West Oxfordshire Field Club

www.thefieldclub.org.uk

Newsletter No. 109 Spring 2019

The "blackthorn winter" is fading, and spring is proceeding in earnest. Banks of primroses are giving way to cowslips, celandines are gleaming under shrubs and hedges, and pin-points of stitchwort can be spotted on roadside banks. If country lore is to be believed, we are in for another dry summer, as the oak is certainly out before the ash in this area. The rivers – and many lawns – have not yet recovered from last year's remarkable heat. Yet tree blooms, be they showy magnolias or less obvious catkins, seem to be particularly prolific this spring, both visually and inferred from the widespread snuffling and wheezing among the local human population. To my delight I have just seen the first yellowhammer in the village for at least a decade. They used to line the telegraph wires, and were frequent visitors to my bird table during very cold spells, vying for seeds with local reed buntings.

Despite the continuing cold nights, spring arrived early this year: temperatures soared in February and the bird observatory at Portland, Dorset, photographed its first swallow of the year on the 21st (the average date of arrival is 29 March). My winter heathers were already buzzing with several species of bumblebees, and various other small bees, hoverflies and flies. Spring bulbs burst into flower early, some before Christmas, and many small birds started nesting early. Fortunately, there was no Beast from the East to threaten nestlings this year.

As well as earlier timing of these natural events, attributed to the warming climate, there is a gradual spreading of the distribution of many native species further north, and species from beyond our southern shores are also visiting more, and some are taking up residence. I remember my excitement at seeing my first collared dove in the 1960s, and many years a later my first (UK) white egret stalking a ditch in inland Dorset. Now both white and great egrets can regularly be seen in our wetlands, and purple herons, night herons, spoonbills and even glossy ibis have bred in the UK in recent years.

For species to be able to "migrate" in response to climate change, it is important to preserve corridors of suitable habitat across the country. To help predict where these corridors are needed and for which species, records of where and when species occur from year to year are invaluable. Amateur naturalists' diaries from past centuries are being scoured for records of the first appearance of species in spring and notes of breeding successes and failures. More recent records reveal which species are capitalising on the changes and which are losing out. By noting in which parts of the country species are struggling, we can look for the reasons and try to help. Today, recording sightings is easier than ever before, with mobile apps for contributing records of a wide range of species from plants, birds, mammals and insects to pond life. Not all of these require the amateur to accurately identify what they have seen. Many will accept photographs and pass these on to experts. The Field Club's aims include promoting the conservation of nature, and this is a good way for members to help, and offer a focus for country walks and a bonus for sharp-eyed gardeners. Our late President, Graham Wren, was a fine example of a meticulous observer, recording in photographs and in his

many lectures observations on our changing countryside, both locally and further afield, and commenting on the consequent losses and gains of wildlife. Garden feeders are now recognised as valuable aids to survival. Not all species respond to environmental signals at the same rate. Many birds are triggered to breed by a combination of day length and temperature, while some the plants that their caterpillar prey feed on may respond only to day length, so breeding and feeding go out of sync. Not only birds are affected. Earlier springs may bring animals such as hedgehogs out of hibernation, only to find insufficient food to survive. One strategy for success is to spread your risks. The hedgerows between Bladon and Long Hanborough used to be full of hawthorns of varying hues of white and pink, individual trees coming into bloom at different times, so at least some would coincide with their insect pollinators. Likewise, some birds, such as blackbirds, can produce more than one brood in a season.
The fritillaries were nodding their heads at Ducklington last weekend, but the full bloom should peak just in time for our trip to Cricklade at the end of April. I wish members a wildlife-filled summer.

Jill Bailey

YOUR NEWSLETTER

A splendid effort by all you contributors – all the reports were in before the due date – many thanks. Please can you let me have your reports of walks and other Club outings by mid-September 2019 for the Autumn newsletter.
E-mailed flora and fauna lists in a single column, not in a table or spaced with tabs, please. If a plant list contains both English and Latin names, a table or Excel file (two columns) is fine, but for other lists, please do not use Excel. If this is not convenient, please post handwritten or printed reports to the address given on your programme.

REPORTS OF FIELD MEETINGS

Field Trip to Norfolk 19-22 October 2018
I am very lucky to have travelled to many countries looking at wildlife, particularly over the last 22 years since I have been retired. However, I keep going back to Norfolk, having been introduced to it by the wonderful Barbara Slocock, a previous president of the Field Club. I find it consistently good for birds, my main interest, and this time was no exception.
Twelve of us went from the Field Club and some of us called in at Welney Wetland Trust on the way up or on the way back, where we were greeted by good numbers of Whooper Swans, some right in front of the hide and others feeding in a field viewed from the restaurant while we were having lunch. Whoopers, the largest of the three Swan species we see in this country, fly South from Iceland to Scotland in one journey of less than a day, probably the longest non-stop swan flight in the world, and they usually stick together in family groups. A bonus here were the House and Tree Sparrows to watch on the feeders.

