



# West Oxfordshire Field Club

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**No.95**  
**SPRING**  
**2012**



### EDITORIAL

It's a strange spring this year, coming after a very brief, but false, summer. Back into the fleeces this week! To warm up my thoughts, I reflect on the club's splendid October long weekend at Gibraltar Point in Lincolnshire, when we enjoyed temperatures over 30 °C every day. Watching the great flocks of waders twist and turn over the Wash against a pink sunset (or dawn) is for me one of the great wildlife spectacles. But today I must content myself with lesser sights – in Oxfordshire the dunnocks, robins and pigeons are courting (when are pigeons ever not courting?) and baby rabbits are bouncing among the budding cowslips along the roadside verges. I even have buttercups flowering in my garden. There seem to be ladybirds everywhere, native ones at that. It seems the harlequins wake up later, but no doubt they will catch up and overtake as usual. The honeybees are out, and the odd brimstone and orange-tip. Soon the bumblebees will be buzzing in the foxgloves as they scabble for nectar.

Driving home near sunset the other night, I had to slam on the brakes several times for a couple of dozy red-legged partridges, a suicidal pheasant, and then an unwary fox, no doubt preoccupied in hunting for its offspring's supper. A fallow deer stepped shyly from the ditch, then wisely vanished as it noticed the car. It occurred to me that, with the exception of the fox, all these animals have been introduced to the UK. On the Field Club's trip to the Wildfowl and Wetland Centre at Barnes earlier this year we saw several ring-necked parakeets, natives of northern Africa and Asia. Popular pets with the Victorians, there are now some 4300 breeding pairs of feral parakeets in the UK. All these immigrants postdate the house mouse, which has been here since the Iron Age and perhaps even earlier. While some introduced animals, like the rabbit, house mouse, the fallow and muntjac deer and the grey squirrel, have become pests, others, like the pheasant, red-legged partridge, parakeets and little owl, seem to have found niches that were unoccupied before. Then there are the old natives being reintroduced – cranes on the Somerset levels, great bustards on Salisbury Plain, red kites in the Chilterns, white-tailed sea eagles in Scotland, European beavers in the Cotswolds, and more. Rather like the constantly changing patterns of human emigration and immigration, assimilation and extirpation and like them, increasingly at the hands of humans.

As I sit here, I am cursing another arrival – the domestic cat (not mine, I hasten to add), which is busy digging up my sweet peas to use the large pot as a sand tray (it has already disposed of my bulbs and used all the other pots.) Earlier, it was eyeing the blackbird nesting in my climbing hydrangea with great interest, before climbing onto my flat roof scrabbling up moss and flicking it into the guttering, then trying to get through my bedroom window. In one week while eating my breakfast I have seen a cat kill five birds (a blackbird, a thrush and three tits). I have long since given up having a bird table – it seems as if I'm just luring them to their doom. Estimates of the annual kill by cats in the UK range from 150 to 275 million wild animals, especially birds. But yesterday the local pest fulfilled the original purpose for which it was brought here – it caught a mouse, for which I was indeed grateful.

Since the summer the Club has roamed far and wide, from searching for fungi at Foxholes reserve to a steep but very scenic walk through ancient woodland skirting Sheepscombe, of Laurie Lee fame, at the western end of the Cotswolds, Batsford Arboretum to see the autumn colours, bird-watching on Otmoor, a trip to the county council's museum resource centre at Standlake where we had a fascinating tour of the bird egg collection and a very wet, chilly day-trip to the London Wetlands Centre, including a guided tour – an excellent place to watch birds in any weather, and finally a canal and countryside walk around Cropredy and the Oxford Canal. Our winter talks have taken us from the chills of Antarctica to the warmth of the Caribbean, from the scenery of Portugal and the wildflowers of Switzerland to the more local ants of Aston Rowant nature reserve, and the history of birds' nesting habits.

Jill Bailey

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

The 49th Annual General Meeting of the West Oxfordshire Field Club was held at the Witney Methodist Church, High Street, Witney on 2 March 2012. The meeting was opened by Graham Wren, our President.

Apologies for absence These were received from Margaret Edwards, Derick Cotterill and Ken and Brenda Betteridge.

