

BIRDING IN THE BRISTOL REGION: *A CELEBRATION*



**50 YEARS OF THE BRISTOL
ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB**

© Bristol Ornithological Club

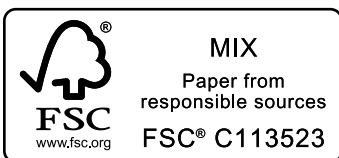
Published by the Bristol Ornithological Club
c/o 4 Pitchcombe Gardens, Bristol, BS9 2RH, UK.

www.bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

ISBN: 978-1-5272-0506-2

Printed in the UK by Swallowtail Print. sales@swallowtailprint.co.uk



Cover photo: Peregrine in the Avon Gorge – Pete Blanchard

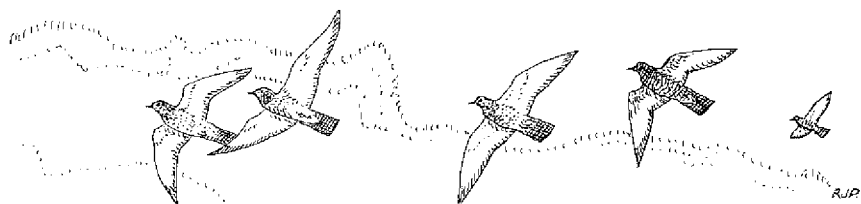
BIRDING IN THE BRISTOL REGION: *A CELEBRATION*

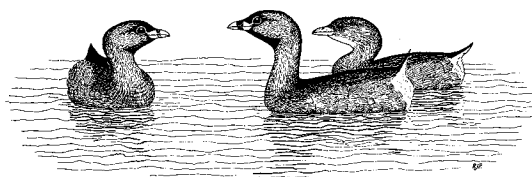
50 YEARS OF THE BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB



Edited by William Earp
January 2017

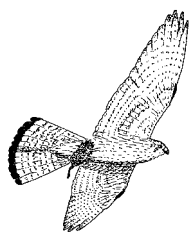
*In warm memory of John Tully (1938 – 2012), long-standing Club member and
BTO Breeding Birds Survey Organiser, who is cited so frequently in these pages.
A mentor to so many.*





Contents

Introduction	5
How we began: the origins of the BOC	7
Fifty birds of Avon	15
Fifty years of change.....	68
Fifty ways to improve your birding	82
The BOC in the round.....	87
The BOC by numbers	88
Messages.....	90
and finally.....	96



Thanks and Acknowledgements

This project was conceived to celebrate the enjoyment derived from observing and recording the bird life of Bristol and its surrounding area over half a century.

Robin Prytherch, one of the Club's founding members, has offered guidance at every stage. He also gave me unlimited access to his portfolio of ink sketches which have enhanced issues of Bristol Ornithology and the Avon Bird Report, and add distinction here.

It has benefited too from the advice and experience of Harvey Rose and Ken Hall, freely given.

Richard Bland spent much time discussing his analysis and adapting his text to meet my many requests. For me, it has been a privileged dialogue.

Bristol Central Library, Bristol City Museum and M Shed have also been valuable sources of reference material and I am grateful to various members of staff at those institutions. M Shed supplied the photographs of Bristol docks in the 1960s used to illustrate 'Fifty years of Change', and David Warden those of Chew Valley Lake. The photographers who have provided extra images for 'Fifty Birds of Avon' merit a separate thank you at the start of that section.

The spirited cartoons for 'Fifty Things to Do...' are the result of Andy Black's painstaking labours. Corinne Welch expertly realised my ideas for 'The BOC by numbers'. Jason Williams gallantly volunteered to read the proofs. Mike Dawson at Swallowtail has been positive, prompt and enabling throughout.

British Birds allowed use of extracts from an article in August 1965.

There has been strong support from the current Committee, in particular the Chairman Ken Carruthers and Club Secretary Richard Belson, as well as Alison Levinson and Keith Williams, 50th Anniversary sub-Committee members.

Above all I acknowledge a personal debt to my son Hugh for the layout and design. A non birder himself, he has shown a combination of technical expertise, good judgement and generosity of which his crabby father can only dream. It has been a real source of pleasure and pride to work with such a professional. Perhaps the delights of 'Fifty Birds...' will convert him yet.

William Earp

Introduction

This year is a landmark in the history of the Bristol Ornithological Club (BOC) – our 50th anniversary. Like any golden anniversary, we should celebrate the life of the Club and its accomplishments, and *Birding in the Bristol Region: a Celebration* is a tangible memento of these achievements.

An interview with Robin Prytherch reminds us of the BOC's foundation including the link between the Club's Pied-billed Grebe logo and the first report of its sighting in Great Britain and Ireland. We owe Robin a continuing debt of gratitude for his outstanding contributions to the Club.

Richard Bland's article 'Fifty years of change' is a first-class summary of the remarkable changes Club members have witnessed: the development of surveying, species loss and gain, changes in farming methods and, of course, climate change.

The fifty personal accounts from past and present members offer us an insight into their birding lives, an acknowledgement of the membership's contribution to the life of the club.

However, no matter how proud we are of the Club's achievements to date, we do need to look forward. From encouraging the next generation of birders to suggesting ways in which we can all protect and develop suitable habitats for wildlife, we hope members will be enthused and make a personal contribution to the future of birding.

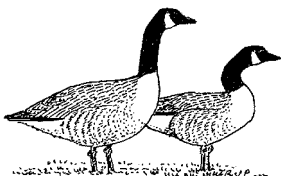
As to what the next fifty years will bring; well, some things are certain - there will be significant changes to bird lists and habitats, technology will have made huge advances, particularly in the identification of birds in the field and to how we might record as we survey. How significant will virtual reality birding become? What I am sure of is that birding will continue to offer us all enjoyment while at the same time enhancing our well-being.

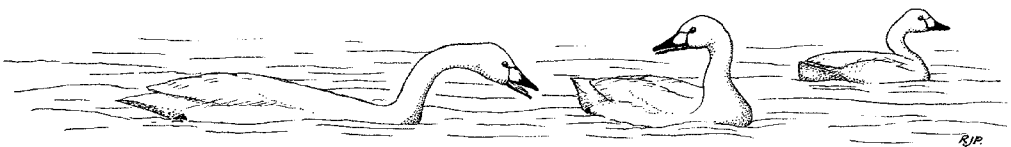
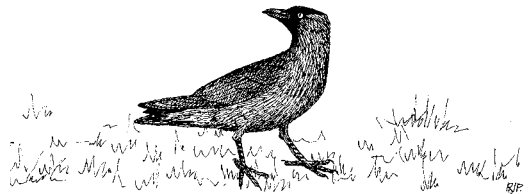
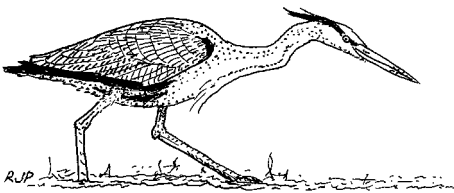
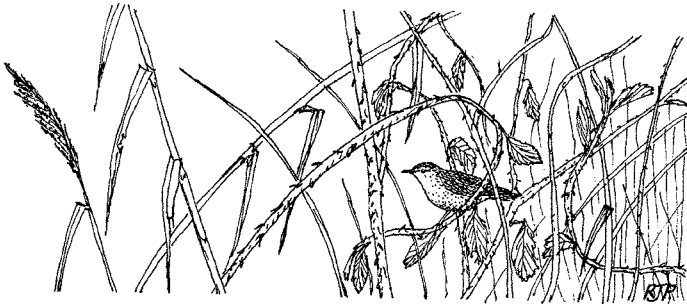
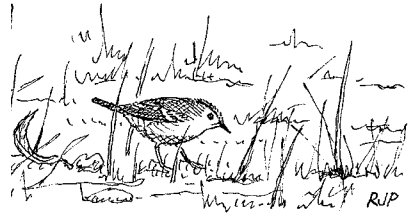
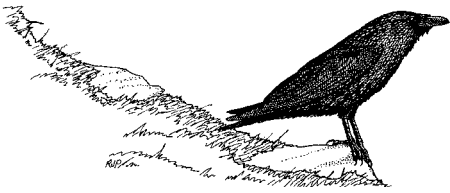
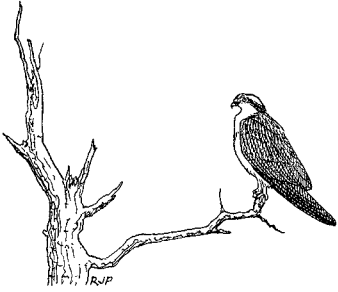
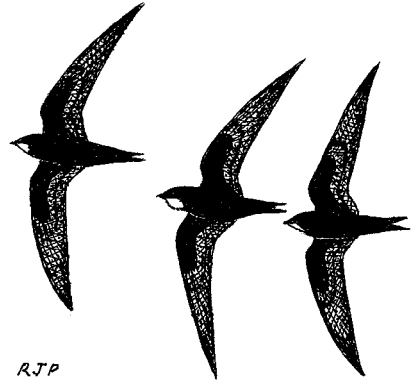
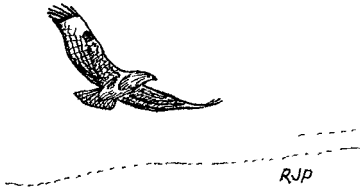
From the founding members, several of whom are still actively involved, to current members, there is a remarkable thread of service to the Club; Judy Copeland, our membership secretary since 1971, deserves a special mention and our sincerest thanks. Such commitment means that the Club remains a vibrant group of people who enjoy their birding – from weekly Tuesday walks to weekend field trips, UK and overseas holidays, surveying and indoor meetings.

And finally, on behalf of members, I would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard to ensure that the BOC's 50th anniversary is celebrated, with a very special thank you to William Earp for his tireless diligence in masterminding this important occasion.

Ken Carruthers
Chairman
Bristol Ornithological Club

January 2017





How we began: the origins of the BOC

William Earp sat down with Founder Member Robin Prytherch to learn more about the Club's beginnings.

WE: *What was the birding scene like in Bristol when the Club started out?*

RJP: There were lots of active birdwatchers - the term then in use - in the Bristol area in the early 60s. Everything was orientated round the Ornithological section of the Bristol Naturalists' Society. Yet there was a feeling that information was not being dealt with – they put out a bi-monthly newsletter which was not very topical as a result. It was also somewhat restricted. There was no space for manoeuvre, really: they were controlled by the senior committee which ran the Society who felt that they could not give priority to birds over their other areas of interest such as flowers, insects and fossils.

The resulting frustration led to the creation, in April 1966, of the *North Somerset Bird News*, which was published informally and sent to those who submitted records at no charge. The December edition lists 54 contributors.

WE: *Why 'North Somerset'?*

RJP: Because that was where the main area of birdwatching activity was, centred on Chew and Blagdon. This was of course long before the days of local government reorganisation which gave birth to Avon. 'North Somerset' was a geographical convenience – we did include news from Slimbridge, though that was one of the few localities north of Bristol.

WE: *So how did the BOC come about?*

RJP: The *North Somerset BN* was really a stopgap. The December 1966 issue is prefaced by this 'Important Notice':

This is the last month that North Somerset Bird News can be issued free of charge. Since it was introduced in April, 1966 the circulation has doubled. There is an ever increasing demand for copies but under the present system the cost prohibits further expansion. Not only have there been new contributors each month, but our "regulars" are sending in more and more material for publication; a comparison of the size of the April issue with those of recent months illustrates this point very clearly.

As from the January 1967 issue therefore, the Bulletin will be published by the newly formed BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB. It will be produced as a service to members of the Club and the cost of production and postage will be included in the annual subscription. We should be pleased to send you details of membership.

We greatly value your support and should like to sincerely thank all those who have contributed in the past months; your continued support, both as a contributor and as a subscriber will help to make this bulletin even more comprehensive and exciting in the future.
M.K., R.J.P., R.F.T. and Caryl White.

Editorial address: Michael Kendall, "Tadorna", 34 South Meadows, WRINGTON, Nr. Bristol, Somerset.

The initial meeting took place on 13th December 1966 at Rosemary Lovell's house near Blagdon, and the Club attracted 80 members within months and 150 by February of its second year. *Bristol Ornithology* No 1 (April 1968) has a list of these members. There was a nucleus of members from the BBC Natural History Unit, and there were other people working at the university who made important contributions in the early years. There was also a number of amateurs who were from very varied backgrounds but who were serious and reputable ornithologists.

WE: *Who were the early officers of the Club?*

RJP: In the first Club Activities (for 1967 in *Bristol Ornithology* 1, 1968) it is recorded under Membership "From the original 17 members who founded the Club in December 1966..." This surprised me as I thought it was only 13. Only the first Committee, of 12, are highlighted in the first List of Members.

Prior to this and soon after the Club was formed I wrote to a couple of national and local bodies to inform them of our 'birth'. Amazingly, I still have a copy of the letter!

Robin J. Prytherch,
38 Ravenswood Road,
Redland,
Bristol, 6.

6 February 1967

Dear Mr. Wilson,

It is my pleasant duty to write with some information about the recently formed Bristol Ornithological Club.

Essentially the Club offers a supplementary service to the keener Bristol-based bird watchers. The increasing membership is supported by the most active amateurs and professionals in the area.

We have a winter programme of 'informal' meetings where members are able to meet to discuss and exchange ideas. Field meetings are 'working' meetings for surveys, migration watches, etc. Co-operative field-work includes surveys on grebes and buntings, also Dunnock mortality. All national survey work is fully supported.

A monthly bulletin is circulated to members. It will contain full details of the previous months bird news, club news, announcements and items of special interest. Secretaries of other local societies, British Birds and also Nick Dymond/Chris Mead and yourself of the B.T.O. receive a copy, so that the news is quickly disseminated.

In it are listed the members and officers of the Club as at February 1967. They were - Ray Poulting (Chairman), Keith Fox (Sec.), Mrs Pam Thearle (Ass. Sec.), Mike Allen (Treasurer), Robin Prytherch (PRO [!]), Mike Kendall (Bulletin ED.), Ken Smith, Roy Thearle, Ken Simmons, Rosemary Lovell, Don Ladhams and David Shepherd.

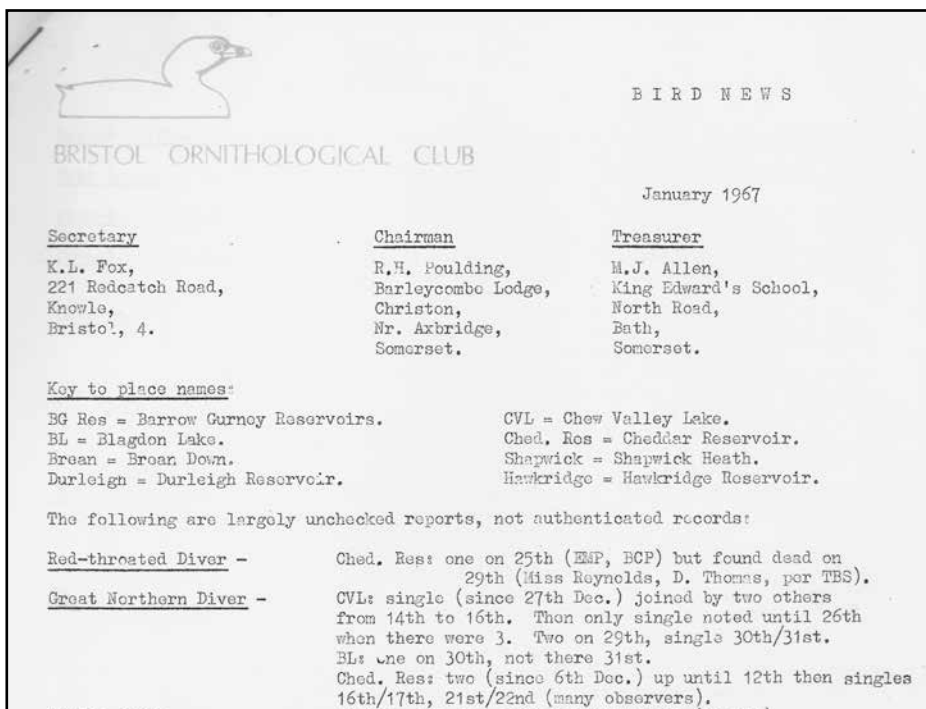
But fairly soon after this things changed as by the end of the first year Mike Allen was off (he'd moved to Cambridge) as was David Shepherd (who had also moved away). In their places were Glen Baggott and Derek Lucas.

WE: Bird News (BN) grew out of the North Somerset BN, as you've explained. BN has really changed very little in format.

RJP: Yes, though the Club News section has vastly expanded. It has appeared every month since and there are very few Clubs that have managed to do anything comparable. BOC should be really proud of this achievement. And it's of considerable value as a resource (the Central Library has a complete set of BNs and also *Bristol Ornithology*).

For the first couple of years we sold folders for storing the bulletin – the one for 1968 has a Godwit design that I did (right). It cost 2/-.

The logo of the Pied-billed Grebe is already there on BN1 (see below) – I'm amazed that I had that done so early.



Part of the first page of the inaugural issue of Bird News, in January 1967

WE: Tell me about the Pied-billed Grebe then... How did we come to have that as our logo?

I had found one in December 1963, at Blagdon. It was new to Great Britain and Ireland. This initial discovery was followed by a string of records of probably this same individual and others in this area through 1964, 65 and 66.

When we met to discuss a logo we considered a number of possible candidates – Black-tailed Godwit, Great Crested Grebe – but we soon realised that all the good ones had already been picked, and the PBG was an obvious candidate because of its local connections. Additionally it is a distinctive bird whose image translates easily into black and white.

[Robin's record was published in *British Birds*, vol 58, no 8 – August 1965 (see opposite page). Readers may be struck by the time which elapsed between first observation and the identification being firmed up. Things were different then. The report also includes a drawing by RJP which takes a form familiar to all BOC members – though in this image the bird is facing left....]

PIED-BILLED GREBE IN SOMERSET

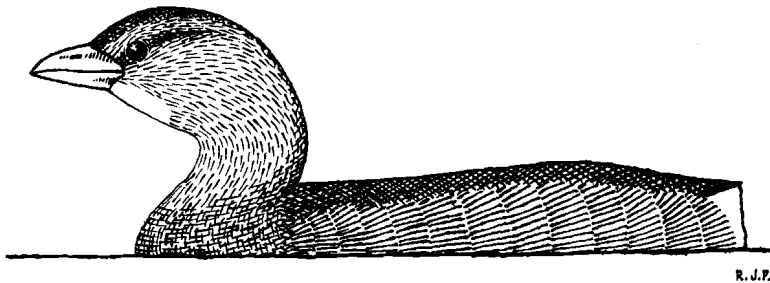


FIG. 1. First-winter Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*, Blagdon Lake, Somerset, 22nd December 1963 (drawn by Robin J. Prytherch)

The bill was short and thick, the depth at the base appearing to be more than half the length of the culmen, which was decurved at the tip; it was dusky grey with a very slight dull yellow-greenish tinge. The eyes were dark reddish-brown.