We all met up at the wonderful Caley Hall Hotel for dinner on Friday 1 October and breakfast the next morning was called for 8 a.m. By 9 a.m. we were on our way to Lady Anne's Drive, Holkham. This had been spruced up by Holkham Hall Estates and a new visitor centre and restaurant installed since our last visit. Pink-footed Geese were in the surrounding fields and more were flying in in impressive numbers. We were to see thousands of these birds flying in wonderful V-shaped skeins while we were in Norfolk; the noise mass flocks of these birds make is amazing. They fly in from Iceland and Greenland, where they breed, to winter here on the leaves and stalks of sugar beet tops cut before harvesting. The geese from Iceland are now increasing dramatically, due partly to the wintering conditions in the U.K. Small flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese, the smaller of the geese which fly in from their summer breeding areas on the Siberian tundra, Northern Russia, 3,700 miles away were also flying over during our time in Norfolk and we were to see these in small groups on the beaches and on the water areas of the reserves. (During its lifetime a Brent will fly the equivalent of 2.6 times around the world!)

We walked down on the boardwalk to the top end of the beach and dunes, looking for small passerines in the scrub areas. Small groups of Linnets flew up and numbers of Meadow Pipits were flitting around. Further along we went up off the sand onto a viewing area and the start of the boardwalk into the pines. From here

we were able to do some sea watching through the telescopes and saw several Great Crested Grebes, with their long necks, out on the sea. Sharp-eyed Roy was able to pick out a Red-throated Diver to show us and there were Gannets flying by in good numbers.

We headed up the boardwalk through the pines, seeing numbers of small dragonflies making the most of the beautiful sunny weather we were blessed with for the whole of our stay. This led us up to the hide, which faces the other side of the ridge, back over fields, marshes and ponds towards Holkham Estate. The ponds contained numbers of ducks, mainly Teal and Wigeon, and some Gadwall and a Marsh Harrier put in an appearance. Grey Heron, Little Egrets and some Curlew were also visible from here.
Dropping down onto the track the other side, some of us walked along a further half a mile to the second hide, which I have not visited before. The steps up to this one are very steep and "taxing on the knees!" and we were met by another birding group there who had been watching a Hen Harrier, as is the way with bird watching, "ten minutes ago"!

After a quick lunch stop at the smart new visitor centre we drove back along the road towards Titchwell, calling in at the beautifully picturesque harbour of Brancaster Staithe. Here we watched Turnstones, Oyster Catchers and Curlew and Mervyn washing his muscles!

Moving on to Titchwell RSPB Reserve where we spent the rest of the afternoon. Some of the notable "goodies" seen from here were one or two rather flighty Bearded Tits, a Yellow -browed Warbler at long last (having spent fruitless times on previous trips waiting for one of these to appear)! Several had been reported in the area over the weekend. Yellow-browed Warblers are a tiny Asiatic warbler probably swept off its Siberia-to-India migratory route by a strong South-easterly wind. They quite often come up on the rare bird alert on this coast at this time of year, sometimes with similar rarities from Asia such as the Red-flanked Bluetail reported at various sites along this coast while we were there. A lucky few saw Rough-legged Buzzard down at the beach, a lovely flock of Golden Plovers glinting in the sun were spooked by what we thought was a very noisy motor bike up on the main road but turned out to be a Peregrine trying its luck then aborting and flying off out to sea. More large flocks of Pink-footed Geese came over from further down the coast and many of them landed in a ploughed field over the road from the reserve, making a wonderful noise. Three Great Egrets did a splendid fly-past over our heads at one stage. Sanderling, Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover were seen down on the beach, as well as Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits.

The next day, which turned out to be another beautiful sunny one, we visited Holme Dunes, just about three miles down the road from the hotel, in the morning. This much improved Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve opens at 10a.m. and while we were waiting we looked over the dunes on to a marshy area at various birds and Roy picked up a Short-eared Owl flying away from us.

There is now a very good visitor centre at this reserve and a cafe. It is a short walk up through some woods to another very long sandy beach and we saw many of the same birds we had already seen, plus Goldcrest in the Corsican pines. There are three hides overlooking the reserve area and an impressive display of prickly sea buckthorn smothered with orange berries, vitamin-rich food for incoming thrushes. Christo, who had just come down from Scotland, had seen loads of winter thrushes there, but we did not see one in Norfolk during our stay.
After lunch at the Lavender Centre we headed down to Snettisham RSPB reserve, most of us walked from the car park and Roy had a pass to drive his car down to the Rotary Hide. High tide was at the convenient time of 17.19 and although not a particularly high at 6.28 metres (on the 10th it was 7.85m at 07.35), it was a lot better than having to get up before dawn and miss breakfast as we have done in the past (must be getting lazy as I grow older!!)
I love to walk there from the car park looking for birds on and around the ponds we pass. These ponds are where gravel was dug and transported by ship from jetties over the bank on The Wash. The gravel was used to help build all the runways along the East Coast for the Second World War. Only the remains of one of these jetties survive now. We had a good view of a small group of Whooper Swans grazing in a nearby field and they took off as we watched them. It is a great experience to come up onto the shingle bank and be suddenly confronted by the massive area of The Wash, a huge area of mud with an incoming tide and overwhelming mass flocks of various waders and other birds – Oystercatchers, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Starlings, Seagulls and above all Knot. Huge murmurations of these birds would every now and then take off and create wonderful fluid patterns in the sky, catching the light before