Matters arising There were no matters arising and the minutes of the 48th AGM were accepted as a true record and signed by Graham Wren. This was proposed by Yvonne Townsend and seconded by David Rolfe.

Treasurer's Report presented by Tony Florey. Room hire and printing fees have been paid leaving £247 in the bank. It was suggested that the membership subscriptions should be increased to £22 for a single person and £32 for a couple as from January 2013. Adrian Gardener has agreed to continue as auditor.

There were no questions raised and voting was positive, therefore the report and the increase in subscriptions were accepted. The report was proposed by Tony Mattingley and seconded by Jill Bailey.

Chairman's Report presented by Sue Morton. This was a summary of the club's activities over the year including walks, Members' Night, the Dawn Chorus meeting and trips to Minsmere and Gibraltar Point. Sue thanked David Rolfe and David Roberts for organising the walks and Yvonne Townsend for arranging trips and the Summer and Christmas parties.

Election of the committee. As all members are willing to stand again the Committee was re-elected en bloc. This was proposed by Ann Dossett-Davies and seconded by John Cobb.

Tony Mattingley stated he would standing down in the near future.

AOB David Roberts proposed that the Club have a tombola at the next Save the Children May Fair at Carterton on 7 May and asked members to bring donations to the next meeting. There was no other business and the meeting was closed.

The evening continued after coffee with Graham Wren showing his wonderful slides of birds' nests and eggs.

Gill Suida

## **OBITUARY**

David John Widdows 1931–2012

It was with great sadness that the West Oxon Field Club learnt of the death of David on 3 January this year.

Originally from Charlbury where he was born and brought up David returned to West Oxfordshire with his wife Kathleen in the 1980s. His sisters were (and still are) keen Field Club members and it was not long before David and Kathleen joined them for the monthly meetings. Their mutual interest in plants, especially alpine, led to them making several excursions to European mountains. The resulting photos they took on these trips they were happy to share with Field Club members on Members' Night. They were also keen members of the Alpine Garden society (Oxford Branch).

David stoically struggled on for his last few years despite chronic pain and constant visits to the Oxford hospitals. Eventually his body could take no more suffering and he died at home with his family. He was cremated at Banbury on a bitterly cold January day.

Many of us are happier for having had the privilege of knowing David, and the Field Club will be the poorer without his presence.

© Kathleen Widdows

You will not be surprised to learn that £1014 was collected for the Myeloma UK Fund in his memory.

Jean Kenworthy

## **YOUR NEWSLETTER**

Thank you all of you who have contributed to this issue: especially Jill for her interesting editorial and those who have written reports enabling us all to share in the Club activities. Please send me reports of walks and other club activities for inclusion in the Autumn 2012 newsletter by the end of August 2012 by e-mail or written clearly on paper by snail-mail to the address given on the programme. Don't forget we also like to include any observations and experiences of the natural world you have had that you would like to share with other members.

Errata to Newsletter 94 (Autumn 2011)

In the report of the walk on Appleton Lower Common on 17 April 2011 the list of birds seen or heard was somewhat truncated. Sue was rather concerned that some people reading the report might think Appleton Common is a bit lacking in wildlife! It should have read:

Blackcap, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Wren, Robin, Song Thrush, Pheasant, Wood Pigeon, Skylark, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch, Willow Warbler, Moorhen, Cormorant, Carrion Crow, Canada Goose, Swallow, Chaffinch, Mallard, Jackdaw, Buzzard, Magpie, Rook, Barn Owl, Linnet, Partridge, Yellowhammer, Whitethroat, Kestrel.

My apologies, Sue.

Also I forgot to add to Tony Florey's report of the Bablockhythe walk on 18 July 2011 that, after the walk, Malcolm Brownsword checked his images of the damselflies against those in books and confirmed that the damselflies seen were Banded Demoiselles and Beautiful Demoiselles.

