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Editor Felicity Jenkins

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2024

Vale of White Horse Local Group

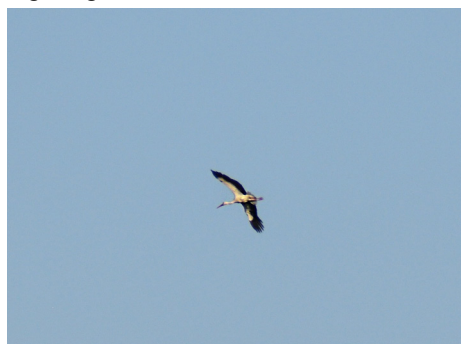
2024 SUMMER NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Vale of White Horse Local Group summer newsletter 2024.

This newsletter is a bumper edition for field trip reports: all Martin Latham's accounts for 2024 are here and are such an interesting resource, particularly as we can compare sightings in local places from different years. Check out the newsletter archive on the website too.

Members' sightings at home and abroad

Tom Burchall 'spotted a white stork in Culham in May, a very interesting sighting.'



Peter Williams and his wife 'recommend Costa Rica as a holiday destination; friendly people, diverse landscape and wonderful wildlife. We spent two weeks there from February to March this year. I did not take the attached photo of a Yellow-throated Toucan but it's amazing what can be achieved with a telescope and mobile phone.'



Less exotic but much more local – a Grey Heron surveying our pond in Abingdon.'



Bob Knight reports that 'Starlings seem to be doing well – loads of juveniles fighting over fatballs in my garden – though a sparrowhawk got one.'



Review of the Year 2023-24 by Bob Knight

This was presented at the Annual General Meeting held on 20 May 2024 at the River Room

Jane Rudd

Before the official proceedings, Bob Knight remembered Jane Rudd, who died recently. Jane was a long-standing Committee member (as Secretary, Meetings organiser and interim Group Leader), and will be greatly missed. A memorial service will be held in Wantage in June. We send condolences and best wishes to Jane's family and friends. Some committee members subsequently attended the service at Wantage Methodist Church in celebration of Jane's life. Here is one of her prize-winning photographs.



Annual Review

Bob welcomed all present. Members had received copies of the review in advance.

We have continued the mixture of in-person, hybrid and Zoom talks that proved successful last year, with good attendances throughout: speakers have included Nick Williams with 65 Years of RSPB Filmmaking, Mike Leach on The Complete Owl, Nicholas Watts on Farming and Wildlife, Professor Andrew Gosler on Ethno-ornithology and Jerry Pride on Swifts.

The 2024-25 programme will be announced in the summer; Fergus Mosey will open the season on 16 September with an update from our local and favourite RSPB reserve, Otmoor. Martin Latham has once again run a series of outdoor meetings at local reserves, including a successful trip to Arne. Mike Haddrell continues to expand our presence on Facebook, linking us to other groups such as BBOWT, Otmoor and Farmoor Birding. We welcome Katie Davis as our new Treasurer, taking over from Sue Buzzacott. The photo competition was judged by David Boag. Winners were Felicity Jenkins and Bill Lester. The photos were published in the January newsletter and on the website.

The next photo competition will be in April 2025 (entry deadline 17 March) and will be judged by April's speaker on 14 April (note the meeting date is not 21 April which is Easter Monday).

For the first time since Covid we were able to arrange a weekend away in September; we visited Rutland Water, Frampton Marsh and the Ouse Washes, and spotted 88 bird species. This September we are planning a trip to Titchwell Marsh, visiting WWT Welney en route, and possibly returning via Lakenheath Fen.

We had hoped to conclude this evening with a talk on Letcombe Brook by Mark Bradfield, but Mark is leaving the project to spend 6 months in Canada; we hope to invite his successor, Jude Verdon, to a future meeting. Meanwhile, Mike Haddrell will tell us about his birdwatching experiences in Cuba.

We are still looking for member contributions to meetings, or shorter contributions at a Members' evening or in the interval in other talks.

Thanks to everyone – Committee, members, helpers and visitors – for making 2023-4 another successful year.

We still need an Indoor Meetings Organiser and Assistant Group Leader – and welcome any member who would like to join the committee.

Have a good summer!

Review of Field Trips in 2024 by Martin Latham Port Meadow in January

Thirteen people turned up at Port Meadow on 21 January for our first field meeting of 2024. In addition to our regulars, we were delighted to welcome Michelle Barrett, the RSPB Local Groups Development Officer.

It was a chilly morning, but the recent ice had largely melted and parties of Jackdaws and Starlings were busy digging into the boggy grass. What appeared a few days earlier to be a natural ice rink in the middle of the meadow was now transformed into a shallow lake.



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Wigeon was the most abundant

species. Several hundred of these attractive ducks announced their presence with loud whistles as they dabbled on the water or grazed the meadow. These gatherings were accompanied by large flocks of equally colourful Teal. Mixed in with them were some 50 or so Shovelers and at least 20 Pintails. Dotted here and there on the meadow were Lapwings and we were pleased to make out, albeit distantly, a flock of around 200 Golden Plovers.