settling on the mud again, a sight I never get tired of. Other birds like Sanderling, Shelduck, Grey Plover, Cormorant, Little Egret, Lapwing, Ruff were in abundance spread over this vast area. At high tide the fast advancing sea water slowed down in the channels in front of us as the light started to change colour and fade. We sat in the Rotary Hide looking at all this and because it is a twin aspect hide with a water-filled "pond" seen from the back windows we were able to watch a large, noisy flock of Greylags fly in and land on the water. They did a lot of bathing and preening before they all started to depart in small groups to the nearby fields. We had been expecting the Pink-footed Geese to start returning from the sugar beet fields, where they had been for the day, to roost for the night on The Wash, as I have seen before, but this did not happen (it is a very long coast). This was a fitting climax to our short two days birding, great to have an appropriately timed high tide to be able to save the best till last, even though the tide was not a very high one. Some of us walking back to the car park in the dusk were lucky to see a Barn Owl coasting low over the fields.

Birds seen or heard:

Red-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Great Grested Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Great White Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Dark-belled Brent Goose
Egyptian Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Shoveler
Tufted Duck
Eider Duck
Common Scoter
Red Kite
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Pheasant
Water Rail
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Grey Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Dunlin
Ruff
Jack Snipe
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Redshank
Curlew
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Lesser black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great black-backed Gull
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Barn Owl
Short-eared Owl
Green Woodpecker (h)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Blackbird
Redwing
Cetti's Warbler (h)
Yellow-browed Warbler
Chiffchaff (h)
Goldcrest
Bearded Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Reed Bunting

David Roberts

Fungus Foray, Bernwood 28 October 2018

This was originally going to take place at Sydlings Copse, near Beckley, but our leader Peter Creed's recce that morning revealed only four dried-up specimens, hardly surprising given the exceptionally dry summer and autumn we have had. He therefore decided that we would move on to nearby Bernwood, a large area of clay woodland on the Oxfordshire / Buckinghamshire border, where he thought we might have more luck.

Seven of us met Peter in the busy car park – it was a beautiful, if chilly, morning, and half the dogs of Oxon / Bucks were out for their Sunday morning run. Luckily, Bernwood is large enough that the crowds soon disperse, and we met few people on our walk.

Fungi were coming up following recent rain, but were still quite sparse, and a lot of them were very, very small. With Peter's help, we found a surprisingly good range of fungi. It's always surprising what you see

when you go a bit off the beaten path and really start focusing on the ground. The most numerous species that we found were False Chantarelles, although the edible Winter Chantarelles were also starting to emerge. False Deathcaps were among the most plentiful species that we found, and we only found a couple of Fly Agarics. The very slippery Butter Caps were also widespread, while an area of burnt ground yielded a good show of Bonfire Scalycaps.
We also saw some interesting trees when we raised our gaze above ground level – Alder Buckthorn and quite a number of Wild Service trees, already bare of leaves but with their red berries showing up well.
Many thanks as always to Peter for his enthusiasm and expertise.

Sue Morton

Common name	**Latin name**	**Comment**
On ride		
Green Elfcup	*Chlorociboria aeruginascens*	Green-stained twig – no fruiting body
Under conifers*		
False Chanterelle	*Hygrophoropsis aurantiaca*	Inedible
Bonnets	*Mycena spp.*	
Butter Cap	*Rhodocollybia butyracea*	Inedible
Yellow Stagshorn	*Calocera viscosa*	Inedible
Common Puffball	*Lycoperdon perlatum*	Edible when young
Tawny Funnel	*Paralepista flaccida*	Edible
Bonfire Scalycap	*Pholiota highlandensis*	Inedible
Nitrous Bonnet	*Mycena leptocephala*	Smells of bleach
Winter Chanterelle	*Craterellus tubaeformis*	Edible
Conifer Blueing Bracket	*Postia caesia*	Inedible
Sulphur Tuft	*Hypholoma fasciculare*	Poisonous
Turkey Tail	*Trametes versicolor*	Inedible
Under beech		
Rosy Bonnet	*Mycena rosea*	Poisonous
Russet Toughshank	*Gymnopus dryophilus*	Edible but not worthwhile
False Deathcap	*Amanita citrina*	Inedible. Smells of raw potato
Blackening Brittlegill	*Russula nigricans*	Edible when young
Fly Agaric	*Aminita muscaria*	Poisonous
Birch Knight	*Tricholoma fulvum*	Inedible
The Flirt or Bare Teeth Brittlegill	*Russula vesca*	Edible – has a mild nutty taste
In ride where bare soil		
White Fibrecap	*Inocybe geophylla*	Poisonous
Lilac Fibrecap	*Inocybe geophylla var. lilacina*	Poisonous