Brenda Betteridge (Newsletter Editor)  
E-mail: [bbetteridge@phonecoop.coop](mailto:bbetteridge@phonecoop.coop)

## **REPORTS OF FIELD MEETINGS**

### **Suffolk 26–30 April 2011**

Ten members of the Field Club met up for lunch at Lackford Lakes Nature Reserve on Tuesday 26 April for the start of our four-night break in Suffolk. This is a super reserve in West Suffolk where we were able to see and hear at least three singing male Nightingales, possibly five and to hear three Cuckoos. Tree Sparrows were in view and good numbers of Reed Warblers were heard deep in the reeds. What a great start to our few days. We moved on to the Ufford Park Hotel near Woodbridge and our number became twelve members. After breakfast the following morning we drove to Ikencliff near Snape, on the Alde Estuary where there is a good view out over the reed beds and estuary from the car park on the hill. We were then able to walk along close to the water where we saw Black-tailed Godwits, Oystercatchers, Redshank and Marsh Harriers among other birds.

In the afternoon some of us drove round to North Warren, an RSPB reserve, and walked from the car park to the extensive reed beds accessible by board walk. This is a superb place at this time of the year to see Hobby in quantities diving, soaring and displaying at close quarters. There were also good views of Marsh Harriers and on the way back Wheatears and Green Woodpecker.

On Thursday we headed off after breakfast for a full day at Minsmere and two of our less able members collected their pre-booked buggies. The day was windy which did not help with seeing some of the smaller birds such as Bearded Tits but we did hear two Nightingales singing and some were lucky enough to see the illusive Bittern. There were good views of Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits in full breeding plumage. There was good opportunity to pick out Mediterranean Gulls amongst the many Black-headed Gulls and a beautiful male Gardaney was showing well on The Scrape.

Despite the strong wind blowing throughout our break we tallied a respectable number of 85 species (see below) and it is always a pleasure to visit Minsmere, one of the star RSPB reserves. The hotel is a good comfortable venue and we all enjoyed our few days together.

Little Grebe Great Crested Grebe Cormorant Grey Heron  
Mute Swan Greylag Goose Canada Goose Barnacle Goose  
Shelduck Wigeon Gadwall Teal  
Mallard Pintail Garganey Shoveler  
Tufted Duck Red Kite Buzzard Kestrel  
Hobby Red-legged Partridge Pheasant Moorhen  
Coot Oystercatcher Lapwing Ruff  
Black-tailed Godwit Bar-tailed Godwit Redshank Turnstone  
Black-headed Gull Mediterranean Gull Common Gull Herring Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull Sandwich Tern Common Tern Little Tern  
Wood Pigeon Collared Dove Turtle Dove Cuckoo  
Sand Martin Green Woodpecker Swallow House Martin  
Grey Wagtail Pied Wagtail Dunnock Robin  
Nightingale Wheatear Blackbird Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush Cetti's Warbler (heard) Sedge Warbler Reed Warbler  
Whitethroat Garden Warbler (heard) Blackcap (heard) Chiffchaff (heard)  
Willow Warbler (heard) Goldcrest Spotted Flycatcher Long-tailed Tit  
Blue Tit Great Tit Jay Magpie  
Jackdaw Rook Carrion Crow Starling  
House Sparrow Tree Sparrow Chaffinch Greenfinch  
Goldfinch Reed Bunting Bittern Marsh Harrier  
Wren  
David Roberts  
Many apologies, David, for not putting this report in the last newsletter. Ed.

### **Bat Evening 2 September 2011**

A good number turned out on a fine evening for our bat evening at Sherborne. Estate ranger and bat specialist, Mike Robinson, gave us a very informative illustrated introductory talk. When the light started to fade we walked along the road to the old estate kennels building. With the use of bat detectors, we could hear bat noises inside the roof of the building and it was not long before the first Lesser Horseshoe bat emerged from a door and flew around us. This was swiftly followed by many others as they flew very close to us and showed up on the echo locators at about 110 kHz. Breeding colonies are mostly to be found in buildings and, as with other horseshoe bats, the wings are wrapped around their bodies while they hang upside down to roost. They hibernate between November and March and colonise an old limestone cave up in the woods on the estate where the temperature is fairly stable. Returning along the road, it was fairly dark as we walked under the overhanging Beech trees. Here we were able to pick up Pipistrelle bats on the detectors at 45 kHz as they flew backwards and forwards in our torch light overhead. Common Pipistrelles are the commonest bat over most of Europe and also the smallest at 18–24 cm wingspan. They made raspberry noises on the bat detectors when they were catching insects above us. The third species of bat we saw –Daubenton's –in the water meadows. These small- to medium-sized bats were flying low above the surface of the water catching insects and showing pale in our torch-light beams. They swim well and are capable of taking off from the surface of the water. One of the most numerous of European bats, they are showing some signs of increase in population, perhaps as a result of climate change.  
David Roberts

