

## **GOS Breeding Bird Atlas**

As most of you are aware 2003 will be the final year for Atlas recording. I wrote to all members last year, asking those who were able, to take a 2km walk, and record all birds identified by sight or sound, within 100 metres either side of your route. The data that many of you sent in from your walks was very valuable in the estimation of common bird numbers. We do however require further data to enable a more accurate picture to develop. So I would like to repeat my request of last year to all members, to carry out a recording walk in 2003. This could be in the same tetrad or in another.

Please remember to state the starting and finishing points of your walk, or draw a simple map. One further refinement to the process this year is to not count any obviously young birds. Finally, a note for all those members who are already actively involved in recording a tetrads birdlife. If possible, please fill in the green cards for numbers of less common species within your tetrad. Even if your numbers are all educated guesses, based on your birding in the tetrad, they would still be extremely useful in calculating bird numbers. Good luck to everyone in your atlas recording this spring and summer

Andrew Baker, Chairman

### **Reports of Recent Field Trips**

#### **George Noakes**

#### **Llandegfedd Reservoir, Sunday 5th January:**

15 members joined Tim Griffiths for our first outdoor meeting of the year – an excellent turnout on a beautifully bright day. The highlights of the walk were occasional sightings of Lesser Redpolls, particularly near Green Pool, and 3 Bewick's Swans.

On the reservoir itself, the expected species were noted: Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Pochard, Tufted Duck, and Great Crested Grebe. As usual, the local Ravens put on an impressive display. All in all, everyone enjoyed a very pleasant walk, which helped to get our year lists under way.

#### **Cors Caron, Tregaron, and Aberystwyth, Sunday 26th January:**

Cors Caron is an unpredictable site but on this occasion the 11 of us were treated to some

memorable sightings and a number of new species for some members. As the early mist cleared, the slow walk up the old railway track produced close views of Willow Tits, Goldcrest, Treecreeper and Reed Buntings. A Snipe and Green Sandpiper rose noisily from the flooded fields. Soon, however, Ruth Brown spotted the first Hen Harrier of the day, a male quartering the bog. Then Dawn Higgs drew our attention first to 2 raptors over the ridge – 2 more male Hen Harriers – then to another raptor, a female Merlin which sped across the bog in pursuit of a small bird. From the hide we were able to enjoy further close views of an immature male Hen Harrier which landed in a nearby bush. While lunching at Pont Eynon Bridge, we watched over 50 Red Kites gathering for the afternoon feed and saw our first ring-tail Hen Harrier.

We then made our way to Aberystwyth. Our first destination was Constitution Hill where we soon found a very obliging pair of Chough. A thorough search of the sea produced no Divers, Grebes or Scoters but at the Marina we were treated to extraordinarily close views of 4 Purple Sandpipers sheltering on rocks. We returned to Pont Eynon Bridge outside Tregaron to wait for Barn Owls. Although the owls failed to appear, sightings of a Sparrowhawk, a ring-tail Hen Harrier and a Peregrine enlivened our wait and we headed home at the end of an excellent day's birdwatching, and a total of 62 species.

#### **GLWR Uskmouth, Sunday February 2nd:**

This walk coincided with World Wetlands Day, an important conservation event, so an unexpectedly large number of people, drawn by publicity in the local media, attended. Chris Jones gave a briefing before we set off in groups around the reserve. Despite the inclement weather, GOS members were able to show visitors a range of species present on the pools. On reaching the sea wall, however, a violent hailstorm forced many of the party to flee to the car park. Those who stayed for the Starling roost were rewarded by sightings of a ring-tail Hen Harrier, at least 2 Merlins and 2 Short-eared Owls, but, regrettably, no Bittern.

#### **Slimbridge / Great West Bird Fair, Sunday February 9th:**

A small group met at Chepstow and were joined at Slimbridge by several other members for our annual visit to the Bird Fair. The trade exhibition and programme of talks and walks gave everyone an opportunity to enjoy an excellent day according to their own interests. As for the birding, the highlights of the day were 4 Ruff and an immature male Smew on the South Lake, and the incredible spectacle of the Starling roost at dusk, enlivened by the attacks of 2 Peregrines.

#### **Kenfig, Saturday February 22nd:**

A potentially rewarding field trip to one of South Wales's premier bird watching sites was marred by a nagging, cold East wind, which kept most birds under cover. Our first stop was the

South hide where we hoped to see a Bittern, which had been appearing regularly close to the hide. Unfortunately, this was not the case today and we headed for Sker Point and the beach where more birds were visible, including Turnstones, Golden Plovers, Curlews, Dunlins, Ringed Plovers and two flocks of Golden Plovers. In view of the weather conditions we abandoned the visit to Eglwys Nunydd Reservoir and walked to the North hide, where incoming gulls provided the main source of interest.

