

Editor Felicity Jenkins

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

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NEWSLETTER

January 2026

Vale of White Horse Local Group

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

As I write, it's mid November and autumn is still blazing around us. After a protracted mild and damp few months, trees and plants have all revived after the summer drought and the seasons seem askew.



Wytham Woods November

News from Otmoor

2025 was a successful year for breeding Lapwing, Snipe and Curlew at Otmoor, but the summer drought made life harder for Redshank. Glossy Ibis and Cattle Egret are now regular visitors, and notable sightings for 2025 were Green-winged Teal and Savi's Warbler.



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com

Important notice:

Appeal for members

We would like to encourage some new faces to join the committee for next year (from the AGM on 18 May 2026), and welcome volunteers or nominations. We don't need a big commitment, as roles can be shared.

In particular we will welcome any member capable of website management.

If you're interested, or know someone else who is maybe looking for a volunteering opportunity, please contact Bob Knight

(bob_knight@tiscali.co.uk)

or any committee member. New or prospective committee members will be welcome to attend monthly online committee meetings until the AGM.

Programme for January to May 2026

Indoor Meetings

All talks start at 7:30pm, either at the River Room, Sutton Courtenay, or on Zoom, or hybrid.

Meetings in January and February are on Zoom ONLY; an email link will be sent in advance by Tim Pett (timothygpett@gmail.com) 01235 526033 to members and also to any guests who pay £5 into the group's account and send him an email to say they have done so.

This year's talks are mostly on UK conservation projects.

19 January 2026

Anne Guichard: Giving Corncrakes a Home Project This will be a Zoom presentation.

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.



C John Bowler rspb-images.com

Big Garden Birdwatch 2026

is from Friday 23- Sunday 25 January. This well-publicised annual event

can encourage participation among people, young and old, new to birdwatching, as there is also the the Big Schools' Birdwatch. Get counting in your school grounds at any time between 6 January and 13 February and why not make your Birdwatch count towards an RSPB Wild Challenge Award? This free scheme encourages pupils to discover more wildlife and help nature in your school grounds.

See rspb.org.uk for details and registration for both events.

16 February 2026

Mark Pearson: Filey International: Arrivals & Departures on the North Yorkshire coast This will be a Zoom presentation

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

14-25 March

ATOM Festival of Science and Technology

The Owl Conservation Project are coming to the Abingdon Science Market on 14 March, and on 22 March are running an owl pellet dissection workshop for children (preregistration required)

16 March 2026

Katie Thorpe: Bringing a Boom to Middleton Lakes This talk will be presented live at the River Room.

Katie is the Site Manager at RSPB Middleton Lakes (a wetland reserve near Tamworth, off the M42).

It is also the deadline for the photo-competition. Send entries by email to mikehaddrill@gmail.com by 9 March. The updated competition rules are on the local group website rspb-vwh.org.uk/photoentry Images will be posted ahead and then judged by Jon Mason at the River Room meeting on 20 April

20 April 2026

Jon Mason :Wildlife in the Chilterns
This will be live at the River Room.

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

Jon will announce the winners of the photocompetition.

18 May 2026

AGM and Members' Evening

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

Field Trips 2026

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

25 January 2026

Port Meadow

Meet at Walton Well Road car park (fee payable) at 10am. Approach Oxford from the north to avoid the congestion charge!

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

RSPB Wildlife Explorers Group

There is a Wildlife Explorers group locally called Sutton Courtenay Kites. Wildlife Explorers is the junior section of the RSPB for children aged 8-12 years. The group aims to involve and inspire children to take an interest in nature and the environment through a fun and enjoyable mixture of indoor and outdoor activities, games and projects.

It is held each month on a Sunday between 10:30am and 12:30pm at Sutton Courtenay Environmental Education Centre, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4TE.. You do not have to be an RSPB Wildlife

Explorers member to attend and there is no obligation to join.

Sutton Courtenay Kites contact is Maxine Bullock 01235 798414. suttoncourtenaykites@gmail.com who asks that you contact them to register prior to your first attendance, to ensure space and resources are available.

Each session costs £2. All the money raised goes towards activities and resources for the group.

Here is the programme for January to May 2026.

11 January Bird battles:

Avian adaptions & survival

18 February Rot squad

Exploring decomposition, composting and natural recycling

8 March Campfire creatures

An evening session to explore outdoor creatures that come out in the dark, including a campfire

19 April Digging deep

A session that will look at species that live underground

17 May Fabulous fossils

We will be hunting fossils and flora at Dry Sandford nature reserve

Autumn field trip reports

Local group weekend away to Somerset in September

by Felicity Jenkins.

