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Editor Felicity Jenkins

Summer 2025

# NEWSLETTER

## Vale of White Horse Local Group

Welcome to the Vale of White Horse Local Group summer newsletter. The hot dry summer has culminated in a local hosepipe ban. Butterflies and moths seem to be doing better than last year, and any vegetation with well-established roots has been growing extravagantly. Many plants have flowered earlier than usual, and gone over quickly. Recent rain showers, although welcome, have been very light. I wonder what autumn has in store.

### Members' recent sightings

#### Jersey Tigers

Jersey Tiger moths are usually seen on the south coast in the summer, but this year has seen significant numbers as far north as Cambridgeshire.

Here's one in an East Hagbourne garden in August



© Bob Knight

### Sparrowhawk

A sparrowhawk enjoying cooling down in summer at an Abingdon garden



© Peter Williams

At a local mothting event, I had my first close up view of a cockchafer in Kennington



© Felicity Jenkins

### Review of the Year 2024-25

by Bob Knight Local Group Leader

This was presented at the Annual General Meeting held on 12 May 2025 at the River Room. Bob welcomed all present. Members had received copies of the documentation in advance.

The mixture of in-person, hybrid and Zoom talks is still proving popular, and most of our membership have attended in person or on-line.

Speakers have included Peter Holden (In the Steps of the Vikings), Nick Williams (The East Atlantic Flyway), Ian Alexander (Camouflage without Spots), and the RSPB's Brand Photography Manager, Ben Andrew (Photographing Birds).

The 2025-26 programme will be announced in the summer, including talks by Katy Thorpe (RSPB Middleton Lakes) and Owl Conservation (with owls!); Fergus Mosey will open the season on 15 September with his annual update on activities and sightings at our local reserve, RSPB Otmoor.

This year's activities have included attending the STFC Big Schools Birdwatch event and Abingdon's Clubs and Societies day, as well as providing a nestbox and camera for Chilton Primary School.

Martin Latham's outdoor meetings at local reserves remain popular and will continue in 2025-26.

Mike Haddrill continues to expand

our presence on social media, with links to numerous local wildlife groups.

The photo competition was judged by Ben Andrew. Winners were:

**Starling murmuration by David Marsh**



**Bearded Tit by Bill Lester**



**Red Knot by David Marsh**



The next photo competition will be in April 2026 (entry deadline 16 March) and will be judged by April's speaker.

### Weekend Away

Once again we were able to arrange a weekend away in September, to Titchwell Marsh, WWT Welney and Lakenheath Fen, and spotted 88 bird species. This September we are planning a trip to the Somerset Levels, visiting WWT and RSPB sites at Slimbridge, Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall.

In the course of the year we have raised over £1000 for RSPB.

We are still looking for member

contributions to meetings, or shorter contributions at a Members' evening or in the interval in other talks and welcome any member who would like to join the committee.

Thanks to everyone – Committee, members, helpers and visitors – for making 2024-25 another successful year.

Have a good summer!

## Community activities

Here's a bit more on the community activities mentioned in Bob's review.

### Big Schools Birdwatch event



On 13 February Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL) held a Big Birdwatch event for about 160 primary school students and their teachers. The all-day event consisted of workshops themed around the RSPB Big Schools Bird Watch, along with related mini talks from scientists at RAL. Our Local Group were there to answer questions and provide RSPB information.



### Nestbox success at Chilton primary school

Our Local Group donated a camera-fitted nestbox to Chilton primary school which the school installed on 27 February. The school kindly sent some short videos of the progress, which was avidly followed by the children. Eleven chicks hatched on 1 May and then fledged on 21 May.



Following this success, we are looking for a second primary school to support

in the same way.

### Abingdon Clubs and Societies day



The Clubs and Societies day is an opportunity for recruiting new members (see above for Committee members Mike and Peter in action). There was a lot of interest in our Local Group.

### Programme for 2025-26

#### Indoor Meetings

This year's focus is mostly on UK conservation projects

All talks start at 7:30pm, either at the River Room, Sutton Courtenay, or on Zoom, or hybrid. Members and any visitors who pay £5 into the club's account in advance will receive a link to the Zoom presentations.

Details are given below for each meeting

#### 15 September 2025

##### Fergus Mosey: What's new at Otmoor?

Fergus is the warden at RSPB Otmoor, and will present his annual review of the year's highlights.

This talk will be presented live at the River Room.

#### 19-21 September 2025

#### Weekend away

This year's Weekend away will begin with a visit to WWT Slimbridge, and include several reserves on the Somerset Levels. Don't forget your RSPB and WWT membership cards for free admission and parking.

#### 20 October 2025

##### Lu Barton : the Owl Conservation Project

The Owl Conservation Project works with environmental groups, landowners, tenants and educational groups to enhance and increase existing habitats for our British Owls and create new habitats for them, linking them as networks or habitat highways. Their work includes surveys and nest monitoring.

The evening will look at the history, behaviour and population status of British owls, and an opportunity to meet some captive-bred owls. The talk will be followed by a Q&A session.

