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Editor Felicity Jenkins

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2025

Vale of White Horse Local Group

Spring

Spring has arrived at last; I'm writing this just after the equinox and slowly the hedges are greening up with hawthorn and elder, despite cold frosty nights. Greenfinch and Chiffchaff are singing locally in the park accompanying the usual Robins and Tits. Sand Martin sightings have already been recorded on the Oxfordshire birding blog from mid-March onwards, with a few swallows too. Recent sunshine is bringing out plenty of brimstone butterflies.



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Programme update until May 28 April

(please note the change of date)

will be a talk by Ben Andrew on Photographing birds. This will be live at the River Room, without a Zoom link.

Ben is a wildlife photographer and the RSPB's picture researcher, responsible for managing their commercial picture library. He has won numerous wildlife photography competitions, including the 2016 Countryfile Calendar competition with his "Happy Hedgehog" image.

Ben will judge our photo competition and announce the winners. You can preview the entries on the web site at <https://www.rspb-vwh.org.uk/Photoentries.html>

12 May

in the River Room, no zoom link.

AGM and Members' evening
(contributions for presentations

welcome, contact Bob Knight bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk)

Documents for the AGM will be circulated to members before the meeting.

Field Trips

Please check our website for further information and updates as trips are weather-dependent. Transport is with our own cars; car sharing welcomed. Leader and contact: Martin Latham (martinj.latham@googlemail.com) 01235 851918

27 April Greenham Common

25 May Otmoor

22 June (evening) Greenham Common for nightjars

Spring field trip reports 2025

By Martin Latham

Otmoor in January

(This was the rescheduled November field outing which had been cancelled due to horrible weather). Nine members turned up at Otmoor on 12 January for our first field meeting of the year. This was an afternoon trip with the aim of observing Starling murmurations. Previous visits had proved quite spectacular with thousands of birds putting on dramatic aerial displays before dropping into the reedbeds for the night. Alas, this was not to be a repeat performance. Numbers were down and the birds seemed to sneak into the reeds without drawing attention to themselves.

We nonetheless enjoyed our visit and managed a trip list of 37 species. The highlight of the day was a Water Rail that proved to be uncharacteristically visible.



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We heard Water Rails calling from several parts of the reserve, but had not really expected to see one. On this occasion, however, the icy weather was on our side and we spent several minutes watching a bird working its way up and down a frozen ditch.

There were sizable flocks of waterfowl huddled together on the ice and in the patches of free water. Mallards were the most abundant, but there were other species mixed in, such as Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe, Coot, Moorhen and Cormorant. A clear favourite was the drake Pintail that looked quite exotic among the accompanying Wigeon and Mallard.

A couple of Marsh Harriers were in constant attendance and from time to time we heard the challenging shout of a Cetti's Warbler. Reed Buntings were out in force, forming flocks with Linnets, Goldfinches and Chaffinches, especially in the vicinity of the hide where they made short work of the grain provided for them.

An insistent croaking overhead alerted us to the presence of two Ravens, one apparently in hot pursuit of the other. The noise seemed to be a food-begging call and prompted the comment that we were witnessing an adult followed by a hungry teenager.

We returned to the car park in the near dark, to the sounds of Pheasants, roosting Rooks and Jackdaws and passing flocks of Canada Geese.

Radley Lakes in January

Despite an appalling weather forecast (again), 14 hardy souls turned out on 26 January to seek out the birdlife of Radley Lakes. Upon arrival we were treated to excellent views of a Redwing in the nearby bushes.



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Surely a good omen for the day's observations! From then on, however, most wayside and woodland birds kept a low profile. We did see Long-tailed Tits, Chaffinches and Goldfinches, but failed to catch up with such regulars as Siskin or Treecreeper.

We fared rather better with water birds. Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes, Coots and Canada Geese proved easy to find and there was a good range of duck species. Thrupp Lake produced flocks of Mallard, Gadwall, Shoveler and Tufted Duck. Best of all were the Goosanders. We observed a pair at close quarters and another at the far side of the lake. The Goosander can be considered something of a special bird in Oxfordshire. Guaranteed to brighten up a dull day, it has long been a regular winter visitor to the county, albeit in modest numbers. Since 2021, its status has changed a little, having joined the ranks of Crane and Cattle Egret. In other words, these species have now bred here for the first time or at least for the first time in many centuries. Long may they continue to thrive! The weather did not improve and we were soon battling against cold rain and a strong wind. We decided to call it a day. Remarkably, we had still managed to put together a trip list of 34 species.

