



West Oxfordshire Field Club

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No.97

SPRING

2013



EDITORIAL

After the wettest summer for 100 years, this Easter was the coldest for 5 years. Many garden plants, such as my pink camellia and the glorious evergreen Clematis armandii, both often flowering in late February, are still without blossom, while I continue to enjoy the snowdrops and crocuses. Also missing are the huge dozy bumblebees that usually bask on my doorstep on sunny days and zoom unsteadily around the garden, seeming to see me only at the last minute to take avoiding action and buzzing angrily at my unwanted presence.

Usually by now the blackbird is nesting in my climbing hydrangea, and sometimes even a thrush, robin or goldfinch, but there are scarcely any birds in the garden. In fact, there have been hardly any since last summer - no goldfinch singing all winter, no robins, small tits or finches. Feeders have remained full for months on end. Our suspicions lie on the great increase in local cats rather than the weather. The reason - feeders 150 metres away are being visited as usual. Some towns and cities have as many as 1500 cats per square kilometre. There has been a spat of new figures for the number of birds and small mammals killed by cats this year, but research shows that it is the skilled hunters among them that are responsible for the bulk of the kills. Keeping cats in during the early part of the morning when birds come out to feed, and having a bell on the collar, have been shown to help a great deal. For some species even the presence of a model cat near the nest will prevent parents from entering to feed their young.

Last year was a poor breeding year for many of our wild birds, especially those that feed on insects. But some seed-eaters also found food hard to come by, especially woodland birds depending on seeds from trees, which were in short supply. Nor have the seabirds been exempt. The RSPB fears that the recent bad weather may be the reason why hundreds of puffins, razorbills and guillemots have washed up on beaches in the north-east of England and Scotland. At the same time some migrants are already arriving from Africa - sand martins, swallows and spoonbills among them. But the migration back to the Arctic has been delayed, with bitterns and swans reluctant to move on.

Already after last year's cold, wet weather, wildlife has suffered some big declines, but this winter has been particularly bad for them. A brief mild spell around Christmas saw hedgehogs and dormice come out of hibernation, only to be faced

with freezing temperatures and a serious shortage of food only a short time later. Badgers, too, suffer from severe winters. The cubs are born in February, and are extremely vulnerable to the cold and their parents to shortage of food as the cold weather keeps invertebrate prey numbers low.

You might think water voles would benefit from such weather, but winter clearing of ditches, more pronounced after the flood of the past year, deprives them of vegetation valuable for winter food and as protection from predators. Cattle trampling soggy river banks compact the soil and make it difficult for the voles to dig tunnels and for grass to grow. Even in a normal winter, 70-80% of the water vole population will perish. High river levels also flood kingfisher nest holes. Otters flee rising water, which results in more road kills as they cross roads when water levels under the bridges are too high. The wet weather has a further, unseen side-effect - hibernating butterflies become more prone to attack by fungi.

In the same week I read of the closure of Didcot power station and the potential use of duckweed as biofuel. Might we yet see another plan for a large reservoir in the vicinity to grow duckweed? (I jest!) Nature is fuelling our economy in other ways, too - tiny robots programmed to mimic the patterns of ants foraging are learning the fastest routes to their goals; potential uses include searching for chemicals and perhaps explosives. Algorithms derived from ant behaviour have been used to study crowd behaviour and design public places to cope with queuing and varying flows of people. The magic of photosynthesis is being unravelled in an attempt to develop new ways to harness solar energy. And computer designers are now looking to DNA design and replication for inspiration.

Despite the bad weather, the Club has been out and about this winter. We have explored Shotover and the autumn woodlands of the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's Chedworth Reserve, foraged for fungi at Sydlings Copse, and studied the geology of the Faringdon area. We enjoyed a trip to North Norfolk in October, once again seeing the great flights of ducks and geese at Snettisham. A more recent trip to Farmoor led to sightings of scaup, goldeneye, Slavonian grebe, snipe and treecreeper. While the scaup were in full breeding plumage, the Slavonian grebe was still in winter plumage.