We visited WWT Slimbridge, RSPB Ham Wall and WWT Steart Marshes on 19-21 September. The weather forecast was dire: heavy rain, but in the event there was glorious sunshine at Slimbridge, and two dry if overcast days on the Avalon Marshes. Thirteen members came; many of us stayed in Bridgewater in the conveniently sited Premier Inn which at the last minute turned out to be in the middle of refurbishment, so no restaurant. But there was a cosy pub nearby, and a highlight for me was seeing a badger run across the main road in front of us as we drove home after supper; it was unscathed, disappearing somehow into the central reservation.



Here is a view of Slimbridge from an observation tower looking towards the

Severn estuary.

There were excellent views of wader flocks on the lagoons, in particular Black-tailed Godwits, among which were a few hard to spot Ruff, but once you saw their bright orange legs, much easier to find. Spotted Redshank were heard and even seen by our most skilful birdwatchers. A good sighting was of Common Sandpipers and Green Sandpipers on a muddy shore next to each other; we could see their differences of plumage and habits clearly. From one of the towers someone spotted a Goshawk quartering over fields near the river, and it set up flocks of Teal as it flew over a lagoon. A first ever for me.



C Mike Langman rsbp-images.com



A typical group scene

Although this was an autumn excursion there were still a few summer visitors about. At Ham Wall and Steart Marshes there were Swallows, and a Wheatear or two. Ham Wall had interesting reconstructions of ancient (3608 BC) tracks through the marshes



Sweet Track

Everyone captured a photo of an obliging Great White Egret fishing for a long time in a drainage ditch.

We all appreciated the spacious hides at Ham Wall where waiting and watching patiently for a long period was effective in getting some great sightings. A Bittern fly-past, circling

around the reedbeds in a stately manner gave everyone a chance of seeing this magnificent Heron. And then we heard Water Rails and there were Hobbies flying around the lagoon, and in the distance, you could just catch a glimpse of Glastonbury Tor.



View towards Glastonbury Tor

Stert Marshes on the Sunday proved to be a pleasant destination for birders, as well as for families with pushchairs and small children with bikes on the metalled and traffic-free paths; there was a pop-up café too. We enjoyed being by the tidal creeks of the River Parrett, looking across to the distant Welsh hills, and watching the tide come up over the mud flats, where a surprising number of waders and duck were eventually discovered.



River Parrett

A few of us who stayed an extra night visited Westhay Moor NNR on the Monday morning. This is also now part of the much expanded Avalon Marshes. There was another sighting of a Bittern and we were pleased to add Kingfisher to the weekend list.

Thank you to our trip organisers and experienced birdwatchers who made it such a successful and memorable weekend.

Here is the combined list of all birds seen by everyone. Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Bittern, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Barnacle Goose, Shelduck, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard, Garganey, Shoveler, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Goshawk, Buzzard, Kestrel, Kingfisher, Hobby, Peregrine, Pheasant, Water Rail,

Moorhen, Coot, Crane, Oystercatcher, Avocet, Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruff, Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Spotted Redshank, Redshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Grey Phalarope, Black-headed Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Feral Pigeon, Stock Dove, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Skylark, Swallow, House Martin, Meadow Pipit, Grey Wagtail, Pied Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Stonechat, Wheatear, Blackbird, Cetti's Warbler, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow, Raven, Starling, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Reed Bunting (86 species).

Arne in October

by Martin Latham

Seven members turned up on 26 October for our autumn trip to RSPB Arne. It was a still morning with plenty of blue sky and sunshine, if a little on the chilly side.



© Sam Turley rspb-images.com

It seemed unusually quiet at first with few birds recorded in the vicinity of the car park and visitor centre or the adjacent woods and heathland. Blue, Coal and Great Tits and Robins were the most obvious sign of life.

Things began to look up when we arrived at the Middlebere Hide. Here we encountered small flocks of Brent Geese and more substantial numbers of Wigeon and Teal, with the odd Pintail and Shelduck thrown in for good measure. The tide was too high for optimum wader watching, but there were flocks of Curlew, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit huddled together in the marsh and damp grassland. One of the most popular sightings from the hide did not involve birds. It concerned a large clump of a magnificent fungus, the aptly named Spectacular Rustgill.