Port Meadow in February

Ten members turned up on 23 February for our Port Meadow visit. It was a cold day with a keen wind. Fortunately, the rain we had been promised (or threatened with) held off until later in the day.

The stars of the show were undoubtedly the water birds, passerines being in short supply. Tits, Wrens, Robins, Dunnocks and finches

kept a low profile and there was very little song. We did, however, obtain close-up views of a Goldcrest, several Pied Wagtails, a Stonechat and the odd wintering Chiffchaff.



© Genevieve Leaper rspb-images.com

At this time of the year the water margins often offer sightings of a range of waders. No luck on this occasion. The bulk of the birdlife was on the water itself - that wonderful shallow lake into which the meadow is transformed following winter rainfall. Wigeon was the most numerous species and there were flocks several hundred strong. There were also at least 200 Teal, as well as parties of Gadwall, Shoveler and Pintail.



© Paul Sawyer rspb-images.com

Other species encountered include Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Egyptian Goose, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cormorant and Red Kite, contributing to a joint trip list of 41 species.

Farmoor reservoir in March

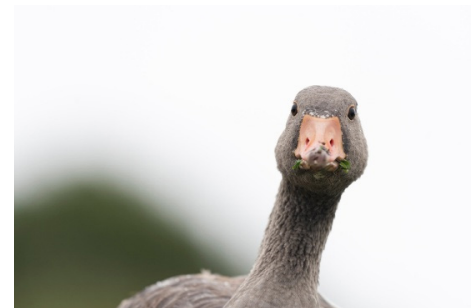
Thirteen members turned out for our Farmoor Reservoir trip on 30 March. We had heard tales of Slavonian Grebe and Little Gull. Unfortunately, these birds had moved on by the time we arrived on the scene. Surely, we were in with a chance when it came to Sand Martins? Again we were disappointed. We failed to find a single hirundine!

The most enjoyable feature of the visit was the undeniable feeling that it was at last spring. Although the reservoir itself was fairly empty, offering a mere handful of species (Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Tufted Duck, Herring Gull, Black-headed Gull, Coot, Pied Wagtail), the adjacent hedgerows and trees were full of life. A Green

Woodpecker seemed determined to be heard and newly arrived Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers were doing their best to outdo the resident birds - Stock Dove, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Cetti's Warbler, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Treecreeper, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and Linnet.

There were Red Kites, Buzzards and at least three Ravens overhead, while Water Rail and Kingfisher filled the 'heard but not seen' slot. Colourful sightings included Great Spotted Woodpecker and Jay. We were intrigued to see a male Blackcap and a male Reed Bunting perched side by side, each showing off its characteristic head pattern.

From the Pinkhill hide we observed Mallard, Teal, Moorhen and Coot and made a point of scanning the so-called 'Osprey platform', just in case. There was indeed a bird present - a large bulky bird lying flat, apparently asleep.. It raised its head and looked round. It was a Greylag Goose!



© Rosie Dutton rspb-images.com

Our experiences had been a bit of a mixed bag, but very enjoyable overall and we returned home with a group list of 45 species.

Members' Essays

The next few editions of the newsletter are featuring essays by local group members of some of their birdwatching experiences at home or abroad. Hopefully members will be encouraged to send in their own accounts or wildlife adventures, which can be domestic or exotic. Here Mike Haddrell has thoughts on birdwatching in the context of an exciting trip to Cuba.

Reflections on Birdwatching

By Mike Haddrell

What is this thing called "Birdwatching"? Why and how do we do it and where does it stand in relation to ornithology, twitching, listing, birding and, as they say in Sweden "Being in the Nature"?

When my wife, Christina, and I were planning our 2024 holiday we were looking for the usual combination of history, culture, nature and R&R, I'd read an article about the Canopy Tower in Panama and I still haven't seen a Cock-of-the-rock so a return to Latin America was at the top of the list. More importantly I had a semi-secret yen to pass three figures on my world life list. I was about a dozen short. In the end we set upon Cuba, with plenty of endemics and much else to pique the interest. I bought the field guide, downloaded a list and categorised the targets for region, season and probability, noting the endemics and other potential lifers. We booked a couple of days with a birding guide during the trip and prepared for all that Cuba had to offer.

