

Chairman Required for 2002

Alan Williams

The Society's constitution sets out the chairman's term of office as no more than five years. This means that I will have to stand down from the post at the next AGM in January. It is a sensible policy to have a periodic change of officers, as new ideas are always welcome in any organisation.

It has been the practice for the vice-chairman to succeed to the post of chairman but that is not possible this time, as we do not have anyone in that post. As none of the present committee members are willing or able to take on the role of chairman I am seeking a volunteer from the wider membership for the post.

What does it involve?

To some extent that is up to the individual. At the basic level, you will only have to chair the committee meetings. It is also custom and practice for the chairman to introduce the speaker at indoor meetings, but that can be delegated on a rota basis. I have taken on a number of additional tasks, such as setting up the village hall, because I live closest. I will continue to do this at least for the time being.

If you would like to volunteer or at least find out more then please contact me.

Gwent Levels Wetlands Reserve – Goldcliff Lagoons Access

Adam Rowlands, Warden

Permissive access to the Goldcliff Lagoons on the Gwent Levels Wetlands Reserve was re-opened from 19th August 2001. A fence has been constructed along the perimeter bund to prevent direct contact between livestock grazing the lagoons and visitors to the site. We have incorporated four viewpoints along the north-eastern section of the bund and another one at the junction with the sea-wall in the southern corner. There is no access along the outer sea-wall. There will be maps at all access points to show the access route and the location of the viewpoints. We are extremely grateful to the patience shown by local birders during the period that access has been restricted to the lagoons.

Recent sightings on the Reserve include up to 24 Little Egret and 2 Garganey as well as a

selection of common passage waders. Tree Pipit and Yellow Wagtail are passing through and the Goldcliff Ringing Group trapped an Aquatic Warbler in an inaccessible area of the Uskmouth reedbed on the morning of 16th August. The developing habitat in the public area of the Uskmouth Lagoons looks very attractive for this species at present. Of dubious origin are the long-staying Whooper Swan at Uskmouth and a female Red-crested Pochard on 16 August. (For more news from the GLWR see page 3 of this issue.)

BTO News (www.bto.org)

Jerry Lewis

Surveys. Fieldwork was severely restricted by Foot & Mouth this spring and summer, but a few BBS workers managed their second visit. If you were one of these, please let me have your forms as soon as possible. If you were not able to undertake any fieldwork please let me know so I can inform the BTO how much coverage was achieved this year. Any new volunteers for BTO surveys are always welcome, as a few surveyors have to relinquish their squares each year.

In 1986 the Woodlark population was less than 250 pairs, but since then it has risen and by 1997 there were over 1500 pairs – mainly due to better management of young forestry plantations for breeding birds. Winter work in East Anglia has shown that not all of the birds are migratory. Some stay on stubble near the breeding areas. The importance of barley and wheat stubble (retained for the winter) already known for other species, has now been shown for woodlarks as well.

Two surveys cancelled in 2001 will now take place in 2002. These are the Peregrine Survey and the Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows Survey. Please contact me if you are able to help, and if you received survey forms for this year, please confirm whether you have kept them to avoid the BTO having to produce a further set.

There have been two interesting ringing recoveries; the full details will be in the 2001 Annual Report. A Long-eared owl from Finland, ringed in September 1997 was found dead at Chepstow in February 1999. The north European population is migratory. A Hobby ringed as a nestling near Gobion last year was caught at the Llangorse Lake hirundine roost in August. It was one of two caught there in just 3 days. Very few adult Hobby are caught and even fewer have rings on. There are only about 30 recoveries of Hobby nationally, two of which are now Gwent birds.

BTO Publications. A new book, *Rusty Flies South*, highlights the journey of a young Swallow to South Africa. It is written for 3-6 year olds and aims to raise funds for the BTO's new Swallow Appeal to undertake research into bird migration. The book costs £5.00 (incl. P&P) from The BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU. Donations for the appeal can also be sent to this address.

Another new book, documenting over 90 years of bird ringing, is to be launched next year. The Migration Atlas has taken four years to write and has involved over 150 BTO authors. As well as detailing present knowledge, it also highlights gaps in our information, and the Swallow Appeal will help fund further research to try to fill the gaps.