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Pied Wagtails were out in force and were a constant presence along the water's edge and even on the remaining patches of ice. We also encountered Chiffchaffs in the soggy grass and along the hedge bottoms. We had good views of a Stonechat and discovered a Goosander in a stream adjacent to the meadow. Other species seen include Grey Heron, Greylag Goose, Red Kite, Buzzard and Siskin.

We were not so lucky with Waxwing. A small flock of these birds was somewhere nearby but defeated our attempts to find them. Nevertheless, we felt that it had been a worthwhile visit and were content with our trip list of 37 species.

Radley Lakes in February

Despite floods and threats of floods, 17 people met for our outing to Radley Lakes on 25 February. In places it was difficult to distinguish between lake and floodwater and wellington boots were definitely the order of the day.



Our track to the lakeside led us past an alder wood, where we had observed Redpolls and Siskins on previous visits. On this occasion there was no sign of the former but Siskins were there in force. We spent some time watching flocks of these active little finches as they darted to

and fro and swung tit-like from the alder cones.



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Our first lake views were dominated by Black-headed Gulls, looking particularly smart in their newly-acquired summer plumage. Tufted Ducks were the most numerous of the ducks, although there were good numbers of Mallard, Gadwall, Shoveler and Wigeon. Also present on the water and the various islands were parties of Canada and Greylag Geese and a couple of Egyptian Geese. Coots and Great Crested Grebes demonstrated their diving skills in the deeper reaches, while Cormorants dried out their wings by the waterside. Our one and only wader was a wandering Oystercatcher that called from time to time as it flew up and down while remaining tantalizingly invisible.

Other birds seen and/or heard include Grey Heron, Red Kite, Buzzard, Moorhen, Green Woodpecker, Mistle Thrush, Redwing, Fieldfare, Cetti's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Nuthatch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, adding up to an interesting mix of 44 woodland and wetland species.

Arne in March

Our trip to the RSPB reserve at Arne, Dorset, on 24 March was attended by 17 participants, a most encouraging turnout given the distance involved for a single day out.

The reserve has a great deal to offer, most visitors agreeing that its major strength is its sheer diversity. It presents a wonderful patchwork of habitats: woodland, heath, marsh, mudflats, farmland and even a sandy beach backed by low cliffs.



The weather was kind to us and we had the feeling that spring was rushing to meet us. Well, Chiffchaffs certainly were. They seemed to be everywhere. The woods and hedgerows were full of them. Also

present in considerable numbers were Coal Tits and Siskins. On our home ground in Oxfordshire we are often content to catch glimpses of Siskins in a few favoured spots. Here they were swinging on the feeders in the visitor centre, apparently unconcerned by the attentions of many delighted onlookers.

A spring visit presents something of a crossroads in the birdwatching year. On the one hand, many wintering species are still to be found. On the other, the first summer migrants are just arriving. Brent Geese were fuelling up on the mudflats ahead of their departure for Siberia, while Sandwich Terns were demonstrating their fishing skills after their long flight from wintering grounds off the south and west coasts of Africa. Such observations illustrate the truly international dimension of birdwatching and the need for worldwide cooperation in conservation.

Highlights include the sighting of a Spoonbill feeding in a channel as the tide went out, swimming parties of Red-breasted Mergansers and Teal and flights of Shelducks, Curlews and Redshanks dropping in to make the most of freshly uncovered mud. Finding birds on the heath was slow going and it took some time to find such species as Meadow Pipit and Stonechat and even longer to catch up with one of our main target species, namely, Dartford Warbler. Better luck next time!



A particularly intriguing sighting concerned a Raven. This individual was sitting in a field of rootling pigs, accompanied by half a dozen Jackdaws. The difference in size and bulk between Europe's largest and smallest crow was impressive to say the least. The pigs also deserve comment. Of Hungarian origin, they belong to the Mangalitza breed and have a sheep-like woolly coat. They perform an important role in habitat restoration and are a welcome alternative to herbicides and machinery.



Other birds encountered include Little Egret, Red Kite (not nearly such a common bird as in our own county), Sparrowhawk, Oystercatcher, Stock Dove, Redwing, Blackcap, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Nuthatch and Treecreeper, bringing our group list to 52 species.

Otmoor in April

The 17 people who attended our trip to Otmoor on 21 April will doubtless have kept a range of different memories of that day. For me, one of the most enjoyable moments was spotting my first Swift of the year, which emerged from a mixed flock of Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins. Other participants will look back on those tantalizingly brief sightings of a couple of Cranes (large birds can sometimes be surprisingly difficult to see!), the booming of a well-concealed Bittern or the reeling of a Grasshopper Warbler.

