

Farewell Frosts, Hello Sun

Finally, the first few signs of spring have appeared: the early migrants coming and going, the days are lengthening and now the arrival of the first Dipper of the year (albeit a tad late).

Well, apparently, Wales just had the coldest winter since 1996/7. Did you notice any great effect on the Gwent avifauna? Personally, I thought some of our winter visitors were in rather short supply, I didn't notice any substantial flocks of Redwings and Fieldfares, no Bewick's Swans were reported and, away from Dingestow, Bramblings were at a premium. Unfortunately for us it would appear that, although much of Europe had a harsher than usual winter (producing the conditions to force birds west towards Gwent), northern parts of the UK did not follow suit. Presumably, the hordes of continental refugees just didn't feel the need to come any closer than Scotland. Great! We finally get a winter that bucks the globally warmed winter trend and Aberdeenshire becomes a sub-tropical haven! A few winter wanderers made it to the county though: a cracking Snow Bunting at Collister Pill attracted a trickle of admirers; both Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes graced our reservoirs; and a Jackdaw, showing characteristics indicating continental origin, was picked out of a flock of more local looking birds. All in all though, it could have been better, here's looking forward to spring.

Darryl Spittle

The submission date for the June 2006 Dipper is Friday 02 June please send any contributions, enquiries, requests or feedback to me at newsletter@gwentbirds.org.uk

Announcements

Request for Records for 2005

A real big thank you to the 51 members that have submitted their records to date.

For those members that have yet to put pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard, it's not quite too late, although time is running out very quickly. The quality of the annual report, for which the GOS is regarded very highly in Wales, is really down to the number of members that submit their records. Without your data the quality of the report will be very difficult to maintain.

Records can be submitted, either hand written on 'recording slips', which are available from myself or from the Library at indoor meetings at Goytre village hall, or they can be submitted electronically via email.

If there are any queries or advice required, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Chris Jones, 22 Walnut Drive, Caerleon, Newport, South Wales, NP18 3SB

Tel 01633 423439 or via email at countyrecorder@Gwentbirds.org.uk

This is the final call.

A Big Thank You

Grateful thanks are due to Mike and Jackie Pointon who have made a £40 donation to the Society. They generated this money from collecting waste paper and selling it through the recycling chain.

Change to Programme

Please amend the date on your programme cards for the Nightjar walk from 12th May to the 23rd June. All other details for this walk remain the same.

AGM Commentary

Nearly 70 members heard the President, Ian Walker, announce the death of Vice President Mr W.G. Lewis, who died earlier in the year. Mr Lewis had made a significant contribution to the Society in its earlier, formative years.

The Treasurer, Keith Roylance, announced a membership increase of 16 to 427 in 2005. In a departure from previous Treasurers' Reports, Keith had prepared slides to clarify income & expenditure figures. The number of members using Gift Aid to further help the Society had

increased once again and Keith emphasised that Gift Aided subscriptions allow the Society to reclaim 28p for every £1 paid as subscription! That is £2.90 for every adult member paying £10.50pa and £3.60 for each family member paying £13pa. It's legal and it does not compromise your tax situation, so please tick the Gift Aid box!

Income level exceeded all budgeted expectations thanks to grants from CCW for the Tree Sparrow project and a substantial survey fee for work carried out by Al Venables and Andrew Baker. But for these grants, income would have been at the lowest level for some years.

Expenditure in 2005 was substantially higher than originally budgeted. Printing costs have risen for both The Dipper and the Annual Report. Grants and donations of £2,820 were significantly higher than previous year's expenditure in this category; £1,000 was donated to The Woodland Trust for their Wentwood Forest Appeal; and £500 was donated to the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales appeal for their purchase of Skokholm Island. We also spent over £1,000 on nest boxes, feeders and food for the Tree Sparrow Project, for which we received the CCW grant. The Society has also paid £8,100 to Helm publishers for the production of 'Birds of Gwent 2', though it is hoped that CCW will provide a 50% grant to help cover part of that expenditure. Expenditure therefore exceeded income in 2005 by £4,680. We commenced the year with cash assets of £24,560 but, after deducting expenditure, we now hold cash assets of £19,879 as of end of 2005.

The Chairman focussed upon planning applications, one of which, happily, has been withdrawn, that of the Pendragon Wind Farm proposal to build wind turbines on Coity Mountain/Mynydd James. The M4 Relief Road scheme, a consequence of the Newport Unitary Development Plan, is becoming an embarrassment for the Welsh Assembly because of their refusal to give details of the proposed route, thought to traverse four to six SSSIs. This has the effect of stifling protest and does not reflect well on the Assembly.