CONCLUSION

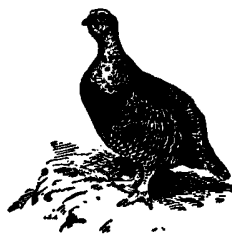
H.A.T. and I left the bird without knowing what we had been looking at. A fortnight later I was still so puzzled by it that I decided to investigate further. After reference to *The Handbook* I felt sure that it was not a British grebe. I therefore looked at books referring to other parts of the world and, after only a quick glance through the *Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* by James Bond (1947) and *The Birds of Trinidad and Tobago* by G. A. C. Herklots (1961), I realised, with much surprise, that it was an American Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*.

Extract from Robin's article in *British Birds*, August 1965, reproduced with permission

British Birds

Vol. 58 No. 8

AUGUST 1965



Pied-billed Grebe in Somerset: a bird new to Great Britain and Ireland

By Robin J. Prytherch

AT BLAGDON LAKE, Somerset, during the afternoon of 22nd December 1963, H. A. Thornhill drew my attention to a small grebe on a patch of open water at the edge of the otherwise almost completely frozen lake. It was swimming quickly among Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Wigeon *A. penelope*, Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula* and Coots *Fulica atra*. It did not seem to fit any of the European grebes described and illustrated in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* by Roger Peterson, Guy Mountfort and P. A. D. Hollom (1954) and after three-quarters of an hour I had still not identified it.

COMPARISON WITH EUROPEAN GREBES

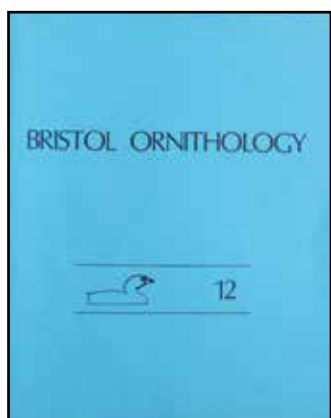
Size. Comparing the grebe with the Coots and ducks, I estimated it to be only slightly larger than a Little Grebe *Podiceps ruficollis* and so there was no question of its being either a Great Crested Grebe *P. cristatus* or a Red-necked Grebe *P. griseigena*.

Shape and stance. When I first saw it, I immediately thought of a Black-necked Grebe *P. nigricollis* or a Slavonian Grebe *P. auritus* because of the way it held its head high on its long (but not thin) neck with its body low in the water. However, when it also held its head low, this and the puffy effect of the flank feathers suggested a Little Grebe, though it did not really look like one. It always held its body low in the water while I was watching it.

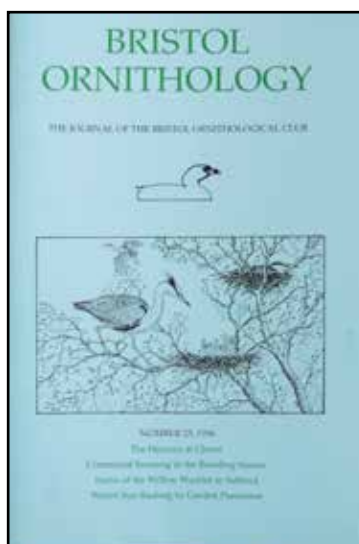
General coloration. It was not 'black-and-white': no part of the plumage was black or even blackish, and the only white visible was a very small area on the chin. This lack of contrast seemed to rule out Black-necked and Slavonian, and the general pattern of the head also appeared to exclude these species and Little Grebe. Its head was

WE: *Can you tell me about Bristol Ornithology?*

The journal of our Club was thought to be an essential part of our activities by the founding members. There was clearly a need to get interesting behavioural observations into print, as well as longer studies of species and places. This was undoubtedly due to the more scientific outlook of many members who were prepared to write up their original observations as notes or longer papers/articles. In the main, only Club members could submit work but the geographical area was not restricted, although most reflected observations carried out in our immediate reporting area.



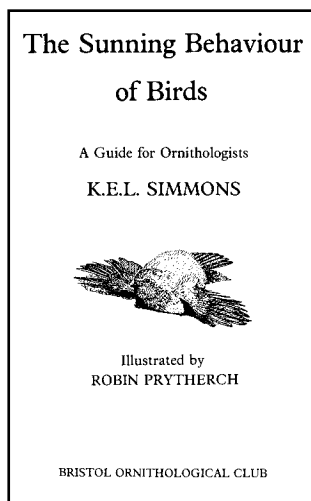
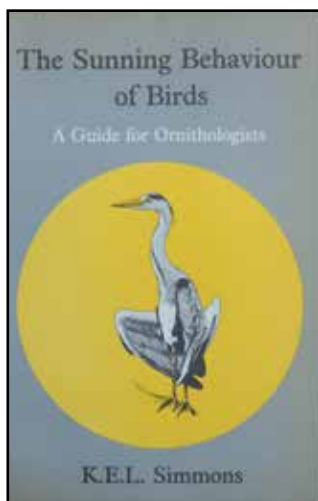
Bristol Ornithology, early (above) and more recent (right) designs



WE: *Give me an idea of what has been included in it?*

The important point was that the journal should reflect the widest interests of the members. Contributors at the start included K.E.L. (Ken) Simmons (a BWP editor no less and specialist on grebes), K.D. (Ken) Smith (African birds in particular) and David Shepherd (Sedge Warblers at Chew Valley Lake) but they were joined by at least 25 other contributors in the first five issues. The short notes section was well supported, the star author being Bernard King who contributed 30 of these, as well as a paper, in the first twelve issues! And so it went on – the enthusiasm was unbounded, and it was published once a year. Over the years approximately 60 members have submitted work to the journal. In 1986 we were delighted to publish a special issue, in book form, *The Sunning Behaviour of Birds* by Ken Simmons. It was well reviewed both here and abroad.





Cover and frontispiece of The Sunning Behaviour of Birds, 1986

By about the 20th issue the pace of publication slowed down, to about bi-annual. This was partly due to a change in emphasis in our membership. Sadly, fewer people wanted to write up their notes despite repeated offers of help from the editors. No short notes were submitted after issue 21 in 1992. The well of papers has now almost dried up but the editors are hopeful for more issues to appear. *Bristol Ornithology* has been cited widely in international ornithological literature and this reflects well on our Club.

BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY	
THE JOURNAL OF THE BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB	
Vol. 1 No. 1 APRIL 1968	
CONTENTS	
Preface	K. D. Smith
A Review of 1967	M. Kinnell
Weather in the South and West, 1967	K. L. Fox
Club Activities, 1967	R. J. Prytherch
"Small Preenters" Survey, 1967	D. E. Ladham and R. H. Poulding
The Distribution and Biology of Hantings in the Bristol Area	K. E. L. Simmons
Some Observations on Families of Great Crested Grebes	D. Shepherd
Some Studies of Sedge Warblers at Chew Valley Lake	J. D. Cross-Costard
The Influence of Weather and Season on the Feeding Ecology of the Redshank	R. H. Poulding
Reverend King, Honorary Life Member	Rosemary Lacey
Explanatory Notes on Income and Expenditure	K. D. Smith
List of Members	
Bristol Crossword No. 1	
Constitution and Rules	

Contents page of Bristol Ornithology, No 1, April 1968, including an article on grebes by Ken Simmons (highlighted)

I think special mention should be made of those who have edited and designed it – Andy Davis, Jane Cumming, Ken Hall, Kim Howard, Don Ladham, Mike Lord, Chris Newman, Ray Poulding, Brian Rabbitts, Lyndon Roberts and Malcolm Sainsbury. I may have had a small contributing hand too, of course!

WE: Thank you very much, Robin, for sharing such a wealth of experience.

From the early issues of *Bird News* and *Bristol Ornithology*:

(Notes compiled by William Earp)

Bird News 1 (January 1967) records 4,100 Whitefronts at Slimbridge. A roost of 50+ Collared Doves – then a recent arrival - at Shirehampton. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at CVL and Ashton Hill Plantation. 20 Tree Sparrows were seen at CVL on 13th.

Contributors:-

A.F. Airey
L.P. Alder
K.J. Allen
R. Angles
G. Baggott
D.K. Balance
G. Beakes
J.T.P. Bennett
G.M. Blackman
T. Bomford
R. Brock
Chew Valley Ringing Station
T.R. Cleeves
R.M. Curber
P. Curry
A.H. Davis
K.L. Fox
P.L. Garvey
T. Gibson
K.J. Hall
Mrs. H. Highway

Mrs. R. Holt
N.G. Holt
E.G. Holt
T.R. Joy
M. Kendall
B. King
D.E. Ladhams
H.R.H. Lance
A.D. Lucas
J.A. McGeech
S.J. Moon
H.W. Neal
R.D. Oades
M.A. Ogilvie
Mrs. B.C. Palmer
Miss E.M. Palmer
D.E. Poole
R.H. Poulding
R. Price
R.J. Prytherch
E. Rabbitts

P. Roscoe
R.H. Robinson
R.J. Senior
D. Shepherd
T.B. Silcocks
K.E.L. Simmons
B.E. Slade
Dr. C.E.D. Smith
K.D. Smith
Dr. J.H. Sparks
W.J. Stone
M. Tibbles
R.F. Thearle
Mrs. P. Thearle
K.E. Vinicombe
D. Warden
Wildfowl Trust
Miss A. Willis
K.B. Young

All February Records, please, to M. Kendall, Natural History Unit, B.B.C., Bristol, 8, by (if possible) Saturday 4th March for inclusion in the March issue. Many thanks.

Contributors to the first issue of Bird News. Those highlighted are still members of the Club. Others still active in various corners of the birding scene include Tim Cleeves, Andy Davis, Brian Slade, and Keith Vinicombe, and of course the Chew Valley Ringing Station.

In March 1967 Cirl Buntings were reported from Sea Mills, Shirehampton (a pair) and Christon. In April 1967 there were additional records from Sand Point, Compton Bishop, Loxton, Axbridge and Rodney Stoke.

In May 1967 Spotted Flycatcher records came from seventeen North Somerset localities.

In July 1967 (only the Club's seventh month of existence) 70 contributors sent in 2000 records, and the editors put in a plea to members to submit them in species order.

In 1968, to celebrate our second anniversary a photographic competition was held (with adjudicators Maurice Tibbles and Mike Kendall).

Bristol Ornithology 4 carries a paper entitled *Birds of Whitchurch and old Bristol Airport 1960 – 71* by K.E. Vinicombe.

Fifty birds of Avon

BOC members (and a few guest contributors) were invited to write a short piece in about a bird of their choice from the Avon list. Accounts arrived from many sources, ranging from founder members of the Club and other stalwarts of the local birding scene to very recent recruits to birding. Some came from folk who have now moved away from the area, an illustration of the loyalty that has been such a feature of this Club since its inception.

We asked for a celebration of favourite birds in a local context. Surprisingly, there was barely any duplication.

Writers were also encouraged to send in a suitable photograph of 'their' bird, and approximately half did so. The remaining gaps have been generously filled by a quartet of local photographers - Gary Thoburn, Pete Blanchard, Rob Miles and Alan Gilbert - who have been open in allowing access to their resources. Two final images are courtesy of Steve Howell (based in the USA) and Tomi Muukkonen (Finland). The input of them all has been essential to the resulting compilation.

It's been enjoyable and illuminating to work on this project. The result is a record of many special moments in the pursuit that absorbs us all.

WE



This Pied-billed Grebe spent some weeks at Ham Wall in March 2013. Since the initial sighting of one at Blagdon in 1963, there has been a number of records in Britain.

Photo: Gary Thoburn

1. Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

I was born in the Arctic tundra of Northern Russia. My first migration was a journey with my parents about 2,500 miles south-west. We left around the end of September, resting en route in Estonia, and arrived in the Low Countries. Of the 27,000 of us who made the journey, about 6,000 carried on into the UK. I and my parents were among a few hundred who reached and spent the winter at the WWT Slimbridge reserve. Around the end of February, we set out back to our breeding grounds in Russia, arriving around the middle of May. Having learnt the route with my parents, these are journeys I will make each year, hopefully with my partner and any cygnets that we have, wintering regularly at Slimbridge.

Apologies for this anthropomorphic description of some aspects of a particular Bewick's Swan's lifestyle but for those of us who experience as volunteers their time at Slimbridge I hope it's forgivable. They are truly iconic birds of the place, individually recognisable from the pattern of yellow on their beaks, but unfortunately threatened with an overall decrease of about 27% between 1995 and 2005. Sadly, monitoring has shown that shotgun pellets are embedded in about 23% of them.

Michael Newstead

Growing up on the Thames Estuary coast of Essex, Michael inevitably became aware of wildfowl, seabirds and waders and they have been a love of his ever since. He used to watch birds with his father, so on and off he has been birding with various degrees of intensity for over 60 years. In the late 1970s, he was a leader for the Young Ornithologists' Club, taking groups birding at locations around Bristol. For the last 10 years he's been a volunteer at WWT Slimbridge. Away from there New Passage/ Pilning Wetlands has become a favourite site, as has Portbury Wharf.

2. Brent Goose *Branta bernicla*



Pale-bellied Brent Goose

Photo: Gary Thoburn

A distant gurgling and yapping set my pulse racing, and then I saw them, a long straggling line of dark geese – it's early autumn and the Brent Geese are back on their wintering grounds. As winter approaches, this small, dark, attractive goose becomes a familiar sight on estuaries and saltmarshes.

Three sub-species are recognised: Dark-bellied Brent from northern Russia and Siberia wintering in southern and eastern England; the Pale-bellied Brent from Arctic Canada wintering mainly in Ireland with a small population from Svalbard wintering in Northumberland; and the Black Brant from eastern Siberia and western Canada.

Memories of these geese on Lough Foyle and Strangford Lough were evoked one winter's morning when I came upon a Pale-bellied Brent in the hills south of Bristol. A prolonged stand-off ensued and then, casually, it headed south. An unexpected encounter, but – with at least one record from Devon of an Irish-ringed bird – intriguing...

Ken Carruthers

Ken spent much of his early years on a farm – Corncrakes and Swallows are among his first memories. He has completed about 35 years of active birding. He enjoys waterfowl and seabirds, in particular geese and Gannets. He has two BBS squares, and counts high tide roosts on the Severn for the *A Forgotten Landscape* project. He spends two days a week on practical conservation work with AWT. He attends BOC trips as and when he can and has driven the minibus on many occasions over the years. He is the current Chairman of BOC.

3. Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

The Shelduck particularly stood out to me after a morning of birding or rather ‘ducking’ at Portbury Wharf in Portishead. I am relatively new to UK birding and was having trouble distinguishing between some of the ducks. However as soon as I saw the distinctive bright red bill, there was no chance I could misidentify this species.

I am also interested by the evolutionary mating selective forces that have driven such a conspicuous adornment – and it rather impresses me, as I suppose it is meant to impress a female Shelduck.

The Common Shelduck is a particularly adaptive species, classified as a native across 85 countries. It is currently of Least Concern, albeit threats include habitat loss due to tidal barrage schemes in Europe, predation from American Mink and hunting for commercial and recreational purposes in Iran. The rich chestnut patches on their plumage are stunning, and I will always remember my first sighting of a Shelduck – if only all ducks were that distinct.

Emma Ackerley

“I do not classify myself as a birder. I’m probably more of a primatologist than anything. However I recently became more interested in bird identification after living in South Africa. I am particularly interested in the diclofenac and aceclofenac poisoning of endangered vulture species in Southern Africa such as the African White-backed Vulture and the Cape Griffon. This is a huge issue. I joined BOC in 2016, and am trying to help engage the younger generation of birders and provide marketing ideas for BOC. I am an Associate Member of the Royal Society of Biology, student member of The Primate Society of GB, and The American Primatological Society.”

4. Garganey *Anas querquedula*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

I have always had a thing for ducks. The Garganey is our only summer-visiting duck, so no big flocks, as you get with other ducks in winter, which makes seeing one a real treat. But in spring, in all their beauty, wow! It always used to be Heron's Green Pool, Chew Valley lake where they would be seen first, locally. But one spring, while sat in Stratford Hide, I was told, "There are some Garganey on Herriott's, by the overflow." So at last, "Some might be close enough for photos," I thought. There were three birds, a drake, duck and a 1st summer drake, actually in the overflow part of Herriotts Pool...brilliant!

I will also always remember hearing my first drake Garganey, on a pool in a wet field near the Kalloni Salt Pans, on Lesbos, Greece. What a weird call! It sounds more like a strange type of frog than a bird.

But they were all eclipsed (no pun intended), by the four birds which were on Cannop Ponds, in the Forest of Dean, in April 2013. A single duck had attracted three drakes. While they were competing for her attentions, none of them paid much attention to the many birdwatchers and photographers who were admiring them. I actually had to take off my lens converter and stand back a bit at some points to get the camera to focus, as they were too close.

Gary Thoburn

"I have been birding since the age of 4, when my dad used to take me to the woods around Kingsweston House, near Lawrence Weston. We also used to bird around Hoar Gout, a brilliant area which has sadly mostly gone. I remember saving up for my first SLR camera when I was 13 or 14, and have been interested in nature photography ever since. The equipment I use has improved a lot since then, and I have tried hard to improve over the years too. My website is <http://garytsphotos.zenfolio.com>. I have been lucky enough to have travelled to quite a few brilliant places in the UK and around the world. I would have loved to have been lucky enough to have worked in birding or nature photography, but sadly I have never had the chance."

5. Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*



Photo: Nigel Milbourne

Birding at Blagdon Lake has been good to me. As well as monitoring the residents and regular migrants, I have been lucky enough to find several rare birds, none more so than a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in 2011. However, for me, the most exciting discovery was a 1st-winter drake Lesser Scaup in 2000. I'm potty about ducks! So, to chance upon this rare American visitor on my 'patch' was manna from heaven!

Changes witnessed over the last 25 years have been quite remarkable, and not all for the better, but visiting the lake as frequently as I do, the daily comings-and-goings both fascinate and delight me. I set off down the hill each time relishing the next encounter that will light up the day. Perhaps I'll uncover another hidden gem* that'll set my pulse racing, in the same way that Little Bluebill did at the turn of the Millennium.