When we met our guide on the first morning in Havana it turned out he was a birding specialist. Mario took note of my caution "It's not just about the birds," but for him it clearly was, and our first experience of a full trip with a bespoke guide brought undoubted benefits and prompted some reflections on the nature of holiday birdwatching. It was to be much more than using a field guide and learning as you go to build a personal trip list. Mario had his eyes on our itinerary but also declared he was "targeting the endemics." He knew where they were and he wasn't shy of an early start and a bumpy ride to find them.

Our itinerary covered a good spread of habitats in west and central Cuba across four hundred miles from Vinales to Camaguey. We spent three nights in Havana, Playa Larga and Cayo Guillermo and two nights in Vinales, Trinidad, Camaguey and Santa Clara. Mario was also our driver.

There are 29 endemics in Cuba including the smallest bird in the world, the Bee Hummingbird. After three days in Havana we had seen just twelve species. The first two were House Sparrow and Eurasian Collared Dove. The third, which I described to Mario as a "yellowy Dunnock," was a Palm Warbler, a lifer which turned out to be very common. Our first endemic species was the Cuban Blackbird. At the top of a tall tree, a Cuban Emerald, the less interesting of Cuba's two hummingbirds, was one of three regional endemics with Antillean Palm Swift and Greater Antillean Grackle.

After a slow start in Havana I started to reflect on "the nature of the tick."

Why did I not even think about taking a picture of the House Sparrow or the Collared Dove, even for the record? The Yellow Warbler stood out among the "Havana Dozen" because it was so striking (yellow!) sitting on a statue in the middle of town and, retrospectively, the only one we saw on the trip. There are ticks which stand out – the lifers, endemics and the plain rare – and ticks which have a unique quality – the long awaited, the self-found, the self-identified. Then there are the birds which are just beautiful.

A new species is always one for the list but some sightings are better than others. Long minutes spent watching at close quarters clearly beat a fleeting glimpse, a fly-over, a roadside view from a speeding car, a distant binocular view or a speeding speck identified only by the guide. Then there's the photographic record – a record shot (aka a dodgy photo!), clear ID or the best picture you could have taken. Proper photographers add to their burden, and reap the rich rewards, with the relentless search for the best portrait, the best action shot, the cute, the funny, the narrative.



Cuban Tody

At Play Larga, also known as The Bay of Pigs, the Las Salinas and Zapata Swamp National Parks provided further excitement and food for thought. The Zapata Wren is one of three eponymous endemics and obliged nearby with the most beautiful song for as long as we wanted to stand there. The Zapata Sparrow really doesn't like having its photo taken, but hopped its way charmingly along the path ahead, always moving on at the critical photo moment. According to the field guide the Zapata Rail is one of two listed endemics "likely to be extinct" which added to the expectation but not the delivery.

We did see a Clapper Rail cross the road. This was one of the more dubious instances of using recorded bird call to lure species at a known location. The speaker was placed in the vegetation on the opposite side

of the road from where the real bird could be heard calling. After several attempts it picked its moment to emerge and investigate. And very nearly got run over. I do hope that's not why the Zapata Rail is "likely to be extinct". How early would you get out of bed for a Cuban Nightjar? The local guide found it and it flew off silhouetted in the dark. A technical tick.

Sometimes a tick is not enough. The local guide at Las Salinas listed a run of terns on a spit... Gull Billed Tern, Royal Tern, Caspian Tern, Sandwich Tern...and was ready to move on. I could see them all but I wasn't about to put them in the notebook without a sufficiently decent look to be able to identify them for myself and for future reference, especially as I had my telescope. And each species was represented in different plumage stages. Gull Billed Tern did not make the trip list.

One bird made a retrospective entry to the trip list. Early on a tiny distant dot was called by Mario as a Shiny Cowbird. I couldn't have identified it and I felt sure we'd see another one. No tick. Towards the end Mario identified a high-flying raptor as a Broad Winged Hawk, as yet unseen. Trust the guide and local knowledge I thought, remembering when I first realised flight pattern could distinguish distant Jays, Woodpeckers and Wood pigeons. I looked at the Field Guide and persuaded myself that I had seen enough of the bird to confirm Mario's expertise. Tick on the list. And if he was right about that let's have the Shiny Cowbird too! (We didn't see another one.) I don't doubt that he was right in both cases but there is a grey area where you do have to see for yourself.