Species of fungi seen:
* Forest floor and decaying wood covered with mosses: Common Tamarisk-moss (*Thuidium tamariscinum*) and Neat Feather-moss (*Pseudoscleropodium purum*). *Brenda Betteridge*

Walk at Rushy Common and Standlake Common on 11 November 2018

It was a lovely sunny but chilly morning when seven Field Club members met up in the Rushy Common nature reserve car park with ten or so members of the Oxford RSPB Group. Very few water birds were evident from the viewing screen beyond the car park, so we moved on to the hide where the greater part of the lake could be viewed from. Here, we had good views of dabbling duck species such as Gadwall, Wigeon, Mallard, Gadwall and Teal, and a pair of Tufted Ducks, which are a species of diving duck. We also saw a Black Swan and several Great Crested Grebes. A pair of Egyptian Geese were loafing on an island among some lapwings. Later, we crossed the road to Tar Lakes where on the Conservation lake five Red-crested Pochards were seen close-to.

We then moved on to the Standlake Common reserve, parking in the village and walking the Windrush Path to the hides – there are two here. Along the way, Long-tailed Tit, Goldcrest, Bullfinch, Fieldfare, Redwing and a Great Spotted Woodpecker were in the hedgerows. Most of the wildfowl species on the lake were those we'd seen earlier on, except for a female Common Pochard and several Little Grebes, seen close to one of the hides. A Great White Egret and a Grey Heron were on the edge of the water on the far side, the former constantly on the move and the latter standing motionless, and a Little Egret was seen occasionally almost beyond the far end of the lake. On the way to the hides, we'd been told by someone just leaving the site that a Bittern had been seen sitting just inside the reedbed on the far side. It was only after sitting in one of the hides for some time that a keen-eyed person managed to locate it, and even then, because of its striated plumage, it was difficult make out against the reed stems until it moved while preening. Further along the far reedbed, a Jack Snipe was almost as difficult to see until it moved, but several nearby Common Snipe were easier to spot. When a small flock of Greylag Geese flew in, a Barnacle Goose and a Bar-headed Goose with them were spotted by a few of our group. All feral birds, of course. A flock of around 50 Golden Plover were also seen, distantly flying by.
It had proved to be a worthwhile trip to several of our local lakes, on a perfect winter morning.

Birds seen:

Little grebe
Great-crested grebe
Cormorant
Bittern
Great white egret
Little egret
Grey heron
Mute swan
Greylag goose
Canada goose
Barnacle goose
Egyptian goose
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Red-crested Pochard
Common Pochard
Tufted duck
Buzzard
Moorhen
Coot
Lapwing
Jack snipe
Common snipe
Black-headed gull
Woodpigeon
Robin
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Long-tailed tit
Blue tit
Great tit
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion crow
Bullfinch

David Rolfe

Walk at the Cotswold Water Park on 27 January 2019

It was a fine, but cool, morning with a brisk wind when just five of us went along, although we didn't all meet up until we'd returned to the Neigh Bridge car park as three who had travelled together were late arriving for the start and did only part of the planned route.

There were several Goosanders and Tufted Ducks on the lake adjacent to the car park, but when we reached Lake 44 at Somerford Keynes Lower Mill, there were many pairs of the former species on the far side and an enormous number, in excess of 50, of Red-crested Pochards closer to us. In bushes along the far bank of the nearby infant River Thames, a Yellowed-browed Warbler had been seen, but after someone told us that he had seen it a little earlier, on this his third attempt, we decided not to give it a try.

When we reached Lake 57 a bit further on, the strong wind had made the water surface very choppy, and with thick shrubs now screening it, we could only make out flotillas of Coots and Tufted Ducks, so we carried on along the Thames Path to Lake 41. On previous visits, this lake had been the one with the most wildfowl species, and it didn't disappoint us on this one. The first ones to catch our attention were members of the heron family: a Great White Egret, and several Little Egrets and Grey Herons along the water's edge. Once again, there was a high number of both male and female Goosanders, the males' bottle green heads and upper necks and black backs contrasting with their largely white lower parts. Other diving duck species comprised at least four pairs of Goldeneyes, and large numbers of Tufted Ducks. There were also lots of Wigeon and Teal, but fewer Shoveler and Gadwall.
On the remainder of the circular route taken the couple of lakes that we passed were situated in a more open area and, presumably because of the gusty wind, had no water birds on them. However, once passed those, on entering an area with mature trees we saw a few small passerine species, including a small flock of Long-tailed Tits. It was nice to meet the others back at the cars and hear about the species that they'd seen

List of birds seen:

	Great White Egret	Mute Swan
Great Crested Grebe	Little Egret	Canada Goose
Cormorant	Grey Heron	Wigeon
Gadwall	Kestrel	Long-tailed Tit
Mallard	Coot	Blue Tit
Shoveler	Black-headed Gull	Great Tit
Red-crested Pochard	Wood Pigeon	Magpie
Common Pochard	Collared Dove	Carrion Crow
Tufted Duck	Dunnock	Starling
Goldeneye	Robin	Chaffinch
Goosander	Blackbird	

David Rolfe

Visit to Oxford University Natural History Museum 14 February 2019
It was a privilege for 12 members to be shown round behind the scenes by Mark Carnall, the extremely knowledgeable Collections Manager (Life Collections Zoology).
We were taken into a basement room and saw racks of all sorts of fascinating specimens preserved in jars of all sizes and in all different sorts of liquids. Notably we saw a specimen of the now extinct Thylacine/Tasmanian Tiger. The last known living animal was captured in 1933 in Tasmania. It was the largest known carnivorous marsupial mammal, evolving about four million years ago.

