

‘Modern’ bird names debate dominates busy AGM

By Trevor Russell

An unusually busy AGM agenda required swift passage through the formalities to leave sufficient time to enjoy the subsequent finger buffet and Al Venables’ presentation on his fascinating analysis of findings from the forthcoming Birds of Gwent publication.

President Ian Walker welcomed the 90-plus attendees and hurried to the first resolution, which was to approve a Committee-recommended donation of £5,000 to Gwent Wildlife Trust to support its appeal for £550,000 to buy the 100-acre Wyeswood Common, near Monmouth.

Wildlife Trust Chief Executive Julian Branscombe gave a presentation to describe the vision to transform the site, which is adjacent to the Trust’s Pentwyn Farm Nature Reserve. Today it’s a monoculture dairy pasture, but the aim is to gradually convert it into a site of open woodland and grassland full of flowers, insects and birds. In time, it is hoped that this will become a model for other local landowners to copy and create similar ‘stepping stones’ in a wildlife corridor stretching down the Wye Valley to the River Severn 20 miles away. Julian made such a compelling case that the proposal to donate £5,000 was approved unanimously.

Another Committee proposal recommended raising the ceiling of Committee-approved expenditure from £1,000 to £3,000. Treasurer Keith Roylance explained that this merely reflected the inflationary increase since the mid-1960s, and that diminished buying power today hampers the Committee’s ability to approve even modest projects without time-consuming delays. The motion was carried unanimously.

A more contentious motion, proposed by Mike Love and seconded by Roger Price, sought to reverse the prominent use of ‘modern’ bird names in the Annual Report introduced in the 2005 edition.

(Background: this topic was first raised in the February 2007 Committee meeting, prompted by a letter from a member complaining that new bird names were being given undue prominence in the 2005 Annual Report. It was decided to discuss the topic more fully at the April 2007 meeting. In April, various formats for presenting both old and new names were discussed, but no clear preference could be reached. So it was agreed to continue with the

2005 format for the 2006 Report and await reaction from the membership. When Mike Love's proposal was received, it was recognised that the AGM would offer a good opportunity to hear the opinions of the wider membership.)

Before the President allowed the motion to be presented, he explained to members that they should recognise it was the responsibility of the Committee to arrive at a final decision on format – but that this was influenced by any clear preference from this AGM. Having agreed this principle with Mike Love, an amended proposal was put: “That the Society requires the Executive Committee to reconsider the use of traditional or common bird names as the first-mentioned name in future Annual Reports, as those that were used prior to 1995.”

Mike Love argued that in the Annual Report we should give prominence to the common names - which would be recognised by the readership - and not adopt every changed name offered by the British Ornithologists Union (BOU), which introduced uncertainty and generated annoyance. He cited new-name annoyances such as Winter Wren, for a bird seen here all year round, and Mew Gull for Common Gull - which, in his view, introduced unnecessary confusion.

Al Venables reminded the meeting that in the mid-1990s, the then Committee agreed to adopt and give prominence to the 'new' BOU names, because it was felt that various publications - from the RSPB and BTO to popular birdwatching magazines - would quickly follow suit, and GOS feared falling behind the times. But this anticipated follow-up by the popular publications did not materialise, and the new names were ignored, except in the more scientifically orientated BTO Journal. While he did not wish to lose sight of the new names in the Report, Al felt that it should use the common name first, with the new name quoted but not so prominently. This view was reinforced by several other speakers.

Opponents to reverting to common names cited Redpoll as a species that could be split in the near future, leaving no common name and only the BOU names available.

A sheet showing five format options had been circulated earlier and it was pointed out that option 4, where all species would be quoted with both common AND BOU name, would add four pages (4%) to the Report - which could increase the cost of production. Option 5 would add two pages.

Chris Field, anticipating future taxonomic changes being reported by the BOU as a consequence of improving DNA analysis techniques, recommended that we did not interfere with any suggested BOU sequence of bird species.

An e-mail from County Recorder Chris Jones to myself stated that the Welsh Ornithology Society (WOS) would be discussing this topic in their County Recorders' meeting in March, in an endeavour to standardise presentational formats in Wales.

