

Vale of White Horse Local Group

Happy New Year to everyone and a reminder that 2017 is the 40th anniversary of the Vale of White Horse Local Group.

Action points for 2017

Our celebrations for the 40th anniversary will be at the meeting on 10 April when Peter Holden MBE will be giving a presentation on 'Giving Nature a Home'. Other RSPB dignitaries will also be attending. Malcolm Ross (mr@rspb-vwh.org.uk) is compiling a memoir of our group: contact him with any reminiscences of speakers, events or history asap.

Big Garden Birdwatch 2017

will run this year for three days instead of two: Saturday 28 - Monday 30 January. Hopefully having more time will increase participation if the weather is bad or people are busy at the weekend.

Last year's top ten for Oxfordshire were: house sparrow, blue tit, woodpigeon, starling, blackbird, goldfinch, great tit, chaffinch, robin, long-tailed tit. Perhaps the end of the decline of the house sparrow?



© Ray Kennedy(rspb-images.com)

Photo Competition

Entries for our wildlife photo competition need to be brought to the meeting on 20 February. You can enter up three prints of birds or other wildlife, no larger than

7"x 5"; please put your name and address and the species name on the back of the print mount. Pictures will be displayed at the March meeting when the winners will be announced.

Weekend Away

On 31 March 2017 a Local Group weekend away in Somerset is being planned by Steve Cload who will announce details nearer the time.

Meeting Refreshments

Another request for volunteers to help with tea and coffee at meetings. Thank you to those who have already signed up on the rota for 2017.

Review of conservation news in 2016

The State of Nature 2016 Report, produced by more than 50 of the UK's expert environmental charities concluded that 56% of UK species are in decline and urgent action at government level is needed to improve the situation. Britain is one of the most depleted countries in the world due to historic policy-driven agriculture, and more recently, climate change. Overuse of fertilisers and pesticides has had a devastating impact on pollinating insects and farmland bird populations, soil and water quality. Nationally, since the 1970s, 54% of farmland birds have declined and 12% of farmland species are threatened with extinction. Locally, In Berks, Bucks and Oxon, just 2% of the landscapes are considered to be of important wildlife-rich habitat. Over the last 10 years, we have lost species like the pearl-

bordered fritillary and small pearl-bordered butterflies.

However it's not all doom and gloom

BBOWT's farmland management practices such as non-intensive animal grazing and hedgerow management have resulted in stable numbers of skylark and corn bunting, and breeding barn owls. *bbowtblog 14 Sept 2016*



© Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

And this year, bitterns bred at RSPB Otmoor, the first record in Oxfordshire for 150 years.



© Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

RSPB Midlands

region has had an excellent year for breeding birds

At Langford Lowfields (Notts) breeding bearded tits and Cetti's warbler were recorded, and redshank at Beckingham Marshes (Notts). Middleton Lakes (Staffs) celebrated a pair of little egrets breeding and fledging three young.

(RSPB Midlands Local Group Update Sept 2016)

Back to 2017

Indoor meetings coming up this season:

In January, Mike Read is talking about wildlife to be found in France in Brittany, Normandy and the Camargue.

February takes us overseas with Colin Wilkinson to Anguilla where he has been involved in seabird research.

There is also a cake stall: contributions welcome.

In March, John Tyler takes us on a journey through English woodland with 'Woodland Wildlife and the Ridgeway'.

The results of the photo competition will be announced.

Sunday Outings in February and March

A local trip on 26 February to Port Meadow in Oxford should provide views of thousands of wigeon, lapwing and golden plover if the meadow floods as usual. This will be a car outing; Steve Clod to provide details.

On 26 March there is an outing to Keyhaven/Pennington Marshes in Hampshire, an excellent venue for waders, duck, geese on the saltmarsh and mudflats.

Book in advance at a Monday meeting. Please bring cash with you to pay on the coach which leaves Didcot at 8am (cost depends on the number of participants; about £25 per person).



Brent geese in Hampshire
© Paul Chesterfield (rspb-images.com)

Review of Autumn Meetings

The season started with an interesting talk in September by Chris Ward on Undiscovered Norfolk with, however, limited mention of birds and no comments about migration.

October's presentation on Birds

of Paradise and the Bower Birds by Glen Duggan, was interesting as well, but the illustrations were rather too small.

In November, *The Mysteries of Migration* by Dr Timothy Sellers showed maps for migration routes of different species of birds. Birds migrate north-south or east-west following their food supply, using landmarks, the stars, and a magnetic sense. Distances travelled by tiny birds are mind-boggling, but they feed up before starting off (as the ancient Greeks observed) and take their journey in stages; scientific measurements have shown that energetically everything balances; it is not impossible.

Autumn trips

In September, members had a lovely day in Pagham Harbour and spotted an osprey. Some had a problem being cut off by a very high tide.



© Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

In October, the trip to Farlington Marshes had a wet start, but there were sightings of godwit, barnacle goose, common sandpiper, snipe, turnstone and wheatear.

On a fine day in November, we could have done with more time spotting the rarities at Blashford Lakes and Stanpit Marsh (with the help of a telescope): ring-billed gull, water rail, large flocks of siskins, a great white egret (nicely lined up alongside a grey heron and four little egret), goosander, goldeneye, tree creeper, peregrine and marsh harrier.

Thanks to Gill Riches and Jane Rudd for species lists.

And finally:

circ bunting brought back from the edge of extinction



© Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The circ bunting has seen breeding numbers rise from just 118 pairs in 1989 to 1,078 pairs in 2016 (Devon and Cornwall). The RSPB said the turnaround came after a 25-year project with farmers to boost the bird's food supplies and habitats.

Wildlife experts say the circ bunting's decline in numbers was down to farmers switching to autumn-sown cereals, increasingly using pesticides and the removal of hedges to create larger fields. The bird is known to forage in weedy stubble fields in winter and nest in hedges or scrub in the summer, when they rely on natural grassland to feed on grasshoppers.

The RSPB said its recovery came after conservationists worked with farmers to help them take advantage of wildlife-friendly farming funding schemes. They included growing spring barley - which after harvest is left as weedy stubble to provide seed for the circ buntings - and planting grassed areas along the edges of fields to provide insects and spiders for them to eat in the summer (report from bbc.co.uk).

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