This will be a live presentation at the

River Room,

#### 17 November 2025 – to be confirmed

Professor Andrew Gosler (University of Oxford Department of Biology): A follow-up to his last year's talk: Guided walk from Ornithology to Ethno-ornithology

Andrew Gosler studies human engagement with birds, especially in the context of nature conservation and policy. He is a council member of BTO and a Vice-President of the Oxford Ornithological Society

This will be a live presentation at the River Room; it may be possible to arrange a Zoom link for members who prefer not to travel at this time of year.

#### 15 December 2025

##### Rick Bayne: Operation Turtle Dove

Rick Bayne is a senior project manager for the RSPB's Operation Turtle Dove

Turtle doves have declined by 93 per cent since the 1970s. They are ecologically unique in the UK as our only migratory dove species and face a range of threats across their flyway including habitat loss on wintering and breeding grounds, hunting and disease.

Operation Turtle Dove has worked to understand the problems face by turtle doves and the conservation action needed. The project is optimistic that we can reverse the fortunes of this enigmatic and culturally significant bird; the latest figures give real hope that things are on the right track.

This will be a Zoom presentation. There will not be an in-person meeting.

#### 19 January 2026 – to be confirmed

##### Anne Guichard: Giving Corncrakes a Home project

Anne is an RSPB Conservation Officer in Northern Ireland. Her talk includes Corncrake ecology and the RSPB's work on Rathlin Island to bring the corncrake back.

This will be a Zoom presentation. There will not be an in-person meeting.

#### 16 February 2026

##### Mark Pearson: Filey International : Arrivals & Departures on the North Yorkshire coast

Fasten your seatbelts! Migration never stops at this east coast hotspot - and neither does Mark in his pursuit of its wonders. Let him take you on a whistlestop tour through four seasons of high drama at his beloved Filey

This will be a Zoom presentation. There will not be an in-person meeting.

**16 March 2026**

### **Katie Thorpe: Bringing a Boom to Middleton Lakes**

Katie is the Site Manager at RSPB Middleton Lakes

This talk will be presented live at the River Room.

Deadline for photo competition. Send entries by email to [mikehaddrall@gmail.com](mailto:mikehaddrall@gmail.com) The competition rules and entry form are on the local group website [rspb-vwh.org.uk/photoentry](http://rspb-vwh.org.uk/photoentry)

**20 April 2026**

### **Jon Mason :Wildlife in the Chilterns**

Jon is an experienced birder, naturalist, photographer and geographer. He is online as 'theearlybirder', particularly on Instagram

Jon will announce the winners of the photo competition.

This will be live at the River Room.

**18 May 2026**

### **AGM and Members' Evening**

This will be live at the River Room, without a Zoom link. Members are welcome to give a short talk after the AGM.

## **Field Trips 2025-26**

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](mailto:martinj.latham@googlemail.com)) 01235 851918

An email will be sent to members prior to each event.

**26 October 2025 Arne**

**30 November 2025 Farmoor**

**25 January 2026 Port Meadow**

**22 February 2026 Radley Lakes**

**29 March 2026 College Lake**

**26 April 2026 Greenham Common**

**31 May 2026 Otmoor**

**June 2026 (date to be confirmed)  
Greenham Common for nightjars**

## **Members' Essays**

The next few editions of the newsletter are featuring essays by Local Group members on some of their birdwatching experiences at home or abroad. Hopefully members will be encouraged to send in their own accounts or wildlife adventures, whether domestic or exotic. Here is the latest in our series .

## **Wildlife in Costa Rica**

**by Peter Williams**

Our holiday in this lovely Central American country in February 2024 was always intended to be a mixture of wildlife (birds, sloths, etc.) and relaxation (kayaking, outdoor thermal pools and beaches).

An early highlight of our boat trips around Tortuguero National Park was this nocturnal Boat-billed Heron.



*Boat-billed Heron © Peter Williams*

We were lucky to see a three-toed sloth so close during a tour near the Arenal volcano. It was returning to the canopy after its weekly visit to the ground to leave droppings.



*Three-toed Sloth © Peter Williams*

These two jewel-like hummingbirds were on a feeder in the Monteverde Cloud Forest National Park, where we wish we could have spent more time, especially because the food in the Monteverde Lodge was so good.



*Hummingbirds © Peter Williams*

## **Review of Field Trips in 2025**

**Greenham Common in April**

**by Martin Latham**

Eight members turned up on 27 April for our visit to Greenham Common. It was an unusually warm spring day and the air was heavy with the coconut scent of flowering gorse. Rarely have I seen the common so

busy. Hikers, cyclists and dog walkers were out in force and there was plenty of activity overhead too, testifying to the upcoming celebrations for the 80th anniversary of VE Day.

Finding birds was clearly going to be something of a challenge,

Nevertheless, we did succeed in recording 30 species, the highlights being a singing Woodlark (which seemed keen not to be seen) and a couple of Dartford Warblers active in what appeared to be their home territory.