The President guillotined discussion after 15 minutes in order to take the views of the members present.

Votes cast on the five options were as follows:

-	Option 1	BOU name followed by common name if very different:	11 votes
-	Option 2	BOU name followed by common name if different:	6 votes
-	Option 3	BOU name followed by common name:	1 vote
-	Option 4	Common name followed by BOU name:	13 votes
-	Option 5	Common name followed by BOU name if different:	33 votes

This outcome means that the Committee will discuss the nomenclature issue again in February knowing that, of the voters, 72% (46/64) were in favour of common names being given prominence over the BOU name.

Richard Clarke sought clarification whether the Committee would also be influenced by the outcome from the Welsh Ornithological Society County Recorders' meeting to be held in March. No vote was taken on this, though it will doubtless raise the issue of which body should have supremacy, WOS or GOS? Who says Committee meetings aren't fun-filled?!

The only application for the 2008 Hamar Bursary was received from Darryl Spittle for a study of the breeding population of Cetti's Warbler at Newport Wetland Reserve. This was to be forwarded for discussion at the Committee meeting in February.

The headline news from the Treasurer was that in 2007, expenditure exceeded income by £669. A total 56% of the £6,901 income was from members' subscriptions. Income from the indoor meetings - at £1,068 - was only 85% of that of 2006, and did not cover the increasing cost of visiting speakers. Printing costs for The Dipper also increased, as did postal charges, which are due to rise again in 2008.

The Chairman adopted Communication as his main theme and observed that many societies, such as GOS, unfortunately fail due to inadequate communication to and between the members. He reflected on our fortune in having Jackie Huybs, a freelance journalist, as Dipper Editor, and an excellent website - managed from America(!) - by Phil Thompson. Mark Stevens keeps the GOS name prominent in the local press, while our Annual Report is second to none under joint Editors Verity Picken and Chris Field. We wait with eager anticipation the publication of The Birds of Gwent 2, the outcome of years of dedicated effort by Al Venables and his team.

Jackie Huybs was elected in her role as Dipper Editor and Luke Phillips and Lyndon Waters were elected as Committee members.

The AGM was followed by a members' evening finger buffet which was generous, appetising and very enjoyable. This, in turn, was followed by a fascinating and amusing presentation by Al Venables on some observations distilled from the forthcoming Birds of Gwent publication.

Thanks to good stewardship by the President, the meeting still managed to close at 22:00

Committee Commentary

Trevor Russell

An update on the shenanigans in the February Committee meeting will be given in the June Dipper.

RSPB Heads of the Valleys Lapwing Project update

Camilla Smith

The RSPB Heads of the Valleys Lapwing Project is intended to address the problem of the significant decline in Lapwing in the area, and forms part of an RSPB Wales-wide 'species

recovery' programme for Lapwing.

Many thanks to all of you who took part in, or were involved in any way, with monitoring Lapwing breeding success in the Heads of the Valleys area in 2007. I'm hoping to continue the good work set up by Lynne Osgathorpe last year.

Sadly, 2007 was not a good year for Lapwing. Of the 30 key sites identified for the survey, breeding birds were only recorded on half. A total of 29 breeding pairs were recorded, with a productivity estimated at 0.19 chicks per pair.

If anyone would like to be involved in this year's monitoring, you should be committed to completing five surveys, at three-week intervals between late March and late July 2008. Surveys should take approximately one hour and involve recording numbers and behaviour of breeding pairs and chicks and observing fledgling success.

We anticipate that a half-day training session will be run in late March to outline the RSPB survey methodology. Please note that there are a limited number of sites available. All sites are in the Heads of the Valleys area, and most are within the counties of Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly.

Please contact me if you would like to take part or if you would like any further information: Camilla Smith, RSPB - Heads of the Valleys Lapwing Project Officer; e-mail camilla.smith@rspb.org.uk, or call me at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council - 01495 355826, or RSPB Cymru - 02920 353275.

Birds of Gwent

The publication of Birds of Gwent is imminent. The Society has negotiated a special price to allow members to purchase the book from GOS at a 25% discount on the cover price.