The progress of the second edition of the Birds of Gwent was also highlighted and publication is expected in Spring 2006 thanks to the monumental efforts of Editor Al Venables and his team.

A grant has been obtained from the Forestry Commission as a contribution to the funding of the management of Goytre Wood. It includes funding for spirals to protect naturally regenerating Oak and Beech saplings, to remove Rhododendron, ring-bark Sycamores and to obtain further nestboxes. A grant has also been obtained to plant a crop for the feeding of

granivorous birds to the front of the wood.

The Gwent Tree Sparrow Project, which is a partnership venture of numerous organisations including GWT, RSPB, CCW, GRG, landowners, other interested persons and GOS, has been launched. GOS is a lead partner in this effort to reverse the trend of the Tree Sparrow in Gwent.

A proposal to increase subscription fees after 7 years led to a lively discussion, given our healthy bank balance, but was carried by a large majority. Adult fees will move from £10.50 to £12, Family from £13 to £15 and Seniors/Students from £7 to £9.

In Any Other Business Trevor Russell outlined the purpose of an approach to us by SEWBReC (South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre, see also Committee Commentary) with a view to a possible collaboration with GOS. This would involve GOS submitting its bird records to SEWBReC who would consolidate ALL biodiversity records in the area to make more powerful responses to, for example, planning applications. There may be a requirement to modify the way we submit our records in future and a lively exchange ensued. It was finally agreed to allow a sub-committee to be drawn up to explore this prospect further.

These formalities were completed at 20:45 which left time to enjoy the delightful finger buffet which was, in turn, followed by a digital slide presentation by Keith Roylance and Dave Brassey who let us re-live their recent trip to Lesvos through their wonderful collection of photographs.

Trevor Russell, Secretary (01600 716266, secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk)

Membership News

Membership Update

As of 25th March 2006, we have received 297 membership subscriptions, which equates to around 400 members if we count a family as at least 2 people. If you have received this issue of The Dipper by post or e-mail, it means that you have paid your subscription, and should have received your card(s) for 2006. If you haven't, please let me know.

Forty-six subscriptions have not yet been renewed and reminders will be going out shortly. I am pleased to say though that so far we have 26 new subscriptions for 2006; 6 from Cwmbran, 4 from Pontypool, 3 from Cardiff, 2 from Ebbw Vale and Caldicot, and singles from Bridgend, Cowbridge, Crosskeys, Crumlin, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouth, Newport, Usk and Whitchurch.

With regard to fees for 2007, the proposed increase was approved at the AGM, so rates for 2007 will be £9 senior/junior, £12 adult and £15 for families. For those of you who pay by standing order, I shall be sending out amendment forms later in the year.

Help at Shows

The first show of the season will be the Blaenau Gwent "GO WILD" event at Parc Bryn Bach, Tredegar from 12pm to 4pm on Saturday 12th June. The event in 2004 was very enjoyable so why not go along. Steve Butler will be manning the GOS stall and he would appreciate some help. We generally have a quiz board, so help will be needed with that, and we just need people to chat to visitors about birds and birdwatching. If you would like to help out please contact me.

The Second show of the year will be the Newport Wetlands Open Day on Sunday 16th July, but we will remind you about it in the June Dipper.

Helen Parry Jones, Membership Secretary 029 20691027, membership@gwentbirds.org.uk

A Trip on the Swansea-Cork Ferry

My wife, Judy, and I had never been to the Irish Republic, so we decided to take a short break in September 2005 to explore Cork and Kerry. As most of the crossings from Swansea are overnight, we arrived first thing in the morning to be greeted by gloomy weather that got steadily worse. By mid-morning we reached Rosscarbery, our destination for our first night. The hotel was excellent and overlooked a large lagoon. As I stumbled into our room with the luggage, Judy shouted to me to come quickly... she had seen an Otter in the lagoon! As the tide went down, the mud attracted many waders and the quiet shore-side road provided an excellent vantage point for observation from the car. The hoped-for American rarities did not materialise but we had excellent views of many species including Curlew Sandpipers.

The rest of the holiday was disappointingly birdless with much of the magnificent scenery obscured by low clouds and rain. Still, there were plenty of other things to do and see as we toured the Ring of Kerry and the Dingle Peninsula. So I was pinning my hopes on better things on our return, daylight, ferry crossing.