In another section we were shown part of the John Tradescants' (Elder and Younger) collection of rarities from the Ark in London from 1600/1700, held in locked cupboards. Notably The Oxford Dodo which is the only surviving Dodo soft tissue remains in the world dating back to early 1700s, from Mauritius. A fascinating subject and well worth looking at online.
We all enjoyed our tour and can't wait to go back again.

David Roberts

Rushy Common and Tar Lakes on 7 April 2019

On a cool and slightly overcast Sunday morning, fourteen of us met at the Rushy Common nature reserve for a circular walk of about two miles between Rushy Common and the edge of Hardwick. The area has a variety of habitats, the most interesting being the restored sand and gravel workings, now used as the Rushy Common reserve and commercially as fishing lakes.
Although the walk had been advertised as 'to look for signs of spring', the first sighting of a female Goldeneye reminded us, however, that winter hadn't long gone. Nevertheless, a number of sand martins and swallows flew over the car park and before we reached Tar Lakes several summer migrants announced themselves. In order of vocal appearance these were: Blackcap, a possible common Whitethroat (later confirmed), Chiffchaff, and at Tar Lakes a Cetti's Warbler – the first time that I had heard one there. Perhaps it was simply a coincidence but Cetti's had been Radio 4's Tweet of the Day that morning, and it seemed auspicious. Later a Willow Warbler completed the set.

In early spring there can be a spectacular display of Coltsfoot – Coltsfoot image by John Cobb

one of the earliest plants to flower – on the south-facing gravelly banks of one of the Tar Lakes, but unfortunately we were too late for it. Even so, we did find several large patches of it in flower. It may have been an illusion, but we noticed that there seemed to be two different colour forms, one a slightly greenish-yellow, the other more orange. Other signs of spring were the mass of Blackthorn blossom, and leaves just emerging on the Hawthorns in the hedges.

Swallows and martins congregate over bodies of water to feed up on insects after their return from Africa, and they wouldn't have been disappointed here, for large clouds of midges could be seen against the sky near the lakes. Fortunately they were the non-biting kind. One which was caught in a spider's web was closely examined. A distinguishing feature was its furry head but since there are 622 species in the UK to choose from, the exact species is unknown.

Further on we found a lot of animal runs crossing the path. We thought these might be badger runs, although after a lot of searching at the bottom of barbed wire fences we couldn't find any tell-tale hairs for a positive identification. There was also a series of fairly large and well used holes in a hedge bank, which may have been used by badgers as 'hang-outs' (rather than true setts).

Coltsfoot image by John Cobb

After crossing the eastern branch of the Windrush we walked around the lake belonging to Linear Fisheries, where a Coot was sitting on a nest. The hydrology in that area is curious: as you walk around the end of the lake and look back at the river, the river bank is above eye level but the lake well below your feet – the levels must be several metres different. Although there were a few Cowslips in flower, most of the vegetation was Stinging Nettles and Goose Grass (aka Cleavers) which Gavin Hageman claimed – and demonstrated – to be edible.

Just before Hardwick we came across a pair of Egyptian Geese. When we made a recce the previous weekend they had been in with a mixed flock of Canada and Greylag Geese, but this time they were on their own. Our return along the Windrush path by the western branch of the river, where you can sometimes see Kingfishers, was not very productive except for common flowers such as Red and White Deadnettles and one patch of small and hard to identify white crucifers. However, by the time we reached Gill Mill the sun had appeared, albeit rather weakly, bringing out an Orange Tip; a little later a couple of Speckled Woods were basking on the road verge.

Most of the party departed when we got back to the car park but a few of us stayed to visit the hide overlooking the Rushy Common lake, where we added a few more species to the list, bringing it up to a creditable forty nine. Although the female Goldeneye was still there, we had certainly seen enough signs to convince us that spring had arrived.

