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

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Editor Felicity Jenkins

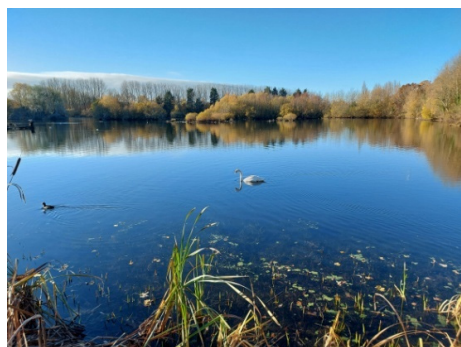
NEWSLETTER

January 2023

Vale of White Horse Local Group

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

Hopefully 2023 will have a more conventional weather pattern for the seasons, rather than the spring and summer drought, extended autumn rains and late onset of winter that we have just experienced. Happily, winter thrushes seem to be abundant as I write this, although the colourful leaves are still on the trees; here is Thrupp Lake in Radley in early December.



© Felicity Jenkins

Congratulations RSPB Long Service Awards

Congratulations to these committee members who have received Long Service Awards from the RSPB for their volunteer work:

Malcolm Ross for 20 years volunteering, who receives a Kestrel badge; Martin Latham and Bob Knight each for 5 years volunteering who receive a Swift badge.

Photocompetition winners

Congratulations to the winners of the 2022 photo competition, judged by Jim Almond, speaker at the November meeting.

First prize (the trophy and a year's free membership): Bill Lester for Sparrowhawk



Peter Williams: second prize for Sperm Whale



Jane Rudd: third prize for Gannets.



Copyright is with the authors. All the other entries are on the website <https://www.rspb-vwh.org.uk/photocomps.htm>

Thanks

Many thanks to Pat Phillips, who has organised the photo competition for many years and is now passing the task on. We are looking for a volunteer to take over from Pat.

Programme for 2023

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch is coming soon on the weekend 27-29 January 2023.

The 2023 programme was published in full in the Summer 2022 newsletter and on the website: below is a brief summary of venues.

Meetings on 16 January, 20 February are to be presented on zoom only; 20 March will be hybrid on zoom and at the River Room Sutton Courtenay. The meeting on 17 April is at the River Room only and is a talk by Simon Booth about the Withymede Reserve at Goring (we have a field trip there on 28 May). On 15 May the members' evening and AGM is to be held in the River Room.



Please check up to date information about meetings or field trips on our website or facebook page.

www.rspb-vwh.org.uk

www.facebook.com/RSPBvwh

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3368074546743022>

Field Trips

Local field trips are continuing as usual in 2023, the organizer is Martin Latham martin.jlatham@googlemail.com

Field Trip Reports for 2022

by Martin Latham

Farmoor Reservoir 25 September

Inspired by the news of recent sightings, seven members met at Farmoor Reservoir for the first field trip of the season. Of the species that had caused the excitement - Little

Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff - there was no sign. However, it was a fine autumn day and anything could turn up.

It is often worth sorting through Farmoor's many Black-headed and Herring Gulls just in case something else is lurking among them. On this occasion we discovered a Yellow-legged Gull and a Great Black-backed Gull. The former was once considered a rare visitor from southern Europe, but it is becoming an increasingly regular sight in this country. The latter, while not uncommon around the coast, is always an interesting find in a land-locked county.



© Paul Chesterfield

We walked along the causeway across the reservoir, hoping for waders. We found a couple of Ringed Plovers that circled round us several times, before disappearing down the far end of the reservoir. A Common Sandpiper was rather less obliging and somehow managed to make itself invisible against a concrete wall.

'You should have been last week. There was an Osprey here.' This was the cheery greeting we received from a mobility scooter rider as she whizzed by along the causeway. Such are the ups and downs of birdwatching!

We encountered impressive flocks of Cormorants and Coots. Great Crested Grebes were also well represented and it was interesting to see them flying, swimming, diving and sleeping. We also obtained good views of Little Grebes. At the end of the causeway was an intriguing line-up of fish eaters: a dozen or so Cormorants (some of them in classic wing-drying pose), two Grey Herons and seven Little Egrets.

Pied Wagtails were present all along the causeway and we also succeeded in finding a Rock Pipit. This is essentially a coastal species and Farmoor is probably the nearest one can get to a seaside experience in Oxfordshire.

We left the causeway and made our way to the Pinkhill hide. The

pond in front of the hide was very overgrown, which seemed to be to the liking of one bird at least - a very noisy Water Rail. The Water Rail's call is often likened to the squealing of a piglet. This particular individual sounded like the squealing of a whole litter of piglets.