*Woodlark © Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

Garden Warblers were particularly vociferous, with one bird serenading us as we sat enjoying our coffee break outside Greenham Common's celebrated watchtower. Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs, Chaffinches, Wrens, Dunnocks, Robins, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes were also in good voice. Willow Warblers, sadly a decreasing species in our part of the country, were also present. They sang only intermittently, and we never managed to see them.

Linnets were plentiful and from time to time we encountered Goldfinches and Greenfinches as well. Whitethroats sang their scratchy songs at many sites in the gorse and also in the hedgerows bordering the common. Stonechats were among the few small birds that proved relatively easy to see and we enjoyed a number of close-up views.



*Stonechat © Ben Andrew rspb-images.com*

Meadow Pipits also put on a good display and entertained us with their song flights and parachuting glides. Perhaps the most conspicuous sign of birdlife was the ever-present Red Kite. How things have changed in recent years!

## Otmoor in May by Martin Latham

Thirteen members turned up for our Otmoor outing on 25 May. Our experiences of the day were quite varied, with different observers concentrating on different parts of the reserve. Our group total was 62 species and covered an interesting range of birds. All enjoyed the exuberant presence of various warbler species. Reed warblers, Sedge Warblers, Blackcaps, Whitethroats, Lesser Whitethroats and Chiffchaffs all seemed determined to outshout each other, although none could compete with the sheer force of delivery of the many Cetti's Warblers that now call Otmoor home.



Cetti's Warbler © Ben Andrew [rsbp-images.com](http://rsbp-images.com)

There was also a Garden Warbler in full song, but it didn't make its presence known until we were almost back at the car park.

Marsh Harriers are now a regular feature over the marsh and we encountered at least three of these birds. We also had regular sightings of Hobbies. I counted six on one occasion, but there may well have been more. The notice board in the car park laid claim to 20+. We hoped to turn one of these dashing raptors into a Red-footed Falcon, but we were unsuccessful.

The heron family was well represented and, in addition to nesting Grey Herons, we saw several Little Egrets, two Great White Egrets, four or more Cattle Egrets and a Bittern. A Barn Owl quartering over the reedbeds was another welcome surprise. Waders were not very much in evidence, but we did observe Curlews displaying overhead and Lapwings busily driving off would-be predators. We also had brief views of Oystercatcher, Redshank and Snipe. Among the most obvious water birds were Cormorant, Coot, Canada Goose, Greylag Goose, Mallard, Gadwall, Teal, Pochard and Tufted Duck.

All the while we were treated to that wonderful springtime sound - the call of the Cuckoo. Other birds present during our visit include Red Kite, Buzzard, Water Rail, Skylark, Swift, Swallow, House Martin, Long-tailed

Tit, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Bullfinch and Reed Bunting.

Greenham Common in June by Mike Haddrill

Eight members met on 22 June at the western end of Greenham Common. The 8pm start at Bury's Bank car park by the junction of Greenham Road and Pinchington Lane reflected the target species: Woodcock and Nightjar.

A flurry of Long-tailed Tits and a juvenile Great Tit caught attention in the car park, Woodpigeons called and a Blackbird flew across. We headed southeast through the trees to the laughter of a Green Woodpecker and turned right at the dry dog pond towards the cruise missile bunkers which, now empty, have legal protection as Ancient Monuments.

Carrion Crows foraged ahead, Magpies right and left. Stock Doves, I was told, favour the railings on top of the bunker and sure enough there were a few around.



Stock Dove © Ben Andrew [rsbp-images.com](http://rsbp-images.com)

There wasn't much bird song but Wrens always make themselves known. The gorse was attracting Linnets and Stonechats which gave good views and Greenfinches wheezed at the tops of bushes.

We spotted three raptors, a distinctive Red Kite, and then, on separate occasions, a silhouette against the dimming sky, which the second time seemed to be on the edge of a hover and we determined Kestrel rather than Sparrowhawk.

A Meadow Pipit flitted from the tops of nearby bushes and fed on the ground, while a persistent pip pip piping was identified by two separate Merlin apps as a Tree Pipit but, without Martin's golden ear, we weren't persuaded.



Meadow Pipit © Annabel Sharpe [rsbp-images.com](http://rsbp-images.com)

We turned the corner by the bunkers and headed again into woodland. Blackcaps sung half-heartedly and the squeaky wheel of a Dunnock was heard with familiar Chiffchaffs as we started to scan the treeline.

We arrived at a suitable watching spot a little after 9.15 and all seemed quiet. A dark corvid caused, excitement and disappointment and then above the distant trees, Woodcock appeared, too far to hear but clear enough to see for sure. At 9.45 we heard churring in front of us, unsustained and without much enthusiasm, perhaps, like the Blackcap, tired by the heat of the day and disappointed by the breezy coolness of a cloud-covered evening.

On the dot of 10.00 a rather slim looking Nightjar, without the distinctive flashes of white on tail and wing, treated us to a few circuits right above our heads. We heard another distant churring to the south so we could, perhaps, credit a female seen and two males heard among the 20 species of the evening.

## Newsletter editor Felicity Jenkins

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