Mammals. The reasons for monitoring mammals are much the same as for birds – to determine abundance, distribution and more importantly population changes. Mammals tend not to receive the same attention as birds, mainly because they are less easy to observe.

A survey to test the effectiveness of two methods is planned for this winter. Because the BTO has extensive experience of working with volunteers, it has joined with the Mammal Society in organising this winter's trial. The survey will take place in random 1 Km squares, similar to the BBS, and many BBS surveyors already record mammals during their two breeding season visits. If anyone is interested in helping, contact Mike Toms at the BTO direct on 01842 750050. Local workshops are planned for late autumn to provide training.

See page 6 for participation in other bird and mammal studies

News from the Gwent Levels Wetlands Reserve

Adam Rowlands, Warden

Despite being unable to carry out a full breeding bird survey, due to the access restrictions created by Foot and Mouth disease, it appears to have been a successful season on the Reserve. Ad-hoc observations, undertaken whilst carrying out essential management work, suggested at least 2 pairs of Oystercatcher, 15 pairs of Lapwing, 5 pairs of Little Ringed Plover and 6 pairs of Redshank to be present. It appeared that many of these pairs successfully reared young. Other breeding records included one pair of Great Crested Grebe and at least 7 pairs of Little Grebe. A pair of Ruddy Duck bred successfully and a female Pochard x Tufted Duck hybrid paired with a drake Pochard to produce a brood of second-generation hybrid young.

Recent peak counts during August include 274 Teal, 12 Gadwall, 29 Shoveler, 107 Ringed Plover, 481 Dunlin and 16 Snipe. Other interesting sightings include a Black-necked Grebe at Uskmouth from 23 July, up to 7 Little Egret in June, increasing to 27 in mid-August, a drake Garganey in June, with up to 2 during August, Common Scoter offshore in July, single Marsh Harrier, numerous sightings of Hobby, up to 5 Curlew Sandpiper in August, single Ruff in July and August, 3 Wood Sandpiper together in August, up to 21 Black-tailed Godwit, single Spotted Redshank in mid-August, up to 3 Greenshank, Long-eared Owl at Uskmouth in mid-June, single Tree Sparrow also in mid-June and up to 10 Crossbill over in August. Of more dubious origin were the lingering Whooper Swan, 5 Snow Goose which flew north-west in mid-June and a female Red-crested Pochard from 16 August.

The Goldcliff Ringing Group has trapped several Cetti's Warblers in the Uskmouth reedbeds, including a female with a brood patch and fledged juveniles. They also trapped an Aquatic Warbler on 16 August.

A Black-winged Pratincole* was present on the Goldcliff lagoons on the morning of 25 June. Unfortunately, access arrangements to view the bird could not be organised during its brief stay. We have now fenced an access route to allow viewing of the Goldcliff lagoons, which were re-opened to visitors on the 19 August.

Following the recording of numerous Otter spraints across the site, there were two sightings of Otter at Uskmouth, near the Reserve Car Park, in June. There was an impressive showing of orchids on the grasslands surrounding the Uskmouth reedbeds in June, with many Southern Marsh, Common Spotted, Bee and a few Pyramidal Orchids. At least 500 Marsh Helleborine spikes were located in this area in July. Interesting moth records included numerous Scarlet Tiger and a Goat Moth at Uskmouth. Larvae of the Small Ranunculus, which was considered extinct in Britain until recently, were found on the Reserve in August.

The study by the Wetland Advisory Service looking at future access and interpretation on the Reserve is now scheduled to be completed in September. Some aspects of the provision of facilities for visitors to the Reserve will hopefully be co-ordinated with the Environment Agency scheme to upgrade the sea-defences at the site. These works are proposed to take place during the summer and autumn of 2002.

*There appear to have only been two other records of Black-winged Pratincole in Wales, one in Flintshire in the 1980s and one at Mona Airfield Anglesey during July this year Birdwatch September 2001, page 60 (HPJ).

Recent Bird Highlights

Compiled by Chris Hatch from information received on the GOS/Hamdden Bird Line

May ended with a Goshawk and a Little Egret seen at Llanwenarth near Abergavenny on the 29th and a Brent Goose at Llandegfedd on the 30th.