Plants in flower

Blackthorn
Ground Ivy
Daisy
Groundsel
White Deadnettle
Common Chickweed
Lesser Celandine
Guelder Rose
Field Maple
Cowslip
Red Deadnettle
Cow Parsley
Common Whitethroat*
Goldeneye (female)
Blackbird
Wren*
Pheasant*
Song Thrush*
Black-headed Gull
Wigeon
Carrion Crow
Cetti's Warbler*
Reed Bunting
Goldfinch
Red Kite
Common Whitlow-grass
Dandelion

Birds (*=heard)

Swallow
Sand Martin
Long-tailed Tit
Great Tit
Chaffinch
Common Pochard
Coot
Great Crested Grebe
Dunnock
Oystercatcher
Blue Tit
Chiffchaff*
Blackcap*
Jackdaw
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Mute Swan
Buzzard
Rook
Magpie
Mallard
Heron
Green Woodpecker*
Robin
Willow Warbler*
Moorhen
Shoveler

Teal
Wood Pigeon
Red-crested Pochard
Cormorant

Insects

Beefly
Orange tip
Speckled wood

Tufted Duck
Canada Goose
Greylag Goose
Egyptian Goose

Mammal

Roe Deer

Lapwing
Black Swan

John Cobb

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Starlings at Standlake

Starling murmurations are close to my heart. They must be one of nature's most spectacular sights. A few years ago I had several students try, with varying degrees of success, to write computer simulations of Starling flocks, but this is not the place to get into technicalities.
Towards the end of January this year, Sue and I decided to go down to see the fabled Starling murmuration at Ham Wall RSPB reserve. Suffice to say that we chose a wet and windy day and to our disappointment, and that of several hundred other people, the Starlings didn't put on much of a show and after a quick flutter around went straight down into the reeds.

A week or so later I spent an afternoon at the hides at Standlake. On my way back to the car I was buzzed by a flock of Starlings and saw the makings of a small murmuration, though I didn't get a good look at it. I was back there a couple of weeks later, spending the morning coppicing with the LWVP volunteers and the afternoon in the hides.
I decided to wait until sunset on the off-chance that the birds were still there and walked along the path towards Chimney to pass the time, clocking up four Hares as a reward. As I turned round to go back to Standlake I noticed Starlings congregating on one of the 400kV electricity pylons. As I watched the pylon became black with them and I assumed that they would stay there - surely a safe enough place to roost - but no!

As one they took to the air with a whoosh and started to assemble over Pit 60 and more came in from every direction until there were many, many thousands of them starting to perform the most spectacular aerial ballet. I must have watched them for a good fifteen or twenty minutes. Eventually the birds all went down to roost in the reeds at the north end of the lake.
I have seen other murmurations, but this was undoubtedly the best (and all the better because, selfishly, as far as I know, I was the only person to witness it!). It was so good that I asked Mary Elford to inform the club about it. Several members went there and weren't disappointed. Sue and I went back a few days later and the show was just as good.

I have tried (and am still trying!) to count the number of birds in the flock. My best estimate is forty to a hundred thousand, though I wouldn't bet my house, or even a half-way decent bottle of wine, on it.

I don't know when the birds dispersed, but of course they are all gone now. It will be interesting to see if they choose the same site again next winter - Otmoor and Ham Wall can't have it all!

John Cobb

An Encounter with Manis Javanica

During the interval at the April 2018 illustrated talk Volcanoes and Dragons, I mentioned to Alison Weaver that while abroad, I'd encountered a creature that was similar at first glance to the 'dragon'. But it wasn't a lizard, and was an only member (*Manis*) of an only family (Manidae) within an order (Pholidota). It was a pangolin, sometimes called the scaly anteater because it shares similar characteristics to anteaters, armadillos and sloths, but is covered by tough scales that overlap like roof tiles. Its name comes from Malay pengōling,

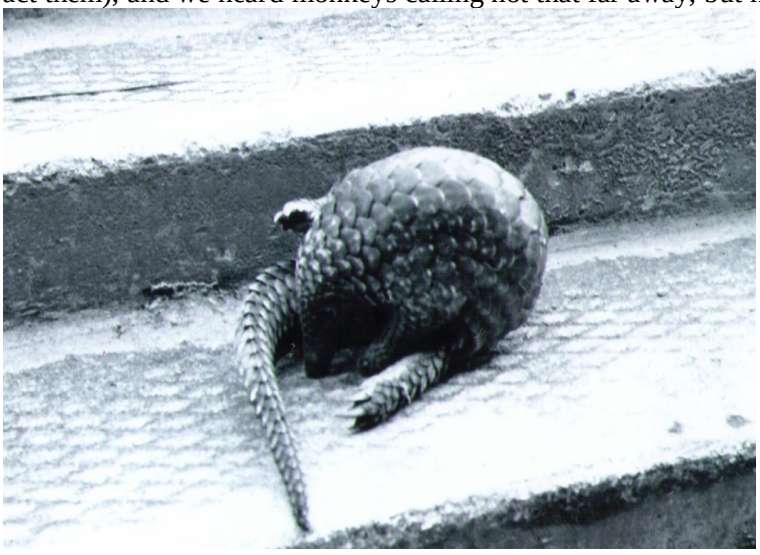
roller, from its habit of rolling up. They live across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Illegal wildlife trade and habitat loss have made these creatures one of the most endangered groups of mammals in the world. In the Far East their meat is considered a delicacy and a sought-after special medicine is made from their scales. It was Alison and Tony Florey who later suggested to me that I write this article for the Newsletter.