Our winter talks have ranged from stunning photography of birds in flight to a close look at river fly life, the geology of local building stones, and warmer reminiscences of flowers of the Algarve and birds of the Seychelles. We hope that the weather will improve for the summer outings of this, the Field Club's 50th year.

Jill Bailey

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 50th Annual General Meeting of the West Oxfordshire Field Club was held at Witney Methodist Church, High Street, Witney on 1st March 2013. The meeting was opened by Sue Morton who took the chair.

Apologies for Absence

These were received from Graham Wren, Mary Elford, Derrick Cotterill, Diana Johnson, Gillian Oldfield and Ken and Brenda Betteridge.

Matters Arising There were no matters arising and the minutes of the 49th AGM were accepted as a true record and signed by Sue Morton.

Treasurer's Report This was presented by Tony Florey. As there is £1258.62 in the bank there will be no increase in subscriptions this year. Tony Florey thanked Adrian State for printing the programmes and the newsletters and not charging the Club for this. There had been extra income from the Carterton Tombola, the Plant Sale and other sundries. There were no questions raised and voting was positive, therefore the report was accepted. The report was proposed by Jill Bailey and seconded by

Yvonne Townsend. It was proposed by John Cobb and seconded by Ann Dossett-Davies that as Adrian Gardener is willing he continues as auditor.

Chairman's Report This was presented by Sue Morton. It was a summary of the Club's activities over the past year including the indoor meetings with talks from a number of very good speakers, the various walks around the countryside and visits to Cornwall and Norfolk. Sue thanked David Roberts, David Rolfe and Mary Elford for organising the walks and Yvonne Townsend for arranging the 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 Tony Mattingley and seconded by Alan Cole.

AOB A reminder was given of the Summer Party which this year will celebrate the Club's 50th Anniversary and will be held in Shilton on 10th August. There was no other business and the meeting was closed.

The evening continued with a talk and some superb photographs by Dr Graham Lenton on The Birds of the Seychelles.
Gill Siuda

YOUR NEWSLETTER

Many thanks to all of you who have contributed to this issue, especially Jill who once again has come up with an interesting editorial. It is good to have on record reports of our meetings and what we see on our walks. We are grateful to those of you who take the time to write these. They enable us all to share in the Club activities. This year we hope that some of our sightings in Oxfordshire, by more precise recording, will also be of value to TVERC (Thames Valley Environmental Recording Centre). Please send me reports of walks and other club activities for inclusion in the Autumn 2013 newsletter by the end of August 2013 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. As you will see, once again our President, Graham Wren, has provided us with some of his interesting observations. In the Spring 2012 newsletter he urged us to eat more venison when he drew our attention to the burgeoning deer population and its consequences on our countryside - a subject which has come to the fore recently in the press and on TV.

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

OBITUARY

Bob Hamilton 1918-2012

Last October we were very sorry to learn that Bob, who was a member of the Field Club from 1983 to 2006, had died from pneumonia in Witney Hospital while recuperating from a hip-replacement operation.

Bob was brought up in Hampshire. He was a keen scout and ranger and became a leader in the early years of Scouting. All his life he enjoyed music and, when a teenager, attained a Certificate of Merit from the Royal College of Music, becoming a skilled player of the mandolin; he also played the guitar and keyboard. After leaving school he did an apprenticeship in agricultural engineering. During the war years he spent long hours maintaining farm machinery out in the fields.

When we first knew Bob he was the superintendent



© Judith Russell

of the Waterworks at Worsham and lived in a tied house within the grounds. One of the many tasks that Bob did daily was recording rainfall, the monthly totals of which he relayed to the media. Even after his retirement in 1983, when he moved into a house in Worsham, he continued to record the daily rainfall. Being a keen gardener, Bob joined the Witney Horticultural Society and helped at their shows. Growing dahlias and fuchsias was his particular interest. I still have some of the fuchsia varieties he gave me as cuttings from his plants in the 1980s. After Witney Hospital was built he worked on the rose bed every month for many years.