© Bill Lester

We left the hide and made our way across the heath to the Viewpoint, an area of high ground overlooking an extensive wetland. On the heath we saw mainly Meadow Pipits and Linnets. Dartford Warblers called in a number of places, offering only fleeting glimpses. However, patience is often rewarded and in the end we all enjoyed very good views. The area dominated by the Viewpoint was a feast for tired birders' eyes. Flocks of Black-tailed Godwits, Curlews and Redshanks were complemented by hundreds of Avocets. Somewhere from within the serried ranks of waders a Spotted Redshank called but remained obstinately invisible. Little Egrets were numerous, as were Wigeon and Teal.

The most intriguing record of the day was reserved for two members of the group who picked up a call identified by the Merlin app as that of a Yellow-browed Warbler. This was corroborated by RSPB staff who reported it as the first for the season.

In all, we saw (or heard) some 50 species. In addition to those already mentioned, these include Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Mallard, Buzzard, Kestrel, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Skylark, Mistle Thrush, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Nuthatch, Greenfinch and Siskin.

Farmoor in November

by Mike Haddrill

On 30 November seven members met at Farmoor Reservoir in beautiful morning sunshine. The wind was whipping across the causeway and chopping the water; birds only materialised as we got to the far end, with good numbers of Coot, Tufted Duck and Great Crested Grebe. Little Grebes were present and diving in groups of two or three at various locations on the way out and back. The Black Redstart, reported recently on the sewage processing plant, was not present but a "big gull" provided the first point of interest and much

discussion. Here it is:



Farmoor photographs all © Mike Haddrill

We eventually agreed that the size, black back (rather than dark grey) and conspicuous white trailing edge to the wings gave good grounds for Great Black Backed Gull, with the additional observation of flesh-coloured legs clinching it.

Not much was showing at Pinkhill Hide so we made our way along the riverbank to Shrike Meadow. On the way we found a lucky spot where trees in the sunshine gave fleeting glimpses of Blackcap and Treecreeper and rather more sustained views of a Goldcrest and a calling Chiffchaff.



View from Shrike Meadow

We were still without any raptors or winter thrushes, so news of a Sparrowhawk across the field from the Shrike Meadow hide was well received. It was very still and difficult to get a full fix on, but the other birders in the hide had photo evidence. We waited in vain for a better view and the conclusion was that the stationary bird was fed up after its dinner. .

Our vigilance was, however, rewarded by a Kestrel flypast and a Red Kite which was first revealed by its reflection in the pond. As we made our way back to the causeway, where the wind had dropped a little, a Grey Wagtail and a Dunnock took the day list to 36. Shortly afterwards the Snow Goose credited here was our thirty-seventh species of the day



- although as the picture shows

Anser dubius would have been a more appropriate designation.

My report is followed by two responses from the Facebook group Gulls of The British Isles where I posted the photo:

'Yes - size of beak, very full-chested, very dark back, very white-headed for time of year. Size of white mirrors wrong for Baltic Gull (LBBG subspecies).'

'A shallow forehead slope to the base of bill helps me to call it a GBBG.'

Species list for Farmoor: Black-headed Gull, Blackbird, Blackcap, Blue Tit, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch, Chiffchaff, Coot, Cormorant, Dunnock, Goldcrest, Great Black-backed Gull, Great Crested Grebe, Great Tit, Grey Heron, Grey Wagtail, Greylag Goose, Herring Gull, Jackdaw, Kestrel, Little Grebe, Long-tailed Tit, Magpie, Mallard, Moorhen, Mute Swan, Pied Wagtail, Red Kite, Robin, Snow Goose, Song Thrush, Sparrowhawk, Starling, Treecreeper, Tufted Duck, Woodpigeon, Wren.

Members' Essays

Cape Verde Islands

by Mike Haddrill

Birds were thin on the ground in the Cape Verde Islands but it was good to see an Osprey feeding by the roadside on our last transfer. A possible female Black-crowned Sparrow-lark didn't make the judges' cut and a Black Kite was granted in preference to the Cape Verde Black Kite, which my rather dated field guide declared to be 'one of the most endangered species of raptor in the world.' Sadly we were unable to make time to visit the Mindelo sewage works where two were seen on 12 May 2000. The Cape Verde Shearwater, seen from one of the ferry crossings was one of five 'lifers' seen on the trip. 10,000 pairs breed on the islands but they are seriously threatened, as 7,500 chicks are killed annually for food. Red Billed Tropicbird was a high hope but they were wisely hiding as 'local people catch and eat them.' Just 100-125 breeding pairs according to my 2006 field guide, reprinted last year. Surprisingly our very own Blackcap was regularly heard singing on a couple of the walks and the occasional churring was probably a Spectacled Warbler, which also breeds on almost all of the islands. Collared Doves were common, the enchanting Cape Verde Sparrow (Passer lagoensis - also called Ground Sparrow or Iago Sparrow and

shown in the photo) was everywhere



and Brown-necked Ravens showed in the hills on most days. Lifers 2 and 3.

