

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2010

Trevor Russell

Ring out the old, ring in the new!

The first GOS meeting of the new decade will have a fresh feel to it, with attendees hearing details of personnel changes — along with a talk from the new CEO of Gwent Wildlife Trust.

As well as announcements of `retirements' and replacements, the new man at the helm of GWT, Richard Poole, will outline his vision for the future of the Trust.

The AGM will be held at Goytre Village Hall on Saturday, January 16, 2010, starting at 7.30pm.

The Hamar Bursary for 2009 was awarded to Jerry Lewis for his work on attracting Hawfinch to the woods in the Wye Valley, and the 2010 Bursary has been awarded to Steve Williams for his Pied Flycatcher nestbox project.

The treasurer has projected expenditure over the next few years and will propose that the annual subscription should increase by £3pa from January 2011 to seniors/juniors - £12, adults - £15, family - £18. Proposer- Keith Roylance, seconder- Dave Brassey

The post of vice-chairman still stands vacant. The expectation is that the vice-chairman will succeed the chairman when Dave retires by rotation in a few years' time.

Field secretary Luke Phillips had to resign following his appointment with the RSPB in Weymouth earlier in the year. Steve Butler kindly came out of 'retirement' to organise the 2010 outdoor programme and will groom Craig Constance to take on the role from 2011.

Report editors Verity Picken and Chris Field are standing down after four relentless years of producing four increasingly professional looking annual reports. John Coleman has bravely volunteered to step into their shoes, and they have promised to give him any help and support that he may require.

Gwent Ornithological Society Newsletter, December 2009 www.gwentbirds.org.uk

Trevor Russell will give up the role of indoor programme organiser and Rob Parsons has volunteered to replace him. Rob has already prepared the 2010 indoor programme and will simply need to be elected into his role.

Verity, Chris and Chris Hatch have all agreed to be elected as committee members, though more are needed - so please submit your name for nomination.

Both proposer and seconder should sign nominations with the agreement of the nominee, or e-mail them to me at trevor.russell7@virgin.net with details. Nominations must be received by January 1, 2010. In the event that any seat is contested, selection will be made by a show of hands at the AGM.

The AGM will be followed by a finger buffet. The trick here is to bring some finger food of your

own to be shared by everyone, but then select something that looks far more appetising than your own offering!

Colour ringed White Wagtail at PW Sluice Farm Pt 2! ☐ ☐ ☐

Roger Price

The Dipper readers might have noticed mystery surrounding the article in the last newsletter about the White Wagtail. A technical glitch meant that half the article disappeared during the edit — apologies for baffling you!

To recap, Roger Price told us about his photograph of a White Wagtail, colour ringed on both legs, taken at SF (Sluice Farm) After details were sent to the BTO, the Slapton Lee (Devon) bird ringing group had contacted Roger to say that there were three groups dedicated to ringing Pied/White Wagtails in the UK. In addition to the Slapton group, they also ring at Abbotsbury in Dorset and East Kilbride in Scotland. Because this bird had its aluminium ring on the right leg, it meant that it was ringed in East Kilbride

The East Kilbride contact confirmed the coding of the four colours meant that the bird was a first autumn female, ringed on September 12, 2008, going into a tree roost at a local supermarket! At Slapton and Abbotsbury, they catch the birds going to roost in reedbeds. In all cases, the birds are attracted into mist nets using audio tape recordings of their calls (tape lures). Ornithological note: In the autumn, the bird lacked a black/grey crown.

In the opinion of Dennis Elphick of the Slapton Lee group, this was an Icelandic bird on its return migration. Interesting that we don't get the numbers of these birds in autumn, as they do. Below is a photo, supplied by Roger, of the White Wagtail taken in the hand at night.

Alfred Russell Wallace

Al Venables

Does the ornithologist, born in Usk, have a better claim than Darwin to be the originator of the theory of evolution by natural selection?

Some readers may remember the excellent talk on the subject of Alfred Wallace given at Goytre a few years ago by our former Chairman, Alan Williams. Since then, there has been some revival of the controversy concerning the relative roles of Wallace and Charles Darwin in the formulation of the theory of evolution (see the recent book *The Darwin Conspiracy* by Roy Davies). So with this in mind, it is worth revisiting the career of this eminent - but often overlooked - biologist.

Darwin's story

Everyone has heard of Darwin and knows he was the first to understand the production of new species by evolution. Few, however, have heard of Wallace - and those who have will repeat the conventional story which runs along the following lines. In 1836, Darwin returned from a five-year voyage of exploration on the *The Beagle*, during which he had spent much time studying geology and wildlife in South America and other locations including the Galapagos Islands. This experience set him thinking about the evolution of species and by 1844, he had the basis of a theory, which he wrote in manuscript but did not publish.

