



**giving  
nature  
a home**

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

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

Editor Felicity Jenkins

# NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2020

**The RSPB has advised that in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, local groups should suspend all their activities until at least 1 September.**

So our planned talks and outings will be postponed including the AGM. But please note the item below about the committee, and consult the website ([rspb-vwh.org.uk](http://rspb-vwh.org.uk)) for up to date information.



© David Broadbent

## AGM and committee

This item needs to be considered urgently by all. At the AGM in September several committee members are resigning after long and dedicated service to our local group. Jane Rudd, secretary, interim chair and indoor meetings secretary, Gill Riches, treasurer, and David Marshall, vice chairman have been on the committee for many years.

We have a volunteer to take on the treasurers role but need a secretary and indoor meetings secretary.

We are also looking for a person to take on the new role of social media secretary to create and manage our facebook, twitter, whats ap and instagram pages.

For the group to continue to function it is necessary to have a full committee, so please consider whether you might be willing to join.

If these posts are unfilled, the local group will have to close down.

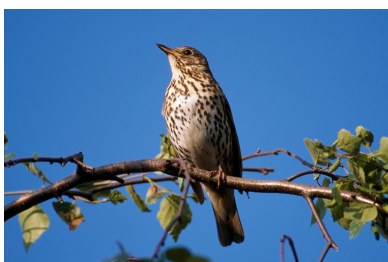
If you have any matters for consideration for the AGM or would like to join the committee please get in contact with Jane Rudd when you receive this newsletter (*henry*).

[rudd@sky.com](mailto:rudd@sky.com) or 01235 771716), as we may be able to convene a virtual AGM to discuss keeping the group going.

## Review of winter field trips

Seven members turned up at Radley lakes for the final outing of the year on 28 December. This site combines a variety of different habitats and attracts species that make a living in hedgerows, woods, reed beds and the open water.

We began our visit along a very muddy path flanked by a range of shrub and tree species. Of particular interest was a stand of alders, which provided a focus of attention for blue and great tits and also a mixed finch flock. The latter consisted mainly of goldfinches with a few siskins and redpolls thrown in. Although the day was grey and overcast, a song thrush in very fine voice gave us a foretaste of the spring to come.



© Chris Gomersall

Thrupp Lake, the high point of our itinerary, proved to be a very busy place. The most numerous duck species were gadwall and tufted duck. Together they demonstrated the two main feeding techniques of the duck family: gadwall are dabblers, while tufted ducks are divers. Other species present that dive for a living included cormorant and little and great crested grebes.

Geese were also well represented. Canada and greylag geese were there in force and a couple of Egyptian geese provided a splash of exotic colour. We should perhaps reflect on what we mean by wild

birds. The greylag is a native species, but the flocks that we encounter in Oxfordshire are made up of feral birds. The Canada goose is an introduced species, but is now very much at home here on both rural and urban waterways.



© Mike Langman

The Egyptian goose, another introduced species, has been breeding in the wild for at least 200 years and has undergone a population explosion in recent decades.

Other birds seen or heard during our visit included grey heron, water rail, green and great spotted woodpeckers, redwing, long-tailed and coal tits, jay, bullfinch and reed bunting. We finished our trip with a group tally of 43 species, a good cross-section of characteristic woodland and wetland birds.

*Martin Latham*

## Slimbridge WWT

On 19 January eight members from the Vale joined the Oxford local group for a coach trip to Slimbridge, Gloucestershire. The day was bright and sunny with no rain forecast, perfect weather for our first outing of the year.

On arrival, we were greeted by the sight and sound of Bewick's swans. Arguably, these swans are Slimbridge's major attraction. They are undeniably wild, having flown all the way from Siberia, but can be observed at close quarters and, if necessary, from the comfort of a warm hide.

Having enquired in the visitor centre

about recent sightings, we decided that we should make for South Lake, where a cattle egret had been sighted. We were delighted to find that it was still there and we obtained excellent views of the bird sitting in a waterside tree. It was practically inviting photographers to take its picture.



© Mike Langman

Although still rare in this country, the cattle egret is a species that is undergoing a massive range expansion. How long before it is as much a part of a day's birdwatching as the little egret? Also present on South Lake were shovelers, pintails, tufted ducks, pochards, a flock of some 200 black-tailed godwits and an avocet.



© Ben Andrew

Not far from South Lake we caught sight of a couple of cranes making their way towards the Severn estuary. Following their example, we too headed for the estuary.