## **News from the Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve**

### **Tony Pickup, Senior Reserve Manager**

Having just spent a fraught week moving down from Carmarthenshire, I'm afraid I had to be reminded by your editor to put this report together. If you read this, it obviously got there in time-but it must

have been a close run thing!

Following up some of the items Kevin mentioned in the last report, predator work has progressed well all winter. Mink trapping has so far removed 10 animals, (mostly from the reedbed area) with a single polecat taken (and released again) in November. Corvid monitoring is giving us a very clear picture of territorial pairs and non-breeding flocks and will be used to target control to minimise predation. The control will not involve killing territory-holding pairs, but instead will aim to reduce their food demands. This should minimise predation effects, while not eliminating them. Elimination would probably require wide-scale corvid killing, which for many reasons is an unrealistic option.

Management has created openings in the dry reedbed and in 2 of the new reedbeds. Very gratifyingly, the single bittern, which has been around all winter, was seen going into the cut areas almost as soon as they were mown. However, the Environment Agency fish survey showed that there were very few fish in the reedbeds, apart from sticklebacks. They have suggested stocking the lagoons with other local species taken from the reens system nearby, and when we've got the necessary consents they'll get on with it.

In anticipation of some management work on fields behind the seawall, the water levels in early winter were lower than we would have liked. This probably reduced the reserve's attractiveness early on, but later bird counts were rewarding, with some more reserve records being broken. Late December and early January counts were hit by the hard weather but birds peaked again in late January. Some highlights include: 26 gadwall on 23rd Jan; 197 pintail on 23rd Jan; 134 shoveler on 23rd Feb, 618 teal on 17th Nov; 1178 wigeon on 24th Dec; 466 lapwing on 16th Dec and 2003 dunlin on 23rd Jan. A single ring-tailed harrier and up to 4

short-eared owls have frequented the reedbed area, and single merlins have been recorded over the grasslands. Egret numbers dropped from the peak of 25 in October to just 1 -9 for much of the winter. In New Year numbers started to pick up again with 19 being recorded on 23rd Jan.

A mention must be made here of the debt of gratitude the reserve owes to the volunteers who turn out regularly to help with counts, surveys and management on the site. Much of the good news above can be attributed to their efforts. My sincere thanks to them, particularly to those who helped out at weekends while I was otherwise engaged in my protracted move down here.

## Recent Bird Sightings

Compiled by Chris Hatch and Helen Jones from information received on the G.O.S./Welsh Water Bird Line and on the website

| Location        | Date  | Species & Comments                        |
|-----------------|-------|---|
| <b>December</b> |       |   |
| Ynysyfro        | 9     | F Scaup/Pochard hybrid                    |
| Peterstone      | 13    | Firecrest                                 |
|                 | 27    | 2 Pale-bellied Brents                     |
| GLWR Uskmouth   | 11    | 1 Jack Snipe                              |
|                 | 12    | 1 Bittern                                 |
|                 | 13-15 | Hen Harrier, also 2 on the 19th           |
|                 | 26    | 10,000+ Starlings attacked Hen Harrier,   |
| GLWR Goldcliff  | 13    | Purple Sandpiper; 12 Bewick's Swans       |
| Langstone       | 13    | 1 Firecrest                               |
| Llandegffed Res | 17    | 11 Snipe                                  |
| Abergavenny     | 19    | 2 Redpoll, Siskin and Goldfinch flocks, ( |
| Wentwood        | 19    | c60 Crossbills, Cadira Beechs. Also Sis   |
|                 | 28    | 1 Goshawk; 35 Crossbill                   |
| Caerleon        | 23    | 8 Bewick's Swans                          |
| Bulmore Lakes   | 26    | 2 Peregrines                              |
| <b>January</b>  |       |   |
| GLWR Goldcliff  | 1     | 1 Hen Harrier                             |
| Clytha          | 2     | Woodcock at Clytha Cutting (also seen     |
| GLWR Uskmouth   | 3     | 2 Hen Harrier                             |
|                 | 12    | 1 Bittern; 1 Short-eared Owl              |
|                 | 26    | 1 Short-eared Owl, 1 Hen Harrier (ring t  |
| Usk             | 5     | 15 Golden Eye                             |
| Llandegfedd Res | 5     | 5 Tree Sparrow                            |
|                 | 8     | 1 Common Crane                            |
|                 | 12    | 12 Goldeneye                              |
|                 | 14    | 1 Merlin                                  |
|                 | 15    | 5 Bewick's Swans                          |
|                 | 25    | 1 Mediterranean Gull                      |

|             |    |  |
|-------------|----|--|
| Tredegar    | 6  | 25+ Lapwing in fields opposite industrial area |
| Wentwood    | 11 | Great Grey Shrike, Cadira Beeches/Ninnes       |
| Blaenafon   | 19 | 1 Goshawk; 30+ Crossbill                       |
| Abergavenny | 21 | 3 Redpoll outside Day Hospital, Nevill Hill    |
| Whitson     | 20 | 1 Little Egret                                 |
|             | 21 | 3 Whooper Swans                                |
| Newport     | 26 | Chiffchaff                                     |
| Gobion      | 31 | 1 Green Sandpiper; 5 Little Grebe; 28 M        |