My spirits rose as we drove to the port with the weather at last clearing and rose further when I met a fellow birder, Tony Swann, on deck. He had travelled over the previous night as a foot passenger. As we set up on the rear deck, an Arctic Tern in the harbour seemed a good omen. Judy, however, retired to our day cabin. The first third of the trip was pretty uneventful, though the presence of a Kestrel about five miles out to sea was a mystery. However, the diet of Gannets, Fulmars and the occasional auk was suddenly relieved by a Cory's Shearwater, gliding right past the side of the ship. This heralded a much more exciting afternoon that continued across the Irish Sea and all the way to Carmarthen Bay. Gannets and Fulmars appeared in large groups with plenty of Manx, a few Balearic and one Sooty Shearwater. But all this was surpassed as I spotted a spout of water about half a mile from the ship... whale!! Fortunately, Judy had returned on deck and shared in this special moment. We could not identify the species but Tony took some photographs that allowed the cetacean experts subsequently to declare it a Humpback. Later, a flock of about 200 Gannets circling and fishing may also have indicated cetaceans too distant to see.

The afternoon wore on and became rather cold so Judy and I retired to our cabin. Fortunately, it was one of the few directly below the bridge with a view over the bows. For, as I warmed up, a school of fifteen Harbour Porpoises swam past, escorted by a flock of Gannets. A little later a Great Skua, closely followed by an Arctic Skua flew across our bows. None of these could have been seen from the rear deck.

And so our short holiday ended on a high note. The day crossing was on 23rd September and this might have been rather late to get the best of the seabirds. Tony's idea of going and coming straight back as a foot passenger could be fun for a group and is much cheaper than the Bay of Biscay trips. The only snag is that there are few day crossings in the ferry schedule, so it might mean having to take time off work. Even so, it's an idea certainly worth considering.

Nicholas Beswick

The Big Garden Birdwatch 2006 in Gwent and beyond

In 2006 there were more than 25,000 participants of the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch in Wales, all watching their gardens or local parks and forming part of more than 470,000 people taking part across the whole of the UK.

Sixty different species were recorded across Wales, highlighting the importance of gardens in providing winter habitat to a wide range of species.

As might be expected from previous surveys undertaken by the RSPB, the BTO and others, the Big Garden Birdwatch results show a marked decline in the number of some, formerly abundant, species since the surveys inception in 1979. The numbers of House Sparrows have shown a decline of nearly 50%, whilst Starlings have dropped dramatically to 25% of the numbers seen in the first survey.

The news isn't so bleak for all species though; higher numbers of Blackbirds and Song Thrushes were noted in 2006, probably due to the relatively cold winter experienced this year. Blackbird was also the most widespread species, being seen in 94% of all Welsh gardens.

Below is a table of the top ten species seen in Wales, Monmouthshire and Newport (the results are broken down by local authority). Interestingly, the results for Newport show Starling, Collared Dove, Magpie and Jackdaw at higher positions than in both Monmouthshire and Wales as a whole, perhaps indicative of the greater proportion of urban and suburban habitats and the ability of these opportunist species to thrive in association with man. Another, perhaps surprising result, is the complete lack of Siskin from the league table (indeed it didn't even make the top 15 in either Monmouthshire or Newport); considering the number of local observers reporting this species on feeders this year, it might have been expected to at least make the top ten.

Further information on the survey results across Wales and the rest of the UK can be found at www.rspb.org/birdwatch/

| Rank | Wales | Monmouthshire | Newport |
|------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1 | House Sparrow | House Sparrow | House Sparrow |
| 2 | Blue Tit | Blue Tit | Starling |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| 3 | Chaffinch | Blackbird | Blackbird |
| 4 | Starling | Starling | Blue Tit |
| 5 | Blackbird | Chaffinch | Chaffinch |
| 6 | Great Tit | Great Tit | Collared Dove |
| 7 | Greenfinch | Greenfinch | Magpie |
| 8 | Robin | Robin | Greenfinch |
| 9 | Collared Dove | Dunnock | Jackdaw |
| 10 | Jackdaw | Long-tailed Tit | Great Tit |

Committee Commentary February 2006

New Officers:

The Committee welcomed Verity Picken and Chris Field as new, joint Report Editors, taking over from Brian Gregory. The position of Vice Chairman is still vacant.

SEWBRc (South East Wales Biodiversity Recording Centre)

Some members of the Committee had received a presentation by Adam Rowe, Manager, SEWBRc, on the benefits of using their services. SEWBRc is a non-profit making organisation which is gathering biodiversity records from other environmental groups (Badgers, bats, etc.) in south Wales in order that the records can be consolidated to make a more powerful response to, for example, planning applications or enquiries from ecological consultants. This had previously been explained at the AGM. The consensus of the meeting was that there could be significant advantages for GOS in participating in the SEWBRc project so long as the interests of GOS were not compromised. It was agreed to set up a sub-committee to negotiate terms, in the form of a Service Level Agreement, with SEWBRc and to report back to the Committee before a report is put to an AGM or EGM for final approval. The sub-committee would comprise Andrew Baker, Verity Picken, Chris Field, Richard Clarke and Trevor Russell.

