Alibone.



© Tom Bowtell

Congratulations to Tom Bowtell for the winning image of a great spotted woodpecker.

21 February Birds of Panama by Glenn Duggan

Glenn Duggan is a keen bird photographer and artist; he has travelled widely and been awarded a Fellowship of the Zoological Society London for his research work and talks.

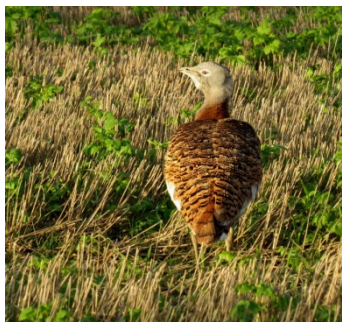
21 March Hampshire's Changing Birds by Keith Betton

Keith Betton is county recorder for birds in Hampshire. He has been a council member of the RSPB and is currently vice president of the British Trust for Ornithology.

11 April Senses and Non-senses of Birds by Dr Tim Seller

Tim Seller is a retired lecturer in Zoology and international student recruitment director at Imperial College London. He has led evening classes and spoken to non-specialist groups for over 30 years.

16 May AGM and Members' evening



© Jane Rudd second prize in photocompetition

Field Trips

Monthly Sunday field trips restarted successfully in September 2021 and will continue throughout 2022.

Transport is with our own cars. The leader and contact for all trips is Martin Latham 01235 851918

martin.j.latham@googlemail.com.

Please check our website for updates.

23 January Port Meadow

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

20 February College Lake

Meet at 10 am at College Lake car park (HP23 5QG).

20 March Greenham Common

Meet at 10 am on site (more details to be announced).

24 April Wytham Woods

Meet at 10 am on site OX2 8QQ (access through Wytham Village not via B4044).

22 May Shotover Country Park

Meet at 10 am on site (at

the east end of Old Road Headington, nearest postcode OX3 8TA, then continue to top of hill).

Coach trips with the RSPB Oxford group are cancelled due to covid restrictions for the time being.

We are unfortunately unable to organise a members' weekend away this year for the same reason.



© Derrick Stowe third prize in photocompetition

Starting over:

The return of field meetings by Martin Latham

Wittenham Clumps and Day's Lock

On 26 September 2021 we held our first field meeting (indeed, our first face-to-face encounter) since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Four of us met in the car park at Wittenham Clumps and made our way down through the woods to the Thames at Day's Lock.

It was a fine autumn day enhanced by the feeling that summer had not quite departed. Red admiral and gatekeeper butterflies were active in the hedgerows, as were darter dragonflies over the woodland ponds. Chiffchaffs were still fairly numerous, some of them announcing their presence with an occasional

burst of song. A constant flow of meadow pipits overhead provided clear evidence of the changing season, peak passage for this species being from mid September to mid October.

We enjoyed an interesting range of woodland birds, including red kite, buzzard, stock dove, great spotted woodpecker, wren, robin, goldcrest, long-tailed, blue, great and coal tits, nuthatch and jay.

On arriving at Day's Lock we quickly added a number of waterside and wetland species to our tally. The most visible of these were mute swan, mallard, moorhen, coot, lesser black-backed gull and a couple of wing-drying cormorants. It took a little longer to find grey wagtail and reed bunting. For the most vivid memory of the day we have to thank the kingfisher, which selected a prominent perch in front of us and seemed determined to show off its fishing skills.

Farmoor Reservoir

The second field meeting of the season took place at Farmoor Reservoir on 24 October and attracted 12 participants - a very promising turn-out!

The birds encountered were pretty much run-of-the-mill for the reservoir with no particularly unusual sightings. We were nevertheless impressed by the large and very mobile flocks of cormorants and tufted ducks. They seemed to be forever on the move, no doubt displaced by the many paddle boarders elsewhere on the reservoir. Also present in large numbers were great crested grebes and coots.

We enjoyed close-up observations of little egrets and little grebes. A particularly

accommodating yellow-legged gull lived up to its name. Standing in full view on top of a buoy in bright sunlight, there was no doubt as to its identity. The visit was also useful for comparing great and lesser black-backed and herring gulls.

It is always interesting and instructive to see familiar birds in a different context. We are all used to observing great crested grebes on the water, whether diving, displaying or just fast asleep. Far less frequently do we see them in flight when they seem to transform bizarrely into ungainly hunch-backed creatures with dangly legs and outsize feet.

Otmoor

Ten members turned up for our Otmoor meeting on 21 November. The main purpose of this trip was to observe starling murmurations. Thousands of these birds gather here towards dusk and perform fascinating aerial manoeuvres before settling down for the night. There was no shortage of starlings, but unfortunately the wind was not in our favour and the would-be performers opted to fly in low and drop straight into the reeds without putting on much of a display.



© Bob Knight

Any disappointment we might have felt at the starlings' low-key performance was more than compensated for by our other sightings. There were at least three marsh harriers patrolling the reedbeds, joined

from time to time by a hunting sparrowhawk and a rather elusive ring-tail hen harrier. Gadwall, shoveler, wigeon and teal were there in force and we obtained excellent views of feeding snipe.

We were delighted to find a flock of some 60 barnacle geese.



© Bob Knight

We watched them fly round the marsh and land on a meadow where they began to feed alongside the more regular flocks of Canada and greylag geese. But the jewel in the crown in wildfowl terms was provided by two magnificent red-breasted geese. At times they were difficult to see, being small and easily concealed behind the accompanying barnacle geese and the much larger Canada geese. Once detected however, they were unmistakable in their stunning black, white and red plumage. Truly a memory to be treasured!

Avian successes in 2021

Despite unseasonal weather 2021 was an excellent year for new breeding birds in Oxfordshire: cranes fledged a chick at Otmoor (the first time for 500 years). Other firsts were breeding cattle egret and goosander. Nationally, it was a good year for roseate terns (Coquet Island, Northumberland), stone curlew, and avocets (first time breeding success at Pulborough Brooks).

Reminders

Once again we appeal to all members for someone to come forward to fill the vacant committee posts so the group can continue. We desperately need an indoor meetings organiser and a secretary. Job descriptions can be found on our website under 'volunteering'. If you feel you can help please contact Bob Knight at bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk

And finally, remember

Big Garden Birdwatch

is coming soon on the weekend 28-30 Jan 2022.

Details are available at www.rspb.org.uk where your results can be entered.

Results in descending order of numbers seen for England last year were:

House sparrow,
blue tit,
starling,
blackbird,
woodpigeon,
robin,
great tit,
goldfinch,
magpie,
long-tailed tit.

Felicity Jenkins
fmjenkins@talktalk.net

Local group website
www.rspb-vwh.org.uk

Note

With reference to the previous newsletter and Danielle Mills' talk on medical detection dogs: I apologise for incorrectly writing that biodetection dogs are already employed in airports as Covid detectors; unfortunately this is not the case. The website for this charity is medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk.