# West Oxfordshire Field Club www.thefieldclub.org.uk



Newsletter No. 105 Spring 2017

### **EDITORIAL**

I have just seen my first swallow of the season in Bibury – the very place where I saw my last swallow wheeling above the church tower in October. The insects teeming above the calm stretches of river there provide rich pickings for swallows and bats alike. In October I was surprised to see a mallard with tiny ducklings, this time it was a swan with cygnets. My garden blackbird is already on a second brood.

In October the flowers were mostly confined to colourful baskets hanging from cottage porches and pub window boxes, and even the public toilets were decked out in no fewer than ten baskets of vivid flowers. This time most of the flowers were in the water meadows – clumps of vivid yellow Marsh Marigolds. Closer to Oxford, the Thames meadows are now showing off their Fritillaries, Cowslips are decorating the verges, and the Blackthorn associated with the recent cold weather is giving way to May (Hawthorn) blossom. The Field Club recently reported a good show of Pasque Flowers at the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust Reserve near Cirencester. More early spring flowers were seen the Club's walk in

Whitehill Wood – Yellow Star of Bethlehem, Toothwort and Moschatel.

The oak was indeed flowering well before the ash this year, and the old saying ('oak before ash, be prepared for a splash, ash before oak, be prepared for a soak) has held good, and the soil is cracking for want of water. The lack of rain meant that locally there was no really synchronised dash for the pond by frogs and toads, which usually happens after the first rain once the weather is warm enough. But the spring competition for mates proceeds whatever the weather.



It was a 'sycamore spring' in West Oxfordshire – lawns, verges, borders and anywhere there was the tiniest speck of soil were filled with sycamore seedlings as densely packed as summer daisies, some still with their winged seed cases attached to the tips of their leaves. The woodlands are full of bluebells, and the wild garlic is starting to come up. I have seen wild garlic leaves on several restaurant menus recently for the first time.

One of the magical moments of spring is the dawn chorus. In the impressive stillness just at first light, when the leaves seem to be waiting for a signal to move, the group of listeners stands fidgeting, cold and bored with the inaction, but fearing to make a noise lest they miss the first call. Then someone hears it – a faint quavering burst of song. Gradually the sound becomes louder and more confident, or perhaps the bird is getting warmer. Little by little, more bird species join the chorus, some cutting in as others leave the choir. To hear such hidden music pouring forth from the dim, misty landscape is an experience not to be missed.

Observing and recording wildlife is vital to its preservation. Every year more than 7,500,000 volunteers monitor the UK's wildlife, assessing some 8,000 species. Of these, 1 in 10 is at risk of extinction. The

relentless pressure of a growing population needing more roads and housing inevitably leads to fragmented habitats, which not only means less space for wildlife, but less chance to move around the country in response to the changing climate. If you want to help, there are many wildlife organisations, some of which have special apps which you can use to record bees, butterflies and any other groups of animals, and there are apps to report threats such as the spread of ash disease and the Harlequin Ladybird. The Wild Oxfordshire Environmental Bulletin, compiled from the programmes of a range of local organisations, is a regular email newssheet that gives details of where groups or volunteers are working, and sometimes also training courses for identifying particular groups of species, as well as walks and talks.

If you just want to relax and enjoy the wildlife while we still have it, join some of the Field Club's walks and holidays. Over the winter we have enjoyed a fungus foray in Foxholes Reserve, searched for overwintering birds on the Ridgeway and at Rushy Common near Witney, and gone in search of the first spring flowers. We are really grateful to all the members and other friends of the Club who spare us time to plan and lead our walks.

Jill Bailey



Fritillaries in North meadow, Cricklade

Photo by Mary Elford

## YOUR NEWSLETTER

A big thank you to all who contributed to this newsletter. It's a good showcase for the Club, a chance for existing members to reminisce, and for potential members to see what we're all about. Please can you let me have your reports of walks and other Club outings newsletter, by the first week of April 2016 for the Spring newsletter, and any April reports as soon as

possible afterwards. My e-mail address is j.bailey@ecofeatures.co.uk. E-mailed flora and fauna lists in a single column, <u>not</u> in a table or spaced with tabs, please. If this is not convenient, please post handwritten or printed reports to the address given on your programme.

Jill Bailey (Newsletter Editor)

# REPORTS OF FIELD MEETINGS

First, an item that missed the last newsletter:

Chimney Meadows Nature Reserve 4 July 2016

Six WOFC members joined the Wychwood Flora Group members for a guided walk through Chimney Meadow Nature Reserve. As Lisa Lane was unable to be our guide her husband, Martyn, ably took her place. He is the Wildlife Trust's (BBOWT's) Senior Reserves Manager and very knowledgeable about the reserve. Through him we learnt so much about this reserve and the wildlife that thrives here. Chimney Meadows was once a commercial farm, but since becoming a nature reserve the arable fields have been transformed into species-rich wildflower meadows with a mosaic of different wetland habitats. With the River Thames forming its southern boundary, it is flooded to a greater or lesser degree every year. Chimney Meadows forms part of BBOWT's ongoing vision to protect wildlife across the wider countryside and lies at the heart of the Upper Thames Living Landscape.

Martyn took us across BBOWT's meadows to the National Nature Reserve (NNR) which is not accessible to the general public. It is managed by BBOWT for Natural England. As we went he stopped to describe the various habitats which have been created to provide for the requirements of different species, e.g. temporary ponds for freshwater species which need a period without water in the summer to complete their life-cycles. The meadows we went through were arable when BBOWT acquired the land. In 2004 the process of conversion was started when green hay cut from the NNR meadows was spread over them. Twelve years later it is difficult to see that they have not always been meadows full of wildflowers. Adder'stongue (a fern) took 7 years to become established. There are no Green-winged

Orchids in them yet. Here, the Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) plants are the less-common variant with showier flowers that have long, deeply-cut outer florets, making them appear like the flowers of Greater Knapweed. Other flowers found here are Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Tufted Vetch (*Vicia cracca*), Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and Pepper Saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*).

The NNR was flooded in July 2007. It is taking time to recover and it is good to know that the wet grassland flora found there is preserved in the recreated BBOWT meadows, which are at a slightly higher level and should not flood should this happen again. Grazing the NNR were a herd of Sussex cattle, an ancient breed derived from draught oxen but now kept for beef. They have a red-brown coat and have a creamy white switch to the tail. They are ideal for this habitat as they are not fussy grazers, maintaining their condition even on poor quality feed.

Unfortunately, as the weather on the evening of our visit was overcast and cool, few butterflies were on the wing and we did not see the meadows at their best. Even so, it was not hard to imagine the meadows in their full glory with the purples, yellows, reds and whites of the wildflowers in amongst the grasses waving in the wind. Apparently every year the meadows appear slightly different, as different species come and go in abundance.

Brenda Betteridge

# Fungus Foray at Foxholes Nature Reserve 16 October 2017

About 17 people joined Peter Creed for the Field Club's annual fungus foray, which this year was held in Foxholes Nature Reserve. It turned out to be an ideal autumn morning to be in the woods. The weather forecast had not been very encouraging with heavy rain forecast for our area but as it happened the weather stayed fine except for a short shower which did not bother us much as we were under the canopy of the trees.

Once we had entered the wood Peter gave us some general information about fungi while our eyes became adjusted to the lower light conditions. Soon we were finding lots of fungi in the leaf litter and on fallen branches helped by our grand-daughters with their eagle eyes. This was the first time they had been on a fungus foray and they really enjoyed the experience. Charlotte, who is 8, methodically wrote down the common name of all the fungi as they were identified by Peter.

We did not cover much ground and stayed mostly in the beech wood. The total number of fungi found was 34. As ever, we were astounded by Peter's knowledge. As he identified each fungus he showed us the distinguishing features and gave us interesting facts about them. We very much appreciated having him as our leader and hope that he found this foray as rewarding as we did.

### List of fungi found:

Rosy Bonnet Common Puffball

Birch polypore/Birch Bracket/Razorstrop

Blackedge Bonnet Hairy Curtain Crust Porcelain Fungus Geranium Brittlegill Mild or Beech Milkcap

Sulphur Tuft Burnt Knight Ochre Brittlegill Brain (Jelly) Fungus Aniseed Funnel Amethyst Deceiver Angel's Bonnet Charcoal Burner Wood Woollyfoot

Rooting Shank Purple Brittlegill Mycena rosea Lycoperdon perlatum Piptoporus betulinus Mycena pelianthina Stereum hirsutum Oudemansiella mucida Russula fellea Lactarius subdulcis Hypholoma fasciculare Tricholoma ustale Russula ochroleuca Tremella sp. Clitocybe odora Laccaria amethystine Mycena arcangeliana Russula cyanoxantha Gymnopus peronatus (syn. Collybia Beechwood Sickener

Butter Cap

Chestnut Dapperling

Bay Polypore Jelly Ear

Beech Woodwart

Artist's Bracket

False Deathcap

Turkey Tail (?)

Small Stagshorn

Yellow Stagshorn

Commmon Earthball

Blackening Brittlegill

Beech (or Slimy) Milkcap

Inkcap (species not identified)

Russula nobilis

Collybia butyracea

Lepiota castanea

Polyporus durus (syn. P. badius)

Auricularia auricular-judae

Hypoxylon fragiforme

Ganoderma applanatum

Amanita citrine

Trametes versicolor

Calocera cornea

Calocera viscose

Scleroderma citrinum Russula nigricans

Lactarius blennius

Coprinus sp.

Brenda Betteridge

# Bird-watching trip to Norfolk 21 – 24 October 2016

Sixteen members of the Field Club (five of whom had not been on one of our trips before) enjoyed a fruitful, interesting and profitable stay in North Norfolk.

On our journey to the hotel a number of us stopped for a short break at Welney Wildfowl and Wetlands site where we saw many Widgeon, Teal, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwits, etc, including a large flock of Whooper Swans which had kindly flown in that very day.

The next morning early a few hardy individuals walked the short distance from the hotel to the coast and were rewarded by seeing a number of other birds which made the effort worthwhile.

After breakfast we all made our way to Titchwell RSPB Reserve where we spent the morning watching large numbers of waders and other birds, the most interesting of which was perhaps the rarely seen Bean Goose. The sun shone for us and the waves crashing on the coast were spectacular.

That afternoon we visited Holkham and had a very pleasant walk down Lady Anne Drive to the hide where we watched, by now the fairly common Marsh Harriers, and the not so common Great White Egret, as well as a party of swallows.

During our get-together after dinner at the Hotel to discuss the birds seen that day we discovered the total was 91 species. So we set off after breakfast the next morning to the marshes at Cley determined to bring the total over 100. A red-throated diver was seen, as well as bearded tits together with the usual waders, geese and ducks at this very attractive site.

But still we hadn't made our 100 total so most of us set off on our final day to Snettisham, and true to form this magical place rewarded us by bringing the total number of species to 102. This included Bar-tailed Godwits, Linnets, Egyptian Geese, rock pipit etc.

We left watching the Knots performing their graceful murmurations over the estuary in

the distance, finishing a successful and enjoyable trip, ably led by Roy, for the most part in pleasant sunshine.

Bird species:

Red-throated Diver Water Rail Swallow Little Grebe Moorhen Meadow Pipit **Great Crested Grebe** Rock Pipit Coot Pied Wagtail Oystercatcher Fulmar Gannet Avocet Wren Ringed Plover Dunnock Cormorant Golden Plover Great White Egret Robin Grey Heron **Grey Plover** Stonechat Mute Swan Lapwing Blackbird Knot Bewick's Swan Fieldfare Whooper Swan Sanderling Song Thrush Bean Goose Little Stint Redwing Cetti's Warbler

Grevlag Goose Curlew Sandpiper **Brent Goose** Dunlin Goldcrest **Egyptian Goose** Ruff Bearded Tit Shelduck Jack Snipe Coal Tit Mandarin Snipe Bluetit Wigeon Black-tailed Godwit Great Tit Gadwall Bar-tailed Godwit Jay Teal Whimbrel Magpie Mallard Curlew Jackdaw Spotted Redshank **Pintail** Rook