Nigel Milbourne

"Interested since primary school, serious birder from 1992 to date. Have seen over 450 spp. in Britain. Have done WeBS counts monthly since 1997 and BBS since about 1998. Editor of ducks section in ABR. Voluntary Bird Warden at Blagdon Lake since late 1990s and fished there since early 1960s. Run Blagdon Lake Birds website with a daily blog of sightings. Regard myself as a 'patch worker' first and foremost, and devote most of my energies to the wildlife of Blagdon Lake, although also a former voluntary manager and warden at Ubley Warren for 20 years (1995-2015) with Somerset WT. One-time Committee member of Somerset Ornithological Society and developed their first website. Especially interested in invertebrates and bats (hold Natural England Licences), Member of Nature Photographic Society (elected in around 2005)."

* Editor's note: prophetic words – Nigel found a Blyth's Pipit at Blagdon Lake in December 2016.

6. Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

We normally associate the Pheasant with the countryside at the edges of woodland, although the Tuesday walkers did see one recently on the banks of the Avon during their Bristol Harbour walk. It was something of a surprise therefore to find one turning up in our suburban garden in Westbury-on-Trym, a long way from open country, in February 2010. It paid a visit to quite a few of our neighbours too. The Goldfinches on the bird feeder had probably scattered enough seed to provide it with something to eat.



Photo: Alison Harling

The poor Pheasant is probably now the most common of our game birds – possibly because of its rather attractive plumage or maybe because it is fairly easy to shoot. Either way, it is a handsome bird that brightened up our day.

Alison Harling

“It was on a tree-gazing walk about 10 years ago that a fellow walker suggested I join a BOC Tuesday walk. I took up the suggestion and I have been regularly ever since. Tuesday walks cater for all levels of knowledge and I found people willing to share sightings and information about birds, which has enabled me to develop my own skills. I have just returned from an amazing BOC trip to The Isles of Scilly. I saw about 15 species that were completely new to me and many more that I have not seen for quite a while.”

7. **Fregetta Storm-Petrel** *Fregetta tropica* / *melanoleuca*

Having birded for over 35 years in Britain, served on the *British Birds* Rarities Committee and travelled around the world birding, I rashly thought I was prepared for any bird I might see locally.



Photo: Steve Howell

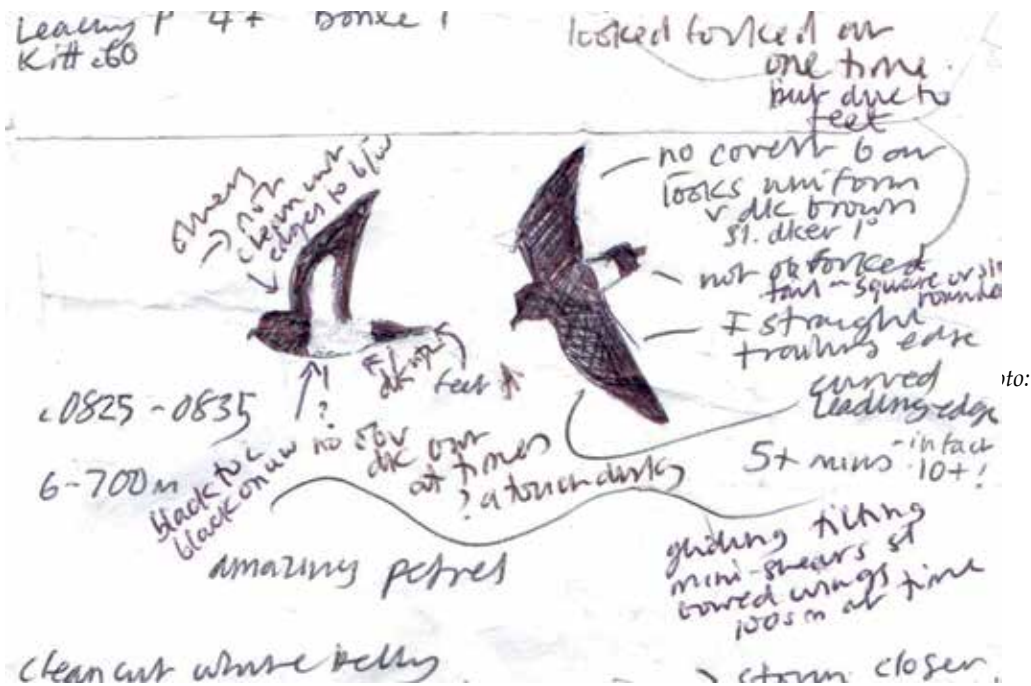
But on 25th November 2009 I saw a bird at my local patch that I was totally unprepared for and that ultimately eluded identification, perhaps partly because of that lack of preparedness. It was the third consecutive day of SW gales. I was watching from Severn Beach's 'Burger Bar ramp' with four Midlands birders when an amazing-looking storm petrel passed slowly by at only about 500m range!

Its flight was extraordinary, skimming along the wave contours like a skilled windsurfer. It had a big white belly and white patches on the underwing, which along with its distinctive flight and shape ruled out any European species. Frantic phone calls followed. Eventually reference books arrived and it became clear we had seen a truly remarkable bird: a *Fregetta* storm-petrel from the southern oceans, the first to be recorded in Europe. It reappeared further out an hour later allowing about 20 birders to see it, but sadly that was the last sighting.

The genus *Fregetta* currently comprises two species, Black-bellied *F. tropica* and White-bellied *F. melanoleuca*. Only Black-bellied has been recorded in the North Atlantic and seems the more likely, but we didn't see the notoriously easily-missed dark belly stripe.

So maybe it didn't have one, or maybe if we'd been better prepared we'd have scrutinised that area even more closely and nailed the identification! My back-of-an-envelope sketches scribbled at the time remind me of that amazing bird, but as a friend remarked – you never forget a *Fregetta*!

John Martin



Field sketches courtesy of John Martin

John remembers seeing a Waxwing in his garden in the 1970 invasion. Birding obsessively started with some teenage school friends and has continued to this day with lots of twitching starting at Cardiff University from 1979. He has got more relaxed since passing 500 species for Britain but he's always preferred finding his own birds. He joined BOC in 1993. "I am way too obsessive with my New Passage patch (the problem started with the habitat creation that actually made it rather good!). I co-authored *Moths of the Bristol Region*, *Dragonflies and Damselflies of the Bristol Region* and *The England Vascular Plant Red List*. I serve as Avon Bird Recorder."

8. Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

One afternoon in January 1995 I walked along the Kingston Seymour sea wall to the Yeo estuary. Visibility was poor. The estuary, the mud, the scenery and even the sky were all the same colour. Even the light was dirty. Suddenly there rose from the mud of the River Yeo, brilliant white and elegant against its dismal surroundings, a small white heron. It was my first Little Egret and it lifted my spirits.

It still amazes me that a bird that was once so rare is now hardly unusual at all. The one thing for which I am still waiting, though, is that I have never seen one within the Bristol city boundary. I have never seen one on the River Avon. Even the many I have seen round Severn Beach so far have always been in South Gloucestershire.

Dru Brooke-Taylor

"I caught my interest in birds off my grandfather at the age of 9 or 10. I have been a birder for just short of 60 years but there's quite a big gap in the middle. I moved to Bristol in 1986 and got interested again through happening on the Peregrine Watch. Since I retired, I note records for a regular walk from Hotwells to the bottom of Rownham Hill and log them on Birdtrack. I'm more interested in what is slightly unusual, a bird in an odd place, rural birds turning up in urban locations or a novel bit of behaviour, than real rarities."

9. Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*



Photo: Rob Miles

To me the most welcome harbinger of Spring isn't the first Snowdrop or Brimstone, it's the whickering call of a Dabchick deep in the reeds. It's a call that's been with me all my life, but I didn't know it was from my favourite bird until my later years. I've always loved this smart little bird.

Moving to Bradley Stoke in 1998 I soon found the delightful lake that is now part of the Three Brooks NR. Finding Little Grebes in residence here was a joy: at last I'd managed to match the call to the bird. A pair regularly rears chicks here, oblivious to the heavy human presence, and a careful vigil usually yields great views of the adults diving and bobbing back to the surface with a silver sliver of stickleback or minnow to feed their begging offspring.

I now live in Thornbury but return to my favourite lake for these wonderful birds. This spring I've already heard my first Little Grebes, so all's right with the world again.

Rob Miles

"I fell in love with wild birds in 1956, at the age of 4, when the tin tray on which I was sledging crashed me into a snow-filled ditch and I found myself staring at a beautiful but quite dead Yellowhammer. Bird books followed and the PG tips card set "Bird Portraits" kept my enthusiasm going." Rob joined BOC in 2005, having moved from Bath to Bristol. He enjoys the indoor meetings and has been on BOC trips to Cornwall and Spain. He likes seeing common birds, and since retiring, exotic ones on holidays, recently to Australia and Costa Rica. He loves capturing birds in photographs and these are shared on Flickr.

10. Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*



Photo: Robin Prytherch

They crept up on me. I had no idea then (back in the 1970s) that they would come to dominate my life. A simple survey of breeding Buzzards developed into a detailed study and I learnt much more about them: their territories (where adults live throughout the year), where they build their nests and how many young they fledge each year.

I got to know many of the birds as individuals; they have highly variable plumage patterns. This feature also helped me to understand their complex social behaviour, which fascinates me.

In my study area in North Somerset the population was growing, slowly at first then more rapidly with up to eight new pairs being added each year. From 13 pairs in 1982 the population had reached 109 pairs by 2015! There is no persecution in my 75 sq.km study area.

A Haiku

Broad wings, circling flight,
Keen eyes lead it down to prey.
A buzzard eats well.

Robin Prytherch

Robin is a founder member of BOC. He is a former Chairman and long-serving Committee member. He is an editor of *Bristol Ornithology* and is also on the Editorial Board of *British Birds*. He has been a bird ringer at Chew Valley Ringing Station for over 50 years and pursued Buzzard studies for nearly as long. He is involved in many surveys including wildfowl counts, BTO surveys including the Heronry Census (45 years at Cleeve and over 20 at Denny Island, CVL), the BBS and Constant Effort Site (CES ringing). He has written notes and papers on many subjects and also illustrated books and papers, mostly as pen and ink drawings. Robin is one of two **Life Members** of the Club.

11. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*



Photo: Rob Miles

I lived for many years on the shores of the Pacific in Western Canada, where our 'garden' birds often included large raptors. Shortly after moving to Bristol I was birding at Blagdon Lake with the Tuesday Group. On the lawn in front of the Lodge everyone was scanning the lake for ducks and gulls. But I'd been having problems identifying passerines, so I was looking the other way, at the bushes and trees.

There I came across an Osprey sitting on top of a tree just behind the Lodge. We communed quietly about faraway places for a while. Then he flapped off across the lake.

When he was halfway across, someone shouted, "Is that an Osprey?"

I was stupid enough to reply, "Yes. He's been sitting here watching us since we arrived.....!"

The Tuesday Group did allow me to continue birding with them. But only on the condition that I 'called' every bird I saw, regardless of how 'common' I thought it was.

Sheila Ablitt

First interested in birds at university in early sixties. Moved to Canada, lived there for forty years, and birded throughout North and Central America. Sheila joined BOC in 2007 when she returned to the UK. She has been on many holidays and birding days with the Club. Since 2010 Sheila has surveyed squares for Bird Atlas and Breeding Bird Survey. She also enjoys drawing and painting birds.

12. Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*



Here today, gone tomorrow, now you see them, now you don't – the Golden Plover is for me the quintessential migrant, arriving on the wind, leaving in the night, rarely predictable but always so heart-lifting to see. Any time between September and April you may find them north of Bath along the Cotswold edge – a golden shimmer on a ploughed field at Lansdown race-course or by the motorway at Tormarton, or perhaps a wheeling flock, tight-packed and pointy-winged, over Charmydown or the Fosse Way.



Photos: Gary Thoburn

I love the way they twinkle like snowflakes in the sunshine as they twist and turn in flight showing the white undersides of their wings. Some of them usually over-winter in the high, bare fields around Marshfield but only checking the number regularly will help you guess whether this is the same group you saw yesterday, or if some have moved on or more are passing through.

My boss reckons it's the best excuse he ever heard for being late for work: "I had to stop and count a plover flock".

Jane Cumming

"I treasure a glowing school report on my enthusiasm for Nature Study when I was six, and was on my university bird club's committee by the age of 18. I first joined the BOC in 1973 when my family moved to Bath but I lived in Hastings and then the USA for 14 years. Back in the area since 1992, I've mostly been on the BOC Committee since then. I'm an active BTO member who loves surveying and counting things (especially waders), but if you scratch a bit deeper there's still a twitcher underneath. I do a bit of conservation work – heavy gardening, mostly - and I enjoy sharing my enthusiasm through leading trips."

13. Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

As a child I drooled over the picture of a Lapwing in *The Observer's Book of Birds* and dreamed of seeing one. Could such a strange and perfect bird exist?

Years later, my first ever sighting was thrilling – a flock on farmland near my childhood home in Brentry. I was alone, my encounter undiluted by someone pointing them out to me. I loved their sad expressions and unruly wind-blown crests, the way they potted and stooped as they fed, their bronze-green sheen. It was plover love!

For me, Lapwings are emblems of wild places and wild weathers, at once mysterious and endearing. I always listen for their nervous yelps and joyous skirls, I watch them tumble and my heart leaps. All power to the Peewit!

Des Bowring

Des has been a member since 1976 after attending evening classes on bird-watching taught by the legendary Stan Crick and says he's never looked back. Although he regularly visits most of the birding hotspots in Avon, it is in his urban patch of Montpelier that he spends most of his time, posting his sightings on his blog Wild Monty. <http://wildmonty.blogspot.co.uk/>



Photo: Des Bowring

14. Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*



Photo: Alan Gilbert

My first sighting of a Turnstone was in the Galapagos, but I subsequently realised that I didn't have to travel halfway around the world to see them but just 6 miles from my home to New Passage. Sandwiched between the Severn bridges, the rocky seaweed clad shoreline is an ideal habitat for these charming waders as they scamper around looking for food either side of high tide.

However, their dark brown and black feathers provide an excellent camouflage in the seaweed although their vivid orange legs do help locate them. Identification can often be rewarded by the appearance of another small noisy flock with their pied patterned wings landing to join in the scavenging and turning over the odd stone.

In summer they migrate to Scandinavia, where they develop an orange-brown breeding plumage, before returning in August.

Alan Gilbert

Alan became interested in birds as a teenager but didn't become a serious birder until 4 years ago. He joined BOC in 2015. He tries to attend evening meetings but hasn't managed many trips yet. His main interest is photographing birds in the UK or overseas – most recently Botswana, Belize and Chile – and he will spend considerable time trying to photograph challenging subjects like Sand Martins flying over a river or House Martins entering nests on his house. He is also a member of RSPB, WWT and Thornbury U3A birding group.

15. Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*



Photo: Jason Williams

In common with many birders I measure the progress of the year by when birds return and leave. Over the past few years a key point in my calendar is the return of the Purple Sandpipers to Battery Point, Portishead. At some point in late October or early November, usually after a few weekends of looking, suddenly a few appear. Winter is coming.

These are hardy souls: throughout the winter they can be found scampering across the rocks, rooting around in the seaweed, eking out the worst of the British winter. I have taken countless photos and just now and again in the low winter sunlight you catch a flash of purple in the feathers.

I admire the hardiness of these High Arctic breeders and never tire of seeing them. Then one day, usually in late April or early May, they are gone and the year moves on.

Jason Williams

Jason got interested in birds when young, lapsed in his teenage years as other interests took over (mostly involving pubs!), before taking birding up again more seriously in his twenties. He is now an active birder in the Portishead and Clevedon area with a keen interest in photography and travel. He has been lucky enough to visit many Western Palearctic hot spots. He can lay claim to finding a national first with a Cattle Egret in Latvia, causing a major twitch (four or five birders!). He has been a Committee member for nearly six years, and manages the electronic version of *Bird News* which has grown from strength to strength.

16. Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

Finding and identifying a bird for oneself is particularly gratifying, especially if it is an unusual one. With barely two dozen Temminck's Stints ever recorded in Avon, and most UK sightings being in spring, it wasn't the first bird on my mind when on 18th October 1984 from Herriott's Bridge I spotted a tiny plain-looking wader, far away out on the mud.

With the limitations of optics in those days, it took some time to be sure that the legs really were pale, the key diagnostic feature. Although I found out later that someone else had seen it the day before, communications then not being what they are today, this detracted not a whit from my feeling of satisfaction!

Fast forward to 2015, and what do I find at Blagdon Lake but another one, even more elusive than the first, requiring two days of struggle and the assistance of many local birders to clinch the identification. Remarkably, when I checked my notes, it turned out to be 31 years to the day since that first sighting at Chew.

Ken Hall

Ken has been a member of the BOC from the day it was founded, was a Committee Member from 1975 to 1996, and Chairman for three years in the late 70s. He was lead author of the Helm 'Where to Watch' guide to Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, which involved exploring every last corner of our area. He acts as the UK contact for the **Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO)**, the French equivalent of the RSPB, and has a website (www.kjhall.org.uk/lponews.htm) to help publicise their work.

17. Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

On a dull November morning I was walking near the mouth of the Yeo when I heard a quiet but clear and slightly sharp ‘vit, vit, vit’ call. A smallish wader disappeared around the next bend. My immediate reaction was: “...There’s another that’s got away!”

But as I rounded the bend I saw the bird swimming on the river some five metres away. It took off again and landed several times not moving very far. It swam quite fast, then stopped, bobbing its head back and forth, and pecked at the surface of the water attempting to feed. It was an adult Grey Phalarope, unusual for Avon; most sightings here are of juveniles.

An even more memorable encounter was from a fishing boat north-west of Bishop Rock (Scilly Isles), on an early evening in mid-August some years ago. Ahead was a flock on the water which from a distance looked like ducks, possibly Eiders. As we got closer we realised that they were quite small: they were Grey Phalaropes, about 55, several still showing some breeding plumage, feeding on invertebrates on large patches of floating plant matter. It was special to see these remarkable birds in their ‘natural’ non-breeding habitat.

Harvey Rose

Harvey joined both BNS and BOC in the 1970s on return from the United States. He was the Bird Recorder for Avon from 1986 to 2007, and has edited the *Avon Bird Report* since 2003. He has been the local organiser for the English coast of the Severn Estuary WeBS counts for the last thirty years, and is the author of a study of the Avon waders over the past half century which appeared in two recent editions of the *Avon Bird Report*.



18. Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*

For many people the sight of the first Swallow heralds the arrival of spring. But I hope that the forecasters will announce prolonged East or North East cool breeze. This seems to happen about three out of five years.

By late April I will be sitting below the sea defences at Severn Beach scanning from Portishead to Goldcliff for the appearance of any flocks of waders, terns or skuas breaking over the horizon, migrating up the Bristol Channel to their northern breeding grounds.

Some days produce hundreds of birds, others very few, but it is the hope of witnessing this wonderful spectacle of nature that compensates for the numb backside sitting on the concrete steps.

My target bird never fails to impress even when first identified as a dot in the distance. It, or sometimes a small flock, rises up and swoops down with powerful wing beats over the distant Denny Island, progressing closer, in just a matter of minutes to arrive directly out towards the Yellow and Red navigation markers.

If you are lucky to be side-on you will be rewarded with the glory of the beast that is the full-‘spooned’ Pomarine Skua. They are often undecided whether to go inland over the sea wall, fly up and over the 2nd Severn Crossing or land on the Severn.

They are stunning birds, much bulkier, thicker-winged and more powerful than the dainty Arctic Skua, a bit like comparing a bricklayer to a ballet dancer.



Photo: Paul Bowerman

The 'spoons' are the icing on the cake and I personally prefer the more common pale morph to the dark variant.

In some years flocks of 20-30 have lingered for hours allowing many people to experience them.

For me, the sight of these stunning birds makes my spring.

Paul Bowerman

"I joined BOC in the early 1970s and was inspired by the field trips organized by the club to exotic places such as Chew Valley Lake, Brean Down and Portland. I first visited Severnside in 1973 by foot and a 6 mile walk from home and 10 years later became hooked following the great seabird storm of September 1983. I eventually moved to live at Severn Beach in 1999 and am fortunate to see many of the birds from my home. Despite being an obsessive local patch birder I have enjoyed the pursuit of 'twitching' British rarities which has taken me to some wonderful parts of the country and at present I am a few birds short of the mythical 500 species seen.

"Since 2002 I have produced almost daily the **Severnsidebirds** website, to promote the importance of the area for birds and provide information for visiting birders. The site has recently passed its 2 Millionth page view.

"Since 2005 I have been involved with the development of the Pilning Wetlands which have finally been created and are living up to expectations. I took early retirement in 2015 and I now tell my understanding wife that I am a full-time birdwatcher. The thing I enjoy even after 45 years of bird-watching is the ability to be surprised and still learn about birds and their behaviour, something that has led me to undergo training as a bird ringer."

19. Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

The first breeding in Bristol was in the early 1970s. Since then numbers have risen dramatically throughout Avon to something over 3,000 pairs and increasing. It is now clear that we have two populations nationally: those in the wild (declining) and those in town (thriving). Quite apart from population trends, the two differ significantly in other ways. For instance (briefly), adult, urban Lessers dispense with migration at about twice the rate of their rural counterparts. It is, therefore, highly likely that the wintering Lessers you see are town breeders. Further, as in the illustration, 3rd summer birds breed commonly in town where, in the wild, this is not at all common. Both strategies increase the chances of breeding success. Curious, then, that except for the Bristol Scheme, there is next to no other research into urban gulls anywhere in Europe.

Peter Rock



LBB White6 B+M (a male). Ringed as a nestling in Bath 24/6/11. Laayoune (Western Sahara) 5-9/2/12, Maguide (Landes) 13/12/14, Les Sables d'Olonne (Vendée) 30/11/15. Started breeding Bath 2014.

Photo: Peter Rock

"I've been colour-ring urban gulls since 1980, so I've found out a few things about them in this country and abroad. In 53 expeditions specifically to find my birds in France, Spain, Portugal and Morocco I've controlled - checked for rings - more than 1.6 million birds and considerably more than that in UK. I have an urban gull dataset that is unique in the World which continues to contribute to whatever I write and say on telly and radio.

"Needless to say, I'm very keen for all BOC members to turn their telescopes on any large gulls they see - there are lots of colour-rings out there for the patient flock-sifter to find and read!

"My rings are the easiest to read in the whole of Europe. Several birds were fitted with GPS tags in Bristol in 2016. And they also carry my red rings. If you find one, please take a photo (or, better, a video) in order to help discover what they really do with their time. Please let me know and I wish you great good luck."

20. Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* var.



Photo: Beryl Tully

I grew up in urban Middlesex, Pigeons were a source of fun and interest. Always scavenging the pavements, they were literally under your feet. Children small and large chased them. They roosted under the railway bridge we had to pass under to go to the park. We ran through, hands over heads, hoping to avoid being splattered with pigeon poo.

At home they came to our balcony. The sunlight brought out their various colours. They could look beautiful but often had deformed feet. I remember feeding them in Trafalgar Square. It seemed a joy for everyone until Ken Livingston put a stop to it.

These memories resurfaced with John's research in Bristol: the pigeons were ubiquitous. They were fed and befriended by some - old ladies and taxi drivers particularly - and loathed by others who saw only their mess.

There may be more attractive birds in lovelier habitats but as an urban-dwelling child the Feral Pigeon is top of my list.

Beryl Tully



Photo: Alan Gilbert

Beryl was married to much-loved member John Tully: "As a child my bird watching was very limited. I just watched birds when they appeared nearby. John's interest started at our first home in Hemel Hempstead old town: many varieties of new birds, never seen before, appeared in our garden. We bought binoculars and took them everywhere. I do say that I was quicker to spot birds so jokingly I have a claim to have added greatly to any list John had. Of course he rapidly moved on from tick lists to linking his pleasure in birding to his pleasure in mathematics with great effect."

21. Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*



Living in a village on the outskirts of the Abbot's Pool woodland, it is a privilege to have Tawny Owls as neighbours.

Tawnies are often heard calling at night, but are much less often seen. During the daytime, they find a roost site up against a tree trunk or among ivy and melt into the canopy. In the winter nights the classic hooting calls can be heard along with a 'keewik' call, carrying through the valley; it is a delightful soundscape to village life. Established pairs probably never leave their territories.

When 'branching', the fluffy youngsters can sometimes be found on the ground below the nest sites or out in trees.

There have been two occasions when owlets have delighted me – once driving up Weir Lane to Tyntesfield an owlet plopped, unhurt, from an overhead branch into the road in front of me and seemed unperturbed to be placed on the stone wall to clamber back up the tree.

Another time, a neighbour asked me to rescue a 'sick white bird' sitting in her tree. It turned out to be a resting owlet.

Our village wildlife group, ALWG, has worked with the rescue and rehabilitation charity, Secret World, to support the soft release of Tawnies back into the wild from suitable locations. In the hand, they are a surprisingly small bird with stunning plumage and eyes.

Karin Rhodes

"BOC member since 2010. I've had the privilege of being a Mum at home for the last twenty-two years, 'grubbing around' with two small boys outdoors, encouraging their fascination with the natural world. With one now enjoying his Natural Sciences course at Cambridge and entomology and the other, a birder, reading Zoology at Bristol, I now walk daily, watching wildlife with friends."



Photos: Steve Hale

22. Swift *Apus apus*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

Arriving back at my top-floor Redland flat after a day's work in Whiteladies Road one summer, I found I had an unexpected guest. I had left my sash window slightly open, and was confronted by a Swift clinging to the curtain. Having let itself in, it was obviously unable to find the exit. After giving it a quick admiring check, I launched it off into the skies once more.

The same thing happened a year or two later with the same result: they were obviously nesting in my roof space.

Only when you see them in the hand do you appreciate what amazingly long wings they possess. Having once found one 'grounded', I had to throw it into the air for it to be able to continue its life! To think that these 'devil birds' can stay airborne for up to two years from leaving the nest, that they feed, mate and sleep on the wing!

Wendy Dickson

Wendy joined the BOC in 1970 when working in BBC Natural History Unit which seemed to be the Club's nerve centre then. She was the Club Secretary from 1972 - 1978. She also trained to become a ringer at CVRS. Since those heady days she has worked in BBC Newcastle, spent 20 years living on Shetland and is now retired and living in Northumberland where she and a friend do several BTO surveys. But the BOC has always been her 'best' Club and she is proud to remain a member.

23. Hoopoe *Upupa epops*



Photo: Katie Horrocks

The Hoopoe has always been one of my favourite birds. To see one on my home patch was a very special moment. I went out for a stroll on a beautiful evening in Doynton on 22 April 2009. It was very quiet bird-wise. There was no sign of the often-reported Whitethroat, Yellowhammer or Little Owl.

Turning for home I saw in the distance a bird on top of a telegraph post. I raised my binoculars and was astonished to see the unmistakable profile of a Hoopoe. I moved slowly towards it shielded by the tall hedges of the lane. I got close enough to take a reasonable record photograph, but I didn't have my camera! Eventually the bird flew off to the north displaying its distinctive black and white wings and I floated off to the south to report my sighting.

Lacking a photograph, talented young photographer Katie Horrocks has kindly agreed to provide a picture of the bird she saw recently in the West Midlands. I like to think that this bird travelled through Avon to get there.

Margaret Gorely

Margaret has been interested in all wildlife since childhood but began to focus on birds on retirement. She joined the BOC 16 years ago and was a regular Tuesday walker for years. She also went on many memorable weekends away with the club and holidays far and near. She was on the Committee for 7 enjoyable years, helping the hard-working team with the smooth running of the Club. She enjoyed keeping an eye on her local patch in Doynton and also had a beautiful BBS survey square at Cold Ashton. Since moving into town she has discovered surprisingly fruitful urban patches on Brandon Hill, the Floating Harbour and her allotment.

24. Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Often when I'm waiting next to the River Frome in Eastville Park I'm asked, 'Have you seen the Kingfisher?' There's a blast of electric blue and a piercing call as it flies past at lightning speed. If you're prepared to wait and then watch when it's perched you'll be treated to the spectacle of it catching a fish.



Photo: Richard Scantlebury

A French legend has it that the Kingfisher was a grey bird when on Noah's Ark. When Noah got fed up with waiting for the Dove to return with news of the flood he sent out a Kingfisher. Escaping a storm, it was struck by lightning thus giving the Kingfisher its blue plumage. The heat of the sun scorched its breast feathers. When it descended the Ark had come to rest and the Kingfisher could not find it.

It now flies up and down rivers and streams, calling shrilly, still searching for Noah.

Richard Scantlebury

Richard recalls having lots of House Sparrows in the garden when he was a kid and a visit from a Green Woodpecker. After giving up rock-climbing and seeing an Osprey at Chew he joined BOC in the 1990s. Like lots of others he attended Don Cullen's evening classes for his 'training'. He has led walks in Eastville Park (his bird list is 90ish) and Stoke Park, both of which were the basis of a 'Patchwork Challenge' in 2015 and 2016. "Not owning a car means I concentrate on my patch although I occasionally travel to Scilly and to Greece (this year). I'm involved with Eastville Park, hoping to make it both more wildlife-friendly and attractive to other users, and I take more than a passing interest in butterflies and dragonflies. See my website: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/richscats/>"

25. Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

My' Great Spot came to the garden daily during the winter to feed on the nuts.

Very occasionally a female came too, then he appeared again when he was feeding his young, but after that – no visits.

I was thrilled to see him back early in November, but he's not regular yet: it's too mild and food is still plentiful elsewhere.

I am often alerted by the 'kik' call to his presence. How seldom must non-birders, with their ears clamped by headphones, be aware of this bird close to them!

Interested people do seem to notice this smart black and white bird with a crimson belly and a touch of red at the back of his head and mention it to me; if they knew that call how much more frequent their sightings would be.

Judy Copeland



Photo: Rob Miles

Judy joined the club in 1969 when she came to Bristol and became Membership Secretary and *ex officio* Committee member in 1972. Remarkably, she has held this post ever since and in 2011 was made a **Life Member** in recognition of her outstanding service. She has been doing the BTO's BBS survey on two squares for 20 years, as well as a survey for Avon BBS on her most local square (Easton-in Gordano/Failand) which adjoins the other two. She has been on many of the club's holidays and field trips over the years and led some of the Tuesday Walks.

26. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*



Photo: Tomi Muukonen

It was the evening of May 2nd 1989 and sunny and warm, perfect for a stroll in Leigh Woods. Being late in the day there wasn't much bird song, though I could hear drumming, and quite close too... but, 'Hang on! That's not a Great Spot!' After a few anxious minutes searching I located the tiny male high in a dead tree, just yards from my CBC patch.

The following day I discovered the nest hole it had been excavating and several visits later finally saw the female on the 16th.

Evidence of breeding came on 22nd when the male brought food to the nest and flew out with a faecal sac.

I never saw the young, probably because they fledged on a day I didn't visit, but for almost a month I had been thoroughly engrossed and entertained by this pair of lovely little birds.

Tony Scott

Tony has been a BOC member for 32 years, serving on the Committee for a period and involved with the first and many subsequent Peregrine Watches. He now undertakes regular BTO surveys and visits to the Severnside 'patch', and in addition makes annual self-guided trips to European birding hot-spots and to Scotland for birding, walking and sea-kayaking. He is an *Avon Bird Report* section editor.

27. Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

Peregrines were very rare when I was growing up in the south-east of England. It was only when I came to Bristol that I was introduced to them by the late John Tully who had been watching and studying Peregrines for many years. Every week we would visit The Horsefair in Broadmead to look for prey remains from the pair there.

Most exciting of all I went up in the lift to the 5th floor of the University of Bristol's Wills Memorial Building with John. We then took many steps up to the top of the tower with incredible views across the city.

From that moment I was hooked on studying what Peregrines eat, revealing that they hunt at night and colour-ringing Peregrine chicks at 3 weeks old to find out more about their movements.

A proud moment was ringing the Peregrines in the Avon Gorge for the first time in 2009.

Ed Drewitt

"I have been birding for almost 30 years. I joined BOC in October 1998. I was on the Committee for 15 years and Chair from Dec 2012 - Dec 2014. As a student the BOC was a lifeline to me: the opportunity to get out of the city and be taken to all sorts of places in the west was wonderful. In May 2001 I remember visiting Gwenffrwd-Dinas with the group in between revision for my exams. It was such a relief to see Bluebells, Pied Flycatchers and Dippers.

"Opportunities from the BOC have helped me do many of the bird-related things I am involved with today. I am a trainer bird ringer across North Bristol and deliver BTO training courses on identification and bird surveys. Since 2008 I have been a tour leader for Naturetrek and have travelled with groups from Spitsbergen to St Lucia and Trinidad to The Gambia. My paper on Peregrine diet was published in *British Birds* in 2008: *Diet and prey selection of urban-dwelling Peregrine Falcons in southern England*. My book *Urban Peregrines* was published in 2014."

28. Jay *Garrulus glandarius*



Photo: Alex Rhodes

Despite being flighty, Jay is a bird I see regularly, visiting the garden feeders and often caching peanuts. In my early birding days as a 13-year-old, I tried photographing one of these colourful members of the crow family. I lay out in the flowerbed under the shrubs, covered myself with scrim as camouflage and waited patiently for one to come down from the woodland. I captured this image.

My photography experimentation continued using a remote-release trigger on a Dunnock in the bird bath, the GoPro camera on a group of Long-tailed Tits feeding on a suet block and setting the Trailcam in the garden!

Alex Rhodes

As a two-year-old, Alex sat absorbed watching Goldfinches bathing – the start of his participation in Big Garden Birdwatch! BOC member since thirteen (2010). In 2011, he was given the BOC's Stanley Crick Award to encourage his birding. BTO 'C' permit holder, training under Robin Prytherch at CVRS. Writes for *Birdwatching* magazine; has given presentation about young birders at the BTO Swanwick conference. Volunteered for 2 seasons at Fair Isle, Falsterbo (autumn migration season) and worked at BTO HQ in Thetford. Gives natural history presentations to local groups, leads walks, helps at BioBlitz events and enjoys photography. Currently studying Zoology at Bristol University.

29. Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

I live on a street of 1920s terraced houses, densely urban on the road side with lanes and long gardens behind. About fifteen years ago Jackdaws started nesting on our roofs, which have many bird-friendly chimney-pot covers. Initially they were very shy of humans and avoided entering gardens – they might rest on a fence and look yearningly at scattered bread, but were usually too timid to swoop down. But gradually they became bolder until now they swagger round our gardens with insouciance.

From my loft room I follow their yearly breeding – the loving pairing, the early investigation of nest sites, the terrible conflict with crows now keeping a close watch on proceedings, the juveniles forming family groups round the chimneys.

I watch their exhilarating flights in stormy weather, and their soft '*chacks*' accompany our days; sometimes at dusk I see them stream off to roosting sites I know not of... graceful, characterful, blue-eyed birds.

Lois Pryce

Lois has always loved nature. She has been a birder for 12 years, joining BOC in 2005. With a friend she runs one Tuesday field meeting a year. In the last few years she has started going on the holidays. She regularly submits records to BOC and 'Avon Birds'. Her local patches are Filton, Severnside and the levels below Almondsbury. She has just acquired her first BBS square at Ingst. Last year and this year she has done Rookery surveys for Richard Bland. She loves to walk and be in nature, and to convey this enthusiasm! She is a member of the Yahoo e-group 'Bristol Wildlife'. Her blog is '**Lois' Art & Wildlife**' (<http://loispryce.blogspot.co.uk>)

30. Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*



Photo: Mike Lord

Ah, life's little ironies. After being involved in the BOC's Peregrine Watch from its beginning, Alix and I emigrated to the far south of Cornwall in 1993. And for the last 15 years, we have found ourselves guarding Peregrine food instead. It happened like this...

A pair of Choughs arrived on The Lizard (from Ireland) in 2001 and raised young annually for the next decade. From Day One a small band of local volunteers kept guard copying the exact same pattern as the BOC's Peregrine Watch, right down to the rota shifts. They – we – were well rewarded: 15 years on, Cornwall has a growing population of Choughs, after a breeding absence of 65 years.

And what wonderful birds they are, the pure essence of wildness. That hey-look-at-us call; that life-is-great, bounding flight; that glittering purple-black plumage against the blue sea and sky! And that fearlessness, albeit with a rashness that gives the resident Peregrines an occasional meal...

Today the bulk of the population is around the Land's End peninsula in a steady drift westwards from The Lizard. But with Choughs crossing the Bristol Channel into ex-Avon, hopefully we'll see more arrivals and another link with BOC territory. I still have a Peregrine pin-badge attached to my binoculars...