Another of Bob's pastimes was bird watching and when a member of the Field Club he enjoyed a trip to Titchwell when he noted down that he saw Little Egret and Black-winged Stilt for the first time. For many years Spotted Flycatchers nested in his garden, giving him much pleasure as he watched their distinctive feeding behaviour, darting out from a branch to catch a passing fly. The Field Club's annual plant sale benefitted from plants he grew and donated for several years.

We convey our condolences to his daughter Judith, her husband and other members of his family.

.Brenda Betteridge

REPORTS OF FIELD MEETINGS

Moth trapping event 15/16 June 2012

On the evening of 15 June, entomologist Richard Comont and I set up an MV (mercury vapour) moth trap in Ken and Brenda Betteridge's wildlife-friendly garden near Worsham, West Oxfordshire. We also set up a small actinic trap in a former quarry next to the garden. Although it was a very windy night with some rain, we were delighted after such a poor season to have a total of 29 species of macro-moths in the traps. Seven Field Club members came the following morning to be introduced to the contents of the traps. The moths in bold in the table below were the first of those species to be reported to the Upper Thames Butterfly Conversation website that year. We are grateful to Richard for sharing his expertise and to Ken and Brenda for their hospitality.

Moths recorded:

Treble Lines
Turnip
Brown Rustic
Pale-shouldered Brocade
Heart and Dart Large
Yellow Underwing

Small Elephant Hawkmoth
Common Swift
Privet Hawkmoth
Burnished Brass
Cinnabar
Eyed Hawkmoth
Angle Shades
Large Nutmeg
Lychnis
Buff Tip
Yellow Shell
Common Marbled Carpet
Treble-bar
Marbled Minor
Uncertain
Rustic Shoulder Knot
Common Pug
Rustic
Setaceous Hebrew Character
Common Wainscot
Ingrailed Clay
Common Rustic
Spectacle

Mary Elford

Oxford Canal - Thrupp to Shipton-on-Cherwell 16 September 2012

On the pleasant morning of 16th September 2012, 21 people aged between 2½ and 86 came along for a circular walk starting by the Oxford Canal at Thrupp to Shipton-on-Cherwell, with a diversion to look at the remains of the village of Hampton Gay and the now ruined Elizabethan manor house. The canal was built in 1787 and the railway in 1848. It was here that 34 people died in a train crash on 24 December 1874.

We were also joined by Julie Kerans from the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) bringing with her a GPS device. GPS (Global Positioning System) is a satellite-based navigation system made up of a network of 24 satellites placed into orbit by the US that enables the precise location of a particular plant to be recorded. Julie came along to show us how to use the GPS as TVERC would prefer to have the precise location recorded against the species names in the lists that the Field Club gathers on field trips. It was fortuitous that we saw a limited number of plants and birds which enabled this neophyte to cope with the technology!

Plants seen: Mugwort, Red Bartsia, Ragwort, Knapweed, Yarrow, Teasels, Ploughman's Spikenard, Soft Shield Fern, Goat Willow (eared variant), Hop, Spindle, Hairy Brome.

Birds seen: Grey Heron, Mute Swan, Moorhen, Great Tit, Wren, Black-headed Gull.

Mary Elford

Shotover Country Park on the eastern outskirts of Oxford 7 October 2012

On 7 October 2012, 11 people gathered on a cool and misty morning for a guided walk with Ivan and Jacqueline Wright and Bonnie Collins of Shotover Wildlife. It proved to be a fascinating and informative tour of this beautiful place that has lovely views over Oxfordshire and is an SSSI. Wildlife habitats there include heath, marsh, woodland and meadow, leading to a wide diversity of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles and insects. To get to Shotover, one travels along the old road from London, a route once taken by Haydn who was travelling with a 100-piece orchestra to

perform in Oxford!