Garganey Redshank Carrion Crow Shoveler Greenshank Starling

House Sparrow Pochard Turnstone Black-headed Gull Chaffinch **Tufted Duck** Lesser Black-backed Gull **Brambling** Red Kite Guillemot Greenfinch Marsh Harrier Sparrowhawk Stock Dove Goldfinch Wood Pigeon Buzzard Linnet

Kestrel Collared Dove Reed Bunting

Red-legged Partridge Tawny Owl Pheasant Skylark

Anne Jackson

# Walk at Rushy Common and Tar Lakes 12 February 2017

It was the most unpromising of days: the sky was grey, the thermometer in the car read between one and two degrees and the light north east wind made it feel a few degrees colder. Nevertheless, sixteen well wrapped-up and be-wellied members of the Field Club and five visitors assembled at 10:30 in the

car park at Rushy Common nature reserve. After a brief introduction to the area, which had been extensively worked for sand and gravel but quite sympathetically restored only a few years ago by Smiths of Bletchington and the Lower Windrush Valley project, we set off for a circular walk between Rushy Common and Hardwick.

There were not many birds on the smaller Tar lakes except the 'usual suspects' of Tufted Ducks, Wigeon and the ubiquitous Coots. An Oystercatcher was spotted on the far side of one of the larger lakes and someone with sharp eyes spotted some Goldeneye a long way off on the Linear Fisheries fishing lake. Roy Jackson had heroically carried his telescope with him which allowed us better views of them (thank you, Roy). A Great White Egret, heading towards the reserve flew over while we were standing there but by this time it had started to snow gently and it was time to move on. A few members of the party took advantage of a short cut, which saved about a mile, back to the car park; the rest of us continued to the west branch of the Windrush near Hardwick and followed the Windrush path in the Witney direction before cutting back across the fields towards Gill Mill. Someone remarked that there were almost always geese in those fields, and indeed there was a mixed flock of some thirty or forty Canada and Greylag Geese. On the track between Gill Mill and the road we were treated to the sight of a flock of two

or three hundred Lapwing flying over. From the end of that track one can look into one of the more recent workings, not yet restored, and David Rolfe pointed out Sand Martin nest holes in some of the banks.

We got back to the car park at about 12:45, a bit chilled but none the worse for it. Most of the party then departed but a few of us went to the hide which overlooks the lake inside the Rushy Common reserve. The lack of birds to see from the hide was rather disappointing. When we made a recce the previous weekend there had been about thirty Red-crested Pochard and three pairs of Goldeneve close in, but some work on one of the islands during the week had obviously disturbed the birds and there wasn't much to be seen, although we counted two or three more species and another (or the same) Oystercatcher, making a total of thirty six species.

It was a shame that the weather was against us as it's usually quite a 'productive' area; at least there were a few signs of spring with lots of Hazel catkins, pussy willows in bud and a few very precocious leaves on a Hawthorn near the car park.

# Bird species seen:

Great White Egret Goldeneye Redwing Song Trush Heron Coot Cormorant Great Crested Grebe Blue Tit Canada Goose Black Headed Gull Great Tit Grey Lag Goose Longtailed Tit Herring Gull Mute Swan Oystercatcher Wren **Tufted Duck** Lapwing (singletons & flock Chaffinch Wigeon of 2-300) Pied Wagtail Gadwall Buzzard Wood pigeon Mallard Red Kite Jackdaw Teal Blackbird **Carrion Crow** Pochard Robin Shoveler Fieldfare

John Cobb and Sue Morton

### Circular walk to Whitehill Wood and Stonesfield Common 26 March 2017

This walk takes in three sites where rare plants are found: Yellow Star of Bethlehem (*Gagea lutea*) in Whitehill Wood (shown below), Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*) on Stonesfield Common, and Cotswold Pennycress (*Microthalaspi perfoliatum*) at Bridgefield Bridge.