### February

|                 |    |   |
|-----------------|----|---|
| Llandegffed Res | 3  | 27 Grey Heron; 1 Snipe; Marsh Tit           |
| M4 Junction 29  | 4  | Barn Owl hunting along verge at 23:45       |
| Usk Area        | 9  | 27 Bewick's Swans near Llandowlais          |
| GLWR Uskmouth   | 9  | 1 Bittern; Hen Harrier (ring tail), Whooper |
|                 | 10 | 9 Little Egret; 4 Cetti's Warbler           |
|                 | 17 | 1 Short-eared Owl; 1 Hen Harrier            |
|                 | 19 | 3 Little Egret, 2 Raven, 8 Reed Bunting     |
|                 | 24 | 1 Merlin, 7 singing Cetti's Warbler         |
| Gobion          | 10 | 2 Green Sandpiper, 2 Little Grebe, 2 Pa     |
| Caerleon        | 10 | Chiffchaff in garden                        |
| Newport         | 15 | 11 Snipe possibly enlivened by F Sparrow    |
| Magor Pill      | 15 | 2 Short-eared Owls                          |
| Raglan Area     | 16 | Barn Owl flying over A40 at 22:30           |
| The Bloreng     | 18 | Red Grouse, Peregrine                       |
| Peterstone      | 24 | Water Pipit                                 |
| Rumney Estuary  | 26 | Avocet                                      |

## BTO News

### Jerry Lewis

I am now receiving the first Winter Farmland Bird Survey forms for the final winter of this survey. There seem to be a few sizable Goldfinch flocks in some squares, as well as the more usual Meadow Pipit, Redwing, Fieldfare and Chaffinch; but not many Greenfinch and Yellowhammer recorded, and no Tree Sparrow so far. Despite some winter survey forms coming in I am still awaiting a few returns from the summer surveys; Lowland Grassland, Breeding Bird, Breeding Waders and Heronry. If the returns aren't made then all the efforts of undertaking the survey achieve nothing other than having an enjoyable day out!

To mark the 75th anniversary of the annual Heronry count a special effort is planned for this year. The counters of the regular Heronries are being asked to be especially aware of looking for the occasional outlier to the main Heronry that may have been overlooked in the past. In addition, 6 randomly selected tetrads have been chosen to search for as yet undiscovered Heronries - hopefully none in Gwent. This survey would be very complementary to GOS's Breeding Atlas, the tetrads are:

- SO 10Z
- SO 30V
- SO 30Y
- SO 32C
- SO 50J
- ST 29X.

Atlas workers will be familiar with tetrads, but if anyone is unfamiliar please give me a ring. Alternatively if these tetrads have already been well covered in the Atlas, perhaps the recorder would be able to confirm that there are no Heronries present.

A new survey for this year (after a trial last year) is for that notoriously difficult species, Woodcock. The survey involves a daytime visit to select a good vantage point e.g. the edge of a clearing or where rides or roads cross, followed by 3 visits at dusk (in May and June) to look and listen for roding birds. Other under-recorded species (for our own Breeding Atlas) that could also be heard during the dusk visits would be owls (especially Long-eared), Nightjar or Grasshopper Warbler. There are 7 randomly selected 1km squares for Gwent, plus a reserve list of squares if these cannot be covered. The priority squares are:

- ST 3497 south east of Llandegfedd Res
- ST 2384 (Michaelston-y-Fedw)
- SO 3022 (Cwmyoy)
- SO 5807 (south of Coleford)
- ST 5395 (north of Chepstow),
- ST 4898 (Devauden)
- ST 2488 (south of Pontymister).

As with previous years a few Breeding Bird Survey squares become available. An early visit to familiarise yourself with the 2km route, and then just 2 visits during the breeding season to record the birds are required. This is the main monitoring scheme to record Britain's common breeding birds and the results are used to produce the "Red, Amber and Green lists" that you will now see reference to in many articles. Currently just 4 squares are available:

- SO 2800 (Nr Pontypool),
- SO 3304 (Nr Chain Bridge)
- SO 3613 (Llanvapley)
- ST 2385 (Michaelston-y-Fedw).