For the next 14 years he worked tirelessly on the elaboration of his theory, studying specimens sent to him from around the world and becoming an expert on the variations in domestic animals, particularly pigeons. However, he still failed to publish it, and - apart from an outline sent to Dr Asa Gray in 1857 - also failed to show his friends a complete account of it.

Then in 1858, Darwin received a letter from Alfred Wallace, a specimen collector working in the East Indies. During a bad bout of malaria, Wallace had suddenly thought of a theory of evolution by natural selection that was essentially the same as Darwin's and asked Darwin to pass it to Dr Charles Lyell for publication. After consulting with his friends, Darwin hastily produced a publishable account of his own theory, and both authors had their papers presented at a meeting of the Linnaean Society later that year.

The resulting theory of evolution was initially known as the Darwin/Wallace theory, but

Wallace's name was soon dropped, and Darwin failed to give him so much as a mention in the first edition of his *Origin of Species*. This tends to be regarded as a fair outcome, as Darwin had spent 20 years working out his theory - whereas Wallace had just happened think of it out of the blue, so to speak. This view, however, is inaccurate and grossly underestimates both Wallace's scientific standing and his role in the development of the theory.

Wallace's story

Alfred Wallace, a largely self taught surveyor and naturalist, was of humbler origins than Darwin - but with similar curiosity about the origins of living things. He was greatly influenced by the Victorian work on evolution, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which inspired him to seek out the answers to how new species had evolved. With this in mind, he undertook two great collecting and recording expeditions, firstly to the rainforests of Brazil (1848-52) and then to the islands of the Malayan archipelago (1854-62).

On the latter expedition, he travelled over 14,000 miles and collected around 126,000 biological specimens, of which 8,050 were birds. He discovered 16 previously undescribed bird species, including Wallace's Standardwing Bird of Paradise, Wallace's Fruit Dove and Wallace's Owlet Nightjar.

He did groundbreaking work on the distribution of animal and plant species, discovering the line of demarcation between the Oriental and Australasian faunal regions (known to this day as Wallace's Line), which was first published in Volume 1 of *Ibis* (1859), the newly launched journal of the BOU. After many other publications, in 1875 he published a book on the geographical distribution of animals that established him as the 'father' of the blossoming science of biogeography.

Evolution was never far from Wallace's mind, and his publication in 1853 of *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* hinted that he was studying the distribution of animals and their adaptations to their environments with a view to answering evolutionary questions. His studies in the Malayan archipelago, observing how different but closely related species were found on each island - and sometimes occupying different niches on the same island - prompted him to discuss evolution openly in an article published in 1855. In this, he stated an evolutionary law that 'every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing closely allied species'.

Written on Sarawak, this revolutionary idea became known as the Sarawak Law, and it prompted Charles Lyell

to write to Darwin saying that Wallace seemed close to solving 'the species problem' and urging him to publish his own theory quickly. Darwin failed to act decisively on this advice, but his writings show that Wallace's ideas had influenced his thoughts on evolution. Early in 1858, while suffering from malaria on the island of Ternate, Wallace had time to think deeply about his observations and ideas and — finally - all the pieces of the theory of evolution by natural selection fell into place. He wrote up the completed theory and posted it to Darwin on the boat that left Ternate on March 9 — and the rest is history. Or is it?

Wallace has an excellent claim to the theory

Firstly, it is obvious that when Wallace wrote from Ternate, he was not a 'mere collector' who had had a sudden brainwave about evolution; he was an accomplished scientist who had thought about evolution for many years and had published more about it than Darwin had. In some ways, Wallace was better placed to come up with answers than Darwin because he was actively thinking about evolution while still in the field. This contrasts with Darwin's first account of his voyage on The Beagle, which makes little suggestion that he was thinking about evolution during the voyage. And the failure of his specimen labels to indicate from which island each of his Galapagos Finch specimens had been obtained would appear to support this view.

Why didn't Darwin publish earlier and did he cheat Wallace?

It is often said, that knowing the furore that would be unleashed when his theory was published, Darwin felt compelled to continue striving for more and more supporting evidence and consequently kept putting off the inevitable. Alternatively, some authors have suggested that he wished to spare his wife - who was deeply religious - from the unpleasantness that would arise from the condemnation of the theory by some Christians.

However, there is another possibility — perhaps he was still struggling to put together a complete and coherent theory, and was therefore not ready to publish. It is just such a suggestion for which Roy Davies presents evidence in The Darwin Conspiracy.