© Ben Andrew

Other species recorded included Kingfisher, Green Woodpecker, Swallow, Grey Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Song Thrush (living up to its name and singing very vigorously), Cetti's Warbler, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Greenfinch, bringing the day's total to a respectable 47 species.

College Lake 23 October

Six members braved the torrential rain and hazardous road conditions to meet at College Lake. Fortunately the site is well equipped with hides, so we began our visit under cover. The weather improved an hour or so after our arrival, allowing us to make the most of the day.

Someone remarked that it was fine weather for ducks. Indeed, ducks were the order of the day. In addition to the customary Mallards and Tufted Ducks, there were good numbers of Gadwall, Teal and Shoveler, as well as small parties of Wigeon. It was a great opportunity to study the plumage and behaviour of these birds in detail and note the best field marks for sorting out the various species.

Other water or waterside birds included Cormorant, Grey Heron, Moorhen, Coot, Water Rail, Lapwing, Snipe, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Cetti's Warbler. However, the reserve is more than just a wetland and includes woodland, scrub, and rough grazing areas. Although passerines in general seemed to be keeping their heads down, Robins were very vocal and we succeeded in obtaining fleeting views of such species as Pied Wagtail, Redwing, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch and Goldfinch.

The site of a former chalk quarry, College Lake was opened to the public in 2010 and is managed by BBOWT. It is not just about birds.

The reserve contains a range of educational facilities, including a bee centre, wild flower gardens, a bat roost, a fossil collection, a farming exhibition with traditional implements and machinery, signposted walks and a picnic area. All in all, it is a fascinating place for a day out.

Otmoor 27 November

Otmoor was the venue for our field meeting in November. The purpose of the trip was to observe Starling murmurations, an activity that has become something of a tradition for us. The days leading up to this event had seen torrential rain and the forecast was none too brilliant. Despite this, nine members turned up and the rain held off for the duration of our visit.

Rarely had we seen Otmoor receive so many visitors. The car park was full and the paths across the reserve were crowded, school children being particularly well represented on this occasion.

But what of the Starlings? They were certainly greatly appreciated by the audience, rather in the manner of a crowd enjoying a firework display. It should be said though that the more experienced Starling watchers agreed that Otmoor has hosted more dramatic spectacles, with a lot more sound and choreography. It may not have been a top-of-the-range show, but it was still very enjoyable.

Otmoor usually attracts an interesting range of raptors.



© Andy Hay

A couple of Marsh Harriers quartered the reedbeds and there were frequent sightings of Red Kites, Buzzards and Kestrels. There was a constant to-and-fro of Greylag and Canada Geese overhead and some impressive flocks of Lapwings. Wetland birds included Grey Heron, Little Egret, Kingfisher and Reed Bunting.

A particularly popular sighting involved a busy and very obliging pair of Stonechats,

As the light faded we made our way back to the carpark against a

brilliant sunset. Small parties of Pied Wagtails, Fieldfares and Chaffinches headed to their roosts and from time to time we heard a staccato burst from a Cetti's Warbler or the squeal of a Water Rail.

Summer sightings

by Bob Knight

Britain's biggest hoverfly

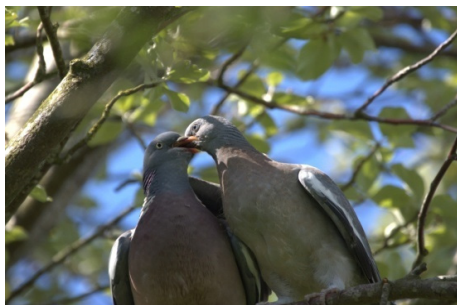
Harmless, but scary at over 2cm long, *Volucella Zonaria* – a relative newcomer to the UK – has been increasingly common in southern Britain in recent years. Its larvae feed on the detritus at the bottom of wasp nests. (East Hagbourne, July 2022)



© Bob Knight

Woodpigeons

'A very small number of birds, including Woodpigeon, produce 'crop milk', a substance similar to mammalian milk in its composition' (BTO). This means that, unlike most birds- even seed-eaters- they don't need to feed grubs and caterpillars to their chicks. The photo shows a juvenile Woodpigeon getting a meal from an adult; both male and female pigeons can feed their chicks like this.



© Bob Knight

Birding on Holiday in Mauritius and Réunion

by Mike Haddrell

As October became November my wife Christina and I spent two weeks in the Mascarene Islands, east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. We'd booked winter sun through a travel agent and flew direct from Gatwick to Mauritius, spending a few days mid-trip on Réunion. We didn't visit Rodrigues. I always keep a birding trip list on holiday and we'd arranged some bird-specific

excursions to add to the fun. Ten of the 35 species we saw were endemic to one or both islands and therefore birds I had never seen before.