Magor Marsh

Julian Branscombe, Chief Executive of the Gwent Wildlife Trust, has written to set out the management plan for the Magor land acquisition, which had been supported financially by GOS. Subsequently a site visit had taken place, which included Tony Pickup from the Newport

Wetland Reserve. A series of proposals to encourage breeding waders were discussed at that meeting and these were supported by the committee.

Monitoring of species present on the land needs to take place and it was suggested that the Hamar Bursary could be used to encourage monitoring to take place in the future.

Newport Wetland Reserve

A grant of £3 million has been made to the RSPB to develop a visitor centre and other facilities on the Reserve.

Birds of Gwent 2

Most species reports are now done. A meeting has been held to draw up a shortlist of photographs. Publication is still possible for Spring 2006.

The Dipper and website

The forum section of the website had been subject to abuse and has been discontinued.

Trevor Russell, Secretary (01600 716266, secretary@gwentbirds.org.uk)

Field Trip Reports

Dawlish Warren – 11th Dec 2005

This trip was marred by poor visibility all day, together with a temperature of 2^o C. Unfortunately, this meant we saw no grebes or divers. However, both godwits were seen along with Dark-bellied Brent Geese, Grey Plover, Knot, Rock Pipit, and the usual supporting cast.

Whitford Point – 7th Jan 2006

In the company of the merry band of Carmarthenshire birders, we squelched through the marsh, and were rewarded with at least six Jack Snipe, and one Common Snipe. At the Point, divers once again eluded us, but other notable species included four Slavonian Grebes, four Common Scoter, Eider and Brent Geese. In addition, Crossbills were seen by some in the pines on the way back. A quick stop at Llanrhidian Marsh supplied a male and female Hen Harrier

coming in to roost.

Tregaron Bog and surrounding area – 22nd Jan 2006

We had a good start to the day at Pont Einon with a flypast by two Whooper Swan, two distant female Hen Harrier, Red Kite, and a Merlin. The walk along the railway track was less productive than usual, but Dave B. found us a pair of Willow Tit. Then at Aberystwyth there were two Purple Sandpipers and an obliging Rock Pipit, but we dipped on the expected Chough.

NWR Uskmouth – 4th Feb 06

A good crowd of between 20 to 30 members met at the reserve car park, the plan to split up into two groups changed, as Helen was unable to be with us. The first sightings of the day included Kestrel, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Fieldfare, Stonechat and Linnets as we walked along the path to the reed beds.

We made our way towards the power station seeing a large number of Coot, and heard the first of many Cetti's Warbler recorded during the day. We continued around the perimeter footpath noting, amongst others, Reed Buntings, Bullfinch, Snipe and Raven. On the reedbed pools Wigeon, Mallard, Pochard, Little Grebe, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Duck, Shelduck, Gadwall and Mute Swan were all seen and Redpolls also showed well. A Sparrowhawk was added to the list and some of the group enjoyed a brief glimpse of a Marsh Harrier disappearing into the reed-beds. An even better view was of a Short-eared Owl, which stayed for a photocall and was enjoyed by all.

Estuary watching produced Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Redshank, Grey Plover, Dunlin and Cormorant and Little Egret, Whimbrel and Curlew were also recorded. In spite of the inclement weather forecast it turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant afternoon, the icing on the cake being the amazing display put on by the thousands of starlings coming into roost. A little late but better late than never!

Wyre Forest – 11th Feb 2006

This walk was led by Jeff Fisher, but he failed to super-glue the required birds in place when he researched the walk! It was a freezing cold day, and we seemed to walk in a frost hollow for most of the morning. It is an impressive area, and we saw only a fraction of it. In the afternoon we had good views of Great Spotted Woodpecker and Yellowhammer.

Forest of Dean – 25th Feb 2006

Another Walk when the day was bright and cold, with a biting north-easterly wind. Starting at Cannop Ponds, we did our best to find some sun to stand in, and Mandarin Duck was eventually found along with two Crossbills and a Goshawk. A stop at Speech House gave good views of Redwing, Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush. Then it was on to New Fancy View, where we had to hang onto our telescopes in the strong gusts while having superb views of Goshawk flying quite close. Finally, we added Siskin and Great Spotted Woodpecker to the list during a quick walk at Parkend.