- Cover Price £40
- GOS Price £30

In order to purchase at this discounted price you must order through the Society. Just give your name to Andrew Baker and copies will be obtained. Those members who have already ordered through Andrew will be supplied with copies as soon as we have them.

We hope to officially launch the publication at a special event in April. Watch out for details on our website and in the press.

Blaenau Gwent Goes Wild!

The Blaenau Gwent Go Wild Event will be held at Bryn Bach Country Park, Tredegar on June 14, from 11pm to 4pm. Helen Jones has kindly volunteered to coordinate this, but has asked for anyone who can help her to get in touch.

Contact Helen on 029 2069 1027; e-mail membership@gwentbirds.org.uk

A year's birding in Blaenau Gwent **Luke Phillips**

After being inspired by Darryl Spittle's intrepid attempt at year listing in Gwent back in 2006, I thought it a good idea to try one for Blaenau Gwent.

For those of you who don't know it, Blaenau Gwent is essentially made up of three valleys: the Ebbw Fawr, Ebbw Fach and Sirhowy Valleys. So it's not very large - and with no coastline, it was always going to be difficult. But with great enthusiasm, I carried on - and it turned out to be a very interesting experience!

I set myself a realistic aim of 100 species, which - given the lack of different habitats - seemed vaguely achievable.

Throughout the year, a number of surprise species were seen within my set recording area. These included a Marsh Harrier drifting around the Garnlydan area, a Black Redstart that spent

a few weeks at the Rassau Industrial Estate, and a Manx Shearwater, which was found in a Beaufort garden!

Perhaps the biggest shock was a Pomarine Skua on Garnlydan Reservoir. The reservoir provided me with a number of other good year ticks, including coastal species such as Arctic Tern and Oystercatcher. Also, an unhealthy interest in gulls resulted in a few Yellow-legged Gulls throughout the winter at the reservoir.

It wasn't all plain sailing, and I recall one incident where I had to twitch a Teal, which was photographed at Garnlydan Reservoir. Also, there were a few dips - which I really couldn't afford if I was to hit my 100 species target. These included Red-breasted Merganser and Iceland Gull.

A few other 'easy' species were also missing from the list, including Spotted Flycatcher and Pied Flycatcher – both of which I'd seen in the area previously. And Pheasant was a very annoying species, as other people had seen a few - but I gave up trying.

So after a very eventful year, did I reach my target? You bet I did! 104!

Common Bird Census - volunteers wanted

Torfaen County Borough Council, supported by the Countryside Council for Wales, is looking for volunteers to take part in a Common Bird Census (CBC) of six Local Nature Reserves.

These are Garn Lakes in Blaenavon, Henllys Open Space at Cwmbran, the cycleway between Blaenavon and Garndiffaith, Springvale Ponds and Churchwoods in Cwmbran, and Tirpentwys and Cwmyrnyscoy Quarry, Pontypool.

The survey requires 10 early morning visits between April and July to record bird activity. No previous experience is required as training will be provided - but knowledge of bird song will help.

If you are interested in volunteering or require further information, please contact:

Steve Williams, Senior Ecologist, Torfaen County Borough Council on 01633 648256 or e-mail: steve.williams@torfaen.gov.uk

BTO NEWS

Jerry Lewis

The first winter season for Atlas fieldwork is now over - and it's been very successful in Gwent, with lots of results already entered on line. Nationally, over one million birds were counted during the first week of November, and fieldwork over the four years aims to survey the distribution and numbers of more than 250 species in Wales.

Locally, finches and winter thrushes seem to be very patchy in the tetrads I've visited so far. On the Skirrid Fawr, the highlight of the first visit was a fine 'ringtail' Hen Harrier quartering an area of rank grassland (that I did not even know was in the tetrad). This had departed by the second visit, but I did pick up Stonechat and Crossbill to brighten the morning.

Steph Tyler recorded Hawfinch in several of her Wye Valley squares before she made a late migration to South Africa. I expect many other recorders will also have had their own highlights, as well as simply enjoying the winter birding.