Mike Lord

"Joined the BOC, with wife Alix, around 1970; former club Secretary (1979 – 82) and Chairman (1983 -85). Involved in various BOC initiatives over the years, including setting up the Avon Ornithological Group and Avon Gorge Peregrine-watching. And it's all Robin Prytherch's and Judy Copeland's fault! They were on welcome duty at our very first BOC indoor meeting (Malcolm Ogilvie on Icelandic geese). Among the highlights of the last 40+ years: working our way through the malt whiskies of Islay on a club holiday there. The birds were good, too, I seem to remember..."

31. Raven *Corvus corax*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

The dexterity, the abandon, the joy, the elation, the vocalisation – seen and heard during their aerial breeding dance – all struck me when I first encountered Raven, four or five birds frolicking in the February wind along Nab Scar above Rydal Water in The Lakes.

Since then: when home, an almost daily call as they make their way to / from one of the nest sites on The Downs; and when out walking, I've an unconscious ear scanning for that unmistakable '*Chruog Chruog Chruog*.'

Glossily inky black, with a heavy beak and wedge-shaped tail. By repute, a bird of evil and ill omen; in fact, a fiercely protective parent, a rapacious feeder, gloriously successful on almost every continent in the world; but above all, a master of wind and weather.

Nick Hawkrigde

Nick has watched birds most of his life. His interest was re-awakened when showing his children what birds were all about – though they only remember him saying, 'I hate ducks'. Active birder since joining BOC in 1995. Active Tuesday Group walker and occasional leader. BTO surveyor: BBS, Winter Thrush, Woodcock, House Martin. Collates records for the Avon area to go forward to the *Avon Bird Report*. Keeps the BOC Website up to date and posts on the BOC Facebook and Twitter accounts. Current Committee member.

32. Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*



Photo: Paul Gregory

I count myself very fortunate to have a local patch such as Sand Point. I love arriving early on a bright October morning and walking carefully along the edge of the car park checking all the small birds in the sycamores and trees.

Just occasionally you pick up one which flashes white underparts. A Firecrest? A Yellow-browed Warbler? A Pallas's Warbler? There's jubilation when it's a Yellow-browed and there will be euphoria one day when it's a Pallas's but more often than not it's a stunning little gem of a Firecrest with a bright white supercilium bordered above and below with jet black lines, a flash of orange along the crown, bright green upperparts and - on some - beautiful bronze shoulder patches.

It is always a joy to watch one flitting around or sitting preening in a patch of late autumn sun. I've found nearly 50 in the last 22 years and every one is special.

Any day with a Firecrest is a good day.

Paul Gregory

Paul grew up in Coalpit Heath and became interested in birds through his brother, Brian, in 1978 aged 11, so has been birding nearly 40 years. Moved to Weston-super-Mare in 1988. BOC member since 1979 and given Stanley Crick award in 1984 for founding and co-leading The Ridings High School Bird Club with William Earp. Led YOC holidays. Often leads the Sand Point migration watch and BOC walks at Uphill and Sand Point. Avidly maintains Weston OS map list rather than county list.

33. Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

Throughout the year, four species of tit appear in steady procession at our feeders on the fringes of the Blaise Estate. On special occasions there has been a fifth, typically grabbing a peanut then off in a flash. The distinctive buff colouring and neat black cap make it a Marsh Tit, of course. A twanging '*pitchuu*', when uttered, gives its presence away.

When we first moved here, more than 25 years ago, it was a regular visitor to the garden and one which I often saw in Blaise Woods. Nowadays I can go for more than a year without recording one. Yet every so often, just when I gloomily think that it has finally disappeared, I catch that ringing call from the undergrowth and there it is, proof that my pessimism is premature.

The last time this happened was three months ago, on Boxing Day 2015*, a little Christmas cracker.

William Earp

First bird notebook dates from January 1961. BOC member since moving to Bristol in the late 70s, and current Committee member. Biggest 'dips': the Cheddar Wallcreeper, and a Black-browed Albatross on Scilly several years ago, a story still too painful to relate.

** Editor's note: since this was written there have been two further reassuring encounters, on 20th April and 6th May 2016.*

34. Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

A bleak early March day, grey skies, a cold north-easterly wind sweeping across the reservoir. A few early daffodils appearing, but the trees leafless. Then, defying the conditions – there, whisking low over the water – a Sand Martin, the first avian harbinger of spring. The spirits lift in anticipation of green leaves, cowslips, butterflies and vibrant activity in the Martins' colony.

They are early leavers and all too soon the young fledge and gather on the wires, numbers gradually diminishing until that final day when the last couple ease away south over the reservoir and disappear into the distance – a poignant moment as they now become the harbingers of the coming winter months.

Tennyson:

And fainter onward, like the wild birds that change
Their season in the night, and wail their way
From cloud to cloud, down the long wind the dream
Shrill'd; but in going mingled with dim cries
Far in the moonlit haze among the hills.

Terry Bond

Birder for 60+ years. Member of BOC for more than 45 years. Regularly attended, and occasionally led, BOC field trips when living in Bristol. Was a participant in the inaugural BOC overseas field trip (Majorca). Organiser and main leader of field trips for RSPB Bristol for many years. Local patch – the Barrow Gurney Reservoirs, where he has been carrying out weekly counts/surveys for c.45 years. Has watched birds in 50+ countries around the world, including all seven continents (one of the benefits of being an international banker!). Regular lecturer (with own slides) around the country, with venues as widespread as Manchester, Northumberland, Lincolnshire and South East England.

35. Swallow *Hirundo rustica*



Photo: Paul Bowyer

For many years I've had a fascination with bird migration and over time have come to depend on the arrival of common migrants as indicators for good migration conditions.

My favourite indicator, the Swallow, is particularly good because they move throughout the whole migration period both in spring and autumn.

Memorable migration moments have included counting 6,500 through in 20 minutes on 1st May 2012 following immediately behind a warm front that came up from France, to logging 7,000 over Weston on 29th September 2012 from my bedroom window.

The Swallow is not just a passage migrant: chattering away on wires at a farm or hawking low over fields or stretches of water they are a little contributory factor to that warm feeling you get when you think of summer.

Paul Bowyer

Paul started birding at age of 9 after picking up '*The Birds of Britain and Europe*' on a bookshelf in a National Trust gift shop. Since then he's been interested in all aspects of birding from rarity finding to twitching, eventually becoming a dedicated 'vismigger' on his local patch of Sand Point.

36. Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*



Photo: Richard Mielcarek

I find wintering Chiffchaffs both fascinating and frustrating in equal measure.

Fascinating in so many ways. Not just the wonder that such a small insect-eater can manage to survive our winters, but where do they come from? They are not local birds: there is always a gap after the breeders have left and the migrants have passed through before the wintering birds arrive. Linked to their source is the question as to which subspecies they are: some are clearly nominate *collybita*, others have been proven to be of the Siberian subspecies, *P. c. tristis* while yet others seem to be intermediate!

Frustrating in so many ways. They tend to winter in thick, damp scrub, are very active and keep low down, all factors that make detailed observation difficult. The birds also have the ability to 'colour morph'. Their plumage shades change, depending on the angle you are viewing from, so what looks pale grey in one sighting is dull brown in another.

All of the above adds up to quite an identification challenge, but it is probably the easiest way to find yourself a real Siberian vagrant, just what you need to keep your interest up on a cold, dull winter's day.

Richard Mielcarek

Richard has been an active birder since the 80s. His local patch is CVL where he's a warden. He is involved in producing the *Avon Bird Report*. His other passion is wild orchids. He is married with two children and two grand-daughters.

Editor's note: the individual in the photograph spent the winter of 2015/6 at Chew Stoke STW – to which subspecies does it belong?

37. Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

For more than 20 years Christine has been recording wintering Blackcaps in our Stoke Bishop garden for the BTO's Garden Bird Watch scheme (GBW). They start to arrive in November, feeding mainly on fat cylinders and to a lesser extent on sunflower hearts, and *Mahonia* flowers. They regularly chase off other birds, and only Robins and Greenfinches seem to stand up to their aggression.

There have been up to four birds on most days, but the accuracy of our recording was queried when, on one day in January 2007, we reported an amazing 10 Blackcaps. It was possible to count them precisely because there were 6 on the feeders, one on a *Mahonia* bush and 3 waiting their turn in the nearby *Japonica*.

In February we hear the first song, and in March they leave, returning presumably to central Europe for the summer. A few weeks later, in April, new birds arrive from the Mediterranean.

Roger and Christine White

Roger has been birdwatching since age 10, initially in Bedfordshire. He and Christine came to Bristol in 1974. Former BOC Chairman. Interested in birds of East Germany and has led trips there for BOC members. He has written two birdwatching guides to the region. Details are on his website: www.germanybirding.com.

38. Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*



In July 1964 I found my first Reed Warbler nest, guided to it by the food-begging calls of a young Cuckoo. This triggered an interest which has led to the finding, so far, of 4875 nests and to the ringing (since 2001) of 4066 Reed Warbler chicks.

The species is a satisfying one for a ringing study for several reasons. Because of its reliance on reed-beds for both breeding and migration, reasonable numbers are re-trapped. Good numbers of nests survive to fledging, unlike in many small open-cup nesting species. Not least, nests are not difficult to find and adults may return to the site where they were ringed, occasionally for up to 12 years. All this allows the accumulation of useful survival statistics. In one case, all 4 young from a nest were caught again at CVL the following year.

CVL-ringed birds have been re-trapped in France, Spain and Morocco on the way to their wintering area in West Africa, as well as at several sites in southern England.

David Warden



Photos: David Warden

"At about the age of 4 or 5 my mother showed me a Pied Wagtail feeding on the lawn. My notebooks date from 1946! While at school in the late 1940s, I was awarded a prize for Natural History. For no obvious reason I chose *Reed Warblers* by Brown and Davies which had just been published, about a bird I had never seen! The result has been years of healthy exercise and fascination. In about 1948 I joined the BTO (filling in an application form at the back of James Fisher's *Watching Birds*). Since 1950 I have contributed to the NRS, receiving the Tucker Medal in 2004 as a result. I joined the BOC from its beginning. My local patch is the Chew Valley, particularly the Lake area. I have had occasional Notes published in *British Birds*, also papers – on Reed Warblers of course! – in the *Avon Bird Report*, *Bristol Ornithology* and the *CV Ringing Station Report*."

39. Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

In the winter of 2011 news spread of Waxwings making their way west and our 20 ft *Cotoneaster* was fruiting well. There were sightings nearby; would they come?

Then one March morning there was a flock of 28 Waxwings. In the twinkling of an eye, a bedroom window gently opened and binoculars, telescope and a 300mm tele-photo lens appeared. The birds were oblivious, the berries were now ripe, and from *Cotoneaster* to bird bath to Beech tree and back flew groups of up to 8 birds, for more than an hour. They stripped the tree.

Our house backs onto a primary school. If you were a discerning teacher in the playground and happened to look up, what would you have made of those lenses?

Caroline Baker



Photo: Caroline Baker

Caroline was taken to Abinger Hammer aged 10 to listen to "a little bit of bread and no cheese" and gradually imbibed her parents' enthusiasm. She made wildlife films for the BBC and travelled widely, always wearing her miniature binoculars. She is content now to enjoy birdwatching locally, including seeing a Sparrowhawk killing a pigeon in her garden, not forgetting the feeding Waxwings!

40. Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*



Photo: Alan Gilbert

We moved to Westbury-on-Trym with two lively dogs over thirty-six years ago and soon discovered The Dingle, walking there every day until recently. In those days it wasn't unusual to have daily sightings of a Kingfisher, often on a favourite branch overlooking the second pond; but although I had been told there was a Dipper, I had never been fortunate enough to see one there. It became my 'bogey' bird in The Dingle.

In November 2015 I returned with Beryl Tully and going along the familiar path beside the stream, conversation turned to the past. As we were bemoaning the absence of Kingfishers, I suddenly saw an iridescent flash as one darted up right beside us and zoomed over the hedge. "OK, Beryl, now all I want is a Dipper, please." A few moments later, to our complete amazement, an inconspicuous plump brown bird landed further down the stream, bobbed a couple of times and turned briefly to reveal its white bib.

It was gone again in an instant, but after nearly forty years of waiting, it was a truly memorable moment.

Alison Levinson

As a Girl Guide Alison was the only one in her area who gained a birdwatching badge; they had difficulty in finding someone to assess it. Since the 80s, on holidays in Devon she became particularly interested in watching waders whilst the rest of the family went sailing. She can still remember the excitement of finding and identifying her first Cirl Bunting. On taking early retirement in 2001 she joined BOC and became a regular member of the Tuesday Group for several years. She now participates in longer field meetings, weekends and holidays. Committee member since 2010.

41. Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*



Photo: Alan Gilbert

The Nightingale as a nocturnal songbird has always been a somewhat mysterious species. It is elusive and to be honest not that impressive to look at. However, the Nightingale's song is unforgettable and overwhelming - a rich, clear, complex and virtuoso performance. I heard (and saw) my first in what was then the local stronghold in Lower Woods but for me finding one singing on my Breeding Bird Survey square at Ram Hill in 1998 was an unbelievable discovery in such a mundane setting, in the scrub in a railway cutting. Up to five were recorded in subsequent years along the railway between Ram Hill and Westerleigh until 2002 when the scrub was cleared as part of improvement work on the railway.

In 1899 the species was described as nesting 'in most parts of the district, and on Durdham Down' and in the year the Club was founded, singing males were recorded in 13 locations, but by 2014 there was just one failed breeding attempt and one other territorial male in Avon.

It seems unlikely that it will survive locally as a breeding species.

Dave Stoddard

Dave started as a caver but was interested in birds as a teenager. He joined BOC and the BTO in the early 90s. He signed up for BBS in 1994 – its first year. When John Tully died in 2013 he took over as local organiser and is now BTO deputy Regional Rep. He enjoys Indonesia (an underappreciated place).

42. Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*



Photo: Pete Blanchard

Never the most adept or confident birder, only the wonderful John Tully could possibly have persuaded me to undertake not only an Avon BBS but a BTO one as well! The necessary four annual early-morning field visits to my two patches have brought enormous joy and satisfaction.

There are many magic moments but on 2nd May, 2012 as I descended through a field of very tall oilseed rape in full flower, I spotted a handsome male Whinchat merely yards away atop a flower spike. The height of the blossoms gave me adequate cover so that I could properly observe this small migrating passerine.

We both rested in the sunshine, glancing westwards over the magnificent Severn Valley, sporting a low, dense cloud of early morning mist. It had come all the way from central Africa and was clearly alone. John later confirmed that a number had recently been recorded as passing through our area.

Phyl Dykes

"As a Biology Teacher my interest in all life forms was considerable but in mid-1992, towards the end of my husband's final illness, long-standing BOC member Steve Kirk took us to see the Avon Gorge Peregrines and the Little Owls at Kington. Soon after the funeral Steve and Audrey invited me to attend a Tuesday walk. Not only did I quickly become enveloped by the process of birding but also by the kindness and generosity of birders. It has been both a balm and a therapy, culminating in being invited to join the Committee for six years thereby seeing something of this remarkable organisation 'from the inside'."

43. Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*



Photo: Steve Hale

Wheatear is a regular spring and autumn passage migrant through Avon, mainly along the coast. It does not breed in Avon so it is largely absent in summer.

For me, it is the epitome of the birdwatcher's bird. It is unusual enough to always be an interesting discovery but not so rare as to be difficult to find.

For me as well, it is the true harbinger of spring and finding one of those cracking males somewhere along the coast in early March is a sure sign that the long winter is over and spring has truly arrived, even if the weather says something different.

Wheatears often migrate in small parties and usually show quite well to the observer but in all my years of birding I have never before seen 2 birds sitting on the same fence post together...so I hope you like this photograph, taken in April 2014 at Portbury Wharf. It's my favourite, easily beating the many rarities I have seen.

Steve Hale

Steve has been birding since 1970 and joined the BOC in 1982, leading club trips locally and to Norfolk. From 1989 to 2004, he edited the bird records for the monthly Bird News. He served on the Committee from 1994 – 1996. Portbury Wharf has become his local patch and he carries out WeBS for the site, though he birds everywhere.

He started the daily blog **Avon Birds** <http://avonbirding.blogspot.co.uk/> assisted by Mrs Trellis, who I'm sorry still hasn't a clue! After many years' excellent service, Steve passed the Avon Birds baton to the BOC in August 2016.

44. Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Previously known as Hedge Sparrow, or even in the 19th century Hedge Warbler, the Dunnock is the sole member of the Accentor family regularly occurring in Britain.



Photo: Keith Williams

Mostly brown with a grey head and breast, you can see why it could be confused with the female House Sparrow, but it has a thin dark bill. Similar in size, but with shorter wings, it is also slightly lighter than the Sparrow.

The males spend several months chasing each other around our garden with their wing-waving display. When they are not pursuing each other they are skulking around on the ground underneath the feeders, in and out of the flower pots and shrubs to find food. Hardly a day goes by without hearing their high, piping ‘tseep’ or their almost warbler-like song in the breeding season. This summer we were privileged to witness the male pecking at the cloaca of a female to stimulate ejection of rival males’ sperm before the one-tenth of a second mating act. If we had blinked, we would have missed it!

They may lack the brighter colours of their fellow garden visitors but they have a subtle beauty and our days would be less cheery without their constant scurrying through the bushes.

Keith Williams

Keith has been interested in birds since his twenties while out climbing and mountaineering, but started birding ‘properly’ in the mid 1990s before joining BOC in 2006. He has always been a keen photographer and this became a major part of his birding once the digital era arrived. He doesn’t have a specific patch, preferring to visit the countryside in a 40-mile radius of Bristol. He also undertakes surveys and goes on club trips when time allows. Current Treasurer and *ex officio* Committee member.

45. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*



Photo: Rob Miles

When I came to Bristol in 1961, the House Sparrow was universally super-abundant. The constant chatter of its varied calls accompanied every walk through even the most dense urban areas.

The Winter Garden Survey began to show a decline in the mid-seventies, and this became national news in the 1990s. When I retired in the mid-1990s I cycled the city plotting the sparrow-rich and the sparrow-poor areas, and it became clear that the difference was related to the relative wealth of the inhabitants.

At the same time John Tully mapped the House Sparrows of Southmead in meticulous detail. Lorna Shaw's DPhil thesis in 2008 showed that sparrow density was linked to social class nationally. And her thesis made it clear that quite small changes in the way we manage our gardens, decking, gravel, bark mulch, the use of sterile F1 hybrid plants, pesticide sprays, had accidentally and unintentionally created a desert for sparrows.

They are the Passenger Pigeon of our times.

