

Vale of White Horse Local Group

Welcome to the 2019-20 season of the Vale of White Horse Local Group. This newsletter is all about field trips. We hope that members might be enthused to participate if they have not been on a Group outing before.

This year's coach trips with the RSPB Oxford local group are to Keyhaven and to Blashford Lakes in Hampshire, to Slimbridge and to Beaulieu Road Station in the New Forest. Local outings by car will be to Little Wittenham, Radley Lakes, Port Meadow, College Lake and Tring reservoirs, Wytham Woods and Greenham Common. Car sharing can be arranged: the contact person for all trips is Martin Latham 01235 851918

martin.latham@googlemail.com. Visit our website rspb-vwh.org.uk for updates.

Group weekend in Dorset

March 22-24

The weekend away was a great success with 29 people attending. Our hotel on the Isle of Portland was comfortable and well situated with lovely views over Chesil Beach and the Fleet.



© Felicity Jenkins

Birdwatching destinations were Portland Bill, Radipole Lake and Lodmoor Country Park in Weymouth, and RSPB Arne. Here

are some reports of trip highlights from various participants.

'The highlight of the weekend for me was seeing the bearded tits at Radipole Lake on arrival on the Friday morning. They were so close to the path that everyone had a good view. After spending the morning at Radipole we moved on to the Fleet which was fairly quiet, but red-breasted merganser along with ringed plover were noted.

Birdwatching near the Fleet



© Felicity Jenkins

It was lovely to hear the skylark singing around the harbour. Saturday morning was a little wet and windy so limited sightings were made on Portland Bill, but many gannets were seen flying over the sea along with guillemots and a kestrel. On the land side there were good views of wheatear besides a number of more common birds. In the afternoon we enjoyed the visit to Lodmoor reserve where we had excellent views of the lesser yellowlegs from America. This bird had been present in the area since last autumn, but was a rarity.



© Jane Rudd

It was lovely to see the black-tailed godwits getting their pink summer plumage, along with marsh harrier quartering the reed bed.



© Jane Rudd

Other birds of note at Lodmoor were snipe, dunlin and little gull.'

Here are black headed, Mediterranean, common and herring gulls at Lodmoor, with shelduck.



© Bob Knight

'Not having visited either Radipole or Lodmoor before, both Gus and I keenly anticipated these venues in the weekend programme. Radipole delivered with distant, but clear views of a ring-necked

duck and our first sightings of sand martins for the year. However, unlike others in the group, we only managed to hear, not see any bearded tits.

So, having enjoyed excellent views of the lesser yellowlegs at Lodmoor and watched the little gulls in flight, we decided to return to Radipole.

After lingering in all the spots where people saw the bearded tits and staring at the reed beds, we drew another blank and decided to call it a day. Turning the last corner en route back to the visitor centre, we could hardly believe our eyes – a male and a female bearded tit perched up at the top of the reeds. We were able to watch them both for several minutes, delighting in our best ever views of the species.

This crowned a memorable weekend, at a comfortable venue, with good food, excellent company and a good range of birds.'

'Sunday weather was the best of the weekend, warm and sunny. We visited Arne RSPB reserve, which was very crowded and birds were rather scarce, but we did manage to see a female Dartford warbler. After that we enjoyed seeing the Flying Scotsman arriving at Swanage railway station.'

Another sighting at Arne was this impressive raft spider.



© Bob Knight

'The weekend provided a fine illustration of one of my favourite themes in nature: bird migration. My most enduring memories include the murky morning we spent at Portland Bill, when departing redwings called through the drizzle and a landfall of wheatears bounced their way energetically across the turf. The afternoon visit to Arne, by contrast, was "coats off" weather. There

was a very relaxed feel as we observed the last of the winter's brent geese cruising the waves, while newly arrived Sandwich terns fished alongside.'

The two old quarries near the hotel were an interesting destination, featuring fossil remains of trees, tunnels and a sculpture park.



© Felicity Jenkins

'An early morning visit to the King Barrow quarry next to the hotel produced a fleeting view of a little owl for a few of our group as it returned and disappeared quickly into its nest hole. However, at least one of our party returned later that afternoon and had a very good view, presumably of the same bird, as it sat outside its hole for several minutes before setting off on another hunting expedition'.



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Our grateful thanks to Pat Phillips and Steve Cload for organizing the weekend once again.

News from the AGM

Jane Rudd, who has been coordinating the group since the group leader post became vacant, chaired the AGM. The events of the year were reviewed and the committee thanked for their efforts. It was reported that membership is declining, but subscriptions will stay the same as last season (£14). A donation of £350 was made to the RSPB. Bob Knight was elected as Group leader, and Tim Pett as membership secretary. We need an indoor meetings organizer: can anyone volunteer

for this?

The deaths this year of members Christine Loder, Dudley Iles and Jon Orme were reported.

Recent outings

Rutland Water

Five members from the Vale joined the RSPB Oxford local group on their April visit to the Rutland Water Nature Reserve. Created in the 1970s alongside one of the largest reservoirs in Western Europe, the reserve is managed by the Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust in partnership with Anglian Water and comprises some 1000 acres of wildlife habitat.

A thorough investigation of Rutland Water would require several visits and so we concentrated our efforts on its western shore where the Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre is situated. This part of the reserve is equipped with some 30 hides providing views of not only the main body of Rutland Water but also eight lagoons.