In prehistoric times Shotover was a forested area which may have been inhabited by animals such as elk, reindeer and wild ox. Wild boar were known to roam the area. The forest was dominated by Oak, with other species including Field Maple, Aspen, Ash and Wild Service Tree. Additional species such as Henbane and Ground-elder were introduced by the Romans for their medicinal uses. Even today, the oldest areas of the woodland can be identified as some of these species can still be found there. Traces of human habitation on Shotover have been found with the discovery of flint tools such as arrowheads which occasionally are still found in the ploughed fields around the hill.

Shotover was once part of the Royal Forest of Shotover which covered a much larger area to the east of Oxford. During the Civil War so much timber was taken from the wood that in 1660 Shotover was deforested and the slopes given over to rough grazing. In the following 250 years the open heath and marsh became a popular haunt for local naturalists who studied Shotover's rich flora.

The multi-layered geology of Shotover makes the hill what it is today: sandy heath caps the hill, spring-fed marshes have developed on glacial clay in the valleys, and there are remnants of ancient woodland on the surrounding heavier clays. We were introduced to two of Shotover's 'veteran' trees: Dick's Crab Apple with an estimated age of around 150 years and a girth of 3 metres and the Shotover Oak which is thought to be 400 years old, dating back to the reign of Elizabeth I. This tree may owe its longevity to the process of pollarding.

Of particular interest to our group was the on-going study of beetles. Ivan showed us the mechanism for collecting beetles - a washing-up bowl containing a special liquid that is hoisted high into oak trees to catch beetles. The resultant species (deceased!) are then studied under the microscope for identification. During the last 15 years more than 550 species have been recorded.

Jacqueline is the County Recorder of Bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and she introduced us to some of 100 species present on Shotover which we examined with hand lenses. Ivan's special interest is solitary bees. There are nearly 500 species of bee and wasp in Britain (mostly solitary) and, amazingly, well over a third of these have been recorded around Shotover over the last century. Ivan showed us the nests of parasitic wasps in a sandy bank.

Although there was little bird activity in the woods during our visit, 110 bird species are recorded with 60 breeding on Shotover.

Our grateful thanks to our guides for giving their time so generously. We were each given a folder of leaflets on topics ranging from ants to trees, and from geology to legends many of which are beautifully illustrated by Jacqueline and Bonnie.

Mary Elford

Norfolk 16-19th October 2012

Thirteen members of WOFC met up for a delicious dinner at the wonderful Cailey Hall Hotel, Old Hunstanton, Norfolk, on 16 October for our three-night birding break. To have a good chance of seeing the wader spectacular at Snettisham we had chosen a window of 3 days when the spring high tides were over the magic 7 m. The times were 8 am on Wednesday, 8.45 am on Thursday and 9.32 am on Friday, but this entailed leaving the hotel before breakfast at least 2½ hours before high tide so as to be in position at Sanctuary Hide in plenty of time.

Wednesday dawned with heavy rain early on so we abandoned plans for that day and headed for Titchwell Marsh RSPB Reserve and had a good morning there watching the birds, notably large numbers of Ruff and a large flock of Golden Plover. After lunch we headed for Brancaster Staithe and then Lady Anne's Drive at Holkham. It was good to see two Grey Partridge there, a bird I had not seen for several years and there were good numbers of Jays in the woods which had come over from the continent a week or so before. We also had good views of Marsh Harrier. On the way home a lone Barn Owl performed for 10 minutes patrolling backwards and forwards across a tussocky field while another Marsh Harrier flew low overhead.

The next day was a repeat, almost, of Wednesday when there was early heavy rain clearing to give a fine day. We visited our local beach within walking distance and headed for a

sandy rocky spit which juts out into the sea about 1 mile along the dunes path. This proved to be perfect for seeing a large number of waders just after the high tide pushed them up on to the spit, and was particularly good when a large flock of Knot took off and flew in front of us before landing further back down the beach where we were able to have close views.