Others may become available so if anyone is interested please let me know. If you want to find out more about any of the surveys or the work of the BTO, phone me, or see me at an indoor meeting

## **The BTO Migration Watch 2003**

As spring is approaching fast, it's time to look forward to the arrival of spring migrants and The BTO is calling for birdwatchers to help them with their 2003 Migration Watch. Started only last year Migration Watch is a web-based survey to chart the arrivals of birds returning from Africa. What Migration Watch hopes to do is to record the arrival of the first migrants, track their flow through the country and see how quickly the sites 'fill-up'.

Migration Watch has started a bit earlier this year so that you can record some of the very early migrants that turn up at the end of February, and also to send in your sightings of winter visitors and wintering warblers. This will give a better idea of their locations before they start migrating. Daily bulletins of new arrivals will be available to view. To join the scheme, you can visit the website at [www.bto.org/migwatch](http://www.bto.org/migwatch) or e-mail [migrationwatch@bto.org](mailto:migrationwatch@bto.org) for further details. Once registered as a recorder, you can enter your sightings using the specially designed web pages. If you don't have a computer but would like to participate, most public Libraries have free computer access.

Although casual records are useful, the best way to take part is to choose a walk (or walks) that you do on a regular basis and make a note of the birds that you see and/or hear. Garden sightings

are equally useful in building up a picture of the pattern of arrival and flow through the site.

It is hoped that volunteers can keep watching until all of the summer migrants have arrived. There are even animated maps showing the movements throughout the country, by species!

Good Luck and Good Spring Birding!

**Talk by Mike Langman - Make a note of it - Field ID using Field Notes**

**Trevor Russell**

60 or so members witnessed an absolute gem of a talk on how to improve their bird ID techniques. Mike Langman is a co-illustrator of "Birds of the Middle East" and the illustrator of the Mitchell Beazley "Pocket Guide to Garden Birds", amongst others, and so has impeccable credentials for this type of talk. Using a multi-media presentation of white board, slides and audience participation with pencil and paper we were led through snappy sketches and how to make rapid field notes of prominent features. This was how field identification should be taught; hands-on. We were asked to make rapid notes of the prominent features seen on a bird in different postures – just as we see it in the field - and he then led us through what we should have been looking for – quite a difference! Then came drawing birds! It was a huge relief to learn that artistic skills were not a prerequisite provided that it was supported by notes on colour, size etc. (can you draw a Puffin that doesn't look more like your Auntie Flo?) The anatomy of the wing was described in great detail, which helped enormously in identifying where all those coloured feathers and panels belonged!

If you missed it, don't despair, Mike will be invited back again, this was too good to miss. Perhaps we should make attendance to this very useful, practical talk mandatory for all GOS members!

## **Nest Box Project - A collaboration between the Canal Association and local Comprehensive School**

**G T Thorne**

The Canal Association for the Crumlin arm of the Monmouth Brecon Canal was set up with the support of the residents in the Risca/Crosskeys area to ensure that the canal is maintained in good condition. The association works closely with the local council, especially on environmental issues, as the canal area is an important part of the local ecology. I am on the committee as a local birdwatcher who has studied the wild life along the canal for 30 years.

Recently, we decided to place several nest boxes along the canal banks to encourage the breeding of birds where walkers along the canal could see and enjoy them. The project would enable the

members of the Canal Association to play an active role by keeping an eye on the boxes and participate in any record keeping.

As we all know the future is in the hands of today's youth, we asked the local comprehensive school to help make the nest boxes as one of their wildlife projects. Armed with plans from the



RSPB and my Tony Soper books, 21 nest boxes have been made and collected from the school, and we are very grateful to the staff and students. Some boxes have already been placed and the rest will go up by the end of February. Students have offered their help in placing the remainder, and some will be near the school path so that they can keep an eye on them. An article on the project has appeared in the ARGUS.

We appreciate GOS' offer of assistance with monitoring this project and look forward to meeting Richard Clarke, from the other side of the valley, to discuss aspects of nest record keeping. As the season progresses, breeding records will be discussed at our meetings, and information passed to the members via our newsletter. This project is very exciting for me, and introduces me to another aspect of wildlife studies in this the area. I have observed birds using nest boxes in that delightful RSPB reserve at Dinas, and I look forward to seeing the birds using our boxes along the canal.

The future of wildlife is in our hands, and I believe associations that participate in the management of such are very important. It has been my pleasure over the years to be a member of GOS, may they continue their good work, and thank you for this space in The Dipper. Dippers will soon be active along valley rivers and raising their young, an indication of reduced pollution within the valleys, and the health of the environment.