It seems that when Wallace posted his theory from Ternate he also sent a letter to England on the same boat addressed to Frederick Bates, the brother of his friend Henry Bates. This letter was received by Frederick Bates on June 3. On June 8, Darwin wrote to Joseph Hooker saying he had just found the 'missing keystone' to his theory of evolution, while on June 18, he wrote again to say that he had just received a letter from Wallace that proposed a theory of evolution identical to his own. Hmmm! Postal historians and philatelists are adamant that Darwin, like

Frederick Bates, must have received the letter in the period June 3-5.

So what was Darwin's missing keystone? And was it stolen, unacknowledged, from Wallace's theory? It seems unlikely that we will ever be certain — the envelope for the Ternate letter, which might have provided the answer, has been lost. Another strange aspect of this affair is that following the publication of the Sarawak Law, Wallace began a correspondence with Darwin. But some of Wallace's letters are missing from Darwin's otherwise systematically organised correspondence. Might these have also contributed ideas to Darwin's theory, and might they have been destroyed to cover the evidence?

Conclusion

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that Wallace is at least an equal in the endeavour to produce the theory that underpins all modern biology, and the theory should be known as the Wallace/Darwin theory of evolution by natural selection.

Big Garden Birdwatch □ □ □

Richard Clarke

The Caerphilly Biodiversity Partnership's Big Garden Birdwatch event 2010 takes place on
January 23 from 10am to 3p
m
at
Parc
Cwm
Darran
,
Deri
(two miles north of
Bargoed
,
SO1103
).

The event promises fun for all the family, with activities including birdbox and

feeder making, bird walks and talks and bird ringing demonstrations. There will also be

Information and advice on garden birds, wildlife gardening and taking part in the RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch.

Indoor facilities, including toilets, are provided in the country park visitor centre. Hot refreshments are also available. There is car parking and disabled access. Entry is free, but donations are requested for some of the activities.

Event organiser: Caerphilly County Borough Council; contact: Maggie Iles on 01495 235450, e-mail ilesm@caerphilly.gov.uk

Outdoor programme

Nicholas Beswick

Silent Valley

After a period of unsettled weather, it was a delight to find the day dawn clear and calm. But sadly, this break from dismal conditions didn't tempt many out to Silent Valley, with the group comprising just Dave Brassey, Rob Parsons and myself.

Nor, it turned out, did the conditions tempt many birds from putting in an appearance. Most were to be found in the woods in the bottom of the valley, with parties of common Tits and Chaffinches active.

Two small groups of Bullfinches were a bonus. Out of the woods, a distant view of some 200 Herring Gulls spiralling up from the landfill site was impressive. But the Ravens, often plentiful over the ridge, were thin on the ground.

As I've adopted SO10Y as one of my Atlas tetrads, this served as the early winter timed tetrad visit, with a total of 23 species recorded. Doubtless there will be more on future visits, and I'm looking forward to going back.

SIGHTINGS

SEPTEMBER 2009

Highlights

A male Black Redstart was reported from Caldicot Pill (4th to 19th). A Ring-necked Parakeet was seen at Malpas (26th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Wader sightings included 12 Spotted Redshanks (3rd), a Curlew Sandpiper (from 6th), two Little Stints (12th) and 43 Avocets (20th). Other sightings of note included a Red Kite (10th), a Rudd Shelduck (15th), a female Hen Harrier (20), a female Marsh Harrier (20th) and 11 Bearded Tits (24th).

Other sites

Over 70 Terns, mainly Common, with a few Arctic were reported from Llandegfedd Reservoir (8th). At least two female / juvenile Hen Harriers were reported from Mynydd Maen (12th).

), with a single bird also seen there (29th). A female Hen Harrier was also reported from Waunafon Bog (13th). Red Kites were reported from Tredegar (two on 3rd), Newbridge (11th), Pontypool (15th), Garnlydan (28th) and Oakdale (30th). Other sightings of note included a Mediterranean Gull at Caerleon (17th) and a drake Mandarin at Llandogo (20th).

OCTOBER 2009

Highlights

A Pectoral Sandpiper was present on the flooded field at Caerleon (2nd until 8th). A Rough-legged Buzzard was reported from Garndiffaith

(
16th
) . A probable Tawny Pipit was recorded at
Dingestow

(
14th
) .

Newport Wetlands Reserve

A Manx Shearwater was seen offshore (3rd). Wader sightings included three Spotted Redshank (7th)

and 42 Avocets (11th

) . Other sightings of note included two
Whooper

Swans (7th

) , a female Hen Harrier (11th

) , a Short-eared Owl (14th

to

16th

) and a Great
Skua

(
25th

) .