### **Ditchley 6 September 2011**

The objective of this visit to Ditchley Park was to see the Meadow Saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) which grows in a meadow surrounded by woods. We were not disappointed – there were thousands of pale mauve flowers showing up above the grasses which had been mowed before the flowers were due to make their appearance. In fact we thought there were more flowers this year than on our last visit on 29 August 2006. Ken estimated the area covered to be approx. 125 yards x 36 yards. Meadow Saffron is widespread on the estate and is found not only in the meadow we visited but also in many of the rides. We met at Ellen's Lodge and walked a short distance up the road into the park, passing a Wild Service tree with lots of berries, before branching off to the right on a track through the woods. This track was lined with Angelica, much of it in seed. The woodland on the Ditchley

Estate is ancient lowland oakwood. *Colchicum autumnale* is one of the survivors from when Ditchley was part of Wychwood Forest.

Meadow Saffron contains a chemical compound called colchicine, which is a cumulative toxin: it is poisonous to any animal which eats it. As a result it has been eradicated from low-lying meadows in the West Country, where it used to be quite common. Colchicine extracted from Meadow Saffron is used in genetics research to double up the chromosomes. It has also been used as a medicine to treat gout and rheumatism as it breaks down uric acid. The name refers to Colchis, an ancient kingdom which used to be located between Armenia and the Caucasus.

We made our back via the field margin that we looked at previously and found it was more extensive than on our previous visit. Light was fading and it was difficult to make out the small arable plants growing there but we did find the Night-flowering Catchfly, which is quite a rare arable plant.

We noticed there were very few ash keys – on our last visit the Ash trees were heavily laden. Three fungi were noted but not identified: a small yellow fungus in the track; a bolete (probably *Botetus edulis*) and a white fungus in the meadow. A solitary Hornet buzzed us as we walked along the track and a Harvestman was found in the arable field.

Plant list (\*arable plants):

*Agrimonia eupatoria* Agrimony  
*Alphanes arvensis* Parsley Piert\*  
*Anagalis arvensis* Scarlet Pimpernel  
*Angelica sylvestris* Angelica  
*Capsella bursa-pastoris* Shepherd's Purse\*  
*Carota dauca* Wild Carrot  
*Cerastium fontanum* Common Mouse-ear  
*Chaenorhinum minus* Small Toadflax  
*Cirsium arvense* Creeping Thistle  
*Cirsium eriophorum* Woolly Thistle  
*Deschampsia cespitosa* Tufted Hair-grass  
*Erigeron acer* Blue Fleabane  
*Euphorbia exigua* Dwarf Sun Spurge\*  
*Gallium aparine* Cleavers  
*Geranium dissectum* Cut-leaved Cranesbill\*  
*Hypericum perforatum* St John's-wort  
*Kicksia spuria* Round-leaved Fluellen\*  
*Lathyrus pratensis* Meadow Vetchling  
*Leucanthemum vulgare* Oxeye Daisy  
*Linum* sp. Flax  
*Lotus pedunculatus* Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil  
*Medicago lupulina* Black Medick  
*Melilotus officinalis* Common Melilot  
*Myosotis arvensis* Field Forget-me-not  
*Odontites vernus* Red Bartsia  
*Persicaria maculosa* Redshank\*  
*Polygonum aviculare* Knotgrass  
*Prunella vulgaris* Self-heal  
*Pteridium squilinum* Bracken  
*Ranunculus repens* Creeping Buttercup  
*Rubus fruticosus* agg. Blackberry  
*Senecio erucifolius* Hoary Ragwort  
*Senecio vulgaris* Groundsel\*  
*Silene latifolia* White Campion  
*Silene noctiflora* Night-flowering Catchfly\*  
*Sinapsis arvensis* Charlock\*  
*Sonchus arvensis* Perennial Sow-thistle  
*Sonchus arvensis* Rough Sow-thistle  
*Stachys officinalis* Betony  
*Stachys sylvatica* Hedge Woundwort  
*Stellaria media* Common Chickweed  
*Tamus communis* Black Bryony  
*Torilis arvensis* Spreading Hedge Parsley