Blaen Trothy – 4th Mar 06

After meeting at Abergavenny bus station we moved on to the SSSI destination of

Blaen Trothy. This habitat is one of the largest areas of natural grassland meadows in the county. Thanks to Ruaridh Macdonald for his generous hospitality throughout the walk.

Birds recorded during this walk included: Dunnock, Starling, Collared Dove, Magpie, Jackdaw, Pied Wagtail, Redwing, Fieldfare, Raven, Rook, Blue tit, Chaffinch, Blackbird, Robin, Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Great tit, Mistle Thrush, Great spotted Woodpecker, Buzzard, Yellowhammer, Meadow Pipit, Bullfinch, House Sparrow, Song Thrush, Wood Pigeon, Pheasant, Long-tailed Tit, Nuthatch, Carrion Crow, Jackdaw, Stock Dove, Snipe and Grey Wagtail. Mammals recorded during walk included both Fox and Rabbit plus the usual flock of wild Welsh sheep.

Ruth Brown (outofcounty@gwentbirds.org.uk) and Steven Butler

BTO News

It's coming round to the time of year when most bird surveys take place and there is a chance for you to get involved in some of them. A Dartford Warbler Survey is planned for the spring; although not a species normally associated with our patch, members will probably remember that Gwent had the first Welsh breeding record a couple of years ago. Birds have subsequently been seen on some of our hills and a number of squares have been identified as having suitable habitat. There are only two squares not yet allocated - SO 1902 (near Abertillery) and SO 2114 (on the boundary with Brecknock). The survey involves just two visits (in the periods 1st April - mid May and mid May - end of June) visiting only suitable habitat.

The Scarce Woodland Bird Survey is unusual in that the observer can choose his or her own site (rather than random selection of a square). The aim is to walk a minimum of 500m in each of two woods, one thought to be quite good for woodland birds and the other not so good. Each route is walked twice during the breeding season looking for target species such as Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, Tree Pipit, Redstart, Wood Warbler, Redpoll and Hawfinch, as well as other (more common) woodland birds such as Song Thrush, Nuthatch and Treecreeper. If interested contact Su Gough at the BTO ASAP (su.gough@bto.org or 01842 750050) so that maps can be produced for your woods. If you took part last year, you have the additional option of revisiting the same woods or choosing two new ones.

Do you keep (or want to keep) regular sightings of the birds visiting your garden throughout the year? If so then the BTO/CJ Garden Birdwatch Survey is for you. Leaflets on attracting different species to your garden (Foods and Feeding) or about hygiene - to keep your feeding areas cleaner and healthier (Garden Bird Hygiene and Disease) are available. For more information phone 01842 750050, e mail gbw@bto.org or write to GBW, Room 6, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

Gwent has 56 different 1km squares allocated for the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) and last year 47 were covered. At the time of writing just seven are available for this year. Fancy spending a leisurely couple of hours walking a square (once in April/early May and once in late May/June) and recording all of the birds? Then this survey is for you. The squares needing coverage for 2006 are SO3613 (Llanvapley), SO 3621 (Campston Hill), SO 4502 (Llansoy), SO 5117 (Welsh Newton), ST 2097 (Newbridge), SO 3504 (Nr Usk) and SO 2106 (Abertillery).

Since 1997 the BTO has been promoting National Nest Box Week each February, but thoughts of nesting sites for birds should not just be restricted to that month. Natural nesting holes are fast disappearing in woods and gardens, as areas become tidier or repairs are made to buildings. There is still time to put up nest boxes for the coming breeding season, and a completely revised booklet is able to help. The BTO's Nestbox Guide is available from Jacobi Jayne & Co, Freepost 1155, Herne Bay, Kent, CT6 7BR or Freephone 0800 0720130. Price including p & p is £8.99.

The Tawny Owl Survey last autumn was very successful and lots of birds were found, 12 tetrads were visited in 10 km sq SO32 (part in Hereford) and 11 tetrads in ST 39. The survey was undertaken between mid August and mid October when the birds are particularly noisy in establishing their territories before the winter. The majority of the tetrads held calling birds with

a few holding two or three pairs. Several Little Owls were also heard.

Fieldwork for the National Breeding and Wintering Atlas (as promoted in the last Dipper) is not far away and it is time to start thinking about which 10 km square you would be interested in recording in. Mary Field mary@field.net has volunteered to help with the organisation of this survey so anyone interested can make contact with either of us.