I have asked Graham to give an update at the end of the season. If any of you are involved in other projects of this sort, please let us know. Following the article on House Sparrows in the December issue of The Dipper, plans for a House Sparrow Terrace can be found at: [www.beautifulbritain.co.uk/htm/wildlife\\_gardening/sparrow\\_terrace.htm](http://www.beautifulbritain.co.uk/htm/wildlife_gardening/sparrow_terrace.htm). If you don't have Internet access but would like a copy, please send a stamped address envelope to me, or give me a call if you are going to be at an indoor meeting. Helen Jones

## **The Okavango Delta, January-February 2003**

### **Steph Tyler**

During January and early February 2003, 14 volunteers counted waterbirds along about 200 km of rivers either by boat or on foot, along over 300 km alongside wetland habitats by vehicle, and at a sample of lagoons and pans throughout the Okavango Delta. In all, the areas surveyed probably represent much less than 5% of the total area of the Delta. In addition birds were counted at 18 roosts, from reed beds to trees by wetlands. Time, difficulties of access and lack of resources did not allow counts at several other major roosts. One volunteer who helped me throughout January was Jos Stratford who some GOS members will remember. Other volunteers included 2 RSPB members on sabbatical in Botswana and 3 Dutch birders.

Unfortunately rainfall in January 2003 was very sparse and many pans were still dry or only part-filled during the survey period. Lagoons in the floodplains of the western Delta were rapidly drying although water levels in the Okavango River in the Panhandle near Shakawe were rising and water was spilling out over the floodplain in the far north.

Some 33,115 waterbirds of 98 species (excluding kingfishers and wagtails ) were counted during the day and almost 11,000 cormorants, darters, herons, egrets, storks and ibis were counted at dusk at 18 roosts. The three most numerous species in the day counts were Ruff, Blacksmith Plover and Cattle Egret with almost 5000 Ruff and well over 4000 of the other two abundant species.

Unusual records included one Garganey, the fifth record for Botswana, two Spotted Crakes, a Black-tailed Godwit and a Corncrake. In addition the Delta specials - Pel's Fishing Owls and White-backed Night Herons - were recorded at four sites. The dry weather accounted for the very low numbers of migrants such as Lesser Moorhen (21 counted), Allen's Gallinule (11), Dwarf Bittern (2) and Painted Snipe (26). More than 50 Wattled Cranes were seen during the survey period (with others located in aerial flights).

As well as providing useful data, the counts were of course great fun. Numerous mammal and snake encounters added to the enjoyment, and we had many an adventure coming back from roosts in

boats, involving near collisions with hippos. On one occasion when a boat ran out of fuel we had three exciting hours drifting down the Okavango River in the dark avoiding angry hippos and awaiting help. The downside of the survey was the loss of we three pairs of binoculars. Two pairs of Leica were accidentally run over by the owners in a Landrover and a pair of Zeiss was stolen from a vehicle in Maun.

The data are still being analysed but one outstanding result so far has been the very high abundances and high species diversity on the Boteti and Thamalakane Rivers. These rivers lie outside the buffalo fence, south of Maun, and are subject to intense pressure by people and livestock but hold very important numbers of many species such as Pygmy Geese and White-backed Duck. These two rivers held over 20,000 birds, 65% of all the birds recorded in the Delta over five weeks.

Although the roost counts were a pilot study and limited in extent, results suggest that coordinated counts over a short time period at a larger sample of roosts would provide better population estimates than already exist for important species such as Slaty Egret. For example, at one major roost site on the Boro River 153 Slaty Egrets, a Red Data species whose global stronghold is in the Delta, were counted at dusk.

Participants in the counts will have many happy memories of watching herons, egrets, storks and ibis by the hundred flying into reedbeds at dusk. The largest roost held almost 1800 birds. Smaller roosts in trees alongside rivers were a spectacular sight at sunset with the trees festooned with Great and Little Egrets and African Darters.

## **AGM Commentary**

Attendance: Fifty members attended.

Matters Arising: Goytre House Wood About 30 bird nest boxes had been installed in 2002, most of which were occupied during the breeding season. Bat boxes have also been erected. To make the wood more accessible to all walkers, the stile has been replaced by an entrance gate and the footpath has been widened.

The 1-acre patch near the entrance will be planted with a cereal crop this Spring in the hope that this will attract seed-eating birds later in the year. A map showing the location of the wood was published in the March 2002 Dipper.

Treasurer's Report: Gareth Waite explained that many of the improvements to the wood had been made possible by generous grants from Monmouthshire C.C. though fencing and pond clearance had been covered by the Society.