For many visitors a major attraction is the prospect of observing ospreys. In this, we were not disappointed. Within moments of entering a hide, we spotted an osprey resting on a platform high above the water. It sat and preened and then flew off on a fishing expedition. Moments later it was back, a large fish twisting and writhing in its talons. It then proceeded to devour its prey to an accompaniment of appreciative comments and camera clicks and whirrs. I heard someone say, 'Job done. We can go home now.' But we didn't go home. There was plenty more to see.



© Chris Gomersall rspb-images.com

From the same hide we watched flocks of sand martin, a couple of little ringed plover, a party of newly arrived common tern, four little gulls moulting into summer plumage, Egyptian geese, shelduck, oystercatcher, redshank, lapwing and a range of ducks, including wigeon, shoveler, teal, gadwall and pintail.

From other hides we caught up with great crested grebe, little egret, curlew, common gull, Cetti's warbler and two green sandpipers. The tracks between hides also proved interesting and we managed to observe three pink-footed geese at close quarters, as well as numerous blackcap and chiffchaff and the odd yellow wagtail.

Our visit illustrated how this time of year can be seen as a crossroads, with some species just arriving from their winter haunts and others beginning their journeys to points further north. The songs of incoming willow warblers resounded in the hedgerows, while hoarse calls from the ash and birch trees along the tracks betrayed the presence of groups of departing brambling.

Beaulieu Road Station

The venue for the group's May outing was the New Forest, more precisely Beaulieu Road Station near Lyndhurst. With a varied mix of heath, bog, scrub, conifer stands and some of the finest mature oak and beech woods in the country, this area epitomises the New Forest. It can be said to offer a showcase for the forest's essential components.

Our arrival was greeted by the plaintive calls of siskin and coal tits foraging in the majestic conifers bordering the car park. House martins zipped to and fro above our heads and curlew bubbled somewhere in the distance.

We made our way across the heathland, admiring its many stonechats and delighting in the song flights of meadow pipits and the call of a well-concealed cuckoo (or cuckoos). Eventually we managed a clear view of a cuckoo as it dashed from cover and across the heather before ducking out of sight again. Pipits beware!

As we entered the woods a sudden burst of song alerted us to the presence of a redstart. It bounded into view, its red tail a-quiver, its white forehead and red chest almost luminous despite the shade. This was to be the first of many.



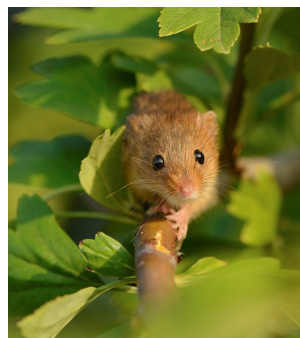
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Another woodland denizen is the tree creeper. We had numerous sightings of these strange mouse-like birds as they zigzagged their way round the gnarled and twisted boughs of ancient oaks.

The deciduous woodlands and adjacent scrub resounded to the cries of great spotted woodpecker, goldcrest, marsh tit, willow warbler and garden warbler, while crossbills chip-chipped their way through the tops of the conifers.

A fair-sized pond amid the cotton grass and sundew on the damper part of the heathland was home to reed bunting, moorhen, mallard, teal, heron and little egret. Once rare, the last species is now very much a standard feature of many British waterways. The arrival of dark clouds was our signal to call it a day, but it was with some reluctance that we said our farewells to the ponies and wended our way back to the carpark.

Otmoor volunteers delve into the tiny world of the harvest mouse



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Over the autumn and winter of 2018/19, a band of nine volunteers have been searching for harvest mouse nests on Otmoor, led by our

non-avian surveyor volunteer, Ellen Lee. We have always known about the presence of harvest mice, but their abundance has, until now, been somewhat of a mystery!

Our intrepid volunteers spent hours poking, probing and parting grass and brambles in the search for the nests. These nests were built by pregnant females over last summer and into the autumn to house a single brood of pups (or pinkies). The nests are small balls of woven grass, usually at least 18 inches off the ground and built into the surrounding vegetation.

This year our survey started at the beginning of November and found 22 nests in the area alongside the river. Exactly the same number as the previous year. We then set out to check areas that hadn't previously been surveyed. Car park field and Julys Meadow were checked next. Both these fields were hard work as the vegetation is long and dense and the ground is uneven, but 12 nests were discovered. In Julys Meadow, the nests were mainly located in areas of tall fleabane with grass growing up through it.

We found a total of 50 nests! An absolutely brilliant result and this season's surveys have really confirmed what we previously suspected, namely that the best areas for harvest mice on the reserve are the reedbed bunds and adjacent tracks. One of the most satisfying parts of this survey was all volunteers were successful in finding nests!

This survey has opened our eyes to the abundance of this charismatic little rodent and the target next year is to set eyes on an actual mouse!

*Fergus Mosey Warden, Otmoor
Abridged from Midlands volunteer
newsletter. Involve spring/summer 2019*

Thanks to all the contributors to this newsletter: Martin Latham for the field trip reports, photographers as credited (many by Group members), and memories of Dorset from Jane Rudd, Bob Knight, Gill Riches, Martin Latham and Tim Pett.

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