Yellow Star of Bethlehem

The first part of the walk from the bridge at Ashford Mill is through an open area where poplars, originally intended to be made into matches, have been felled. Here the ground is carpeted with seedlings of Himalayan Balsam (Impatiens glandulifera) – when you see them in such great profusion it is easy to see how quickly this plant can take over an area. Once the path enters Whitehill Wood it runs very close to the River Evenlode. Most of the Yellow Star of Bethlehem plants grow in the area between the path and the river, a habitat which is gradually being lost to erosion. All except two of the eight flowers we found were on that side of the path where there is a little more light. One flower was in the middle of a badger latrine on the river bank! Although there were few flowers we could see lots of leaves.

As we progressed through the wood we were pleased to see Toothwort, Primroses, Wood Anemones, Dog Violets and Townhall Clock. Toothwort is parasitic on roots of Hazel and the pale pink flowers in a one-sided spike soon die back after flowering. Townhall Clock, also known as Moschatel, has a small flower head which is unique. It is dice-shaped with a greenish-yellow flower on each side and one on top. This plant is in the Santalaceae family, of which the only other members in the British flora are Mistletoe and Bastard Toadflax.



Toothwor

On the other side of the bridge which carries the Oxford to Worcester rail line over the River Evenlode we stopped to estimate the age of an old oak tree. A rough measurement of the circumference of its trunk was obtained by four people surrounding it with arms outstretched. It took the equivalent of 3½ people measuring approx. 7 m, which means it is probably over 300 years old. As we crossed the meadow we could hear Buzzards mewing and a Cormorant flew overhead.

We crossed the River Evenlode on a wooden bridge and rested in the sun sitting on a decaying tree trunk – a lovely spot to take in the surroundings. From here we followed the steep path through some Hawthorns up on to Stonesfield Common. Here we were struck by the large number of ant hills which showed up now that the grass has been grazed by sheep. Our route took us past the second rare-plant site, where the Meadow Clary grows. At this time of year only the beginnings of the basal rosettes of leaves in each clump are visible. Come back in June to see the attractive blue flowers.

We returned to our cars at Ashford Bridge following the road. On the way we stopped at Bridgefield Bridge, where the road goes over the railway, the site of the third rare

plant, the Cotswold Pennycress. This is an unusual member of the cabbage family and is an annual. Unfortunately we could see no sign of this plant here but as it so small – it only grows to be about 25 cm tall – with white flowers about 2 mm in diameter it may have been there and we could not see it from the roadside. This rare plant is a Cotswold speciality. Nationally there are 14 sites, 10 of which are within the Cotswolds AONB.

This was a most enjoyable walk for the 12 people who came along. The weather being fine, sunny and warm (when you were out of the chilly wind!) made it particularly memorable. Thank you, Ken, for leading this walk and sharing some of your knowledge about this area.

## Plant species in flower:

Lesser Celandine Ranunculus ficaria Dog's Mercury Mercurialis perennis Blackthorn Prunus spinosa Toothwort Lathraea squamaria Wood Anemone Anemone nemorosa Moschatel (Townhall Clock) Adoxa moschatellina Ivy-leaved Speedwell Veronica hederifolia Primrose Primula vulgaris

Yellow Star of Bethlehem Gagea lutea

Viola reichenbachiana Early Dog-violet

Common Dog Violet Viola riviniana

Ground Ivy Glechoma hederacea

Cowslip (in bud) Primula veris Sweet Violet Viola odorata

### Birds (seen and heard):

Wren Skylark Red-legged Partridge

Buzzard Butterflies: Red Kite

Small Tortoiseshell Chiffchaff Cormorant

**Great Tit** Kestrel Brimstone

Brenda Betteridge

# **MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

# Postscript to Moth Morning 18 June 2016

After we had looked at all the moths and eaten our bacon butties Ken took some of the members into the disused quarry next-door to look at the Bee Orchids. On the way back Gavin Hageman showed us his party trick – he ate a stinging nettle leaf! Later, reading a magazine I came across a small article about a The World Stinging Nettle Eating Championship. Apparently this event took place at the Bottle Inn at Marshwood in Dorset on 18 June (just noticed coincidence of date!). The competitors are given freshly picked 2-ft-long nettle stalks, from which they have to strip the leaves and consume as many as they can stomach in 1 hour. The person who manages the most is crowned King or Queen of the Stingers. How about giving it a go, Gavin?