Major expenditure had now been completed on the wood leaving a substantial balance in the bank, which ensured that there would be no need to increase Membership fees this year. In answer to a question regarding cheaper methods of distributing The Dipper, e.g. by e-mail, the answer was that Helen is already e-mailing Dippers to some members and anyone else who would like to receive their Dippers by e-mail should give their names to Helen.

Chairman's Report: Andrew Baker thanked Gill Jones, Membership Secretary, Brian King, Outdoor Field Secretary and Ian Smith co-opted Committee Member, who had stood down during the year. His review also acknowledged the funding given by Monmouthshire C.C. and the progress that it had made possible with Goytre House Wood. The Society is opposing an environmentally damaging development at The Hendre, Monmouth, whilst proposals for an M4 Relief road around Newport and a Severnside airport are perpetual anxieties. The Birds of Gwent project completed the 4th out of 5 years of data gathering before our thoughts turn to printing and publication in the next couple of years.

Committee Changes: Prior to Committee member voting, the Chairman informed the meeting that at a recent Committee meeting it had been proposed that Alan Williams be nominated as an Honorary Vice President of the Society. This was in recognition of his work in various positions on the Committee over many years culminating as Chairman, during which period he successfully navigated the Society to gaining Charitable status enabling it to become the owner of Goytre House Wood. Outside the Society Alan is also Treasurer of the Africa Bird Club and the Welsh Ornithological Society. His nomination was unanimously endorsed.

An unopposed nomination for Jeff Fisher meant that Jeff was elected as Vice Chairman, filling a long-standing vacancy. Helen Jones was elected as Membership Secretary and Steve Butler as Field Secretary. Helen would like to now relinquish her role as Dipper Editor, but there being no nomination, has agreed to continue in that role as well until another volunteer steps forward. New Committee members elected were Chris Hatch, Rob Moeller Verity Picken, and Mark Stevens. Seconded to the Committee were Steve Williams, Brian King and Stephanie Tyler.

A Members' evening followed the AGM and comprised a finger buffet to accompany a captivating snapshot of life on the Farne Islands, given by Graham Wren.

## **Committee Commentary**

New Committee Members: The new Vice Chairman, Jeff Fisher, was welcomed as were new Committee members, Chris Hatch, Verity Picken, Mark Stevens and Rob Moeller.

Memorials: At the 2003 AGM, Keith Binmore asked whether the Society would fund the erection of a hide in memory of Dave Wood who died in 1999. During the ensuing discussion

the Committee heard that the Society had never previously paid for such a memorial, even for the Founding Member, Bert Hamar, in whose memory a hide had been erected at Llandegfedd Reservoir. That hide had been paid for jointly by the Hamar family and Hamdden; GOS had only paid for a memorial plaque. The discussion concluded with the endorsement of the policy arrived at three years ago: if members wished to remember friends with a memorial then they were, of course, free to organise the financing of such a scheme themselves but should not necessarily look to the Society to make a full, or part, donation.

This, hopefully neutral, policy is intended to reflect the sensitivities of those involved whilst avoiding causing offence by being seen to remember some members and not others.

Donations: £25 each was agreed to be donated to the BTO House Sparrow Appeal and to LIPU the Italian Bird Conservation organisation.

Goytre House Wood: In Goytre House Wood the M.C.C. have agreed to keep the footpath trimmed annually to prevent excessive bramble growth. Whilst the appropriate cereal seed has been identified to sow in the 1 acre patch near the entrance, we need to find someone to prepare and sow the ground. Signs will be erected shortly warning that shooting is prohibited in the wood, following the sighting of shooters recently.

BTO: The BTO is appealing for volunteers to join its Migration Watch 2003 scheme – see page 8. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey details will be sent out shortly. See page 7 for news of vacant squares.

Country Show dates have been published: Chepstow, Saturday 9th August, Monmouth, Thursday, August 28th, Usk, Saturday 13th September. Whilst we have not yet decided which shows to attend, if anyone would like to volunteer to man the GOS stand for a few hours please contact Trevor Russell 01600 716266

Other Business: John Davies has submitted recent bird sightings to Bird Watching magazine for publication

**Gillian Capper**

As you may recall from the Library Update in the December issue of The Dipper, Gillian Capper had donated a number of books to GOS. This was because she had been unwell for some and was unable to participate in bird watching. I am sorry to announce that she died at the beginning of February.

Helen Jones

## **Birding Holidays and the Companies they Keep**

### **Trevor Russell**

Birding holidays are not cheap and the purpose of this (hopefully) on-going series is to exchange opinions, reduce the guesswork and increase the chances of picking a good birding holiday. This is intended to be the start of an exchange of information on birding holidays that members have taken. The destinations, the organisation that ran them, contact details, brief comments on the trip, e.g. journey time, internal transportation time and quality, accommodation, quality of birding, leader, would you go again, stating why/why not? Would you recommend the Company/trip to your friends? If so, tell us! More importantly if not, you **MUST** tell us!!