I'm coordinating the effort in 15 of Gwent's 10km squares, with some of the border squares - those with most of the square in an adjacent county - coordinated by a neighbour. Each 10km square needs a minimum level of coverage in eight tetrads (as there are 25 tetrads in each 10km square, there's plenty to choose from), and so far this level of coverage is expected in all but four squares - although there are still vacant tetrads in every 10km square for those who have not yet 'signed up' or want more.

Taking on even a single tetrad will be of great help, and with the breeding survey period about to start, this is a good time to get involved. The four squares with a very poor level of interest are SO31, SO40, ST39 and ST49 - which is surprising, as they contain some potentially very

interesting bits of countryside. Any further offers of help in these squares would be much appreciated. All that's needed is two visits to a tetrad during the winter and again during the breeding seasons. Each visit can be as short as one hour, although two hours would be better.

The current coverage and details of completed visits can be viewed on the Atlas website www.bto.org/birdatlas/ which is continually being updated. Each day all records of a selected species are mapped, which makes very interesting viewing, and helps to highlight gaps in the distribution. Have a look at the website (or see me at an indoor meeting, send me an e-mail jerrylewis@monmouthshire.gov.uk or phone 01873 855091) and get involved in time for the coming breeding season.

Although many people's thoughts will be with the Atlas, the other annual surveys should not be neglected, and in recent years there seems to be a tailing off of Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) coverage. A few squares are always available in Gwent, so if anyone is interested in having a go for the coming breeding season, please get in touch.

Each 1km square needs a 2km route to be walked twice, to record everything you see or hear - couldn't be easier. However, the information gathered is invaluable in monitoring population trends. At the time of writing, the available squares for this spring are SO4817 (Tregate Bridge), SO3504 (Trostre, near Usk), SO3621 (Campston Hill), SO3613 (Llanvapley), ST2097 (Newbridge), SO5117 (Welsh Newton), SO4502 (Llansoy) and SO3011 (Llanellen). Although the BBS is the main survey for monitoring population trends, other BTO surveys complement it.

The very wet weather of May, June and July 2007 may now be a distant memory but its effects are still being seen. It was a very poor breeding season for many birds, and of the 25 species monitored by bird ringers, seven had the worst breeding season ever. One of the worst hit was the Blue Tit, and members may have already noticed fewer visiting their feeding stations. Great Tit and some of the warblers didn't fair much better, but Long-tailed Tit, being an early breeder, did well and benefited from the good April weather.

Other species are doing well, and Garden Birdwatch participants are recording Wood Pigeon in more and more gardens. This species is now found in more urban gardens than Feral Pigeon, even in those towns and cities that have large Feral Pigeon populations. The RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch at the end of January had over 120,000 people involved. It's hoped that this brief introduction to the concept of watching and recording garden birds will result in more regular participation in Garden Birdwatch.

Recent data from the Wetland Bird Survey suggests that the Mallard decline first noticed in the mid 1980s is continuing. There is only one UK site that holds nationally important numbers - the Ouse Washes - and numbers have halved here since 2002. The maximum count over the 2005/06 winter was just 2,454 - has anyone noticed reduced numbers in our area? It may be that our milder winters are allowing birds to remain dispersed on small ponds rather than having to congregate on large water bodies.

Visit the BTO website www.bto.org, or phone them on 01842 750050 or me on 01873 855091, to find out more about any surveys that you might be interested in helping with.

Identifying important bird sites in Gwent

Jerry Lewis

Wildlife sites or SINCs (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) are being designated by several South Wales local authorities to target them for favourable management and help protect them during the planning process.

These are 'non-statutory' sites below the tier of the statutory SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), but their designation recognises their importance when weighing the wildlife interest against a planning application.

So far, in Gwent, local authorities have concentrated on the designation of habitats - mainly grassland and woodland - and are now moving on to consider river systems. But there is an opportunity to have sites designated for their bird interest – whether a breeding, wintering or passage interest.

To give some examples of what might be suitable: breeding sites for Lapwing, Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, Yellow Wagtail or Marsh Tit; small lakes/reservoirs that have a good variety of wintering wildfowl; or an area of scrub that supports good numbers of passage migrants.