Madagascar Fody © Mike Haddrell

I added four additional birds to my life list: Madagascar Fody, Madagascar Turtle Dove, Village Weaver and the beautiful White-tailed Tropicbird.

We saw Mascarene Swiftlet regularly in both Mauritius and Réunion. I was unable to persuade myself that any of these high-fliers were in fact the Mascarene Martin, also known as The Mascarene Swallow, so that remained one of the target birds which escaped the trip list.

The four endemics seen in Réunion were the Réunion Grey White-eye, which was common around the hotel, although difficult to spot, and three others seen on our day out to the active volcano, Piton de la Fournaise. The Reunion Olive White-eye was a good spot in a bush at our first viewpoint, the Nez de Boeuf at 2136m. We walked from Pas de Bellecombe to Formica Leo, a small crater in the lava field below the main crater, named for its resemblance to the pitfall created by the antlion. There we enjoyed several good views of the Réunion Stonechat. The Réunion Harrier was a fleeting glimpse spotted by our driver as we descended.

In Mauritius we visited the Ebony Forest, near Chamarel, where they provide nest boxes for the Mauritius Kestrel and Echo Parakeet and manage a captive breeding programme for the Pink Pigeon. These endeavours are successfully but slowly increasing the numbers of these seriously endangered birds. The Echo Parakeets were hiding but we saw the Mauritius Kestrel and a Pink Pigeon flying free. We saw two other Mauritian endemics in the Ebony Forest, a pair of Mascarene Paradise-Flycatchers and a pair of Mauritius Black Bulbul, ticked as a 'flying away spot' on the word of our expert guide. We also saw Rose-ringed Parakeet and a small flock of Common Waxbill. The endemic Mauritius Grey White-

eye was seen elsewhere on more than one occasion.



Mauritius Grey White-eye © Mike Haddrell

We dipped on five other endemic species found in the two islands: the endangered Mauritius Fody – which is hard to distinguish from the common and beautiful Madagascar Fody and lives much deeper in the forest – Mauritius Cuckoo Shrike (vulnerable), Mauritius Olive White-eye (critically endangered), Réunion Bulbul (near-threatened) and Reunion Cuckoo Shrike (critically endangered).

Other possibles in both islands were Scaly-breasted Munia, and Yellow-fronted Canary, in Réunion the Cape Canary and the striking Red Avadavat, Pin-tailed Whydah and Red-billed Leiothrix, in Mauritius the 'rare/accidental' Laughing Dove – which is nevertheless sufficiently similar to the Madagascar Turtle Dove for me to wonder whether I looked closely enough at all of those! These all remained 'might-have-beens.'

As well as the Madagascar Fody, Common Mynah, Red Whiskered Bulbul and our very own House Sparrow were all familiar visitors at breakfast. There was a fine display of village Weaver nests at the hotel in Chamarel. We saw a Moorhen in the Botanical Gardens at Pamplemousse. Zebra Doves and Spotted Doves were often looking for crumbs while the Madagascar Turtle Dove was more reclusive. Feral Pigeons were common but we had to wait a while for a House Crow. At the coast around Grand Baie we got good pictures of Striated Heron.



Striated Heron c Mike Haddrell

Towards the end of our holiday we spent an excellent morning in the

hide at the Rivulet Terre Rouge Bird Sanctuary near Port Louis, a protected site for winter migrants. Although birding in the Mascarenes was always going to be about quality rather than quantity, it was good to have a chance to bump up the numbers. Just a few weeks after seeing my first ever Curlew Sandpiper at Farmoor, I saw upwards of twenty who spent most of the time asleep with bills tucked away! We also saw Whimbrel, previously seen on the coast and at an inland reservoir, Common Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Grey Plover, Lesser Sand Plover and Common Tern. In addition, I was able to show the warden my pictures of single Sanderling and Greenshank, which he said were the year's first arrivals of those species. I know I heard Curlew too, but he remained doubtful. Whimbrel don't sound anything like Curlew, do they?

RSPB News: A New World Heritage Site?

Some of us will have been lucky enough to visit the expansive natural landscapes that lie on the English east coast, like the Humber, The Wash, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex coasts and the Thames Estuary, experiencing some of the fantastic nature that can be found there. What is perhaps less well-known is how internationally important these places are for migratory birds. There is now a campaign underway to make this area, the East Atlantic Flyway, a World Heritage site. Read more at <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england>

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