Your comments or opinion could save someone a considerable amount of money and avoid a very disappointing holiday with your first hand advice. For example, I keep reading about the £990 10-day trips by Naturetrek to Namibia. Are they still good value for money when compared with the >£3000 15-day trips led by Rod Lawrence (our Speaker on Feb 15th) for Wilderness Safaris? Does anyone have any experience of these "cheap" trips? What are they like? Please let us know your experiences; here are a few of mine:

Senegal and the Sahel region of West Africa, with Birdwatching Breaks, led by Mark Finn plus a French translator and a local guide. Price guide £1750 A flight to bustling Dakar via Paris then a short but comfortable lorry trip to a ranch near the Mauritanian border in the north was the introduction to a fascinating experience as we criss-crossed the country to visit many different habitats. From arid semi-desert to coastal lagoons and islands to riverine forest and savannah as we journeyed south towards the Gambian border. The local guide was a brilliant birder and the ground arrangements worked very smoothly, lots of French cuisine and surprisingly good accommodation made this an exciting and unusual trip. One that I would strongly recommend.

Ibisbill Tours, led by Algirdas Knystautas Nepal, February 2001. Price guide £2200. Flying to Kathmandu is long but what a fabulously exotic destination! The 5-day trek up the Annapurna Trail demands good legs and lungs but is an unforgettable experience. Algirdas is an excellent leader and birder and ground arrangements (elephants, jeeps, dugouts) worked like clockwork. Accommodation varied from good hotels to YHA standard on the trail. Food was safe, different and delicious, Saw >350 birds in 15 days. Would definitely go again when I can afford it! Safe for single ladies. Opportunities were created to visit towns and villages.

The Baltics, Unknown Europe, (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) April 2002 Price £1500 The flight to Vilnius, Lithuania, is brief but some of the days involved long internal transits in a large, comfortable coach. Algirdas brought a new standard to al fresco lunches, unbelievably good, especially if you like fish and beer. Accommodation varied from excellent hotels (Riga, Latvia) to fairly basic cabins in the remote Latvian countryside. Evening meals were, let us say, Russian. Good Vodka, better beer. Good birds – many “UK species” but in breeding plumage. Highlight were the hundreds of Ruff in breeding plumage. Not wall-to-wall birding, toured the 3 capital cities. A novelty was to spend an evening at the opera in Tallin, Estonia – sung in Italian with Estonian

sub-titles, quite tolerable especially after the interval G&T, oh, and the farewell party at Algirdas' flat.

### **Do-it-yourself Holidays**

Florida. In my view Florida is DIY country. It is so well documented that it does not require a leader or a group. Armed with Bill Pranty's "A Birder's Guide to Florida" you can plan your own itinerary. No need to pre-book accommodation (except maybe in high season December – March) Food is, well, American, so order children's portions. Driving is leisurely and all cars are automatics, fuel is cheap so just go for it and enjoy! We toured the coastline from Cape Kennedy via the Keys to Fort Myers and back to Orlando inside 2 weeks. Disneyworld would require longer.

The Gambia. Price Guide £750 for 10 days B&B Good climate, good safe varied food, few problems with insects and excellent birds make the Gambia a popular birding destination. The trick is to organise yourself with a local 'minder' to avoid the Hassle Factor which can be daunting. Either travel with a birding company or hire a local birdwatching guide. This will almost guarantee that you are not hassled, otherwise watch out! I would not recommend this destination for ladies either on their own or in small ladies-only groups. The Senegambia Hotel (see The Gambia Experience brochure) can be recommended for its excellent accommodation and food and the birding inside its 20 acre grounds. Good birding walks are only half a mile away or within short taxi rides but you need persistence to brush off the beggars. Birding trips led by Guides at the hotel are good and safe. The 7-day trip up-country led by Clive Barlow was a memorable experience not only for the

birds but the accommodation and food. Mary and I have been twice. This is by no means an exhaustive list but now it's your turn!

Who has travelled with Avian Adventures, Limosa, Naturetrek, Sunbirder, Speyside Holidays etc? Please let us have your views to allow your fellow members to book with confidence. If you have

contradictory views to those expressed above, lets be hearing from you! Please send your contributions to Helen for publication so that we can all benefit from our experiences.