So, if you're able to suggest a site that you think is important, please make contact with the relevant county borough council ecologist/biodiversity officer for advice on how to get your site

better protected:

- Blaenau Gwent - Deb Beeson 01495 355702 deborah.beeson@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk
- Caerphilly - Mel Sutherland, 01495 235253 sutherm@caerphilly.gov.uk
- Monmouthshire – Kate Stinchcombe, 01633 644684
katestinchcombe@monmouthshire.gov.uk
- Newport – Dolores Byrne, 01633 232880 dolores.byrne@newport.gov.uk
- Torfaen – Steve Williams, 01633 648256 steve.williams@torfaen.gov.uk

Bryn Serth update

Andrew Baker

Blaenau Gwent has undergone its first assessment of sites suitable for SINC status. Bryn Serth was assessed, found to be a good candidate on the basis of habitat, and gone forward to the next stage. However, the planning permission for building on the fringes of course remains - and this is the area where the Lapwing breed.

Rhyd-y Blew was not included in the first tranche of sites and so will be assessed next time (during March, I think). It will not qualify on the basis of habitat, but should on the basis of bird species present, particularly the Lapwing, which is in the A list in the SINC guidelines.

The relevant line of the guidelines is: 'On this basis, the following should be considered for selection - sites supporting breeding populations, of any size, of species marked with an A in Table 9.' It is, however, still earmarked for industrial development by the Welsh Assembly.

Gwent UKBS Report

Chris Hatch

Sightings, December 2007

Highlights

A Snow Bunting was reported from the Bloreng (1st). A Little Gull was seen along the shore at Newport Wetlands (10th). A Pomarine Skua and a Purple Sandpiper were also reported from this location (29th). Large flocks of Bramblings were reported from a number of locations, with 2,000-plus birds near Manmoel, and flocks of 1,000-plus birds at Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Pantygasseg.

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Up to two Bewick's Swans were present (26th). Other sightings of note included two Water Pipits and a Spotted Redshank (22nd) and nine Avocets, five Bearded Tits, 18 Cetti's Warblers, 10 Water Rail and a Short-eared Owl (26th).

Other sites

Raptor sightings include a Red Kite at Garnlydan (12th), two Merlin near Manmoel (21st), a Goshawk at Pantygasseg (27th), a male Hen Harrier at Tredegar (29th), and a single Merlin at Peterstone (31st). Up to three Yellow-legged Gulls were reported from Garnlydan Reservoir (26th), with a single bird at Dunlop-Semtex pond Brynmawr (22nd). Four dark-bellied Brent Geese were recorded at Collister Pill (16th) and up to 12 Bewick's Swans were present in the Usk valley near Llangybi (24th).

Sightings, January 2008

Highlights

A male Ferruginous Duck was present at Llandegfedd Reservoir (7th), with a Slavonian Grebe also reported from this site (5th). A Great Grey Shrike was recorded at Wentwood (23rd) and a possible Red-necked Grebe was briefly seen at Bulmore Lakes (1st).

Newport Wetlands Reserve

Up to eight Avocets were present during the month. Two Water Pipits were recorded (7th). Other sightings of note included 11 Little Egrets (5th) and a Bearded Tit (6th).

Other sites

Flocks of Bramblings were reported from a number of sites, with the largest flocks recorded being 1,200-plus birds at Pantygasseg (1st), 300-plus birds at Garndiffaith (also 1st) and 350-plus birds at Cwmbran (19th). A Brent Goose, together with a Barnacle Goose, were reported from Bulmore Lakes (1st), while a Pink-footed Goose was present at Llandegfedd Reservoir (6th). Red Kites were seen at Brynmawr (1st), Abergavenny (20th) and from near Garnlydan (27th), when three birds were observed flying together.

Up to three Short-eared Owls were present at Waunafon Bog (from 22nd) and a male Hen Harrier was also observed at this site (also from 22nd) with a Barn Owl making an appearance (24th). A male Hen Harrier was also reported from Garnlydan (16th). Two Yellow-legged Gulls were recorded at Garnlydan Reservoir (3rd) and single Mediterranean Gulls were reported from

Newport (9th), Ynysfro Reservoir (23rd) and Caerleon (30th). Other sightings of note included 12 Bewick's Swans at Llangybi (2nd), a Jack Snipe near Tredegar (2nd), a Merlin at Gobion (10th), two Water Pipits at Peterstone (16th), a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker at Llandegfedd Reservoir (16th), a Barn Owl near Abergavenny (24th) and two Goshawks at Abertillery (31st).