Some years ago I read in a field guide that birds have addresses. A Cuban Grassquit lived in a farmyard, where a small tip secured a large tick. In addition the bird guides keep in touch and they share the knowledge. It was this which enabled us to see, at specific locations en route, a number of endemics which we saw nowhere else. An unremarkable roadside spot on the long day's journey to Camaguey was marked with a blue tarpaulin and a little maze of tracks. That's where it lives. Endemic number 24. Oriente Warbler. The Cuban Gnatcatcher was found in similar fashion and made the photo record. One of the key diagnostics for the bird is the black "c" just behind the eye. Perfectly obscured by that twig.

was the one Mario called the Good-luck Hawk. It was in some Botanical Gardens and someone knew which tree it was in. They were right, we found it and we had good views of Gundlach's Hawk.

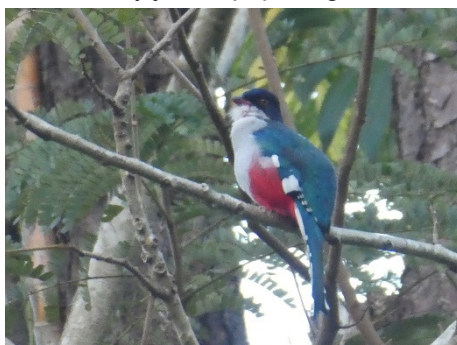
Before we travelled, and especially before I knew we would have a birder as a guide, I really wondered just how many of the endemics we would see. The Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world and a childhood legend was the "if only one then this one" target. In Playa Larga we spent an hour or so in the garden of a local birder, taking photographs of Bee Hummingbirds on the feeders.



Bee Hummingbird

There we also saw several other species for the only time. It was good to sit and watch with close-up views, trying and failing repeatedly for the "best ever picture". The Cape May Warbler like many of the warblers was a Winter visitor from N America. We were there in February, just the right time. I repeatedly had trouble remembering the name of the Black-Throated Blue Warbler. I most frequently see Coal Tits in the garden at home, so let's love that Bee Hummingbird even on a garden feeder. It's indubitably in the wild and much more obliging for photographs. It doesn't have to be difficult!

Two other must see targets were the beautiful Field Guide cover stars, the Cuban Tody and the Cuban Trogon or Toco-ro, named for its call which became a familiar sound. We were lucky indeed to see both. Repeatedly. Great views. Properly in the wild. On one occasion both at the same time. And in the same photograph. The Cuban Tody just kept posing.



Cuban Trogon

On the way to Trinidad we had some important targets. Blue-Headed Quail-Dove, Gray-Fronted Quail-Dove, Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Parakeet. We came to a halt just by the coach park. The Quail-Doves were on one side of a screen, where the food had been put out, we were on the other side. One or two were quite happy picking around at our feet. The birds are in a protected area and fed regularly by local enthusiasts. Like the Yellowhammers at Otmoor. Cheating or not? The Fernandina's Flicker was by the side of the road – it's always there. The Parrot and Parakeet were a bit harder to track down but, as the Quail Doves are regular in their habits, we relocated to track them down while the Gray-Fronted Quail Dove got round to turning up. It doesn't have to be difficult!

One of the birds which had really led us a dance was the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, the only Cuban woodpecker to elude us apart from the Ivory Billed Woodpecker (which is almost certainly extinct). It makes little holes all around appropriate trees to suck the sap, which we saw almost every day. But not the birds. Our last day with Mario was an early morning drive from Camaguey to La Belen, 45 miles south which asked the question "How far would you travel for a Plain Pigeon?" The main target was our last endemic, the Giant Kingbird. It was an interesting drive, with beautiful countryside and other new birds on the way, including Green Heron, Northern Jacana which was on my personal target list and a Sand Martin which I picked for familiarity flying over a gravel pit. They call them Bank Swallows. We saw the Plain Pigeon atop a distant tree and a pair of Giant Kingbirds in branches closer by against a bright blue sky and the elusive Yellow-bellied Sapsucker which we stalked in a little stand of trees close to the road.

After Mario's departure we added Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Yellow-throated Warbler (which had repeatedly given me the slip) Sandhill Crane, Forster's Tern and Herring Gull to the trip list. 132 in all. 25 of the 29 Cuban Endemics, 12 Regional Endemics, 44 other lifers, 50 birds I'd seen before and a Shiny Cowbird.

I've often been charged with over thinking things so...final Mission Statement...maybe...

Watch the birds and enjoy the scenery. We both had a wonderful time. It wasn't just about the birding,

but the birds and the nature were big factors in a really special trip.

(Photographs are copyright of Mike Haddrell)

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Local group website

www.rspb-vwh.org.uk