Richard Bland

"When I came to Bristol in 1961 the only organisation other than the City Museum involved with birds and the natural world was the Bristol Naturalists' Society, with a lively ornithological section and undertaking a wide range of survey work. I was in America when the BOC was founded, but joined on my return in September 1968. I have been involved with both organisations ever since as well as being active in the British Trust for Ornithology."

46. Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*



Photo: Gordon Youdale

When I was 13, a teacher at my school in Stockton-on-Tees pointed out a lovely small bird, feeding in the school grounds. At that time everything looked like a dirty sparrow, but this was cleaner and neater. I suppose it was my first real “tick”. I was hooked, and joined the RSPB Junior Bird Recorders Club. After moving to Bristol I was pleased to find Tree Sparrows on farmland owned by I.C.I. near Easter Compton. For many years, I ringed the resident birds, but numbers continued to fall and by late 1988 they had all left our site. I found another small population at Avonmouth Sewage Works so again I erected nest boxes and monitored them, but after a few years they also disappeared.

Today it is a bird that is rarely seen in Avon, even though we have large areas of ideal habitat. The UK Tree Sparrow population declined by an estimated 90% between 1970 and 2013, and they are now of Conservation Concern and on the UK Red List. However, recent Breeding Bird Survey data is encouraging, suggesting that numbers may have started to increase, albeit from a very low point. A full recovery for Tree Sparrows is a long way off, but I know local farmers are getting involved with Agri-environment schemes. This could be a way forward for this cracking bird to make a return to breed within Avon once again.

Gordon Youdale

Gordon started birding at school in Co.Durham at the age of 13, encouraged by a teacher. His local patch was the Teesmouth area, now RSPB Saltholme Reserve. He is into his 56th year of birding. He joined BOC in 1969; on Committee from 1979 completing 33 years before retiring; was Chair from 1991-94 and 2011-12. His patch is S.Glos, including Yate, Inglestone Common and Marshfield. He holds a BTO 'A' Ringing Licence, and is a Volunteer at Slimbridge WWT. Member of Editorial Committee for Avon Ornithological Group 1979-1982 and Chairman of Executive Committee from 1993-1998. Currently BTO Regional Representative for Avon; Recipient of BTO Silver Badge for his service since 1971.

47. Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*



Who is the fairest of them all?

Photo: Lisa Presland

I'm a new birder and happy to admit that before I started I only knew a few bird types. For instance, I knew about Pied Wagtails, but not other species. So when I first saw a Grey Wagtail, my heart skipped a beat. But, when I looked it up, I mistakenly thought it was a Yellow Wagtail - classic 'newby' mistake!

I was corrected by my 'teachers', and did eventually see a Yellow Wagtail on the salt marsh, but still my preference for the Grey Wagtail remains.

I adore its subtle grey top-half, vividly contrasting bottom-half, its movement, long body and tail length, its solitary nature - everything about it in fact!

It's still a daily visitor to the water outlet in New Passage and delights me whenever I see it. Even better, I also see one regularly on my neighbour's roof and another in the pond at my workplace!

Motacilla cinerea is my favourite UK bird.

Lisa Presland

Lisa started birding when a Wryneck landed in her garden for the day and caused quite a stir! She lives in New Passage, the perfect birding patch on the Severn Estuary. As a new birder, she is happy to stay on her patch, with occasional visits to Chew Valley, Frampton, Forest of Dean and Slimbridge. She enjoyed birding on holiday in Greece and Antigua for the first time, where she saw over 40 new birds including the Antillean Crested Hummingbird! New member of BOC. More recently, she has begun learning to take photos of the birds she sees. She has enjoyed helping RSPB with their Starling Project, and observing bird ringing in her garden.

48. Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*



Photo: John Thorogood

Back in the late 1990s we began the BTO Garden Birdwatch survey and since then have witnessed a remarkable change in the fortunes of the Bullfinch in our Banwell garden. Initially, sightings occurred in just one or two weeks of the year. Now as I write in March 2016 we see them on our feeders several times each day. We wait to see if juveniles appear in September, as they have in the last three years.

For now, two pairs visit the garden regularly and their gentle piping calls are simply a delight; just occasionally we hear their quiet, subdued song which is even better. Among British birds it is hard to think of a more beautiful colour than the salmon-pink breast of a male, particularly in bright sunshine.

It has often baffled me how such a brightly-coloured bird can be so difficult to spot. Sometimes you have to be satisfied with a glimpse of the white rump as one flies away. They may have a reputation for being shy and retiring but, once settled on the feeder, they can be extremely difficult to dislodge.

We are delighted that they have adopted us and hope they will continue to grace our garden for a long time to come.

John Thorogood

Member of the RSPB since the 1970s, now a Life Fellow, John began 'serious' birding, and joined BOC, 20 years ago after taking early retirement. He values very highly the work of the BTO and participates in as many of its surveys as he can. He has enjoyed birding trips to many parts of the world including India, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean and many countries across Europe.

49. Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*



Photo: Rob Miles

We count the birds each spring in a kilometre square near Keynsham. Exploring it for the first time 20 years ago, we were greeted by a mass twittering from an old hawthorn: Linnets on migration. We called it 'the Linnet tree'.

A year later, a little forlorn in a new and tidy golf course, we found our Linnet tree again. It still serves as the 400-metre mark of the survey.

Now each spring a pair of Linnets nest in dense brambles not far from the tree. They rise with a soft '*pt-prt*' and flit off like leaves in the wind.

I admire the dutiful male who follows his mate's every move until she settles on her nest. Then he can puff out his pink breast and twitter and extol the beauty of the day – as well as of her – and the joy of spring.

Michael Baker

Michael Baker was once the Chairman of the Witwatersrand Bird Club in Johannesburg and has been fortunate enough to live and bird for a time in North and South America as well. Now retired from electrical engineering, he regularly participates in two spring counts.

50. Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*



Photo: Gary Thoburn

When I was about ten years old I was given a copy of *The Observer's Book of British Birds* (1952 edition!) and one bird that I particularly remember from that book is the Goldfinch.

Unlike many of the birds in the book the picture of the Goldfinch was in colour. I think it must have been its striking plumage and the fact that I was able to see it in our garden that made it so memorable for me.

I have been very fortunate to have seen many amazing birds in other countries and in some ways the Goldfinch reminds me of some of the small brightly-coloured birds that I have seen abroad.

So I always look forward to seeing a Goldfinch on our garden feeder or a charm of Goldfinches feeding on thistles on a Tuesday walk.

Mike Landen

It was much later in life that Mike began to identify bird species, the result of wanting to know what he was seeing both in the garden and on country walks. He joined BOC in 1985. During the last four or five years he has been a 'regular' on the Tuesday walks and led for the first time last year. Foreign holidays have given him the opportunity to see and photograph many wonderful birds and he has contributed to the holiday section of the BOC website. He works as a volunteer at Folly Farm.

Fifty years of change

Richard Bland

Imagine, if you will, the region before the county of Avon came into being, one in which there are no breeding Peregrines or Ravens or Canada Geese; the Chaffinch is probably the commonest bird, and there are only two common native species whose populations are even approximately known, the Heron and the Rook. In winter Starlings are so abundant that a huge net has to be hung over the entrance to Temple Meads station to prevent vast flocks congregating to roost there. There are no large gulls nesting in Bristol, Jays are shy and confined to woodland, Wood Pigeons are a menace on farmland but unseen in towns and Magpies are never seen at bird tables. Three years earlier the coldest winter in two hundred years has destroyed the Goldcrest population, made the Wren a rare bird, and the Long-tailed Tit even rarer.



Since 1900 the average temperature has risen by a whole degree from the cold conditions of the end of the nineteenth century, back to levels last recorded in the 1850s, a result of vast quantities of coal mined every year and burnt in the hearths of the nation over a century. The main environmental concern is pollution, partly by pesticides, partly by acid rain. No one, absolutely no-one, thinks that the increase in temperature matters at all. The creation of nuclear reactors will, it is believed, make electricity too cheap to meter. A hundred Mute Swans winter in the city docks among the coasters full of Baltic timber, but there are only about two dozen breeding pairs in the region, and they are in decline. House Sparrows are superabundant everywhere, and if you drive down any country road in the early morning clouds of them will fly up from the gutter as you approach. Mind you a journey of fifty miles will take two hours on a good day, and in this region scarcely a mile of motorway has been built. If you come across a rare bird you send a postcard to the county recorder. And you refer to yourself as a 'bird-watcher'. Such was the world into which the BOC was born.



Left and centre: these photos, taken in September 1963 from what is now the Picnic Area, show a former nest site for Skylarks and Yellow Wagtails

Right: near Herriott's Bridge in the early 1970s when gullies were dug to create potential Bittern habitat

Photos: David Warden



Bristol docks in the 1960s. Photo courtesy of M Shed

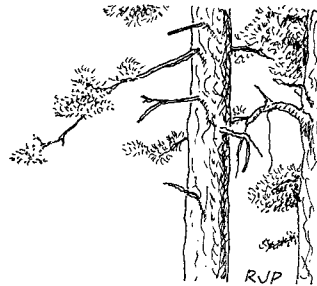
Looking back now one can see that the birth of the BOC coincided with very dramatic changes in ornithology. The first Bird Atlas was launched in 1967 by the BTO, who firmly believed, despite all the doubters, that it would actually be possible, given five years intensive work, to create an Atlas of the distribution of all breeding species in every one of the 3862 ten-kilometre squares in Great Britain and Ireland. Many of the BOC's early members gave much time and effort towards surveying the seventeen squares that lie in the local region, and the end product (*The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*, Sharrock, 1976) was a triumph and a revelation.

Another crucial development in the past fifty years has been the dramatic change in the process of recording and analysing records. For the 1967 Bird Report records were written on cards, and kept in old shoe boxes. If the record came from a Somerset location it was copied out and sent to the Somerset Ornithological Society. Records were submitted by 130 people, and the Report covered 166 species in 23 pages. 47 common species were listed at the end as being present and it was acknowledged in the introduction that virtually no records of them were submitted.

The Club, by printing a monthly list of reports received, began the process of increasing the number of records, and by the 1990s an efficient paper system was generating some 5000 records annually, many of them multiple. In 2014 more than 70,000 records formed the database for the annual Report, the majority of them downloaded en bloc from Bird-track or the Club website, and they came from some 600 observers. In 115

pages 252 species were described, and for most of them their varying fortunes over the past decade were outlined.

The year 1962 saw the launch of the Common Bird Census, which began the process of establishing the density of species in different habitats, initially simply defined as woodland and farmland, as urban areas were considered to be irrelevant. This would enable national bird populations to be estimated for the first time. The widespread use of chlorinated hydrocarbons as seed-dressings had led to wildlife deaths, especially in eastern England, and although the poisons had been banned in 1963, they continued to concentrate in the food-chain and this led to the collapse of top predators such as Peregrine, Sparrowhawk and Otter. When the club was founded bird populations were still recovering from the devastation of the 1963 winter, and, unwittingly, farmland birds were about to face having to adapt to the most revolutionary change in farming practice, the switch from spring to autumn sowing, whose dire consequences the CBC was to define with statistical rigour.

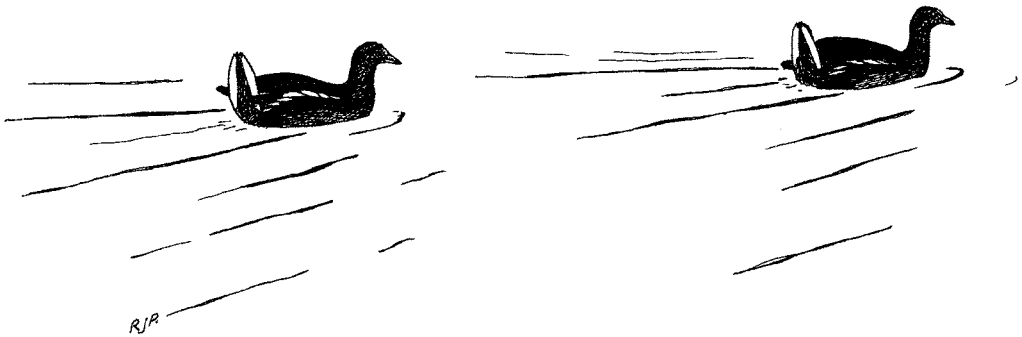


Chew Valley Lake had been flooded by 1955, and was being very skilfully managed to balance four key interests: clean water, fishermen, sailing, and ornithology. The Ringing Station there was set up in 1956, and many of its supporters joined the club. The reeds that now fringe much of the shoreline were far more limited in extent. The lake was, and still is, a major focus of ornithological activity.



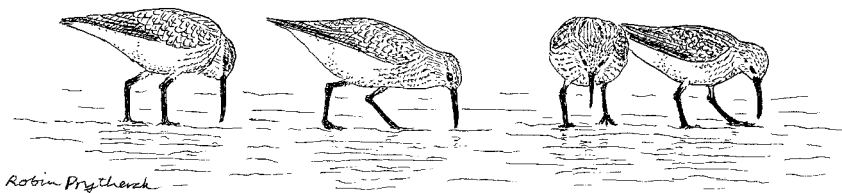
The overall pattern of change in bird populations since 1966 has been complex, as there have been many alterations in both British and European habitats. Resident and migrant species have been affected in different ways. Perhaps first it is best to analyse the habitat changes that lie behind the population fluctuations. For resident species the intensification of agriculture has had the greatest impact. This included a massive increase in the use of chemical sprays to gain total control of the environment in the field, and mechanisation with the result that farm workers have largely vanished from the countryside. On the pasture side the production of silage and zero-grazing tech-

niques have transformed farmland. Both have led to massive loss of hedges. That part of the countryside given over to woodland has seen coniferisation on a vast scale. And there has been a substantial increase in the size and density of towns, a proliferation, especially in southern England, of sprawling suburbs, and a continuing shift in the way that gardens are used and managed. There has been a vast growth in bird feeders. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of lakes and fish ponds, and this has been accompanied by a very dramatic improvement in river water quality, driven by EU regulation.



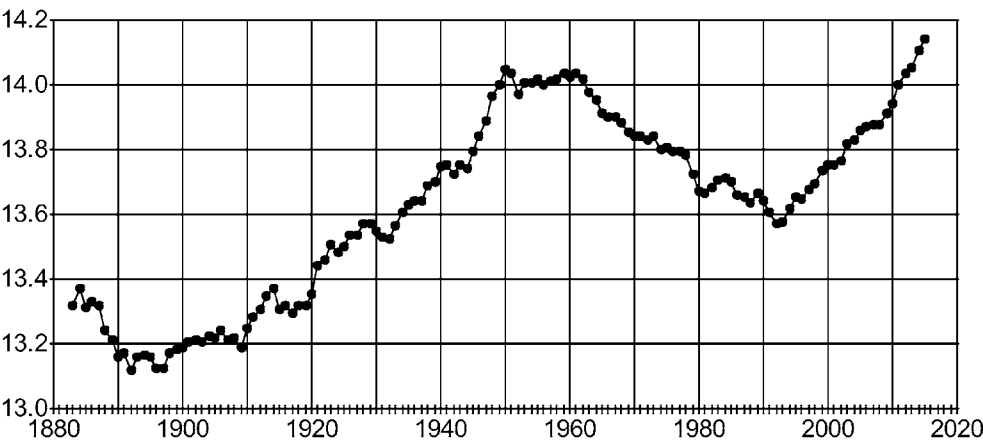
The passing of the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981, which pulled together a mass of previous legislation, gave total protection to all bird species and their nests, with a few specific exceptions. And this was synonymous with a great change in the public perception of the importance of the environment, and concern about it, and hence all political parties began to have environmental policies. The Green Party, created in 1975 as the Ecology Party, became an increasing voice especially in local politics, and aggressive environmental organisations began to take direct action in ways that hit the headlines but did not always win friends.

In winter the numbers of wildfowl and waders in the Severn Estuary reflected bird population changes in the Arctic. Passerine winter migrants from the Baltic area were



affected by the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy and conservation policies in the Netherlands. Summer migrants from the Sahel region south of the Sahara began to be influenced by pressure of both people and drought, but also by the steep falls in invertebrate populations in this country as a result of the widespread use of insecticides.

Today the most common explanation for almost any variation in population is “climate change” by which is understood, but not stated, that the climate in this country is becoming progressively warmer. Before 1995 only a few academics even considered this a matter of concern, and in Bristol the thirty-year average temperature peaked in 1960, and fell more or less continually to 1992, which was also true of the UK as whole.



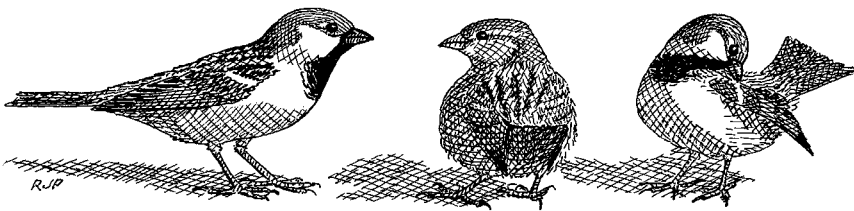
*This chart shows the thirty year average annual temperature in Bristol, 1882-2015.
In 1967 the figure was 13.9°C, in 2016 14.3°C*

There is no obvious explanation for the decline in a period (1960 to 1990) of break-neck economic expansion, and an increase in the production of carbon dioxide. When Prime Minister, Tony Blair did not dare challenge the concept of continuous economic growth, the bedrock of the western world, though ultimately impossible. As a consequence, he opted for the simpler alternative – not to curb global warming. This view became a tenet of faith not just in this country but in large parts of the world. The impact this has actually had on wildlife remains largely un-researched, although there has been massive speculation about what the impact of future change might be. For what it is worth the evidence that I have gathered from fifteen years of standardised recording of plant flowering dates on the Downs suggests that a change of one degree in annual temperature results in a change of about a week in the date at which particular events occur.



Measuring the impact on birds of all these changes has become increasingly sophisticated. The Common Bird Census was limited to some 250 sites largely in the south of the UK, but it monitored the decline in farmland species very well. In 1994 the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) took over. There are now some 3000 randomly chosen one-km squares across the nation monitored annually, which show with considerable precision the change in populations, and the two surveys were run together for five years to enable the indices of change to be aligned. Locally, John Tully took charge of the BBS from the start, and the Bristol region has been better monitored than almost any other area of the country, with some 10% of the surface area covered every year by around 120 observers. Dave Stoddard took over the organisation after John's death.