Trifolium hybridum Alsike Clover  
Trifolium pratense Red Clover  
Viola arvensis Field Pansy\*  
Brenda Betteridge

### **Gibraltar Point 30 September to 2 October 2011**

Thirteen members of the Field Club travelled to Gibraltar Point on Friday 30 September for a 2-night stay at The Wash Study Centre. A National Nature Reserve, it covers over 1000 acres along 3 miles of the coast from Skegness to the Wash and is run exceedingly well, we found, by members of The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust.

It contains almost every type of habitat a discerning bird could wish for: scrub full of Sea Buckthorn, sand dunes held secure with Marram Grass, saltmarsh rich with colonising plants, woodland and pasture near old farm buildings, shingle spits, winding muddy creeks and inland lagoons and ponds. Cattle and sheep are used to graze the marsh grassland in summer and the invasive buckthorn scrub is removed in winter months.

The sea still covers the marsh on the higher tides and we experienced this on our visit when high water of over 7 m covered a lot of the area and vast flocks of waders entertained us performing complicated patterns and manoeuvres in an aerial ballet in the near distant sky on the two mornings of our visit. Our cars had to be moved to the highest part of the car park just in case. The area was hauntingly beautiful in the light of dawn when the sun rose as a red ball and suffused the sky with its glow and accentuated the many aircraft vapour trails. We were extremely lucky with three perfect summer-like days with unseasonably hot and clear weather.

The Field Station consists of a modern annexe built on to the old coastguard station. As is the way of coastguard stations, it once had waves lapping at its doorstep. But, over the last 10 years, acres of accumulated land have built up and it is now a good trek from station to sea.

Far across the other side of the Wash, during a clear unhazy spell we could pick out the white cliffs of Hunstanton and the North Norfolk coast. While clearly visible in the sea off Skegness is the ever increasing army of wind turbines – a controversial and intrusive newcomer to the seascape. In a closer view, on the exposed sand banks at low tide, a group of Grey Seals were basking in the sun and waving a casual flipper from time to time.

Along the intervening strip of water an Arctic Skua gave chase to a Sandwich Tern in an exciting skirmish.

Perennial Glasswort covered areas of the saltmarsh and some stems of Sea Lavender remained in flower indicating what a spectacular show it must have been earlier in the year. Some of us visited Frampton Marsh RSPB reserve on the way home and added a few more species of birds to the total list which is given below.

Little Grebe Great Crested Grebe Cormorant Little Egret  
Grey Heron Mute Swan Greylag Goose Canada Goose  
Brent Goose Shelduck Wigeon Teal  
Mallard Shoveler Tufted Duck Red Kite  
Marsh Harrier Kestrel Peregrine Pheasant  
Moorhen Coot Oystercatcher Avocet  
Lapwing Knot Dunlin Ruff  
Snipe Black-tailed Godwit Curlew Redshank  
Greenshank Green Sandpiper Arctic Skua Black-headed Gull  
Herring Gull Great Black-backed Gull Sandwich Tern Wood Pigeon  
Short-eared Owl Meadow Pipit Green Woodpecker (heard) Pied Wagtail  
Wren Robin Stonechat Blue Tit  
Great Tit Magpie Jackdaw Rook  
Carrion Crow Starling House Sparrow Tree Sparrow  
Chaffinch Greenfinch Goldfinch Linnet  
Reed Bunting

David Roberts

### **Fungus Foray at Foxholes Nature Reserve 16 October 2011**

Once again Peter Creed led our annual fungus foray. We met at the car park which has limited space hence the necessity to share transport! The weather was perfect and some of

us even started off in short-sleeved shirts; we did add layers though as the afternoon progressed and we walked further into the woods. It was nice to have several non-members join us and we hope to see them again at some of our indoor meetings or other outdoor pursuits. There had been so little rain this year Peter thought there would be few fungi to see but we actually found 18 different ones.