Later in the morning some of us used a car pass to drive down to Snettisham Rotary Hide and some walked from the RSPB car park. The tide was out, exposing vast areas of mud way out into the Wash, and the birds were well spread out. There were notably a large flock of Golden Plover close in and large numbers of Knot way out, viewable through the scope. This is an amazing wild area for birds to feed. The shingle beach still had some flowering Horned Poppy.

The last morning six of us left the hotel at 6.30 am making the considerable sacrifice of missing out on a Cailey Hall breakfast! We left our cars in the Snettisham car park and headed out for the third hide (Sanctuary Hide) just as it was getting light, a walk of about 1½ miles. A considerable number of bird watchers and photographers were congregating above the beach as we took up our seats in the hide overlooking the bottom end of Pit 4. Redshank were coming over the bank and dropping on to a small island first of all, and there were Little Grebe in the water in front of us. Later very large numbers of Oystercatchers flew over and congregated in a group on a shingle bank in front of the hide. Then came thousands of Knot in swirling masses, performing wonderful patterns as they came in ever increasing numbers to land in huge swathes, which were continually moving and seemed to flow into and across the water from an island that was completely covered and then formed a large amorphous mass pushing the Oystercatchers back. The noise of their wings and their calls was breathtaking as up to 50,000 waders had left the now flooded Wash and came over the bank to land in front of us. These were augmented by many large skeins of geese flying noisily overhead.

This was one of Nature's most spectacular sights and one I had been waiting 20 years to be there at just the right time - a fitting climax to our three days.

List of birds seen/heard (H) over the 3 days:

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Bittern
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Brent Goose
Egyptian Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Pintail
Shoveler
Red-crested Pochard
Pochard

Tufted Duck
Red Kite
Marsh Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Grey Partridge
Pheasant
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Grey Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Dunlin
Ruff
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Spotted Redshank
Redshank
Greenshank
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Bar-tailed Godwit
Stock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Barn Owl
Tawny Owl
(H) Green Woodpecker
(H) Great Spotted Woodpecker
Pied/white Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Blackbird
Mistle Thrush
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treecreeper
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Starling
Chaffinch
Brambling
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Bullfinch

Fungus Foray at Sydlings Copse 21 October 2012

Twelve people attended the foray, expertly led as ever by Peter Creed. We were hopeful that we would see many more fungi this year compared to the dismal collection in the very dry autumn of 2011 and we were amply rewarded. Over 50 species were seen on this beautiful reserve with its diverse habitats, including the following (not an exhaustive list owing to the exhaustion of the scribe!):



© Mary Elford
Magpie Inkcap

Bolbitius vitellinus Yellow Field Cap
Clitocybe sp. Common Funnel
Collybia butyracea Butter Cap
Laccaria amethystina Amethyst Deceiver
Lycoperdon perlatum Common Puff ball
Mycena rosea Rosy Bonnet
Agaricus xanthodermus Yellow Stainer
Clitocybe nebularis Clouded Funnel
Gymnopilus sp. Rust Gill
Sepia Webcap Cortinarius decipiens
Suillus granulatus Weeping Bolete
Collybia peronata Wood Woollyfoot
Lactarius subdolcis Milk Cap
Cystolepiota sistrata
Trametes versicolor Turkeytail
Lactarius pubescens Bearded Milk Cap
Coprinus plicatilis
Coprinus picaceus Magpie Inkcap
Clitopilus prunulus The Miller
Hypholoma fasciculare Sulphur Tuft
Hebeloma sp. Bitter Poisonpie
Mycena polygramma Roof-nail Bonnet
Armillaria mellea Honey Fungus
Scleroderma citrinum Common Earthball
Russula ochroleuca Ochre Brittlegill
Panaeolus sp. Mottlegill
Lactarius tabidus Brch Milkcap
Lepista nuda Wood Blewit
Mycena galericulata Common Bonnet
Xylaria hypoxylon Candlesnuff Fungus
Laccaria laccata The Deceiver Tephrocybe atrata

