

Vale of White Horse Local Group

Spring

With such a mild winter until recent weeks, watching for early signs of spring this year has been confusing. There were red admirals and other butterflies and moths in December, and many wild flowers in bloom unseasonably early: cowslips and primroses in January. The Spring Watch Citizen Science project surveys the first signs of spring nationwide; last year it took three weeks for spring to spread northwards across the country. This year look out from mid-March onwards for the first flowering of native bluebells; the first date blackbirds carry food to their nests to feed their young; budburst and first leaf for ash and for oak, and first orange-tip butterfly.



Chris Shields (rspb-images.com)

Records for bluebell and orange-tip butterfly exist from the early nineteenth century so adding to the database is of great value

(see woodlandtrust.org.uk for more).

Indoor meetings coming up soon



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

First of all another urgent request

for volunteers to help with tea and coffee at meetings. Thank you to those who have already signed up on the rota for 2016. Volunteers are also needed as new committee members. Please contact Steve Bastow.

stevebastow@btinternet.com

On 18 April Nigel Glover-Wright LRPS is to speak on wildlife of the Serengeti: 'Ngorongoro Crater and Ndutu'. There are sure to be marvellous photographs.

There is also a plant sale; please bring some plants on the day.

The meeting on 16 May features the (brief) AGM at 7.15 pm before the talk by Oliver Smart: 'Voyage to the South Atlantic'. Oliver's images were category winners for the Zoological Society of London Animal Photography Prize in 2014. His illustrated talk is about his travels to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula. Please arrive promptly for the AGM.

Trips in April, May and June

Coach outings need to be booked in advance at a Monday meeting. Please bring cash with you to pay on the coach; the cost depends on how many people come.

If you would like a lift or car-share for car trips please contact stephencload409@btinternet.com.

There are two trips in April: on 17 April a car outing (own cars) to Linky Down, part of the Aston Rowant Nature Reserve located at the top of the Chilterns, with panoramic views over the Oxfordshire Vale. Meet at the carpark at Cowleaze Woods at

9 am. This is also home to the Chiltern Sculpture Trail which is signposted from the A40 and Christmas Common roads. We hope to spot ring ouzel on migration.



Ring ouzel Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

On 24 April there is a coach trip to Durlston and Studland in Dorset with the RSPB Oxford Local Group, leaving Didcot at 7.30 am. Durlston Country Park includes sea-cliffs, hedgerows, coastal limestone downland, hay meadows and woodland. There is a visitor centre and a café. Studland NNR beach attracts waders, while grebe and divers can often be seen out at sea. Dartford Warbler breed on the heathland. All the English snakes and lizards are found here and rarities like richard's pipit and early spider orchid have been spotted. On 22 May another coach trip is to the Wyre Forest, Worcestershire leaving Didcot 7 am. The Wyre Forest is one of the finest remaining native woodlands in Britain. It covers around 6,000 acres with a wide variety of habitats; at Dowles Brook dipper, kingfisher, grey wagtail and mandarin can often be seen. Redstart, pied flycatcher and wood warbler all breed on site. and there are fritillary butterflies and orchids.

Saturday 18 June there is a car outing to Snelsmore Common Country Park (BBOWT reserve);

meet at the Common at 8.30pm. Snelsmore Common contains a range of habitats including heathland, wet mires and woodland, making it home to nationally rare bird species including nightjar, woodlark and tree pipit. We are hoping for nightjar on this evening visit.



Chris Shields artwork (rspb-images.com)

Review of recent meetings, outings and local sightings

Great Northern divers paid an extensive visit to Farmoor reservoir this winter



Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

In January Steve Magennis explained how to stalk birds and construct hides in order to take good photographs, in his excellently illustrated 'Successful Wildlife Photography' talk.

In February Peter Holden MBE gave a varied and well-received presentation on 'The RSPB's Natural Secrets'. With video clips, fascinating natural history facts and photographs of all kinds of wildlife he toured various RSPB reserves, explaining how each has developed as a haven for particular species. Nature reserves in the 1970s were funded from selling shingle dug from Dungeness for use in motorway construction; the resulting lakes enriched this SSSI habitat, where the medicinal leech, thought extinct in England, was rediscovered, and purple heron are breeding now.

The Lodge, in Sandy, was built on the site on an iron age camp; the meadow saxifrage plants there might come from the Bronze Age. Many reserves are being restored to heathland after felling excessive conifer plantations dating from post-world war 1; such areas are

particularly attractive to moths, of which Peter had some delightful photos. And the protection of ospreys at Loch Garten attracted national public involvement which in turn raised £1 million pounds for buying Abernethy Forest.

In March Christine Marshall led us through Goa and Karnataka on a fascinating birdwatching trip which featured a variety of kingfishers, hornbills, plovers and whistling ducks, visits to beaches, wetlands and woodland, and a cashew nut tree in flower. Thanks are due to Christine for stepping into the breach at short notice when the advertised speaker failed to appear.

There were winter outings to Blashford Lakes and Blackwater Arboretum in Hampshire, Cliffe Pools in Kent, and Farlington Marshes in Hampshire.

At Blashford Lakes Slavonian and red-necked grebe, green sandpiper, siskin, redpoll, brambling and nuthatch were spotted, and at Blackwater Arboretum six hawfinch.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Although it was rather early in the year for a visit to Cliffe Pools, with gales blowing and no hides, the group recorded 55 species, including several hundred black-tailed godwit. There was a very cold wind.

There was a very cold wind at Farlington Marshes as well; there were pintail and hundreds of Brent geese, a rather nice showy stonechat, grey plovers and black tailed godwits, some already in their smart breeding plumage.

News from the RSPB

'Hope Community' - countdown begins. Imagine a new housing development with built-in homes

for swifts, sparrows and bats, nesting cups for house martins, hedgehog-friendly gardens and a local green space with ponds, meadows and woodlands. Doesn't that sound great?

In partnership with the RSPB and Aylesbury Vale District Council, Barratt Developments are about to starting work 'on the ground' to create Kingsbrook, a new development on the east side of Aylesbury that will raise the bar of wildlife-friendly housing to a new level.

Mike Pollard (Involve Midlands RSPB volunteer newsletter winter 2015).

News from the Earth Trust

Thanks to funding from Biffa Award, environmental charity Earth Trust has launched the first stage of a project to create 17 hectares of species-rich wildflower meadow along the banks of the Thames in South Oxfordshire. Sheep and cattle grazing, along with seasonal hay cutting, is the traditional way in which wildflower meadows would have been managed; vital as it helps create a varied habitat, with vegetation at different heights, and bare ground where wildflower seed can germinate; and helps control the more competitive grasses. The work will contribute to Europe-wide plans to help our rivers and riverbanks to recover 'good ecological status'.

See www.earthtrust.org.uk/riveroflife.

Last but not least the winner of our wildlife photo competition. Congratulations to Derrick Stow for 'Teal at Titchwell'.



Derrick Stow

Second and third prizes were won by Jim Taylor 'hummingbird' and Steve Cload 'siskin'.

see website www.rspb-vwh.org.uk