Useful contact numbers:

- Avian Adventures, 01384 372013
- The Gambia Experience, 023 8073 0888
- Bird Holidays, 0113 3910 510
- Speyside Wildlife, 01479 812498
- Birdwatching Breaks, 01227 740799
- Sunbirder, 01767 682 969
- Ibisbill Tours, 020 8203 4317
- The Travelling Naturalist, 01305 267994
- Limosa Holidays, 01263 578143
- Wilderness Safaris, 01884 34135
- Naturetrek, 020 8667 9158

## **Library Update**

**George Noakes - Librarian**

The following titles have recently been added to the library:

- Where to watch birds in Europe & Russia (Helm 2000)
- Where to watch birds in Africa (Helm 1995)
- Where to watch birds in Scotland (1997)
- Where to watch birds in Southern & Western Spain (2001)
- Finding birds in Poland (Gostours guide)

### **Unreturned books**

I am trying to complete an index of the library stock. If you have any unreturned books or



other items, I would be very grateful if they could be returned to me as soon as possible. It does not matter how long you might have had them – we do not have a system of fines!

## Who's Who on the GOS Committee 2003-03-07

Accompanying this issue of The Dipper is a sheet containing contact details and pictures (of most) Committee Members. Please keep this safe in case you need to contact one of us during the year, as the full list will not be appearing in future issues of The Dipper. Details of Officers of the Society who are most likely to be contacted will appear in each issue. Many Committee Members have already given a brief background to their involvement in birdwatching and GOS, and these appeared in the June & September issues. Three more appear below:

**Chris Jones, County Recorder:** I became a member of the GOS in 1978, having been a young casual birder since the mid 1970's. I started serious birding in the County in 1979/80, visiting Peterstone, Collister Pill and Llandegfedd Reservoir from Newport by bicycle. A 12 month work experience job at Magor Reserve culminated in my first real birding discovery, an American Bittern, which became a local celebrity. Since then, I have been actively birding in the County, becoming County Recorder in 1990. Although I have birded in many parts of the County, my main interests have been along on the levels at Peterstone / Sluice Farm and Goldcliff, and inland at Llandegfedd and Ynysfro Reservoirs. I can recall, from browsing through my notebooks, that in one year in the early 1980's I visited the Peterstone area in excess of 150 times.

Over the years I have found a number of firsts for the County, including Iceland Gull, Dartford Warbler, Pomarine Skua and Long-billed Dowitcher, and have recorded 251 species within the County. I have represented the GOS at the former Llandegfedd Reservoir Users Group and am currently on the Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve Liaison Group. I have been a committee member regularly since 1980, with only an occasional break.

**Jeff Fisher, Vice Chairman (2003):** I am a retired (early) safety officer who used to work in the pharmaceutical industry. Although born in England, I have lived more than half of my life in Wales, moving first to Llantrisant (Mid Glamorgan) in 1973 and then to Govilon (Abergavenny) in 1978. I have had an interest in birds and wildlife since my early teens. I can still remember reading avidly the Romany series of books about wild life in Britain when I was eleven or twelve. My birding really began in earnest when I retired two and a half years ago. This gave me the time, and my redundancy gave me the money to buy a decent pair of binoculars. My wife also shares the interest with me although not quite as keenly. Having the time means that I can usually take at least one half day each week to visit sites in Gwent and Powys. Having a

caravan and a wife who understands means we can visit sites further afield and we often enjoy a trip to Norfolk. Just over a year ago I acquired a digital camera and tried 'digi-scoping'. I am smitten, and during this period have taken more than four thousand pictures. Although many of these have since been discarded I have built up quite a library on disc and enjoy putting slideshows on my laptop.

**Verity Picken, Committee Member 2003:** My interest started as a small child here in Monmouthshire when, to keep us occupied, my father offered a reward for finding birds' nests- a penny for a Blackbird's, sixpence for a Long-tailed Tit's nest etc. Thus began a lifelong interest but serious birding only started in Hong Kong where we lived from 1975 to 2000. Birding there was incredibly exciting with the added bonus of regular exploratory trips into remote parts of China & birding holidays to other parts of Asia. I edited the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society's Bulletin & the Hong Kong Bird Report for several years as well as producing a children's magazine for WWF HK. Now back in Monmouthshire, living outside Llangybi, I'm aware of having a great deal to learn about British birding. Once our house is built I look forward to getting out into the field a lot more.

## Announcements

**Treasurer.** Gareth announced at the AGM that due to other commitments preventing his attendance at Committee meetings, he would like to step down from the post. If anyone is interested on taking on this role, perhaps they could contact Gareth to find out what is involved.

**Dipper Editor.** As I am now Membership Secretary, would anyone like to take over as Dipper Editor? Please contact me if you are interested. Helen Jones. Chris Mead.

**Chris Mead**, well known in the field of ornithology, died on 16th January. He was an authority on migration patterns and was involved in bird ringing at the BTO. More recently, he has been evident as a promoter of National Nest Box Week.