I came across this Asian Sunda species of pangolin during eighteen or so months of my army national service spent in Malaya – the Malay peninsula of present-day Malaysia. When I first arrived out there, my colleagues and I lived in a 'bashah', a palm-leafed thatched wooden hut, but later-on we moved into brand-new modern single-storied pan-tiled roofed accommodation with terrazzo tiled floors, louvred windows and covered concrete veranda-like walk-ways with monsoon drains (concrete ditches, instead of roof gutters which couldn't cope with the daily heavy rainfall) along-side them.

Just before dawn one morning, we discovered a pangolin that had fallen into the monsoon drain overnight and was trapped there. We guessed that it was nocturnal and knew that if left there through the day it would have been eaten alive by ants and died in the sun, as happened daily to many frogs, so we lifted it out and shut it in our room. It was two to three feet long, and so was a full-grown adult one. On returning from work for our 9.30a.m. breakfast break, we found it still in the room and asleep on the exposed chain-link type metal base of a spare bed with its tail loosely curled over the tubular frame at the foot-end. On returning to work, I mentioned this to my British army Malay soldier assistant, who told me that they climbed trees and used their semi-prehensile tails to help them do this.

We didn't release it at nightfall because we liked having it around and decided to keep it for a couple more days. It didn't seem to mind us and, during the evening and throughout the night, it scuttled about using its long sticky tongue to lap up the large accumulations of what we called 'monsoon flies' (similar in appearance to our crane flies) from the smooth floor, which saved us the chore of having to sweep them up and out through the door at daybreak. Those left on the walls and ceiling were dealt with through the day by the 'chitchats', small geckos, that lived behind our bedside lockers, and by praying mantises. Before we went to work each day, we would hang the pangolin on the end of the spare bed – it curled its tail around the tubular rail and dangled there until evening. We'd all agreed that we'd release it on the following Sunday evening, but on the Saturday evening, while we were in the NAAFI or out in the town, it escaped through the slatted louvred window next my bed, which I'd left open. I didn't realise that it would be able to squeeze through the narrow gap between the slats. A person lying on his bed near a similar window in the adjacent room was suddenly startled when it clambered in through it, presumably hoping to find more monsoon flies - or to get back into our room! The room occupant and a couple of his room-mates then placed the creature on a blanket and carried it to the nearby grass airstrip and released it – exactly what we'd planned to do the next evening. No doubt the area would have been familiar to it, as would have been the nearby groves of trees.

So, for us, it was back to watching the antics of chitchats and praying mantises, and the occasional chameleon in the banana trees. Some of my colleagues kept praying mantises as pets by tethering them to window sills using cotton thread with one end tied around the insects and the other attached to drawing pins pressed into the wood. These were fed smaller insects and licked Ghurkha rum (identical to navy rum) from their owners' fingers. There were very few birds near our accommodation (back then, we didn't know about putting food out to attract them), and we heard monkeys calling not that far away, but hardly ever saw them