Brittlestem (*Psathyrella* sp.) Conocybe sp.
Clustered Bonnet (*Mycena inclinata*)
Psathyrella spadicea Chestnut Brittlestem
Stereum hirsutum Hairy Curtain Crust
Xylaria polymorpha Dead Man's Fingers
Russula emetica The Sickener
Marasmius sp. Pearly Parachute
Geastrum triplex Collared Earthstar
Crepidotus mollis Peeling Oysterling
Macrolepiota rhacodes Shaggy Parasol
Biscogniauxia nummularia Beech Tarcrust
Datriona mollis Common Mazegill
Mary Elford

Withington Woods/Chedworth 10 November 2012

Five members met up near the National Trust Roman Villa on an overcast but fine afternoon. A Nuthatch was calling high up in the trees as we set off towards the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust's Chedworth Reserve, which straddles the railway track of the former Midland & South Western Junction line (later part of the Great Western Railway) between Cheltenham and Cirencester, which was opened in 1891 and passes through Chedworth Woods. The track bed includes both high embankments and deep cuttings, which show a geological sequence in the Middle Jurassic period (about 180 million years ago) and where fossils can be found in the Oolitic and shelly limestone scree.

First, we walked southwards along the track towards the tunnel. Some trees, mainly Beech, still retained their leaves, and it was like walking along a colourful woodland ride. The ground on both sides of the track was covered with lots of moss and liverwort species. We passed the tufa spring, where water containing lime emerges from underground and flows over the rocks and plants which become covered with limescale (petrification). When we reached the entrance to the tunnel, we about-turned and retraced our steps to where we'd entered the reserve, and then walked the northern part of it, passing a couple of medium-sized trees, which were completely covered with silvery-grey lichens from the base of their trunks to almost the ends of their twigs, on our way. Our route back to the Roman Villa took us through a formerly coppiced but now a semi-natural part of the woodland where tight clusters of mature Ash and Oak trees now grow from the original stools.

Bird species seen:

Buzzard, Pheasant, Wood Pigeon, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Robin Blue, Tit Great Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Jay, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch

David Rolfe

Farmoor Reservoir 24 February 2013

It was a very cold but clear morning with a northerly breeze when nine members met in the visitors' car park.

When we arrived at Reservoir 1, the smaller of the two expanses of water, we could see in the distance small flotillas of Goldeneyes among the many Coots and Tufted Ducks. Pied Wagtails and Meadow Pipits flitted ahead of us at the waters edge as we walked along the causeway between the reservoirs, and several Great-crested Grebes and a couple of Little Grebes were seen just off-shore. From a new bird-watching hide situated halfway along the causeway, we obtained better views of the Goldeneyes, and a Slavonian Grebe, disappointingly for us still in its winter plumage. On our way to the Pinkhill scrape hide, a Kestrel was perched on the edge of a pump-house roof surveying the nearby grassland, no doubt an energy-saving way of hunting for prey rather than the usual hovering. From the hide, we saw Teals, Wigeons, a Lapwing, a Common Snipe and several Fieldfares. After leaving the hide to walk the northern edge of Reservoir 1, several small bird species were seen in the

hedgerow, including a Treecreeper. On scanning the open water once more, two pairs of Scaups were spotted near to the Goldeneyes. It is unusual to see Scaups at an inland site and, in particular, in full breeding plumages, as these birds were - a fitting end to our winter's day stroll.

Bird species seen:

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Cormorant
Mute Swan
Teal
Mallard
Pochard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Goldeneye
Kestrel
Coot
Lapwing
Snipe
Wood Pigeon
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Blackbird
Fieldfare
Great Tit
Treecreeper
Magpie
Carrion Crow
Chaffinch
Reed Bunting

David Rolfe

Nether Westcote 10 March 2013

Five of us turned out on a very cold afternoon for a circular walk from Nether Westcote. Starting out from 'The Feathered Nest' pub we set off down the lane and soon turned left off the increasingly muddy track on to the accepted footpath which leads down through the fields, past a pond which is being taken over with Reed Mace.