The second year of the Turtle Dove Survey and monitoring will be going ahead this spring in the Trelleck area. At least five birds are thought to have been on territory last year in what is their last location in Wales. If you are interested in helping, contact myself or Debbie Scott for more information debbie.scott@rspb.org.uk

Finally, late winter is the best time to see Hawfinch, probably at one of the well-known sites in the Forest of Dean (Parkend Church, Speech House, Nagshead or Brierley). If anyone is lucky enough to see birds please keep a special look out for rings (either a grey metal ring or a metal ring and a colour) and let me know when, where and which leg the rings are on. It would also be useful to know how many birds are seen which definitely did not have rings. There have been four colour ring sightings so far, two at Nagshead in the late winter/early spring (one came from Brierley and the other from near Chepstow) and two at Brierley (earlier this month) that had been ringed there in previous winters. I can be contacted at 01873 855091, 01633 644856 (work Mon - Wed only) or on jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk

Jerry Lewis, BTO Representative (01873 855091)

News from Newport Wetlands

In the last report Kevin mentioned the development of visitor facilities at Uskmouth. Planning permission is currently being sought for the first stage of these. The current application includes improved access for the disabled and less able-bodied. Wheelchair friendly ramps and surfaces are being provided around the Uskmouth lagoons, and a screened boardwalk is proposed to cut straight through one of the reedbeds to the lighthouse. This will make it much easier for people of all abilities to access the major sites of interest at Uskmouth.

At the same time all the tracks that cross the deep-water channels in the reedbeds are to be

fitted with reed screens to cut down disturbance. Viewing facilities will be built in to the screens and to diversify the habitat at these points we have cut back the reed for some distance to create areas of shallow water. We are also stopping public use of one length of track down the middle of the reedbeds to reduce the disturbance caused to the neighbouring deep-water channel. Hopefully this will increase its use by wildfowl and justify the screened viewing points we are going to build to overlook it. On the seawall we are also going to provide some "viewing benches" with elbow rests to make for easier binocular use in windy conditions.

The Environment Agency have warned us that they are planning to upgrade the rest of the reserve's seawall this summer. This will include the bank at Goldcliff with the viewing platforms on it, which EA are taking over as the primary sea defence. Unfortunately this is going to mean that the Goldcliff lagoon sea wall is going to be "out of bounds" from July onwards until work is completed, possibly mid October. However, the "upside" of this is that, once completed, we hope to have more and better vantage points over the lagoons from the new seawall.

This winter, once again, saw a new record count of Wigeon, 2,260 birds in late December is only 540 below the 1% national population level. Even more encouraging is where they are being found. In the reserve's early days most of the birds would be on the shore but now they are mostly on the grasslands; grazing in small groups and generally only resorting to the shore when they are disturbed. This is a real indication of how much the reserve is supporting this population. It has also been interesting to see how faithful different groups of birds are to particular areas of the grasslands and also, how much more tolerant of us they have become as the winter has progressed. Shoveler peaked at 215 in late January and equalled our record of Feb 2002, and Teal peaked at 806 in December, on a par with the last couple of years. However, the number of dabblers using the reserve has the potential to increase hugely and we'll be increasingly turning our attentions to this now we have control over the water levels.

A Dunlin count of 4,000 in February is close to a record for us, but is a significant count for the Severn anyway. Something that has attracted local comment is the fantastic wintering Lapwing flock. Numbers have been slowly building up since early December and peaked at 1,400 by late February. Hearing them quietly calling to one another in the dark as we lock up after work is great compensation for the miserable short, dark winter days at this time of the year.

Roll on spring!

Tony Pickup

Recent Sightings: December – February

The following is a summary of reports posted to the 'Recent Reports' page on our website (www.gwentbirds.org.uk). 'Notable' records (i.e. those relating to species recorded infrequently within the county and requiring a description to be sent to the county recorder) are in bold type. All areas within the NWR and associated areas of foreshore are treated as a single location. Records relating to rare breeding species, or those susceptible to persecution are omitted. Please note that the inclusion of a record within the following summary does not imply official acceptance and all records should be forwarded to the county recorder.

When posting information to the 'Gwent Sightings' page, please refrain from advertising the whereabouts of rare breeding species, or those susceptible to persecution. Please remember that the information on the website is open to all.