There have been some startling losses. The most remarkable change has been the decline of Starlings and House Sparrows, two super-abundant species in the 1960s. The Starling breeding population has declined by 80% since 1994, and the House Sparrow urban garden winter population has declined by 75%. The cause of this has been closely examined in the case of the House Sparrow, and is largely related to the change in our management of gardens. Sparrow counts across the city in the 1990s led to the discovery of sparrow-rich and sparrow-poor areas of Bristol. This correlated with socio-economic status as was confirmed by an AWT survey financed by the city and supported by 3000 people. John Tully and I presented these findings at a national Sparrow conference in London. Later a D Phil student, Lorna Shaw, from Exeter proved that this hypothesis was true nationally as well as locally.

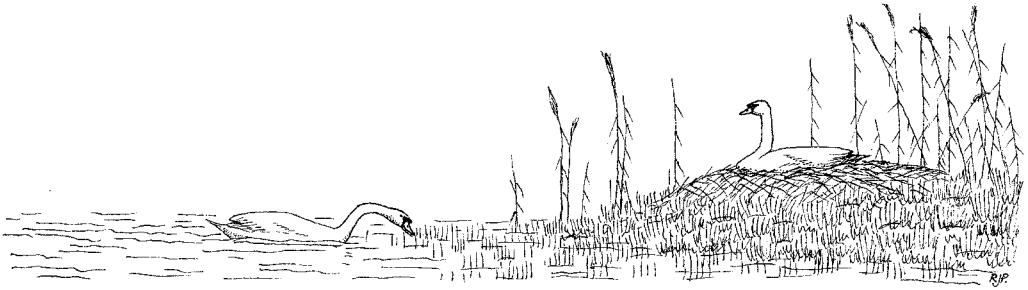


Starlings have been less well-studied, but their decline is probably related to the declines in invertebrates as a result of insecticide use. Farmland birds such as Skylarks and Yellowhammers, which rely on stubbles to overwinter, have been badly hit by the switch to autumn sowing, and the loss of hedges has reduced the density of species such as the Linnet.

A few species that were clinging on in the 1960s have gone. These include the Tree Sparrow, which had never been common, and the Nightingale, which finally ceased to breed in the Lower Woods in 2014. There had been 53 singing males at twenty sites in the Nightingale census of 1980. The Cuckoo has collapsed locally and nationally, and this may be related to the decline of large insects such as the May bug.

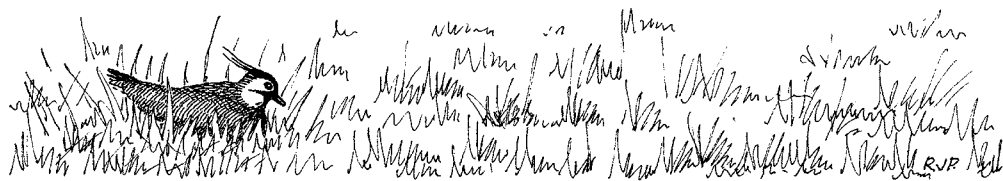
Amid all this change there have been some constant factors. Wren numbers fluctuate with the winter weather, as do Long-tailed Tits. Great Tits, Blue Tits, Robins and Blackbirds have swung up and down depending more on breeding success. Jays and Jackdaws have prospered, Mistle Thrushes have declined, Crows are stable, although in larger numbers than fifty years ago, and Bullfinches remain elusive.

Turning now to the main species groups that are represented locally, we begin with wildfowl and raptors. On the reservoirs the Canada Goose first built up a largely non-breeding flock of over 500 at Chew Valley Lake, where they are annually caught and ringed, and then in the past fifteen years breeding pairs have become established in a wide variety of smaller ponds, on golf courses and on urban lakes. Swan numbers were very low in the 1960s and 70s, and there was a national decline caused by anglers' discarded lead weights. A campaign changed that and the 2012 Atlas revealed a startling increase over the previous twenty years.



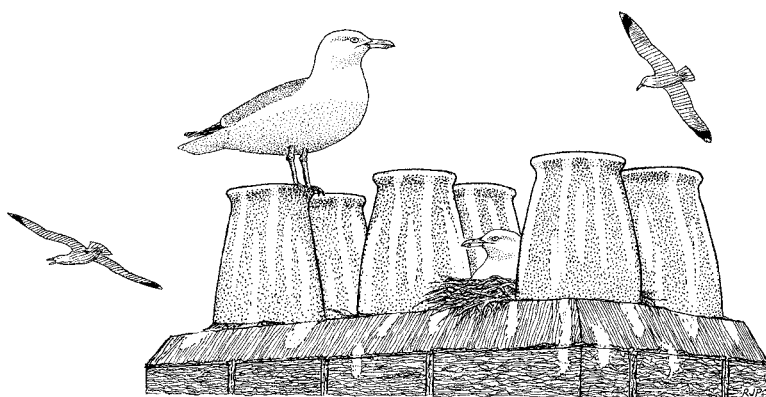
The increase in the Buzzard population has been documented by Robin Prytherch's careful research, and this was revealed nationally by the 2012 Atlas. It seems likely that their distribution and numbers have recovered as a result of the protection of the 1981 Act. This ended the casual shooting of easy prey that, after the invention of the breech loading shot gun in around 1800, was the main cause of the collapse of species such as the Red Kite and Raven. Peregrines had maintained a breeding pair on Steep Holm, but their return to the Gorge in 1988 was the start of a very dramatic increase, so that there are now more than perhaps at any time in the past 200 years. Their populations had been destroyed by the impact of the pesticides of the late 1950s. The Sparrowhawk had also declined steeply, though less so in our pastoral area, and they have been at maximum density for the past twenty years. The creation in the 1970s of a local branch of the Hawk and Owl Trust, supported by many members of the Club, has greatly assisted the increase in all raptor populations, especially Barn Owls.





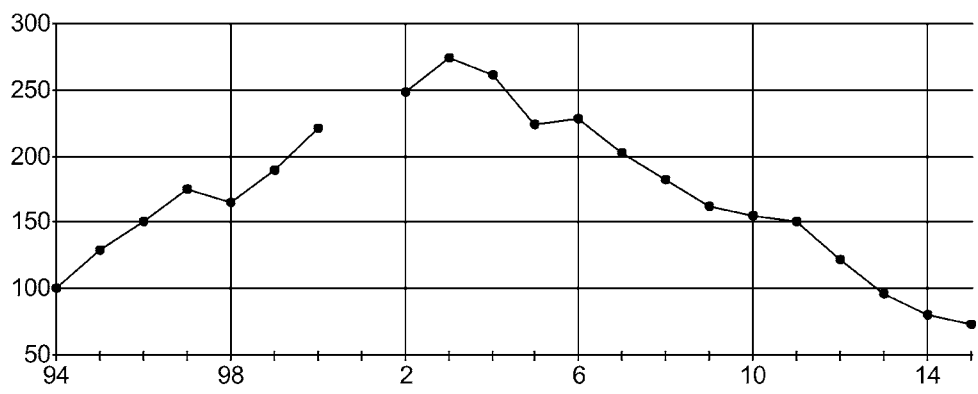
Lapwings were the only wader species that used to breed in large numbers. In 1981 there were around 300 breeding pairs, which fell to 60 by 1989 and by 2014 there were around 20 pairs. Nationally they are a victim of autumn sowing as they need bare ground around their nest sites. Redshank first bred in 1902. In the 1980s there were thought to be 50 pairs; one or two pairs still cling on today. Snipe last bred in the Gordano Valley in 1992. In winter the Severn Estuary is host to very large numbers of migrant and wintering waders, and they are closely monitored by the dedicated Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) counters. There have been substantial changes in the pattern of migration of Lapwing and Ringed Plover, and in the numbers of overwintering Curlew, Redshank and above all Dunlin. The causes of these changes are obscure and may relate to the fact that some species are wintering further east in the huge, well-managed, Dutch reserves. But the richness of the invertebrate populations of the Severn mud is also a crucial factor and this has yet to be investigated fully.

The first pair of large gulls nested in Bristol in 1972, and the urban gull population, carefully monitored by Peter Rock, increased at a rate of 10% a year from then through to early this century. Council efforts have slowed the increase by substituting plastic eggs for real ones, and new buildings are usually designed to prevent nesting opportunities, so that the reliance on expensive netting systems has largely ceased.





The remarkable spread of the Collared Dove was a focus of interest. They first reached the area in 1960 when a pair was reported at Chipping Sodbury in May; breeding was first recorded at Shirehampton in September 1961. Their distribution expanded rapidly and the BBS index rose until 2003. Since then their population has fallen substantially and there are now fewer than there were in 1994.



This chart shows the BBS index figures, (1994=100), for the Collared Dove, 1994–2015. No data was collected in 2001, the Foot and Mouth year. The cause of the decline is unknown.

The urban expansion of the Wood Pigeon has been remarkable. To some extent they have replaced Feral Pigeons, whose numbers in the 1960s were very large because of their ability to breed in derelict buildings and bomb sites, and the presence of waste grain in the Avonmouth docks which allowed huge flocks to build up. Feral Pigeons have declined greatly in the past thirty years, largely from competition with the large gulls.

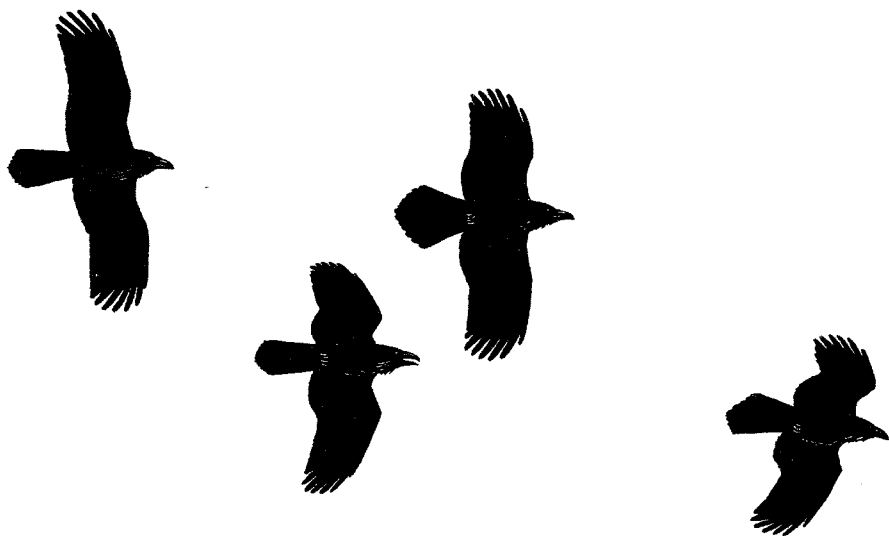
Rooks have also been closely monitored with counts every five years since 1975. Rooks matter partly because the UK holds 30% of the world population outside Russia, and partly because it is the only species apart from Grey Heron whose population can be estimated with reasonable accuracy, so it is a benchmark species for the accuracy of

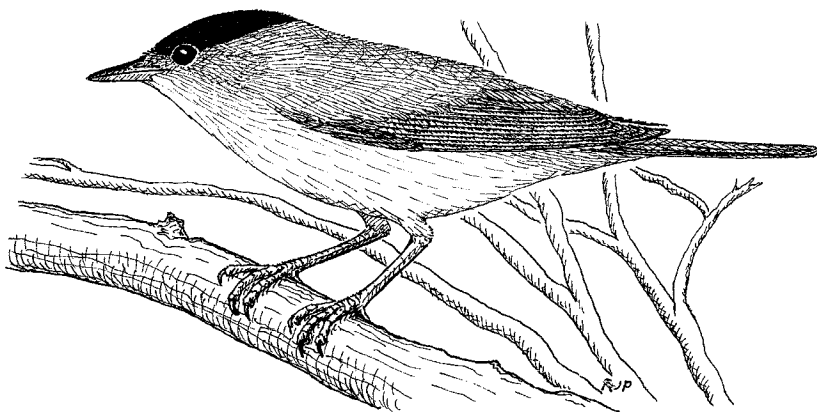


This chart shows the total number of Rooks counted in the Bristol region, 1975-2015.

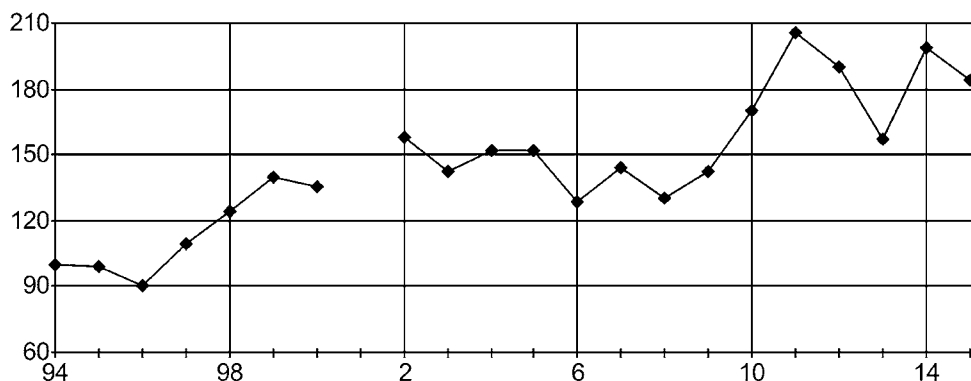
Atlas and BBS counts. It is also a farmland species whose numbers did not react to the agricultural changes of the last half of the twentieth century. Numbers increased steadily to 2000, but have shrunk in the fifteen years since. There were fears that Dutch Elm Disease after 1975 would cause problems, but, although it led to the relocation of rookeries, Rook populations grew. The cause of their recent decline is unknown.

Magpies expanded in towns rapidly in the late 1970s, and became a major feature of garden bird-tables. Their local breeding population seems to have peaked in 2003 and fallen a little since. Until around 1990 a pair or two of Ravens bred on Steep Holm or Brean Down. They moved into the Avon Gorge in the 1990s and since then have expanded rapidly across the city and the region as a whole.



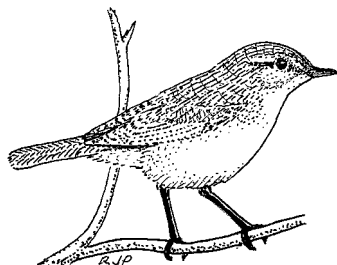


Another remarkable change in gardens in winter has been the expansion of overwintering Blackcaps. They were an exceptional winter visitor until around 1975 when I began to collate all local records, since when numbers have risen dramatically. They tend to arrive in gardens in late December and are often semi-resident until the end of March. They then return to South Germany, to be replaced by a quite different breeding population, which itself has expanded rapidly. I summarised the available information about this development in the Blackcap's status in the *Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland* (Lack, 1986).



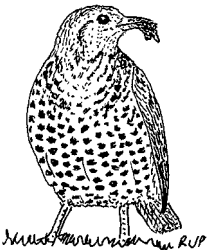
This chart shows the BBS index figures, (1994=100), for the Collared Dove, 1994–2015. No data was collected in 2001, the Foot and Mouth year. The cause of the decline is unknown.

Among other migrant warblers Reed Warblers have expanded as reeds have spread around Chew Valley Lake and other sites. Chiffchaffs have seen abrupt booms and slumps, and the same is true of Whitethroats, whose numbers tend to reflect rainfall in their wintering quarters in the Sahel. Willow Warblers have, very abruptly, become a spring migratory species, although they still breed on Mendip. Wood Warblers have vanished as a breeding species. Cetti's Warblers have become established, though numbers fell sharply after the cold winter of 2010. And for a time in the 1990s Dartford Warblers

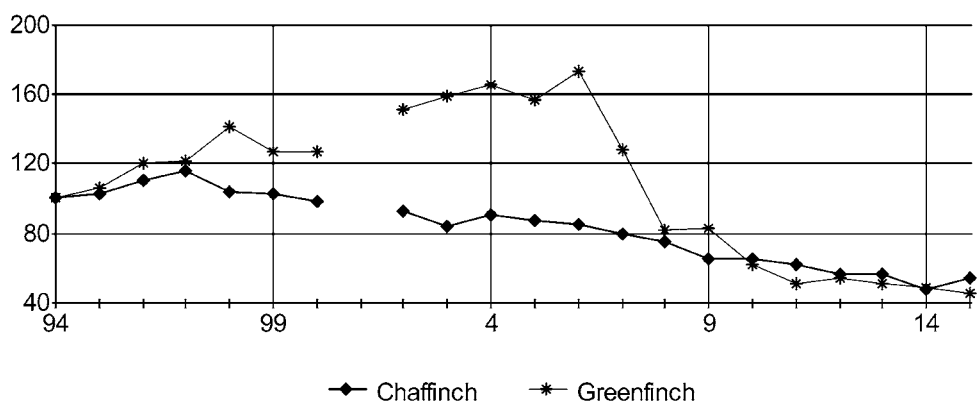


established a presence on Crook Peak, more or less astride the boundary line with Somerset. They bred in 1996 and 1997 but did not survive the very cold winter of 2008/09. They are expanding in Hampshire, and if warmer winters become a pattern they may well return.

The decline of the Song Thrush has been much lamented, but they are in competition with Blackbirds. It is probable that they outnumbered them a hundred years ago, reached parity fifty years ago, and were badly hit by the cold winters of the 1980s, and that there are now eight Blackbirds for every Song Thrush. Like any species whose population is in decline they have shrunk back from urban gardens to their optimal habitat, deciduous woodland.

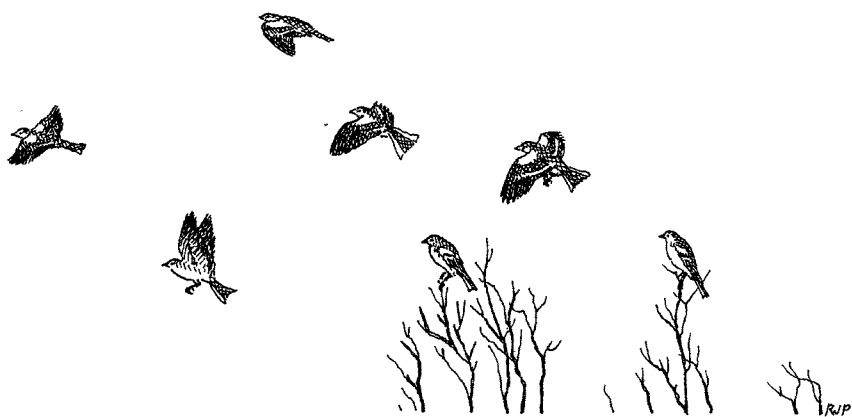


Finches have been affected in varying ways, as the charts (below and overleaf) of the local BBS results show.