June: On the 1st, a Cetti's Warbler was heard in a hedgerow near the UCI cinema in Newport. Hobbies were reported from Llandegfedd on the 2nd, Penhow on the 17th and Abergavenny on the 23rd. A Ruddy Duck was observed at Uskmouth on the 17th, a Nightjar was present at Wentwood also on the 17th, and a pair of Little Ringed Plover was at Llandegfedd on the 25th.

July: Hobbies were reported from Caldicot Pill on the 1st and Llandegfedd on the 15th. A Kittiwake was seen offshore at Caldicot Pill on the 1st, whilst on the same date 3 pairs of Little Ringed Plover and a pair of Common Sandpiper with a chick were present at Gobion. On the 13th, two Common Scoter and a Mediterranean Gull were observed at Peterstone. Little Egrets were present at Llandegfedd on the 14th (2 birds) and at Uskmouth (max. 8 birds on the 29th). A Black-necked Grebe was present at Uskmouth from the 23rd to the 29th, whilst at the same site, a female Marsh Harrier was reported on the 29th and a Scaup was present on the 31st.

August: A Scaup was present at Llandegfedd on the 1st. Hobbies again featured in reports , with 2 at Abergavenny on the 2nd and 2 at Cross Ash on the 10th. Four Little Egrets were reported from Llandegfedd on the 4th, with 12 birds seen at Uskmouth on the 15th. An Aquatic Warbler was a highlight at Uskmouth on the 16th, whilst 9 Common Terns passed through Llandegfedd on the 18th.

Goytre House Wood, an update

Alan Williams

We have given you occasional updates on the progress towards the Society purchasing Goytre House Wood following Betty Morgan's generous bequest. It now looks likely that the purchase will be completed sometime in September or October.

Once in our ownership we will need to do a little bit of management to improve its attraction to birds. The wood is to be fenced by a contractor but there are a couple of small patches of rhododendron that should be removed. We have had a grant from Monmouthshire County Council to put up nest boxes and we still need to have the pond de-silted this autumn.

The committee would like to set up a working group to look after the wood in accordance with the management plan. If you are interested in this sort of activity, from shrub clearing to nest box erecting and monitoring, then please contact Alan Williams.

Cetaceans and Seabirds in the Bay of Biscay

Adam Rowlands

This autumn I joined the growing numbers of birders who have taken the ferries that operate between Britain and Spain, thus providing the opportunity to see large numbers of sought-after seabirds and cetaceans in the Bay of Biscay. I sailed on the Brittany Ferries service from Plymouth to Santander. We sailed out on 20 August and returned to Plymouth 48 hours later.

The outward journey travels through the Western Approaches and around the coast of Brittany (allowing distant views of the island of Ouessant). Gannet were especially numerous during this leg of the voyage, with some large feeding parties that attracted other species. We also recorded over 100 Storm Petrel, along with small numbers of Great, Manx, Balearic and Sooty Shearwater. There were also small numbers of Bottle-nosed and Common Dolphins.

As we moved into the northern part of the Bay of Biscay we began to pick up Sabine's Gulls, including an impressive flock of nine together, Grey Phalaropes and Cory's Shearwater. One of the last birds of the day was a fine Little Shearwater that cruised alongside the boat, causing pandemonium amongst those birders who had not retreated to the restaurant for an evening meal.

The following morning provided an introduction to southern Biscay, with our first Fin Whale and small numbers of Cory's, Sooty and Balearic Shearwater. We docked at Santander at about eight o'clock in the morning and remained on deck, from where we located Peregrine, Woodchat Shrike and Pied Flycatcher around the port and were able to study the local Yellow-legged Gulls.

We left Santander at about ten o'clock and sailed into the cetacean rich waters of southern Biscay. The next three hours provided numerous sightings, including Fin and Pilot Whales and several Cuvier's Beaked and Sperm Whales. One of the Fin Whales swam across the bow of the boat at a range of no more than 200 metres and a party of three Cuvier's Beaked Whales provided a memorable sight as they passed even closer. Pods of Risso's and Striped Dolphins made straight for the boat and provided stunning views.