Thanks go to the following observers who all contributed records: John Aggleton, Malcolm Appleton, Terry Arnold, Mick Bailey, Pat Balshaw, Tony Balshaw, Martin Bevan, Nicholas Beswick, Sam Bosanquet, Mike Bosley, 'Braddie', Julian Branscombe, Dave Brassey, Ruth Brown, Andy Bryant, Steven Butler, Bruce Campbell, George Chappell, Tom Chinnick, Maurice Chown, Craig Constance, 'Steve D', John Davies, Steve Davies, Bernie Donders, 'Doug', Claudia Dupe, Joanne Dupe, Kevin Dupe, Max Dupe, Sheila Dupe, Sue Edwards, John Evans, Ray Evans, Richard Evans, Jeff Fisher, Mair Floyd-Bosley, W. Foster, Nigel Garside, Brian Gregory, Tim Griffiths, Patricia Groom, Tim Hall, John Harper, Chris Hatch, Shaun Healey, Adrian Hickman, Mike Hogan, 'Holly', Gary Howells, Richard Howells, Jackie Huybs, 'Ifor', Barry Ingram, Janice Jenkins, Mal Jenkins, Andrew Jones, Chris Jones, Clive Jones, Gareth Jones, Hadyn Jones, Keith Jones, Ron Jones, Andrew King, 'A L', 'Lee', Llandegfedd Rangers, Allen Lloyd, H. Lloyd, John Marsh, Steve Millard, Rod Morris, Paul Morton, Howard Oates, John O'Sullivan, Dave Owen, Wesley James Parfitt, 'Pat', Martin Peers, 'Philippa', Luke Phillips, Arthur Pitcher, Jackie Pointon, Mike Pointon, Roger Price, Karl Richards, Andy Rowlands, Keith Roylance, Ian Smith, Darryl Spittle, Ed Stevens, Mark Stevens, Carol Stokes, Brian Thomas, Vaughan Thomas, GT Thorne, Christine Waite, Gareth Waite, Eddie Wang, Mike Warburton, Bev West, Chris West, Julie West, Craig Williams, Steve Williams and John Wilson.

- Red-necked Grebe – A single bird was seen at Llandegfedd Reservoir from 13th January until 23rd February, two were reported on 29th January (B. Thomas, K. Jones et al.).
- Black-necked Grebe – Two birds were found at Ynysfro Reservoirs on 6th December, the following day three were present and remained into March (G. Waite, GT Thorne et al.).
- Bittern – Just one report, of a single bird at the NWR on 4th January (A. Hickman).

- Little Egret – Reported from six sites mostly at various points along the estuary.
- Great White Egret – This species is fast becoming a bit of an enigma in Gwent, sightings in January and early February at the NWR join a growing number of reports, none of which, much to the chagrin of at least one local observer (i.e. me), have produced a 'twitchable' individual (J. Aggleton & per H. Lloyd).
- Dark-bellied Brent Goose – A lone bird was present at St. Brides on 28th and 29th January having possibly been seen earlier at Goldcliff Pill.
- Ruddy Shelduck – One was present at Bulmore Lakes on 19th February.
- Aythya hybrids – Single birds were seen at the NWR on the 7th January and 18th February.
- Goldeneye – Small numbers were reported from the NWR, Brynmawr, Bryn Bach CP, Dunlop Semtex Pond and Llandegfedd Reservoir through the winter, eight at the NWR was the maximum count.
- Red-breasted Merganser – Two birds were seen flying west at Peterstone on 5th December (K. Jones).
- Hen Harrier – A male was regularly reported from Waunafon Bog from mid January to early February with an additional ringtail seen on 27th January. Elsewhere a bird was reported at the NWR on 6th February and a male (possibly the Waunafon bird) was noted at Brynithel on 18th February (C. Constance, A. Pitcher, per K. Jones, Steve et al.).
- Merlin – This diminutive raptor was seen in ones and twos along the estuary, from Collister Pill to Sluice Farm, throughout the winter. Inland, there were three sightings at Dingestow (involving two different birds) and another at Chwarel y Fan.
- Red Grouse – A maximum of five birds were seen on the Blorenge on 10th December whilst the highest count in the Coity Mountain/Waunafon Bog area was of three on 5th February.
- Red-legged Partridge – Just one record, a single bird was seen alongside the River Usk on 25th January.
- Grey Partridge – As with the previous species, only one sighting noted, five were at Collister on 1st February.
- Water Rail – Seen or heard at four sites around the county. The highest count was of an impressive 30 at the NWR on 18th December.
- Spotted Crake – A bird was reported as heard calling at the NWR on 4th January (K. Jones)
- Golden Plover – Four were at Collister Pill on 28th December and 65 flew 'down-channel' at the same site on 1st January, the only other report was of a single bird at the NWR on 6th February.
- Purple Sandpiper – Three reports were logged during the period, the first records since 2000. A bird was seen along the river in Newport on 23rd January and then, presumably the same individual, was at the NWR on 19th and 28th February (C. Waite, D. Spittle & B. Thomas).
- Dunlin – In addition to regular counts along the estuary, a solitary bird was at Ynysfro Reservoirs on 8th and 9th January (J. O'Sullivan).
- Ruff – Two birds were reported from the NWR on 4th January and a single on 6th February.
- Jack Snipe – Seen at five sites: Magor Marsh, Ebbw Vale, Collister Pill, Peterstone and Gobion. The highest count was of five at Peterstone on 31st January.