We also heard a Green Woodpecker and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Common name	Latin name	Can you eat it?	Occurrence
Dryad's Saddle	<i>Polyporus squamosus</i>	Yes	Very common
Blushing Bracket	<i>Daedaleopsis confragosa</i>	No	Very common
Clouded Funnel	<i>Clitocybe nebularis</i>	No	Very common
Tawny Funnel-cap	<i>Lepista flaccida</i>	Yes	Very common
Butter Cap	<i>Collybia butyracea</i>	No	Very common
The Miller	<i>Citopilus prunulus</i>	Yes	Widespread
Oyster Mushroom	<i>Pleurotus ostreaceus</i>	Yes	Very common
Parasitic Bolete	<i>Pseudoboletus parasiticus</i>	Yes	Occasional
Red Crackling Bolete	<i>Boletus chrysenteron</i>	Yes	Common
Charcoal Burner	<i>Russula cyanoxantha</i>	Yes	Very common
Ochre Brittlegill	<i>Russula ochroleuca</i>	Yes	Very common
Stinking Brittlegill	<i>Russula foetens</i>	No	Common
Turkey Tail	<i>Trametes versicolor</i>	No	Very common
Common Earthball	<i>Scleroderma citrinum</i>	No	Very common
Birch Knight	<i>Tricholoma fulvum</i>	No	Very common
Common Puffball	<i>Lycoperdon perlatum</i>	Yes when young	Very common
False Deathcap	<i>Amanita citrina</i>	No	Common

Gill Siuda

If you have not already got it, Peter's book *A Guide to Finding Fungi in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire* is a very helpful for identifying fungi locally. It is very user-friendly, giving the English names and good descriptions with clear photographs. Ed.

### **Cranham walk 23 October 2011**

The walk we did in Cranham in 2009 proved so popular that we repeated it again this year. Thirteen of us turned up on Cranham Common and headed off down into the valley before climbing up again through magnificent ancient beech woods with some wonderful specimen trees which have grown tall and straight on the hillside. Because of the exceptionally mild autumn this year the autumnal colours were not at their best but looking across the wooded landscape there was a good mix of greens, yellows and browns. Up above Sheepscombe a fine view opened up over Painswick and Haresfield in the distance. After another brief climb we plunged into yet more wonderful beech woods in what is mostly the Ebworth Estate gifted to the National Trust by the Workman family in 1989. The house itself, probably a Tudor hunting lodge became derelict and in the 1960s was used by the local fire brigade for practice and subsequently burned to the ground. A fine specimen of Deadly Nightshade was growing from the ruins.

Further on an amazing Beech tree in a field was split in two by an Ash tree growing out of the middle of it and actually fused into it in one section and with a hole going right through the base to the other side.

It was notable to see some trees, particularly Ash, completely devoid of leaves up on the Cotswold brash hillside, indicating our particularly dry year but in the valley an Ash tree by a brook still retained all its leaves and was still green. I should think that many of the large Beech trees we saw on the walk were quite stressed after yet another period of very little rain after a completely dry April. There has been talk in recent years that beech trees could be having problems in the southern half of the country with continuing dry years.

David Roberts

### **Batsford Arboretum 6 November 2011**

On a late sunny autumn afternoon, twelve members of the Field Club met in the garden centre shop and restaurant from where we started our walk around the arboretum. Following the wall where spring flowers were already showing, we continued along the perimeter where we saw the herd of Fallow Deer, albeit from some distance.

From here we followed the path leading to the waterfall (dried up due to weather conditions) and lake which is approximately 600 metres in length. Following it's restoration it has bee re-

stocked with fish which has brought in a number of different wildfowl.