We saw the Cape Verde Swift (4) just once, over the canyon en route to Ribeira das Patas. Kestrels appeared most days, presenting something of a puzzle. The nominate Common Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus* is a very rare occurrence on the islands, and some authorities regard both Cape Verde forms as separate species rather than subspecies. Neglected Kestrel (Lesser Cape Verde Kestrel) and Alexander's Kestrel (Greater Cape Verde Kestrel) are 'common and widespread on most islands on which they occur.' Clearly seen through the binoculars the rather dark kestrel with barring on tail and back is going on the life list - male *Falco tinnunculus neglectus*. The other species on the trip list were a solitary Sanderling keeping company with Turnstones, Purple Heron making a change from Little Egrets, Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon everywhere and a couple of coastal Whimbrels.

News from the RSPB

(rspb.org.uk edited)

Here is news from various reserves which the Local Group has visited.

LIFE on the Edge

Celebrating five years of coastal success: LIFE on the Edge has been a large-scale project designed to conserve, restore and future-proof our fragile coastal habitats at seven coastal Special Protected Areas (SPAs) across England. The project was in collaboration with the National Trust, Natural England and the Environment Agency.

These sites provide vital nesting habitats for many seabirds and waders including Little Terns, Sandwich Terns, Redshanks, Common Terns, Avocets and Ringed Plovers.

Our teams have restored 66.5 hectares (ha) of freshwater scrape (permanent shallow ponds) and saline lagoon habitat around the English

coast. This includes key areas of sites like RSPB Minsmere, Titchwell and Hodbarrow, the West Hayling Nature Reserve and Farlington Marshes.

On beaches in the Solent, colonies of nesting terns, Oystercatchers, Ringed Plovers and gulls are often disturbed by unwitting visitors and curious dogs. To combat this, temporary fences were installed. A brilliant team of volunteers was then recruited to engage the public, spread awareness and help to document how the different species reacted to disturbance.



This is one of the signs I saw in summer on the Solent Way explaining Dark-bellied Brent Geese arrive in winter from Arctic Siberia, Turnstone from N Greenland, Canada and Lapland and so on.

New hope for Turtle Doves

Turtle Doves used to be summer visitors at Otmoor. Rick Bayne, Senior Project Manager for Operation Turtle Dove gave our Local Group talk in December 2025



© Ben Andrew rspb-images.com
It was another record-breaking year for Operation Turtle Dove, with 442 farmers and land managers joining us to provide feeding and nesting habitat. In addition, specially formulated seed mix was provided at 425 supplementary feeding sites to ensure that returning birds could get back into breeding condition as quickly as possible. Rick Bayne, Senior Project Manager for Operation Turtle Dove says: 'Following years of worry that we might lose one of nature's most familiar summer sounds – the gentle purring of the Turtle Dove – we can

finally look ahead with real optimism. Provided we continue our efforts working together with farmers across the breeding range here in the UK, there is no reason that we can't expect Turtle Doves to return once again to being a much more common sight in our countryside

New land purchased at Somerset

At West Sedgemoor and Greylake in Somerset, we have acquired 15 hectares of land, at a cost of £150,698. These wet grassland fields will allow us to manage water levels across a wider area of the existing nature reserve. This will benefit breeding Snipe and Curlews at one of their remaining strongholds in southern England, as well as winter visitors like Teals. We will also be helping to deliver a Landscape Recovery Project here, together with our partners, which will support nature-friendly farming alongside peat and floodplain restoration across 4,000 hectares of the wider Somerset Levels and Moors.

Digging up the past: Bronze Age spade unearthed at RSPB Arne Moors

With rising sea levels threatening to destroy important wildlife habitat around Poole Harbour, we're working with our partners to transform 150 hectares of land close to our Arne nature reserve into vital wetlands for wildlife, in particular Redshank, Avocet, and Common and Sandwich Tern.

During excavation work for The Moors at Arne Project, archaeologists from Wessex Archaeology unearthed an extremely rare and almost complete prehistoric wooden spade. Scientific analysis has revealed that it dates from the middle Bronze Age, between about 1500BC and 1400BC, making it one of the oldest wooden tools ever to be discovered in Britain. It's very rare for organic matter to survive this long in the ground, but the site's waterlogged conditions helped preserve the spade for more than 3,000 years.

Newsletter editor Felicity Jenkins
fmjenkins@hotmail.co.uk
rspb-vwh.org.uk www.facebook.com/RSPBvwh <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3368074546743022>

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