Brenda Betteridge

# Discovery of a Rugged Oil Beetle 22 February 2017



I was cycling home across Langel Common, Witney. As I passed Cogges church priory I saw on the ground a large, dead, black beetle, which I picked up. It was a very interesting-looking round-bodied beetle, and one which I had never seen before. At home, I identified it as a Rugged Oil Beetle, *Meloe rugosus*. I took the beetle to the Oxford University Natural History Museum, where Ivan Wright confirmed it was indeed *Meloe rugosus*. This is a rare species.

These parasitic species have a complex life cycle. The flightless female lays up to several thousand eggs in a burrow. The larvae are called triungulins. They wait in flower, to be picked up by a ground-nesting solitary bee, and to be taken to its nesting burrow. They attach themselves to the bee with their hook-like forelegs. In the bee's burrow they eat the bee's egg and pollen store. They pupate in the burrow and overwinter there, emerging the following year as an adult.

Alison Weaver

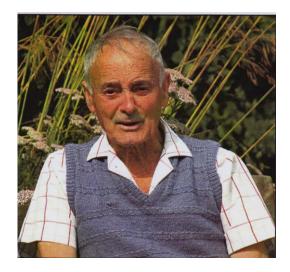
### **OBITUARIES**

### **Jean Cole 1932 – 2016**

Jean moved to West Oxfordshire from Essex when she married Dr Alan Cole, of Bampton. Introduced to each other because of their shared love of natural history, especially of birds, they travelled the world f exploring the wildlife. Both became keen members of the Field Club. A former primary school teacher, Jean was very involved in community life in Asthall, where her daughter was married, contributing to the 'Chronicle' and the local Book Group, and also serving time as Secretary to the Parish Council. After the couple moved to Bampton, Jean cooked for the Old Folks Club, served in the Bampton Charity shop and became an active member of the Bampton Zimbabwe project. Her other great love was her old crofter's cottage on the west coast of Argyll, lovingly restored, and now occupied by her son, Giles.

(based on an her obituary in the Chronicle)

### **Martin Slocock** 1924 – 2017



Born on his parents' farm in the Chilterns, Martin was the quintessential countryman. After service in the Second World War, he virtually spent the rest of his life in the countryside farming and following many countryside pursuits. I first met Martin, and indeed Barbara, when becoming a member of the Field Club in the autumn of 1968. We became instant friends and so remained. At the time I was working on a dairy farm at Northmoor, and I well remember Martin lending us his 'Cock Pheasant', a state of the art piece of hay-making equipment not to be confused with the one you pop in the oven given half a chance! This was an early example to me of Martin's very generous nature.

We were regular members of two pheasant-beating teams on estates in the Burford area for several decades. These were always enjoyable social occasions, meeting a variety of country characters. For me particularly, they were a chance to observe the wildlife in areas not open to public access, as great and much appreciated bonus. As a result of this involvement, we qualified to attend both cock pheasant shoots at the end of the season and hare shoots. It is said that five hares eat as much grass as one sheep. For me, there are now too many sheep in the countryside and too few hares! These a shoots involving us beaters were rather reminiscent of 'Dad's Army', although possibly rather more safety-conscious. Attending ploughing matches was another of Martin's favourite pastimes, where he could indulge and air his considerable knowledge of both vintage and modern tractors.

As an active member of the Club, Martin regularly attended our indoor and outdoor meetings and accompanied Barbara on many weekends away. He always gave Barbara his full support at the Club's soup kitchens (held after chilly May dawn choruses) and committee meetings held at 'Long Meadow' and throughout her time as a committee member, Chairman and President. On a personal note I much enjoyed the hospitality of Long Meadow with overnight stays, house sitting and in more recent years visits to the local hostelries with Martin for a bar meal and a pint or two! He will be sadly missed by us all. To quote an old adage, 'You don't get many Martin Slococks to the pound'.

Graham Wren