From the lake we passed the mansion – the one-time home of the first Lord Redesdale who, during the late 1800s, worked for the British Embassies in Russia, Japan and China. What he saw on his travels inspired him to plant natural groupings of trees, shrubs, etc. at Batsford. The Wills family (Lord Dulverton), of tobacco fame bought the estate in 1919 and continued planting some of the larger trees. From 1956 the second Lord Dulverton greatly increased the number and variety of trees in the arboretum and in 1984 the Batsford Foundation was formed, which is now a charitable trust and is one of the largest collections of trees in the country.

We followed the main path for a short while admiring the variety of trees in autumn colour, including some of the acers, and turned to walk uphill, bordering the upper end of the arboretum. Some of us came across an interesting tree, the so-called 'Dukes Cypress'. This is an Italian Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) which, it is said, is a direct descendent of a sprig which was part of a wreath which fell from the Duke of Wellington's coffin during his funeral. It was picked up by the then 15-year-old Lord Redesdale and planted in the garden. We then approached the area where the majority of maples are planted, some of which looked stunning with shafts of late autumn sunshine highlighting the beautiful red, yellow and brown leaves. This is a fine collection of maples, 176 in total of which 85 are the lovely Japanese maples which look so splendid in both spring and autumn. It was primarily to see these in their autumn glory that this visit was arranged.

Contrasting with these acers were the majestic Giant Redwoods and many other trees, shrubs and bamboos from around the world. A final descent alongside the watercourse and pools with interesting waterside plants eventually brought us back to the shop and restaurant where we had a welcome cup of tea before driving home.

Tony Mattingley

### **RSPB Otmoor Reserve Walk 3 December 2011**

The morning was bright and clear with a light breeze when eleven field club members met in the car park at the reserve. It had rained through the night, but this was welcome because, due to the very dry autumn, water levels in the reserve were very low with many of the usually water-filled scrapes, ditches and reed-beds completely dry. The RSPB has a licence to abstract water from the River Ray into the reed-beds at certain times, but didn't this year because a non-native pond weed (*Azolla*) was present in the river and they didn't want to introduce it into the reserve. Apparently, there'd been no evening Starling roost in the reed-beds so far this winter because of the lack of water. High water levels are a fairly good deterrent to mammalian predators.

Wildfowl numbers were well down for the time of year compared with previous years due to the low water levels and mild autumn and on the morning of our visit very few were evident. However, it had been a good period for raptor species with several present on most days. We walked from the car park along the bridleway to the new hide and then along the footpath to the two viewing screens that overlook the reed-beds. From the hide we had good views of a Ring-tail Hen Harrier and from the screens even better views of it, and also a Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and Red Kite. While we were at the far screen a pair of Ravens caught our attention, 'cronking' as they flew past. Wildfowl species seen from the screens included Wigeons, Teals, Mallards and Shovelers. Quite a few small bird species were also encountered, including a few winter thrushes.

Birds seen:

Grey Heron Mute Swan Greylag Goose Wigeon Teal  
Mallard Shoveler Red Kite Hen Harrier Sparrowhawk  
Kestrel Red-legged Partridge Pheasant Lapwing Black-headed Gull  
Woodpigeon Green Woodpecker Pied Wagtail Dunnock Robin  
Blackbird Fieldfare Redwing Long-tailed Tit Blue Tit  
Great Tit Jackdaw Rook Carrion Crow Raven  
Green Woodpecker Pied Wagtail Starling Chaffinch Goldfinch  
Reed Bunting

David Rolfe

### **Oxfordshire County Council Museum Store Visit 18 January 2012**

Ten Field Club members were met at the entrance to the museum store by our guide for the afternoon, John Campbell, former curator at the site and one of the club's Vice Presidents.



The visit proved to be very illuminating and enjoyable as we peered at some of the 17,800 sets of mainly Western Palearctic bird species' eggs, plus 70 different British bird species' nests. What first struck all of us was the range not only of background colours across the eggs of a particular species, but also in the amount of variation of marking on egg surfaces, even in small clutches, with very often one egg having almost no markings what-so-ever – as if the hen bird had run out of ink! Guillemots were an example of a species whose eggs had quite a range of background shades, and also very dark and densely spaced markings. Contrastingly, ignoring the size difference, the markings on eggs of Yellowhammers varied in density and were very scratchy, as if small insects that had escaped from being immersed in ink blots had crawled over their surfaces. We also noticed that the size and shape of some species' eggs also varied, with very often one very small one, a 'runt' egg, in a clutch. Puffins were one example of bird species whose eggs were very large in relation to the size of the parent bird. One of our party recognised a couple of nests from her garden which she'd passed on to Graham Wren who in turn had passed them on to the museum. This was a really fascinating afternoon.