Other sites

A Dartford Warbler was present at St. Brides (from 8th). A Firecrest was recorded at Peterstone (31st

) . Hen Harriers were reported from
Mynydd

Langattock

(female on

4th
)
Pontypool
(male and female on
10th
)
Brynmawr
(female on
18th
) and
Blaenserchan
(female on
25th
) . A pale—bellied Brent goose was observed at
Peterstone
(
8th
and
26th
) , with a dark-bellied Brent at
Collister
Pill (
10th
) . An Emperor Goose was seen at
Llandegfedd
Reservoir ((
27th
) . Single
Merlins
were reported from
Caldicot
Pill (
13th
) , West Pill (
16th
) ,
Brynmawr
(
18th
) and Sluice Farm (
19th
) . Single Red Kites were recorded at
Pontypool
(
10th
) ,

Brynmawr
(
26th
and
31st
) and Beaufort (
27th
) . A juvenile male Ring Ouzel was seen at
Ebbw
Vale (
19th
) , while on the same date, a party of four Ring Ouzels were seen at
Mynydd
Llangattock
. Single Barn Owls were recorded at
Magor
(
12th
) ,
Portskewett
(
18th
) and
Monmouth
(
21st
) . Two Barn Owls were also seen at
Monmouth
(
27th
) , with three birds present on the
30th
. Other sightings of note included a Jack Snipe at Sluice Farm (
19th
) and a Mediterranean Gull at
Sudbrook
(
31st
) .

NOVEMBER 2009

Highlights

A Twite was reported from Peterstone (1st). Single Snow Buntings were recorded at Sluice Farm (7th) and Peterstone (19th to 21st). Four Leach's Petrels were seen offshore at Goldcliff (24th), with two birds also recorded there on 25th.

A Single Black Redstart was recorded at Sluice Farm (9th), with two birds also recorded there (20th). A Black Redstart was also seen at Abergavenny (27th). Little Gulls were reported from Llandegfedd Reservoir (22nd) and Newport Wetlands (24th). A Grey Phalarope was present at Llandegfedd Reservoir (26th ~ 27th).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Raptor sightings included a Red Kite (2nd), and a Merlin (17th). Wader sightings included up to two Spotted Redshanks (9th) and two Avocets (6th). Sea-watching from Goldcliff point produced a Great Northern Diver, a Gannet, an Arctic Skua and 25+ plus Kittiwakes (

14th
) , a Great
Skua
and 100-plus
Kittiwakes
(
24th
) and four Great
Skuas
(
25th
) . Other sightings of note included a Barnacle Goose (
15th
) .

Other sites

Three Whooper Swans were reported from Sluice Farm (4th). Bramblings were recorded at C
roespenmaen
(
4th
) and the
Blorenges
(
9th
) . Two Green Sandpipers were at the
Gobion
(
5th
) . A Great Northern Diver was seen at Black Rock (
15th
) .

Other sightings of note included a Bar-headed Goose at Bulmore (9th), a Water Pipit at Peter
stone
(
19th
) , a Merlin at Sluice Farm (
20th
) , a Mediterranean Gull at the Moorings (

20th
) and single Red Kites at
Garnlydan
(
28th
) and
Llanvetherine
(
30th
).

Newport Wetlands

Tom Dalrymple

SEPTEMBER

Birds

Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit have been present in nationally important numbers, with peak counts of 55 and 250 respectively. However, the migratory wildfowl are still in low numbers - we have approximately 10% of the Teal and Wigeon that should come to the reserve this winter.

It has been a good month for raptors on the reserve with a Hobby sighting in addition to the Marsh and Hen Harriers and Red Kite. Other notable bird sightings for the reserve this month were four Little Stint and a Ruff.

Management

The wet weather of July and early August has been replaced with hardly any rainfall. We have started to raise water levels in the saline lagoons and certain wet grassland fields in preparation for the wintering wildfowl. To do this, we have been using water pumped from the reedbeds.

Our chosen contractors, Caldicot and Wentlooge IDB, have begun work on the first phase of a three-year project on the NNR funded by a Bif

fa
award. The project is part of an
RSPB
UK-wide project to improve coastal grazing marshes. The project will concentrate on improving
the conditions of the reserve ditches for the
SSSI
plants and invertebrates. This will involve re-excavating filled in ditches, removing shading
vegetation and installing water control structures.

A bat survey was carried out this month to assess whether it will be possible to add a cladding
to the Redhouse office buildings to improve the weather proofing of the office and workshop.

Events and visits

Kevin and long term volunteer Chris Hurn ran a bird migration event to look at migratory
wading birds on the 5th.