Crossing over the fast-flowing Westcote Brook, which eventually flows into the River Evenlode, we walked through an area with lots of bushes, which in March should have been a haven for birds, but due to the harsh conditions were virtually empty. As the path became increasingly muddy and I knew there was worse ahead we retraced our steps and then branched off and headed uphill towards Church Westcote. This is the first time I have been down here and not even seen a deer. They are usually plentiful across these fields. Just before reaching the road below the church we did see some purple violets and a patch of Butterbur in flower.

Returning along the road across the top of 'Tattle' we stopped to inspect the topograph and discover the names of some of the places we had been seeing on the far-reaching views towards Chipping Norton and Stow-on-the-Wold.

We returned to the cars feeling lucky that snow had not caught up with us as the sky had been quite threatening at times.

Birds that we did see were Redwing, Fieldfares, Bullfinch, Raven, Long-tailed Tits

and a Moorhen.

For many years villagers have always called the piece of land separating the two villages 'Tattle'. Does anyone know the meaning of this word?

David Roberts

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Hair worm wound round a beetle 3 April 2012

We were walking by the gravel edge near the bridge over the River Evenlode at Stonesfield Common when I noticed two medium-sized live black beetles (species unknown) seemingly drowning. I gathered up one out of the water with my hand, the other seem to be wound round with very fine strands of what looked like brown fishing line. I pulled it out with a stick on to the land and the 'fishing line' turned out to be an extremely thin brown smooth worm which unravelled itself to a length of about 4 inches (100 mm).

The Oxford Book of Invertebrates (OUP 1971), p. 3 states: 'The Nematomorpha (Hair Worms). These long thin worms (up to 32 inches - 800 mm) are free living as adults in freshwater and damp soil, but the juveniles are parasitic in insects and other arthropods. They enter their host, often a beetle, and feed parasitically, then emerge as adults.'

Alison Weaver (via Tony Forey)

Bird-watching holiday to Morocco 17-27 March 2012

Within 3½ hours of leaving Gatwick we were boarding a mini-bus at 11 am in sunny and warm Marrakech and spotting our first birds on the way to our hotel at Ourika in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains, 1 hour away. Fifteen minutes later we were on our way in the bus again winding our way 30 km up a twisty steep road through some wonderful scenery with snow-covered peaks in the background, stopping along the way to see Red-billed Chough, Long-legged Buzzard, Black Redstart, Moussier's Redstart, African Bluetits, Dipper and Cattle Egrets; the list went on and we reached the ski station at Oukaïmeden about 6,000 feet up in the snow line. Here we saw Crimson Winged Finch, Rock Sparrow and Atlas Horned Lark as we walked further up. It was pretty cold up here and rather incongruous to see our first camels in the snow. It was dark when we returned to our hotel for a delicious dinner.

No lying in bed in the morning but up and out for a walk at 6.15 am just as it was getting light and the air was alive with bird song - Nightingale, Blackbird, Common Bubul, Song Thrush. Down in the trees, through some wet pasture I saw my first ever Hawfinches, feeding high up in the tree canopy.

After breakfast we left for a long day's journey to Boumaine Dades, stopping for birding breaks along the way.

Over the 10 days we travelled about 1,200 miles and did a lot of walking. We saw over 190 species of birds, experienced some wonderful scenery from high mountains to arid desert, sand dunes, gorges and coastal beaches, ate some tasty different food, met some friendly people and saw some colourful and memorable sights. All this to be experienced just 3½ hours away.