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David Rolfe

OBITUARY

GRAHAM WREN 1936 - 2018

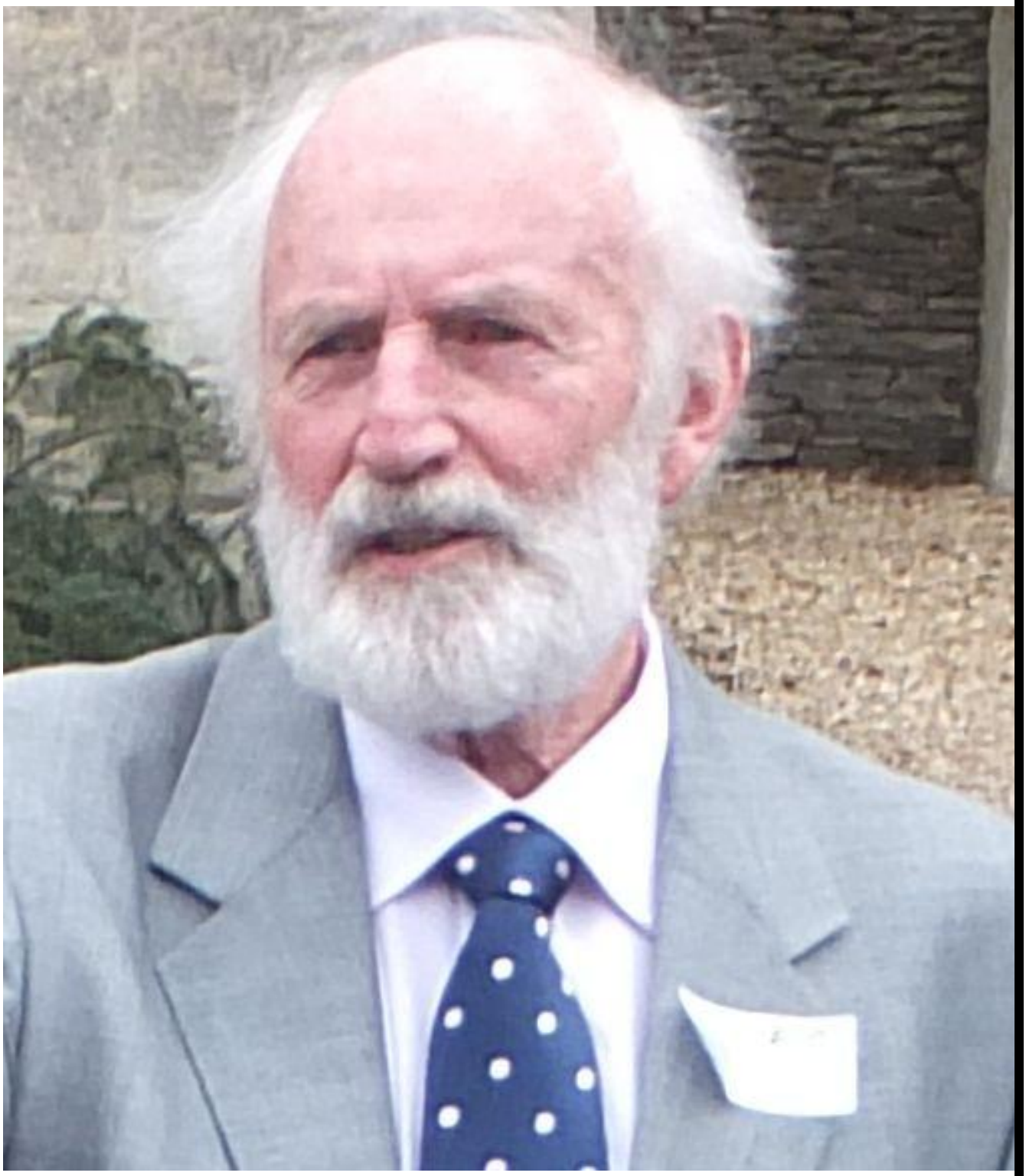
Graham was one of the Field Club's earliest members. He was on the Committee for many years, and became its President in 2003. His great enthusiasm for wildlife and the countryside made him a mainspring of the Club in its youth, and his extensive knowledge and contacts were a bonus.

Graham was that rare combination – a man who enjoyed the solitude of photographing nature, but was also interested in people, their families and their loved ones. Graham was a friend for life – maintaining contact with friends all over the world, visiting them whenever possible on his extensive travels, and faithfully attending weddings, christenings, funerals and celebrations.

Graham grew up in Botley, and for a time worked at the Dunn School of Pathology in Oxford University with the famous Nobel Prize winning team led by Prof. Florey, Prof. Chaine and Dr Heatley with their work on penicillin. After National Service in Bahrain, he studied dairying at Nottingham University, and later for a time managed a large dairy farm at Standlake.

No-one who knew Graham will be surprised to learn that he could talk before he could walk. He was an excellent raconteur with a memory for quirky details and numerical fact. Over the years he gave us countless lavishly illustrated talks on topics ranging from the changing English countryside to the wildlife of the Scottish islands and the birds of Scandinavia and beyond.
His passion was bird nests, eggs and breeding habitats.
He spent many summers photographing birds on their high mountain and Arctic breeding grounds in Scandinavia, from the Baltic to the Arctic circle, and also recorded changes on the Farne Islands from the National Trust. Graham thought nothing of climbing into the treetops or scaling the cliffs of St Kilda for the definitive picture.
One of us remembers that he even climbed an electricity pylon to photograph the landscape near Botley before the building of the bypass.
Graham also led walks for the Club. For many years we would meet him at 4 a.m. on a May morning to listen to the dawn chorus. On one memorable occasion he led fifteen or twenty not-so-young members of the Club on a Dawn Chorus walk which involved scaling a five foot high wire fence and then crossing a clapper bridge with one clapper missing and the river in spate. No one else would have dared.
His great delight after a dawn chorus was Yvonne Townsend's breakfast, generously supplied to the whole group, which he always referred to as the 'Full Hailey'.
Many of us learned our bird songs from Graham, He was a great enthusiast, and once phoned one member out of the blue to explain his latest infallible method for distinguishing between the songs of Blackcaps and Garden Warblers. But his golden rule was that if you didn't know what was singing it was probably a Chaffinch.

Another important role was to compile the Fiendish Quiz for the annual Members' Night. Apart from the expected pictures of birds, mammals, insects and plants to identify, Graham always arrived with a collection of curiosities – (unattached) feet, beaks, feathers, skulls, and nests were spread out for us to puzzle over. The most fiendishly difficult photos were those (deliberately) out of focus or, in one case, almost out of the picture – the bird had taken off before Graham was ready, and the picture consisted of just a pair of feet heading skyward. There were also anagrams and more intricate word quizzes.
Graham was a dapper dresser – on social occasions he enjoyed a quiet flamboyance – the last time many of us saw him was at our Summer Party, resplendent with pink waistcoat, shirt and tie – and shorts! Once Graham had arrived, you always felt the party had begun. He will be greatly missed.



GRAHAM WREN 1936 - 2018 RIP