



**giving  
nature  
a home**

The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

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Editor Felicity Jenkins

# NEWSLETTER

January 2020

A Happy New Year from the committee to everyone in the Vale of White Horse local group.

## Awards

Firstly, congratulations to Maurice Meardon for his long service award for 40 years' volunteering with the RSPB; here being presented with a golden eagle badge and certificate by Bob Knight.



*c Jane Rudd*

Other committee members were also presented with certificates, but for rather fewer years of dedication!

## Upcoming talks and trips

Graham Lenton makes a welcome return to the group on 20 January with a presentation on Birds and Wildlife of Namibia.

Of local interest on 17 February is The Laboratory with Leaves: the story of Wytham Woods, by the conservator Nigel Fisher.

The 16 March meeting Birding in Northamptonshire is by Mike Alibone, county recorder and optics editor for Birdwatch magazine.

The annual members' spring birdwatching weekend away is being organised; details to be announced (contact [patphillips384@gmail.com](mailto:patphillips384@gmail.com).)

On 19 January a coach trip with the Oxford Local Group to Slimbridge WWT leaves Oxford at 8.15 am. Further details from [martinj.latham@googlemail.com](mailto:martinj.latham@googlemail.com) or 01235 851918.

The next two half-day outings are by car, meeting on site: 23 February to Port Meadow in Oxford for wildfowl on the flooded meadow (meet 9.30 am) and 22 March to College Lake and Tring Reservoirs (meet 10.0 am at College Lake HP23 5QG where there is a visitor centre).

## Review of autumn field trips by Martin Latham

The field trip to Little Wittenham was a follow-on from the September Earth Trust talk. Seven members turned up at Wittenham Clumps on 22 September for our first outing of the autumn. The word autumn in fact sums up the mood of the day. The hedgerows, draped liberally with cobwebs, seemed to be bursting with blackberries and the fruits of black bryony and dogwood.

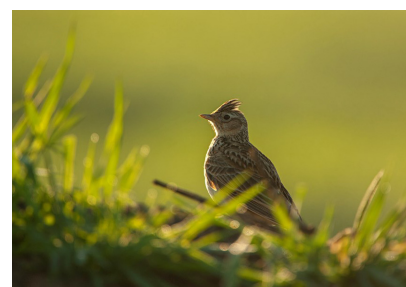


*c Chris Shields rspb-images.com*

On the horizon a dark bank of cloud warned us of the weather we would soon be experiencing.

Our first birds of the trip were a yellowhammer in the car park and a party of seven skylarks overhead. In Britain skylarks occur as breeding residents, passage migrants and winter visitors. Many

home-bred birds leave our shores in the autumn, being replaced by migrants from northern and central Europe. Autumn flocks in Oxfordshire may well have travelled just as far as redwings, fieldfares or ring ouzels.



*c Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

Next on the day's tally were rooks, jackdaws and red kites. It is quite remarkable how the last species has become such a common sight in our part of the world.

We made our way down through Little Wittenham wood and towards the River Thames, encountering a good range of characteristic woodland species. Blue, great, long-tailed and coal tits foraged alongside us, but were not always easy to observe. We managed several, albeit brief, sightings of great spotted woodpeckers and jays. Chiffchaffs were plentiful, some of them breaking into song again after their recent summer silence.



*c Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

Nuthatches were calling everywhere but proved frustratingly difficult to see. Also

present were robins, wrens, goldcrests and a mistle thrush. Insects were abundant and included hornets and hawker dragonflies.

The effects of the recent dry weather were plain to see as we passed the woodland pond managed by the Earth Trust for great crested newts. The trilling call of a little grebe seemed eerily out of place. Wave after wave of swallows passed overhead. Was this migration in earnest or were they fleeing the approaching storm? We were soon marching heads down, hoods up, back to the car park, rather earlier than we had planned.

The venue for our field meeting on 13 October was Keyhaven Marsh. This reserve, managed by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, is situated just across the water from the Isle of Wight and comprises mudflats, salt-marsh, shingle banks, saline lagoons, coastal grazing marshes and scrubland.

It was raining heavily when we arrived on site at around 10.30, but a recent forecast lured us into the open with the promise (or hope) that the weather would improve from about 11.00. Amazingly, this was indeed the case and gusty winds soon dried us out after our initial soaking.