David Roberts

Weathervanes

Many of my friends in the club will know that I have long pondered the origin of weathercocks. We see so many on our field trips, gleaming in the sunshine atop the splendid Cotswold churches. At last I have found the answer - courtesy of an article in the Western Daily Press. It seems weathercocks were first introduced to Europe in

the fifth century by the Pope, who issued a Papal Bull commanding that every church tower should have one as a reminder of the watchful eye of the Almighty. Early weathercocks had a tube in either side of their bodies, so that when the wind blew they emitted a crowing sound - another reminder of the Almighty, and of the Last Supper, when Jesus prophesied that the cock would not crow until the disciple Peter had denounced Him three times. Some have served a less respectful purpose in more recent times. At Clyst St George, near Exeter, the Home Guard used to use the local weathercock for target practice. The use of weathercocks may date back even further. It is said that the Ancient Greeks, who believed that winds had divine powers, also used weathercocks. So maybe this was another example of a pagan practice being adapted by the Christian church for its own ends.

Jill Bailey

Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*) - Clutches of three: how common?

As some of you already know, I started my nest photography project in the spring of 1964 with the intention of photographing a full clutch of eggs on the nest plus the habitat of all the regular British breeding birds. After four seasons of photographing nests on the dairy farm where I was working and in the surrounding area of farmland and gravel pits in the Thames Valley at Northmoor in West Oxfordshire, I had accumulated a total of 35 species.

Early in 1968 I had the pleasure and privilege of meeting Bruce Campbell (the Club's first President) who was acclaimed in many circles as 'the Prince of Nesters'. He very kindly initiated my successful trip to Handa in May of that year. In 1969 it was time again to spread my wings. I visited Dungeness on 19 May, when the warden of the reserve, Bob Scott showed me a Stock Dove nest, my first, with three eggs which I duly photographed.



Having previously photographed Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) and, by the end of the 1975 breeding season, Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) and Rock Dove (*Columba livia*), all with clutches of two eggs, I consequently wondered how significant was the Dungeness clutch of three. During the late 1970s I found another Stock Dove nest with three eggs on the floor of an old disused stable on the Barrington Park Estate on the Oxfordshire/Gloucestershire border. I noted these were all fresh eggs and did not include an infertile egg from a previous clutch.

In the autumn of 2000 I erected a chimney-type Tawny Owl nest box on a Perry Pear tree in our garden in south Herefordshire. It was occupied by a pair of Tawny Owls (*Strix aluco*) the following year and four young successfully fledged. In 2002 Grey Squirrels took up residence - these were discouraged! In 2007 Tawny Owls were again in charge, fledging two young this time. Each year from 2009 to 2011 Stock Doves have occupied the nest box, with varying success.

As usual, in mid-February 2012, I checked the nest box removed the old nest and relined it with wood shavings. I observed a pair of Stock Doves in the pear tree on 18 March, one of which entered the nest box. Checking the site on 8 April I was amazed to find my third clutch of three. The next visit was on 21 April when all three eggs had

hatched with the young 4/5 days old. By 6 May only one young remained, about three-quarters grown. Later in the month it was seen feeding and flying around with the adults. As we all know the weather in 2012 was far from ideal for a successful breeding season and these Stock Doves were probably two of the many victims.

John Campbell, who was in charge of the natural history collections at the Oxfordshire Museum Store at Standlake, informed me that there are 18 clutches of Stock Dove in the Jourdain Society Collection there but only one with three eggs. I have checked my library, consulting 14 books with reference to British birds' eggs and nests, etc.; only five mention the possibility of Stock Doves laying more than two eggs. My conclusion is that clutches of three are not common. What is your experience?

Graham J. Wren

The Flight of the Blackbird

Since 1959 I have been driving around the country lanes of my native Berkshire/Oxfordshire and for the past 18 years here in rural Herefordshire. Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) have caught my eye more than any other bird species as they cross the highways swooping just a foot or so above the tarmac and often only a few inches - this action sadly proving fatal all too often. You may well be thinking we all know this! However, I have noticed with particular interest over the last decade or so when driving in urban areas that Blackbirds, in general, fly much higher, propelling themselves over the roofs of the average car and surviving.



With the breeding season soon getting in full swing and with bird activity much greater, remember when driving in the countryside to ease your foot off the accelerator pedal, lower your fuel costs and help preserve one of our finest songsters. You may think perhaps that my observations are wishful speculation - comments welcome.

Graham J. Wren

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