Newport Wetlands

Tom Dalrymple

December

Birds

The wildfowl continue to come in: Wigeon numbers are now twice that of last month at 2,152. Teal are three times as plentiful as they were in November, with a peak count of 851, and Mallard numbers are currently 468 - four times as many as four weeks ago. However, Shoveler remain comparatively low at 102. Five Bewick's Swan were seen on December 29.

Wader numbers are also good. The Black-tailed Godwit flock appears to remain constant at 260 birds, as does the Avocet with nine. Lapwing numbers have increased to 1112. We have also had some good counts of Knot and Dunlin - 1400 and 4000 respectively. There is a flock of a 102 Grey Plover on the reserve at the moment that includes a bird in summer plumage! The peak count for Snipe was 50.

Peak counts for the arable fields this month are: Linnet 214, Reed Bunting 18, Chaffinch 235, Bullfinch 2, Redpoll 5, Brambling 9. Other notable birds this month were: Merlin, Short-eared Owl, Little Gull on the 10th, a Purple Sandpiper and a passing Pomarine Skua on the 29th.

Management

Water levels are now at their maximum desired levels on the Wet Grassland, the Saline Lagoons and the Reedbeds. Work continues on the Reedbed sluice grids. All grids will hopefully be fitted by mid-January. Constructing and fitting the new reed and viewing screens will take a lot longer, but we were hoping to have them finished by the end of February.

Events/visitors

On December 9, Kevin led a Reedbeds in winter walk, which culminated with the Starlings coming home to roost. Graham Hirons, Gareth Fisher, Dick Squires, Reg Thorpe, Neil Lambert, Adam Rowlands and Lewis James visited on December 17 to see the reserve and comment on its current and future management.

January Birds

The peak wildfowl counts are as follows: Wigeon 1612, Mallard 562, Teal 727, Shelduck 307, Tufted Duck 69, Pintail 33, Shoveler 353 (a reserve record).

The peak wader counts were: Curlew 368, Black-tailed Godwit 207, Lapwing 2999, Grey Plover 205, Dunlin 7034, Knot 800, Avocet 8. Peak counts for the arable crop were: Brambling 6, Chaffinch 715, Linnet 344, Greenfinch 6, Reed Bunting 13, Goldfinch 3.

Management

Mike and Keith have finished installing all the safety grids over the reedbed sluices and have now started on the screens with Tony. The screens are coming on at pace – we've used wooden structures where we predict the wear and tear will be most severe, but everywhere else, we've used reed screens, which blend in better with the surroundings.

Work has begun on the pedestrian ramp from the visitor centre to the wider reserve and Perry Lane, the vehicular route drained and in the process of being re-profiled. Fox monitoring on the reserve began in early January. If I'm honest, I'll be quite glad when it's over! Stalking the reserve in the starlight is fantastic, but it's also tiring.

I've applied to Newport City Council to improve the signage from the M4, and work continues on the interpretation for the visitor centre and the reserve.

Chairman's Chatter Dave Brassey

Very shortly, the birding profile of Gwent will be raised following the opening of the RSPB Visitor Centre at Newport Wetlands. I will be representing GOS at the official 'booted and suited' opening on March 6, closely followed on Sunday March 9 by the public opening. Iolo Williams will be there and the place should be very busy (on second thoughts maybe best avoided). Apologies to readers if these dates came and went during putting The Dipper to bed – Ed.

The benefits to our club should be positive as, I am told, many schools will be holding visits as part of their curriculum and hopefully the general interest in birds will be raised. We must do our part to encourage this and develop good relationships with the centre staff for the long term benefit of our region's birdlife so please encourage any youngsters you know to visit.

Garn Lakes Country Fayre

GOS will be represented at the Country Fayre at Garn-yr-Erw, Blaenavon, on June 29. Any offers of assistance greatly received – please contact Keith Roylance on 01633 868410; treasurer@gwentbirds.org.uk