A couple of Hoopoe and several Serin over the sea were unusual in a "sea-watching" situation, but the absence of good numbers of large shearwaters was disappointing, following the counts of over 1000 that have characterised recent autumns in this area. We continued to see small parties of Grey Phalarope, but apart from an adult Long-tailed Skua the latter half of the second day proved to be very slow.

This all changed during the last hour of the day, as we neared the continental shelf in the north of Biscay. Suddenly Storm Petrels became more frequent and soon Little Shearwaters were being seen lifting off the sea ahead of the boat. One of the many highlights of the trip was two Little Shearwaters that flew alongside the bow, at no more than 50 metres range, for at least five minutes. The stable deck allowed superb views of these individuals through the telescope. Several other individuals allowed good views and up to 12 were seen during this period. An adult Pomarine Skua provided a brief diversion and as dusk approached a Wilson's Petrel was picked up feeding amongst a party of Storm Petrels, providing a fitting finale to the day.

The last morning provided more typical British fare as we sailed into Plymouth, the small numbers of Manx Shearwater providing a fresh comparison with the Littles from the evening before. All in all this proved to be a very enjoyable trip and one I will certainly take again.

This is a trip that I have been considering over the last couple of years, and might try to do next year.

If anyone is interested let me know and perhaps I could organise a GOS trip. Helen Parry Jones

Committee Commentary, June and August 2001 Meetings

Trevor Russell

Goytre House Wood. Our application for Charitable status with the Charity Commissioners met with requests for what seemed to be trivial changes to our Constitution. Rather than waiting for the next AGM, it was decided to hold an Extraordinary General Meeting immediately prior to the first indoor meeting, on September 22nd. The whole process should take less than 5 minutes.....

The revised wording to the Constitution appeared in the June issue of The Dipper and is repeated on page 7 of this issue.

Meanwhile we will seek advice from experts regarding what trees should be removed and planted in order to promote regeneration. We then intend to set up a group to run and maintain the wood on a day-to-day basis. Volunteers should contact Alan Williams or any Committee member.

Annual Report. Editor Brian Gregory was unable to incorporate last-minute inputs for the Annual report to enable him to publish in April as he had hoped but the publication should be distributed in August/September.

GOS/Hamdden Birdline. As reported in the last edition, usage of this facility is being monitored to assess whether it is worthwhile keeping it running. Use it or Lose it!

Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve. Due to the foot & mouth epidemic the Reserve has remained largely shut since late February, even to warden staff.

Birds of Gwent/Breeding Atlas. Foot & Mouth has similarly stopped Atlas survey work though some urban areas might still be able to be surveyed. This message would be put on the Birdline, and the Gwentbirds.org.uk website. Alan will prepare an article for the local press calling for Garden Sighting records.

RSPB Cymru. A request has been received calling for volunteers to help as Youth Leaders at their Ebbw Vale site. Please contact Alan Williams or Trevor Russell if you can help.

Diminishing Membership. In an attempt to understand why membership numbers are falling and why attendance at both indoor and outdoor meetings is diminishing, it was agreed to compile a questionnaire for the September Dipper. Entry and Exit questionnaires will also be prepared in order to understand members' expectations and what we should do to match them more closely in order to retain their membership.

Replacement Chairman. Alan retires from his post at the January 2002 AGM having served his 5-year term. Because we do not have a Vice Chairman we do not have a natural successor. Neither do we have any volunteers! It was suggested that we should make the role more attractive by i) reducing the term of office to 3 years, and ii) remove the 'obligation' to attend every indoor meeting to act as Introducer and Summariser, by asking Committee members to undertake this role, in rotation. This would work out as approx. 1 meeting per year.

Dunlop Sementex pond. It has been reported that Blaneau Gwent Council have removed extensive areas of reedbeds and trees around the margins of the pond whilst breeding and nesting birds, including Little Grebe and Coot, were still present. We will try to establish from B.G.C. what actually happened and why the GOS were not invited to comment on the action taken

Car Lifts to Indoor Meetings. There are several members who no longer attend the indoor meetings because they do not want to drive to Goytre in the dark but would be grateful for a lift. If these people would make themselves known to any Committee member we will publish brief addresses in The Dipper and ask for driver-members to respond, again via a Committee member, to arrange lifts. In this way, anonymity and security should be maximised.