We were all impressed by the omnipresence of warblers. Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Whitethroat and Lesser Whitethroat were all audible from the carpark and as we progressed along the path into the reserve we felt almost overwhelmed by the sound of singing Sedge, Reed and Cetti's Warblers. The first of these established itself as a firm favourite with some members of our group, being not only very talkative but visible too. Its varied repertoire of whistles, chirps, buzzes and mimicry of other birds was often accompanied by an energetic song flight to mark out its territory.

Young Herons in their nests provided a major attraction, not least because the two nests in question were in the reeds and more easily observable than those built in the treetops. Marsh Harriers put on a good show and we obtained fascinating views of displaying Red Kites and a hovering Kestrel. Shovelers were widespread and there were good numbers of Tufted Duck and Pochard. Curlews were very vocal and from time to time Redshanks reminded us that they too were in residence. Lapwings were actively displaying and driving off intruders and we enjoyed some happy

moments observing a Lapwing on its nest. A couple of Oystercatchers provided a showy and noisy addition to the cast of wading birds.



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Our combined list for the day featured 59 species and included the following: Canada and Greylag Geese, Little Egret, Buzzard, Coot, Moorhen, Water Rail, Snipe, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Yellow Wagtail, Long-tailed Tit, Linnet, Lesser Redpoll, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting.

Whelford Pools in May

On 26 May we visited Whelford Pools.

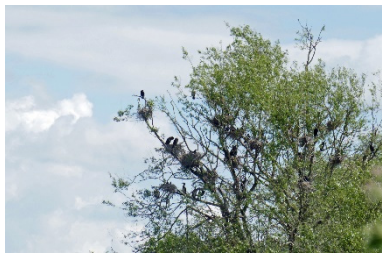


This reserve, formerly the site of a couple of disused gravel pits, forms part of the Cotswold Water Park and is managed by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. There were nine of us and this proved to be the ideal number, as we all fitted snugly into the hide. Situated a mere stone's throw from the car park, this was the perfect solution on a day dominated by threats of rain and more rain. Clearly a day when we might need to spend much of our time under cover.

Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Reed Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Cetti's Warblers were all doing their best to shout each other and we welcomed the Cuckoo that decided to add its own contribution to the medley. Reed Warblers often imitate other species, thereby adding variety to their songs. There was a particularly enterprising individual in the reeds a few yards from the hide. It enriched its repertoire with the calls of Oystercatcher, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blackbird and Goldfinch, giving a clue as to which species to look out for.

A large colony of tree-nesting Cormorants provided a popular attraction. It often comes as something of a surprise to see birds

in an unfamiliar context. Traditionally a coastal species in this country, Cormorants are generally assumed to nest on sea cliffs and the like. However, they are increasingly encountered inland and have developed the habit of breeding in trees.



Great Crested Grebes, Coots and Tufted Ducks were well represented and there was a sprinkling of such species as Gadwall and Shoveler. The most striking duck was a very handsome Red-crested Pochard. This bird reminded me of a former acquaintance, who would dress smartly in black, white and grey and had a conspicuous orange hairdo and startling red lipstick!

A rotten tree stump immediately in front of the hide presented wonderful opportunities to get up close and personal with a Great Spotted Woodpecker, which returned at regular intervals in search of food to take back to a nest nearby.



Bob Knight

A Hobby and small flocks of Swifts and Sand Martins all put in an appearance, albeit rather fleetingly. Other birds encountered during our visit (and most of them from the hide) include Grey Heron, Little Egret, Buzzard, Oystercatcher, Black-headed, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Moorhen, Treecreeper, Goldfinch and Bullfinch, making up a combined trip list of 45 species. We saw plenty of insects too.



Four spotted chaser © Bob Knight



Red damselfly

Greenham Common in June

Eight members turned up at Greenham Common on 9 June for our final outing of the season. As usual, birdwatching (or rather listening) started as soon as we arrived at the car park. Both Blackbirds and Song Thrushes were putting on a fine performance. Robins, Wrens, Dunnocks, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs were also in good form and we were aware of the occasional burst of activity from Greenfinches and the odd Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker.

As we crossed the common we encountered several Stonechats, family groups of Blue and Great Tits, singing and displaying Meadow Pipits, and parties of Goldfinches, Linnets, Jackdaws and Stock Doves. A welcome addition to the general chorus was Willow Warbler - a species that has declined considerably in the south in recent years.

As dusk approached we arrived at an area where heathland and woodland meet, without doubt the most interesting part of the common for certain species. Here we stopped and waited. We were not disappointed. Before long we picked out the unmistakable churring of a Nightjar. The bird in question seemed to be marking out its territory and divided its attention between two different song posts. We glimpsed it from time to time as it flew from one to the other, making its presence clear with active wing clapping.



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The other special bird in this neighbourhood was the Woodcock. A strange chirruping sound, followed by a squeak and grunt, alerted us to the display flight of this enigmatic species. When "roding" the displaying bird

patrols a regular circuit over its territory, calling frequently. We enjoyed several sightings and on one occasion two birds swooped and swerved together just above our heads.

We remained at our post until it was almost too dark to see. We then called it a day and made our way back across the common, agreeing that the evening had been a great success.

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