The reserve is well equipped with hides of varying size and design, one of the most impressive being the newly renovated Holden tower. From this three-storeyed hide we observed a marsh harrier, numerous shelduck, wigeon and teal, a flock of 30+ white-fronted geese and at least 200 barnacle geese. We also caught up with the cranes again. For most of us this was our first visit to a hide containing a lift!

On our way back to the visitor centre we encountered an interesting range of species, including buzzard, water rail, oystercatcher, curlew, redshank, ruff, dunlin, snipe, golden plover, common gull, great spotted woodpecker, fieldfare, Cetti's warbler, long-tailed tit and reed bunting. As we boarded the coach

for our return journey we spotted a lone raven overhead, bringing our day's total to 65 species.

*Martin Latham*

### Port Meadow

A blustery February morning saw an intrepid group of seven members and three visitors meeting at Port Meadow in Oxford. A solitary long-tailed tit lurked in a bush in the car park. A few mallard and pintail flew overhead as we trudged to the water's edge. There was a cold wind. The flood plain of the Thames had become an extensive lake this winter. On the far side of the choppy waters where the edge of the river used to be, we spotted black-headed and lesser black-backed gulls, and one oystercatcher. It was too windy to keep the scopes steady but we did try, unsuccessfully, to find a Caspian gull, which had been reported here recently on the Oxon birding blog. Now a regular, although fairly rare winter visitor to southern England, the Caspian gull, once considered a subspecies of the herring gull, as was the yellow-legged gull and all looking very similar, are all, according to DNA analysis, now deemed distinct species.

We walked into the relative shelter of Burgess Field to get a better view of a large flock of wigeon with a scattering of teal.



© Andy Hay

In the distance towards Wolvercote at the edge of the water were an unusually small number of greylag, Canada and farmyard geese. Daffodils were flowering and hawthorn hedges starting into leaf. Robins and tits were singing and a redwing and a greenfinch were spotted.



© Felicity Jenkins

A sudden rain squall stopped bird and observer activity and we started heading back; then the wind dropped again and the sun gleamed. A kestrel hovered overhead and song thrush, wren and chaffinch started up and it suddenly felt more like early spring. A chiffchaff, probably a resident as it was rather early for a summer visitor, was heard in a blossom tree. It was an enjoyable walk despite the challenging weather and we resolved to return later in the spring.

*Felicity Jenkins*

### Review of winter indoor meetings

In December Peter Holden RSPB gave a very interesting and informative insight into 'The Hidden World' of birds. He commenced by talking about the lifespan of birds and saying that often birds don't live past their first year of life. This is especially true of small birds. Larger birds, such as seabirds, can live for a very long time – 25 to 30 years and occasionally longer.

Feathers were then considered and although birds moult in late summer they still look smart in the spring when attracting a mate.

Peter managed to play some bird calls to illustrate his talk.

Nests was the next topic. Some birds, such as the blackbird and rook make nests, and some, such as guillemots and cuckoos have no nests. Many nest examples were described. Moorhens can lay eggs into other moorhen's nests. Some birds, such as the sedge warbler, use water as a defence and protection of their nests. Egg hatching is another interesting field of study. Some birds carry out synchronized hatching. This means that one egg is laid per day and will not be incubated until all are laid; therefore all the chicks are of the same size. The barn owl is different as their eggs hatch at different times and the young are of different sizes.

*Jane Rudd*

For the first talk of 2020 we welcomed back Graham Lenton, this time to talk about 'Birds and Wildlife of Namibia'. Graham has spent years working as an ecologist in different parts of Africa, and had visited Namibia on several



occasions as an independent traveller, staying at lodges. His wonderful photographs showed mammals and birds in their habitats, often photographed at waterholes. Zebra, salt pans, springbok, lions, termite mounds, quelea flocks, shipwrecks on the Skeleton Coast, sand dunes and quiver trees were all illustrated. A strange plant *welwitschia mirabilis*, beetle-pollinated and able to survive in this desperately dry country, can live for 1000 years.

*Felicity Jenkins*

In February, Nigel Fisher spoke on 'The Laboratory with Leaves. The story of Wytham Woods'. The woods were bequeathed to the University of Oxford in 1943 by Colonel Raymond Ffennell and his wife Hope in memory of their daughter Hazel. It is famous for its long term studies and has 102 active researchers at present. The whole area is 1000 acres and it contains some very ancient trees. Some trees are 600 years old and one field maple is 1000 years old.



© Jodie Randall

In the year 2000 a good management plan was put into practice which has improved the area greatly. There are 1174 blue tit and great tit boxes in the woods which are carefully studied. The woods also contain 12 species of bats, badgers and a small population of roe and fallow deer besides much interesting flora, to mention just a few species.