Bert Hamar Memorial Bursary

As in previous years, the Society would like to award a bursary of up to £100 for an ornithological project in Gwent in memory of Bert Hamar. The grant is available to GOS members only, and a condition of the grant is that a short article on the project would be written for the annual report. Applications, including details of the project, estimated expenses and any

other funding should be sent to Trevor Russell by 15th October.

A small sub-committee will consider applications, and the successful applicant will be announced at the AGM in January.

Snippets from the Press
culled by Helen Parry Jones
Cuckoos in Decline (BTO News No 235, 2001)

From writing the report on Cuckoos for the Annual Report for 5 years, the impression is of a decline in the recording of Cuckoos in Gwent, presumably reflecting a decline in Cuckoo numbers. In the recent BTO News* the Common Bird Census has shown a decline of 31% between 1974 and 1999.

Over this period many of the host species in dry habitats have also declined – Tree Pipits (-76%), Meadow Pipits (-45%) and Dunnock (-44%). In contrast Reed Warblers have increased to 117% and the number of parasitised nests reported to the Nest Record scheme has more than doubled (this must be why the only Cuckoos I seem to hear are on my BBS square at Uskmouth).

Whilst the population size of the Cuckoo may be related to those of its hosts, its capacity to switch hosts may point to loss of food supplies in UK farmland and woodland, or in its African Winter Quarters.

*Thewlis, R., Marchant, J., Noble, D., Glue, D. BTO News No 235 (July-August 2001) page 12.

Peregrines and Man Made Structures – sightings wanted (BTO News No 235 2001)

Nick Dixon, project officer for the Hawk & Owl Trust is undertaking a 3-year study into the increased trend of Peregrine Falcons nesting on man-made structures. He is particularly interested in single birds or pairs over-wintering or roosting, perching or feeding on tall buildings/structures in town centres. If you have any sightings, please send them to Nick Dixon by email at nickdixondevon@aol.com

or by mail to

The Hawk & Owl Trust,

c/o Zoological Society of London, Regents Park, London.

NW1 4RY

Yellow Wagtail Study Group (BTO News No 235 2001)

The Waterways Bird Survey population trends highlighted the rapid decline of the riparian breeding Yellow Wagtail. Some coastal populations seem stable but in many areas there has been a dramatic decline. To examine possible reasons for this a Study Group is planned to allow interchange of individuals and groups from around the country. Studies of any type will help – populations, habitat, breeding and feeding ecology, ringing and survival, migration and wintering areas. A meeting/workshop for anyone interested is being scheduled for September/October. For further information, contact Kevin Briggs, 2 Osbourne Road, Farnborough, Hants, GU14 6PT, Tel 01252 5198810, email kbriggs@yahoo.com

The Great Nut Hunt 2001 (Mammals UK Summer 2001 page 7)

Some of you may have participated in the Great Nut Hunt in 1993. That year, almost 6,500 people took part and as a result, 334 dormouse sites were identified in England and Wales (compared with only 52 records of dormice between 1980 and 1983). English Nature, Mammals Trust UK and the Royal Holloway, University of London, will be repeating the Great Nut Hunt this autumn. The Great Nut Hunt is both simple and fun. No special skills are required as detailed instructions are provided. You just need to search among dead leaves under hazel trees and pick up any nut shells. These can be examined t home with the help of an ID pack and free magnifying glass, and any likely-looking dormouse nuts sent to the Chief Nutter for expert confirmation

If you would like to participate, please request a survey and ID pack from The Great Nut Hunt, PO Box 26169, London, SW8 4AF, or email

enquiries@mammalstrustuk.org, or register on the special site www.greatnuthunt.org.uk

National Hedgehog Survey 2001 (Mammals UK, Summer 2001 page 13

You may be in time to contribute to this survey, running until the end of September. It involves counting the numbers of hedgehogs (and other mammals), seen dead or alive on roads. Contact Oliver on 020 7498 5262 or fill in your details on the website at www.mtuk.org to receive a form.