- Woodcock – Just one report of a single bird near Blaenavon on 1st February.
- Bar-tailed Godwit – Small numbers were seen at the NWR in January and February, the maximum count being of eight on 4th January.
- Whimbrel – A scarce wintering record came in the form of one at the NWR on 18th December.
- Green Sandpiper – Single birds were reported from Llanwenarth and the NWR, two were seen at Gobion and three were in the Bulmore Lakes/Caerleon area on 3rd December.
- Common Sandpiper – As with the species above, the Bulmore Lakes/Caerleon area played host to the bulk of the birds recorded with three, on 4th December, being the best count.
- Yellow-legged Gull – Two records came from Llandegfedd Reservoir, an adult was in the roost on 14th January and two were present on 6th February (D. Spittle & I. Smith).
- Barn Owl – Reported from seven sites, unfortunately two records were of deceased birds: feathers indicating predation were found at Llandegfedd Reservoir and a corpse was picked up at Llandenny.
- Short-eared Owl – The birds at Waunafon Bog attracted a large number of admirers between 14th January and the end of February. A maximum of five were seen at this site whilst one or two were at the NWR and one was near Penperlleni.
- Kingfisher – Single birds were seen at Tredegar Park GC, Sor Brook, Newport and the NWR between the 8th January and the 18th February.
- Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – Two records were logged: one was seen near Blaenavon on 27th December and another near Pontypool on 15th February.
- Rock Pipit – Reported from Blackrock, Peterstone and the NWR, the maximum count was of nine at Blackrock, elsewhere between one and three were seen.
- Water Pipit – An unusually large wintering flock was seen in the Peterstone/Sluice Farm area throughout the period. The highest count was of 28 on 24th January. Elsewhere a 'probable' was seen at Collister Pill on 1st January (many observers).
- Stonechat – Reported from just six sites during the winter, the majority of which were on the levels. The NWR provided the highest number with nine on Christmas Eve.
- Cetti's Warbler – Only reported from Magor Marsh and the NWR with a high of 15 reported on both the 2nd and 20th January.
- Dartford Warbler – Two reports from the NWR on the 9th and 11th February, unlike the last wintering record at the site this individual didn't hang around (R. Evans, B. Thomas & J. Marsh).
- Blackcap – Reports of between one and three birds from Newport, Abergavenny, Osbaston, Risca, Govilon and Magor show the wintering population is spread widely, if somewhat thinly, throughout the county.
- Chiffchaff – Less widespread than the previous species, the majority of records derived from the levels, the only exception being one in Newport. Magor Marsh produced the maximum count with two on the 4th and 15th December.
- Bearded Tit – Only three records were logged from the NWR through the winter, birds were heard or seen briefly on 12th and 19th December and 18th of February (C. Jones, M. Pointon & K. Jones).
- Jackdaw – A bird showing characteristics of one of the continental/eastern races (*monedula/soemmerringii*) was recorded at Dingestow on the 1st and 2nd January, is this a first

for the county? (S. Bosanquet).

- Tree Sparrow – A flock of 30 were seen near Redwick on the 4th December, hopefully evidence of a successful breeding season, elsewhere one was at Llandegfedd Reservoir on the 5th December and between one and three were at Dingestow.

- Brambling – Reported from just four sites; Dingestow held by far the greatest numbers with a maximum of 30+ on 12th and 18th February. Additionally, singles were seen at Wentwood, Cwmbran and visiting a garden in Newport.

- Twite – A finch, possibly this species, was seen briefly at Dingestow on the 12th February (S. Bosanquet).

- Crossbill – Two reports from Wentwood involved nine birds on the 14th December and two on the 25th January.

- Hawfinch – A wandering individual at Magor on 14th January must have been a pleasant surprise, could this be one of the continental birds, which appeared in the UK last autumn?

- Snow Bunting – A lone individual was found at Collister Pill on the 18th December, it remained until at least the 19th February and attracted a steady stream of birders (H. Jones).

- Yellowhammer – Another seedeater found at Dingestow in good numbers with 80 thought to be present on the 23rd December, elsewhere 25 were seen at Springdale Farm, one at Llandegfedd Reservoir and “some” at Brynithel.

- Corn Bunting – Possibly the find of the winter, a single bird was recorded at Dingestow on 22nd January. Unfortunately, it didn't hang around, but did provide more evidence, as if it were needed, of the quality of habitat at Dingestow.