© Chris Shields

The deer numbers need to be controlled by culling so as not to damage the area.

Unfortunately 12 species of birds

have been lost from the woods due to deer grazing. About 70 deer are shot each year to maintain the biodiversity.

There was a short discussion about why bird's eggs have spots on them. It is to do with the calcium levels of the parent birds. It has been found that each blue tit/great tit chick needs 70 caterpillars per day to survive. The caterpillars are mainly found on the oak trees.

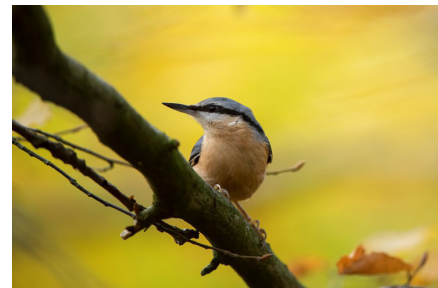
Nigel gave a very interesting, informative and humorous talk which I think was enjoyed by most members. He is the conservator and has been in post for the past 20 years.

*Jane Rudd*

### Climate change and garden birds

Our climate is changing. 2019 was the Earth's second warmest year since modern records began in 1880. The average UK temperature has increased roughly 1 degree C since the 1960s, leading to warmer and wetter winters, and evidence is growing that changes in our UK climate are affecting our birds.

The effects on birds can be anything from where they occur, to when and how breeding and migration takes place. It can impact the amount and timing of food available and our garden birds are no exception, with climate change affecting even the species which visit our bird feeders. Some birds are increasing in numbers in northern parts of the UK where winters have generally warmed. As an example, great tits recorded in gardens have increased across the UK by 8% over 10 years, mostly in Scotland compared to the usually mild south-east of England. Goldfinch numbers recorded in the Big Garden Birdwatch increased by 71% since the early 2000s, particularly noticeable in northern Scotland where they were recorded in more than double the number of gardens.



© Ben Andrew

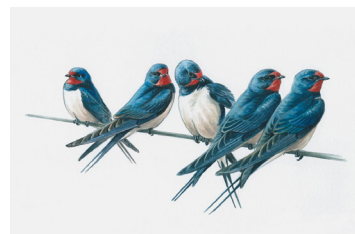
Nuthatch has extended its range northwards and now occurs in more gardens in southern Scotland than previously.

These changes are possibly due to both warmer winters and an increase in the number of people putting out food.

Climate change is a global phenomenon, and changes experienced by migratory birds elsewhere can affect what turns up in our gardens. In response to warmer spring temperatures, birds including swallows, house martins, willow warblers and chiffchaffs, are arriving back in the UK up to two weeks earlier than they did in the 1960s.

Some birds have also started laying their eggs earlier in the year, including chiffchaffs, willow warblers and resident great tits. Although the ability to adapt and change is essential for a species to survive a changing environment, this still depends on

food and habitat being available at the right time. If insect food isn't around for parent birds to collect, that could cause fewer chicks to reach adulthood.



© Mike Langman

The milder winter on the continent this year means that we have seen fewer brambling, redwing and fieldfare in our gardens – these species come in large numbers to the relatively milder UK when conditions are particularly tough on the continent.

*Daniel Hayhow*  
RSPB conservation scientist  
(from [community.rspb.org.uk](http://community.rspb.org.uk) edited)

## Birding at Home

Whilst you are in social Isolation you might consider doing your birding on line.

The RSPB website has a mass of information you might like to look at.

There is an excellent section 'Birds and Wildlife' which gives information about most birds you might find in Great Britain. Including how to attract wildlife to your garden.

*[rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)*

Also worth exploring is the British Trust for Ornithology website. This site contains lots of information. It has sections on understanding birds and developing your birding skills. At present they are inviting people to become garden bird recorders to submit weekly lists of birds seen in your garden. This study has been going for many years and has amassed a wealth of data.

*[bto.org](http://bto.org)*

If it's improving your bird identification by their songs and calls (or just enjoying the sounds) then tryXeno-canto.

*[xeno-canto.org](http://xeno-canto.org)*

You can also find a plethora of sites by simply putting appropriate words into search engines.

Bird images

Bird groups

Migration

Identifying bird nests

Birding blogs

Give it a try. Its as good as watching a rerun of Midsummer Murders.

*Malcolm Ross*

## Obituaries

We are sorry to announce the recent deaths of members

Penny Iles and Michael Taylor.

*Felicity Jenkins*

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