If you have hedgehogs in your garden, you can help their survival by putting food out at night. Tinned cat or dog food and kitchen scraps are ideal. If you put out bread and milk, be sure to use full cream milk to provide the calories needed for hibernation. Hedgehog boxes can be purchased from Mammal Trust UK on 020 7498 5262, or you can make your own stuffed with leaves or grasses for bedding and with a short entrance tunnel.

Natur Cymru A Review of WILDLIFE in Wales

A new publication for those of you interested in the Welsh Environment. The first issue includes:

- A new start for Puffin Island
- Secrets of red squirrel survival
- Decline of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel
- Habitat restoration
- The aftermath of foot and mouth
- Regular features
- Assembly notebook
- Biodiversity News
- Wildlife records
- Book reviews
- Marine matters

Until 31st October 2001, two years' subscription are being offered for the price of one (issued 3 times per year) @ £10.00. Alternatively you can order a single issue for £3.50.

Cheques, payable to Natur Cymru should be sent to

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust

Warwick House

High Street

Llandrindod Wells

Powys, LD1 6AG

Charitable Status Application Update

(as previously published in the June issue of The Dipper)

I have received a response to our application for registration with the Charity Commission (CC). Although we used their standard constitution the Society's objects we submitted were those that we had in the previous constitution, and guess what, the CC have asked for them to be amended. They have suggested an alternative which appears to cover all the things we do, albeit in a form of words more acceptable to the CC. They have agreed to let us keep the specific reference to publishing the Gwent Bird Report, which was omitted from their first revision.

The Society needs formally to approve this amendment. Rather than wait for the next AGM I propose we hold an extraordinary general meeting just prior to the first indoor meeting on September 22nd. It should only take a couple of minutes.

The amended version is:

The objects as suggested by the Charity commissioners

1. To advance the education of the public in all aspects of ornithology.
2. To promote research into ornithology and to publish reports, newsletters and other papers of ornithological interest or as may be deemed by the management committee suitable or desirable for promoting the society's objects.
3. To publish an annual report known as 'The Gwent Bird Report'.
4. To support and encourage the preservation and conservation of wild birds and places of ornithological interest.

The objects as submitted to the Charity Commissioners:

to advance the ornithological education of the public by:

1. studying and recording all aspects of bird life in Gwent;
2. promoting increased interest in bird life in Gwent, particularly among the young;
3. supporting the conservation of bird life and ornithologically important habitats, particularly in Gwent;
4. co-operating with and supporting local, national and international bodies involved in ornithology;
5. producing an annual report to be known as the 'The Gwent Bird Report'.

I hope that by you all agreeing to this course of action we can finally resolve this issue.

Alan Williams, Chairman

Hobbies at Nantyglo – local patch news

Grant Herbert

Just an update on observations in my 'local patch' as we are all suppressed by

foot & mouth. The ringing of thrushes has been without doubt the best year for Gwent totals ever, (even though I planned to do Dippers). Jerry Lewis will probably have expected ringing totals to have dropped, but there are a lot of Blackbirds and Song Thrushes in gardens where I was allowed to ring. Some brilliant news, for Nantyglo, is that there are regular sightings of Hobby here. Eight of us watched a bird carrying prey south of our valley this week. Rod Morris and I have been able to continue our filming in Gwent and the restrictions of foot & mouth have provided us with a breeding pair of Sand Martins at Corus Ebbw Vale, the nest being in a pipe in a wall. </DIV><DIV align=center>

Gwent Atlas News

Al Venables

Many thanks to all observers who were able to do some recording despite the problems!

Please return your Atlas Cards for this year, regardless of whether you have added anything to them in 2001. One reason for returning cards that have nothing new on them is that it allows me to add casual records to them, and I have plenty of those. However, the main reason is to allow me to assess what was achieved this year.

Foot and mouth disease has, of course, played havoc with this year's fieldwork, but it has been very variable. I am aware that some observers were able to do quite a lot of recording late in the season when restrictions were relaxed, some did a small amount, and others were not able to do anything significant. I really need to get information back from all observers before I can ascertain how much (or how little!) was achieved this year, and in which areas, and so be able to plan an appropriate strategy for 2002 (free from foot & mouth we hope!).

Plans for 2002, when ready, will be included in a future issue of TheDipper.