David Rolfe

### **Great Tew 5 February 2012**

As happened some years ago when we arranged a walk for the Field Club in this area to see the Snowdrops and Aconites the weather had other ideas. Snow and the bitterly cold winds put everybody off except Ken who manfully braved the elements in case somebody did turn out and expected their leader to be there!

Brenda Betteridge

### **London Wetland Centre 4 March 2012**

Fifteen club members travelled by mini-bus to Barnes, on the outskirts of London, where this Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserve is located next to the River Thames. It was created some 12 years ago on the site of some old concrete reservoirs. Habitats cover 105 acres (43 hectares) and comprise a lake and lagoons with reed-beds, a wader scrape, a grazing marsh, and small pools – some for native species of insects and amphibians and some as examples of some of the world's diverse wetland areas, along with quite a few of their wildfowl. Although the day was rather wet and cold, we didn't get too wet thanks to the short walks between the site's cafeteria, shop and numerous bird-watching hides.

As we left the reception area most of us were greeted by a small flock of Ring-necked Parakeets – not a wetland species but common enough around the reserve. From the hides, many dabbling duck species and several diving duck species, plus a Common Snipe or two, were soon seen. Later on, from the Peacock Tower, a three-story hide with a lift, Cormorants of the European race, Lapwings, a Kingfisher, a couple of Water Rails and a Bittern were seen by almost all of us. Later on, after lunch, some of us went on a guided tour of the reserve, others went to view the captive duck species from most continents of the world, and the rest of us went back to the Peacock Tower where we spent the afternoon leisurely studying the numerous wild water-birds. It had been an interesting day out, with 42 wild-bird species logged. All the birds that we'd seen during our day out had been in their breeding plumages but on the way home, through the Chiltern Hills, there was a smattering of snow on the grass along-side the motor way, a reminder perhaps that winter wasn't quite over.

Wild birds seen:

Little Grebe Great-crested Grebe Cormorant Bittern  
Grey Heron Mute Swan Greylag Goose Canada Goose  
Shelduck Wigeon Gadwall Teal  
Mallard Pintail Shoveler Common Pochard  
Tufted Duck Water Rail Moorhen Coot  
Lapwing Common Snipe Black-headed Gull Common Gull  
Herring Gull Lesser Black-backed Gull Great Black-backed Gull Stock Dove  
Woodpigeon Collared Dove Ring-necked Parakeet Kingfisher  
Wren Robin Wheatear Blackbird  
Long-tailed Tit Blue Tit Jackdaw Carrion Crow  
Starling Reed Bunting

David Rolfe

## MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Eat more venison and help save our woodland birds

The number of deer roaming our countryside has doubled in the last decade and all their natural predators are no longer resident in these islands. Apart from natural fatalities and road casualties the population expansion goes unhindered. Deer stalking on many Scottish estates is a very important source of income; on certain estates south of the border and some Forestry Commission land, numbers are controlled by gamekeepers and professional marksmen, respectively, plus the action of illegal poachers. This is not controlling the significant growth in the population overall. Home consumption of this tasty meat has dramatically increased during the last 5 years and demand is outstripping supply. Previously the majority of home-grown venison was exported to Germany.

On our patch here in south Herefordshire, we only have Fallow Deer but rather too many; they spend the majority of the daylight hours resting or browsing in woodland. Damage to trees by deer is well documented, but with this population increase, the undercover, particularly brambles, is now being severely trashed in many places. Bramble patches are an essential nesting habitat for a number of our woodland bird species, especially Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*), Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*), Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) and others, while ground-nesting Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) often use them as cover. This deer meat is not always dear meat, so please give your taste buds a treat and help conservation of our woodland birds. I can certainly recommend barbecued Muntjak as very acceptable – more please!

Graham J. Wren

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