The RSPB field teachers ran 'Hogweed's School of Wildlife Wizardry' on the 6th. The centre
staff gave a guided walk to the
Aberystwyth
Univ
. Old Students' Association on the
19th
.

OCTOBER

Birds

Despite the low water levels and the mild weather, the reserve has reached its bird targets for
another year: Black-tailed Godwit and Shoveler both present in nationally important numbers,
with peak counts of 280 and 163 respectively.

Other migratory waterfowl numbers are also beginning to pick up: Wigeon 633, Mallard 333 and Teal 190. Notable bird sightings for the reserve this month included a Brent Goose on the 19th and a Merlin on the 20th

Management

The dry weather of September continued into the first half of October. It seems as though wet summers followed by dry autumns are becoming the norm. The October rainfall figures for the reserve are: 194mm in 2006, 64mm in 2007, 84mm in 2008 and 107mm in 2009.

The Caldicot and Wentlooge IDB continues to work on the project to improve coastal grazing marshes. The water control structures are in, grips have gone in one of the flat fields and work has begun removing unwanted hedgerows and reducing the height of others. The hedgerow work is necessary to regain the flora and fauna of the ditches for which they were notified SSSI

Volunteers Sheila and Rhys have been busy cutting back over growing vegetation from the reserves many footpaths and tracks.

Events and visits

The first day of a two-day CCW Reserve Managers' training event was held at the Reserve on the 6th. Kevin gave a talk for the Bristol Naturalists' Trust on the 14th. RSPB South West director Tony Richardson was shown around the reserve on the 15th

ITV filmed from the centre and the saline lagoons on the 28th

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NOVEMBER

Birds

It feels like winter now. The wet grasslands are flooded and the sounds of Wigeon and Teal are everywhere. However, the winter bird numbers are still to peak: Wigeon 1,465, Teal 798, Lapwing 1,200 and Dunlin 3,000.

It has been a great year for watching Starlings in the reedbed, with flocks of up to 47,000 counted using the James method (count the wings and divide by two).

The most notable bird sightings this month were seen over the estuary — a Leach's Petrel on the 26th and 25th and Little Gull on the 24th.

Management

The rains have come! Only two dry days on the reserve in November - lovely! Richie and the volunteers have made the best of the wet weather by painting the new workshop.

The Abergavenny team (Dave Charles, Lucy Roberts, Rob Parsons and Bryn Jones) have been cutting the path edges of the reedbed for us. The vegetation is being removed and composted in an effort to increase the flowering plants in the area for the rare Shril Carder Bees.

We have had a local contractor in to pollard some willow trees that were in danger of damaging our neighbour's property. The IDB have been forced to take a break from the Biffa award work, as the ground is so saturated that continuing would cause too much damage.

It has been a very bad month for undesirable activities. A member of the public found a mist net on the reserve. They managed to extricate a Blackbird and a Reed Bunting, but one Reed Bunting was already dead. Presumably, whoever set the net was trying to catch finches or buntings to sell. The police have been informed.

Chris Hearn our long time voluntary warden discovered some lengths of plastic and armour cabling that had been stripped off wires, presumably so the copper could be salvaged for its scrap value. Later that evening, I found approximately 400 meters of electric cable an inch and a quarter thick lying on the footpath. It had been stolen from the power station next door. Contractors working on the power station were able to retrieve the cable before any attempt to cut it up and remove it was made.

The fire brigade were called to the reserve when a member of the public spotted some chemical containers washed up on the salt marsh. Fortunately, the containers were empty but the Environment Agency was alerted and is chasing up a contact name found on one of the containers.

Chairman's Chatter

Dave Brassey

It's true what they say — the older you get, the faster Christmas comes around. Yes, it's that time of year again; the time when you drop all sorts of hints about the latest carbon fibre tripod, knowing full well that and you'll get a pair of hiking socks and a pretty bird book.

I've had a go at setting a crossword for you to do while the turkey cooks. If it's too hard or too easy, I apologise - it's just a bit of fun. But do have a go and please submit your answers to me before the AGM. There will be a liquid prize for the winner, which may go down to the tie breaker question or even a draw!

We've had another full year and our committee is always looking for ways to further the aims

of the society. One suggestion, which has come from outside the society, is that we should seriously use modern methods of social networking such as Facebook and Twitter to reach potential new members. Facebook is certainly one way of connecting with more young people who could one day become members, and I think we should explore it.

What I know about these, though, could be written on a Blue Tit's egg. But at least Twitter has some Ornithological connotation, so if anyone can walk and talk me through them I'd be grateful.