We made our way along the seawall, trying to check out both the landward and seaward sides. There was a constant passage of skylarks and meadow pipits overhead and the seawall itself was busy with rock pipits, linnets and goldfinches. Surprisingly, there were also a few house sparrows. On one side there were stonechats in the gorse and on the other turnstones in the bladder wrack.



c Mike Langman rspb-images.com

Attempts at sea-watching were pretty much defeated by the wind, but we did manage to find an (female) eider.

The lagoons proved very productive. We were surprised to see that swallows were still quite numerous and we enjoyed watching such species as grey heron, little egret, brent geese, wigeon, teal, shoveler, pintail, shelduck, oystercatcher, redshank, greenshank, curlew, black-tailed godwit, dunlin, ringed plover, grey plover and ruff. For many of us, the highlight of the day was a merlin.



c Mike Langman rspb-images.com

It seemed to materialize from nowhere and shot across the lagoons and over the fields, panicking flocks of starlings and linnets, before disappearing behind a reedbed.

We cut inland, taking a path through the fields and along the hedgerows, past reedbeds and pools and back to the car park. Pied wagtails were abundant and we were pleased to encounter a yellow wagtail, probably our last for the year. The flooded fields also provided us with a few snipe and a flock of golden plover. The hedges were full of activity and we added treecreeper, chiffchaff, Cetti's warbler and bullfinch to our tally. Among our final sightings were kingfisher and great crested and little grebes, bringing our collective total for the day to at least 70 species.

## Review of autumn indoor meetings

Congratulations to photographic competition winners Derrick Stow and Bill Lester.



c Jane Rudd

In September, Lucy Duerdoth, senior community warden at the Earth Trust, gave an interesting talk entitled Introduction to the Earth Trust and the Community Reserves.

Their remit is championing accessible green spaces where all the living world thrives. They have 3000 school visits a year and a GCSE in countryside skills is available. Local sites at Little Wittenham in addition to the Clumps include Broad Arboretum and Paradise Wood, and the River of Life along the Thames at Shillingford, soon to be extended. Further afield are Wallingford Castle Meadows, Mowbray Fields in Didcot and Abbey Fishponds and Thrupp Lake in Abingdon, all excellent for a range of wild life including water voles, toads, stag beetles and otters.



c Andy Hay rspb-images.com

In October, Hugh Warwick, hedgehog enthusiast and champion, encouraged everyone to make accessible highways for these nocturnal far-roaming edge specialists by means of CD-sized holes in fences and walls. He showed many endearing photos to an appreciative audience.



*c Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

In November Marcus Ward told us about his interests and study of the rare breeding birds of the New Forest and how in 2016 he established 'Wild New Forest' by bringing together a group of experts and professionals to co-ordinate survey work. He told us much about the hawfinch which appeared to be his favourite bird and also about the lesser spotted woodpecker, which is always a challenge to see as numbers are low. Wood warbler numbers in the Forest have declined dramatically, and so the monitoring of them is having to be stopped. He compared the goldcrest with the firecrest and said they were both the same size. He said they had noted, via camera traps, that a pine marten was present in the New Forest. He played many bird calls during his interesting talk.

*:Report by Jane Rudd and Gill Riches*

### **RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch**

The dates for 2020 Big Garden Birdwatch are 25-27 January.

National results for 2019 show once again the house sparrow has hit the top spot. At number two is starling, closely followed by blue tit and blackbird. Woodpigeon flies in at number five, followed by goldfinch, great tit and robin at number 8. In Oxfordshire woodpigeon is fourth and blackbird fifth. The top eight remain the same as last year, so it's a battle for nine and ten. The chaffinch has seen off long-tailed tit to be at number 9 and magpie has crept in at number 10. In Oxfordshire collared dove is in the magpie slot.

Although the top of the list stayed stable, there were more shifts lower down. Bullfinches have climbed the rankings since the early 2000s, regularly reaching the top 25. Brambling moved from number 50 in 2018 to number 43 this year. They're winter visitors and migrate here in

large numbers if conditions are more favourable than on the continent, or when their favourite food, seeds of beech, are in plentiful supply. Sadly it's bad news for song thrushes and starlings.



*c Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

Both have declined by around 77% since the Big Garden Birdwatch began in 1979, but there's also good news: coal tits are up by nearly 245% since 1979 and goldfinches, not even included in the first Birdwatch, have increased by around 70% since the early 2000s! [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)

### **Reminder**

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

### **Mary Gales**

And finally, we are sorry to record the death in October of Mary Gales a stalwart helper with the raffle each month.

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