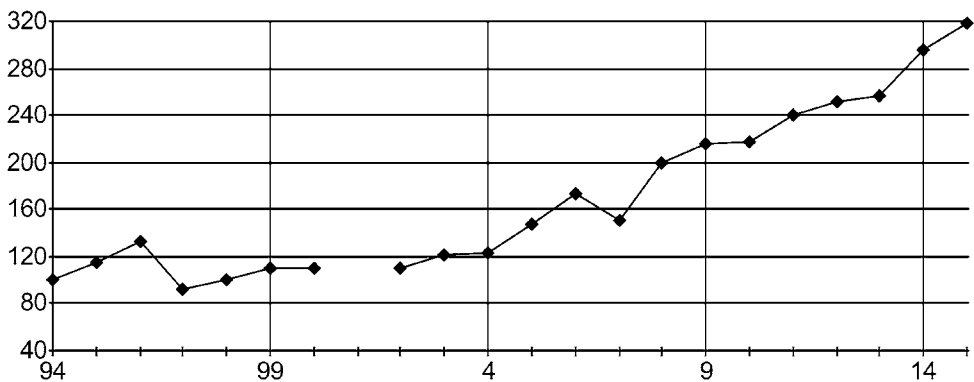


This chart shows the BBS index figures (1994=100) for the Greenfinch and Chaffinch. The sharp increase and collapse of the Greenfinch is a marked contrast with the steady decline of the Chaffinch. No data was collected in 2001, the Foot and Mouth year.

Chaffinches have declined steadily, and this has not been helped by the impact of the parasite *Trichomonosis* which first appeared, especially among Greenfinches, in 2006. Their population has fallen to below what it was in 1994.



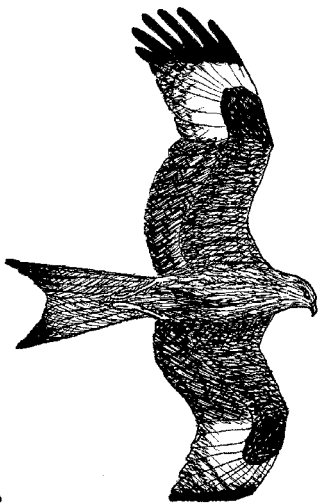
The biggest increase has been among Goldfinches, which had declined steeply in the 1980s because of the farmers' success in eliminating thistles. The adoption of Nyger seeds in garden feeders by households has led to a rapid reversal of their fortunes.



This chart shows the BBS index figures (1994=100) for the Goldfinch. No data was collected in 2001, the Foot and Mouth year

Monitoring change is vital, because, without an understanding of how populations are changing, it is not possible to discern the causes of change, and hence impossible to have any effect on it. Species which, like Blackbird or Wood Pigeon, have a varied diet and are not fussy about habitat, have on the whole survived the habitat

changes of the past fifty years well. Many species which are primarily insectivores have suffered most because of the collapse of invertebrate populations. It is possible that genetic modification of crops will in future end the annual massacre by insecticide, and hence enable some declines to be reversed. But we tend to forget that evolution is continuously at work, as the story of the wintering Blackcap population shows. Reintroduction, as the Red Kite and Sea Eagle demonstrate, can work, but the process of habitat change ensures that the world they come back to is not the world that they left. Re-wilding is an attractive concept, but its impact can never be more than marginal.



RJP

The truth about wildlife is that it is continuously adapting to continuing changes in habitats. Bemoaning the loss of bird populations, and the use of this by conservation bodies to raise money – ‘*Save the Skylark*’ – backed up by the journalists’ mantra

that bad news sells papers, is unscientific. The assumption that there is some ideal bird population that we should seek to preserve is nostalgic nonsense. Our job is to monitor and understand the processes of change, and to seek to maintain as complex a variety of habitats as we can.

We have come a very long way in fifty years, and now monitor every species in the region in detail annually. I am proud to have played a small part in this process. BOC members have been – and remain – key supporters of both BTO national surveys and locally-based efforts. I am indebted to the very large number of observers who have volunteered down the years to tramp the highways and byways recording their sightings.

The information on which this article is based is available in numerous articles written by many ornithologists published in the Avon Bird Report. It has concentrated on passerine change, which is my main interest.

Richard has amassed a large body of work, some of which has had a national dimension, including several bird population surveys.

His achievements locally include being responsible for the organisation of many surveys for the British Trust for Ornithology, finding observers to count – amongst others – Nightingales, Mute Swans, Breeding Waders of Wetlands, Tawny Owls, Gull Roosts, Nightjars, Woodcock, and Swallows. He published a *Breeding Atlas of Bristol* in *Bristol Ornithology* in 2010.

In 1996 the BTO developed a year-round Garden Bird Watch scheme. John Tully and Richard got a grant to run a national garden bird breeding survey, published with the assistance of Jeremy Greenwood in the BTO journal *Bird Study* in 2004, which helped to put urban bird populations on the map. As mentioned, he was editor of the Blackcap account in the *BTO Winter Atlas* (1986).

He served as regional representative of the BTO for 33 years, from 1980 – 2013.

In 2013 he was the recipient of the prestigious BTO Jubilee Medal, which is awarded for “committed devotion to the Trust”.

In 2015, he was awarded the Lord Mayor’s Medal for volunteer service to the Bristol community.

Richard says: *I have spent my life walking - and counting birds. I did it at school, where I had a standard weekly walk, and counted Rooks’ nests, and surveyed Starling roost flight-lines. I love surveys of all kinds.*

I am interested in population change and distribution and in finding methods that permit accurate statements about the perpetual process of change across the world. I have no interest at all in rare birds or birds in foreign fields.



Fifty ways to improve your birding

Enjoy your birding

1. Enjoy watching familiar birds in your garden and study their behaviour



Enjoy watching familiar birds in your garden
and study their behaviour

2. Keep a garden list and/or year list
3. Walk your local patch regularly and send in the results to Avon Birds – bocbirds@gmail.com or Birdtrack – www.bto.org
4. Monitor a favourite site throughout the year
5. Keep systematic and careful records – document photos. You will be glad to have done so at some point in the future.
6. Take part in some organised survey work – Big Garden Birdwatch, BTO's Breeding Birds Survey (BBS), Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS) – www.bto.org
7. Look out for colour-ringed birds and report them – gulls around Bristol, waders on Severnside – www.cr-birding.org
8. Focus on a single species and become an “expert” on it
9. When out birding, record other wildlife, eg, butterflies, mammals, and send in records to appropriate society/ individuals
10. Follow the many excellent websites and blogs by local birders, including the BOC's – bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk and, for further links – avonbirding.blogspot.co.uk

Bonus suggestion: If you are feeling adventurous, sign up for the Patchwork Challenge in 2017 – patchworkchallenge.blogspot.co.uk

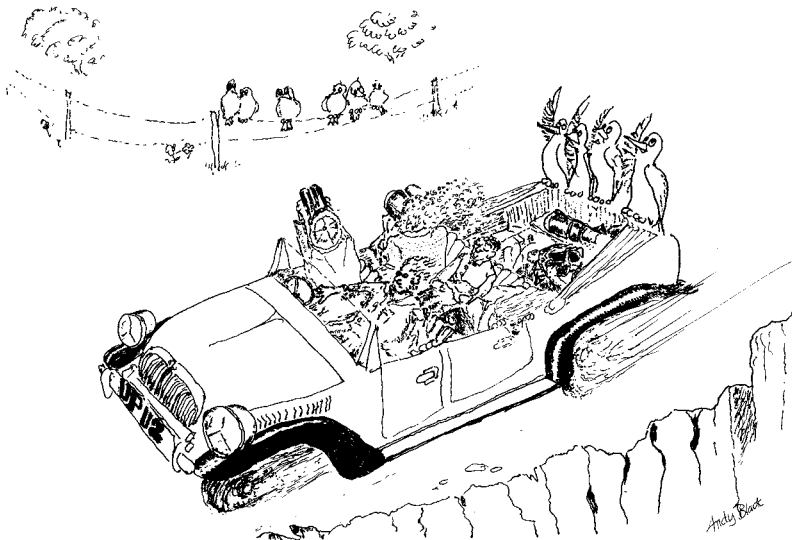
Support your BOC

11. Go on a BOC walk or weekend field trip and...
12. ...maybe offer a lift or agree to do the subsequent report for *Bird News*
13. Come along to an indoor meeting – a lift offer could be welcome here too
14. Join the majority - sign up to receive *Bird News* by email
15. Submit a report on a birding holiday to the Club's website
16. Volunteer to help at an indoor meeting, deliver *Bird News*, help at events – Bristol Festival of Nature, Peregrine Watch
17. Lead a walk – the Club is always looking for new blood
18. Give a short presentation at Members' Evening – as 17 above
19. Serve as a Committee member – as 17 above
20. Take a holiday with the BOC – and maybe offer to help with the driving

Bonus suggestion: suggest a new venue for the Club to visit – could be local, UK wide or even abroad

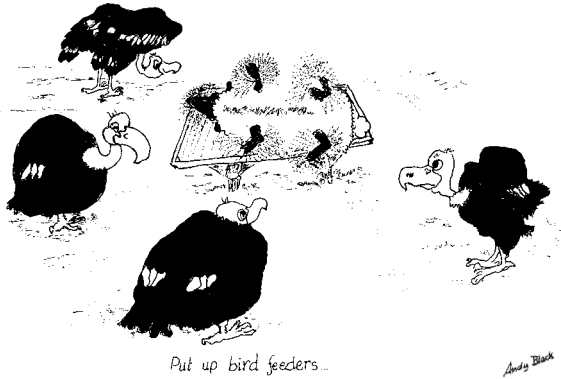


Take a holiday with the BOC - and maybe offer to help with the driving.



Encourage birds/wildlife

21. Put up bird feeders with a variety of nut and seed types – shopping.rspb.org.uk/birdfeeders or www.livingwithbirds.com



22. Make your garden wildlife friendly – provide food, water and shelter - www.rspb.org.uk/make-a-home-for-wildlife/wildlife-garden

23. Plant flowers that will attract insects and seeds for birds, eg, sunflowers - www.wildlifetrusts.org/how-you-can-help/wildlife-gardening

24. Leave some of the garden as a wild area

25. Put up nest boxes, particularly Swift boxes – bristolswifts.co.uk or birdfood.co.uk or nhbs.com

26. Use bird silhouettes to prevent birds striking windows

27. Cut hedges in winter before the nesting season

28. Grow some climbing plants to provide a safe roosting and nesting place

29. Add a pond to your garden – it's amazing what wildlife it will soon attract



30. Invest in a Birdcam outfit to track progress in one of your nest boxes – nhbs.com

Bonus suggestion: If you don't have a garden, see if you can install and stock feeders in a local park – as people do in Central Park, New York – create a “Central Park Effect”

Become involved locally and nationally

31. Join the Avon Wildlife Trust (www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk), RSPB (www.rspb.org.uk), WWT (www.wwt.org.uk), or BTO (www.bto.org)

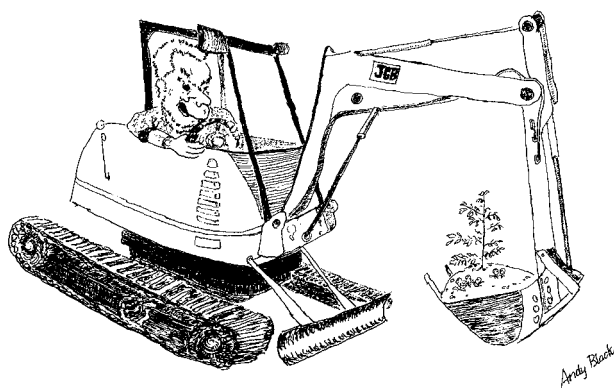
32. Acquaint yourself with the debates on environmental/conservation issues in the blogosphere or on Twitter – both currently channels for spirited discussions – eg, Mark Avery's blog - markavery.info

33. Ask your local council / parish council to set aside a community wildlife area

34. Ask your local council / parish council to support a local wildlife project

35. Volunteer for the Avon Wildlife Trust, RSPB, WWT or BTO

36. Look out for opportunities to take part in a tree planting or wildflower planting day



Look out for opportunities to take part in a tree planting or wildflower planting day

37. Support national campaigns, eg, Hen Harrier Day in August – henharrierday.org

38. Keep up to date with local planning developments – how will they affect wildlife?

39. Follow the RSPB's watching brief on the Severn Estuary – search the internet for “RSPB Severn Estuary”

40. Write to your MP when environmental issues arise and urge them to take action

Bonus suggestion: Arrange to stay at a Bird Observatory – they have come a long way from the spartan hostels of old – you will learn a lot and contribute to their funds by staying there - www.birdobsCouncil.org.uk

Encourage future generations

41. Give presents to encourage an interest in birds: binoculars, beginners' field guides (the Collins *BTO Guide to British Birds* with Paul Sterry's photos, is well worth a look), bird-feeders and seed
42. Give a present of RSPB membership: RSPB Wildlife Explorer, and from their 13th birthday – RSPB Phoenix - rspb.org.uk
43. Take children to a WWT Centre or an RSPB reserve
44. Help children make and put up nest boxes - www.bto.org/about-birds/nnbw/information-pack



Help children make and put up nest-boxes

45. **They** can show **you** how to follow birders and bird-related hashtags on Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms
46. Ask if the children's school has a Bird or Wildlife Club – could you help?
47. Be a mentor to an aspiring naturalist
48. Donate any suitable unused optical equipment to a young birder
49. Tell young birders about:
Bristol Nature Network - bristolnaturenetwork.wordpress.com
Next Generation Birders - nextgenerationbirders.blogspot.co.uk
BTO Young Birders - btoyoungbirders.blogspot.co.uk
50. Sponsor a young birder to visit an observatory - www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/taking-part/young-bird-obs-volunteer-fund or attend a Bird Camp – BTO Bird Camp

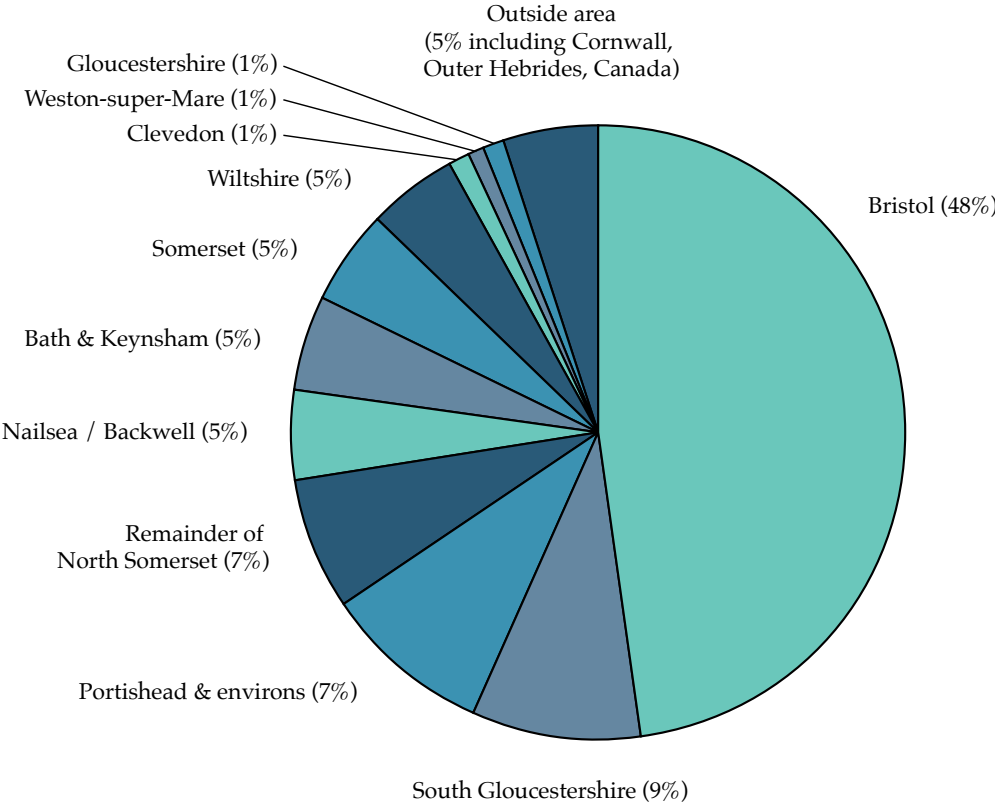
Bonus suggestion: a variant on no 48: donate that unused equipment to a field worker in a developing country.

www.rspb.org.uk/joinandhelp/otherwaystohelp/donateoptics

Why not arrange to do so in person?

The BOC in the round

Where current members live



The BOC by numbers

3004

BOC members
over 50 years



44

records of
Pied-billed Grebe
now on
British List



1,397,322

hits on
AVONBIRDS
website*



344

species on
the Avon List

31

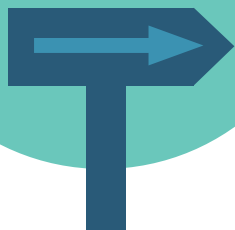
issues of Bristol
Ornithology



* as at 23 November 2016.

1,107

scheduled
Tuesday walks*



19

average number
of members on
a Tuesday walk



35,721

cumulative total of
species counted on
all Tuesday walks



20,281

pairs of feet
participating in
a Tuesday walk

* excluding a 13-week shut down in 2001 because of the Foot and Mouth epidemic.



We would like to wish the
Bristol Ornithological Club many
congratulations on your 50th
anniversary!



Reg. Charity No.280422

Avon Wildlife Trust is the largest local charity working to protect wildlife in the West of England area, supported by over 17,000 members. For more information on our work, please visit: avonwildlifetrust.org.uk



BRISTOL NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

Founded 1862

Registered Charity No. 235494

www.bristolnats.org.uk

President: David Hill, BSc (Sheff.), DPhil (Oxon)

The Bristol Naturalists' Society heartily congratulates the Bristol Ornithological Club on achieving its first fifty years.

From its start, the Club has been an innovator and leader, bringing in a monthly record of birds seen around the region, developing the skills of members by actively encouraging reports of rare birds, setting up a ringing station and creating a network of observers, some of whom became national figures, based on observations at Chew Lake and on the Estuary.

The Club has become a major source of annual bird records and stimulated the establishment of the Avon Ornithological Group, which publishes the award winning independent Avon Bird Report replacing bird notes previously published in the BNS Proceedings since 1936.

This is a record of achievement which all members of the Bristol Ornithological Club can be immensely proud of.

David Hill BSc DPhil MCIEEM
President of Bristol Naturalists' Society

BRISTOL WATER

**Congratulations to Bristol Ornithological
club on celebrating 50 Years!**

**We wish your club all the best and we
look forward to seeing some of your
members at our lakes in the next
coming seasons .**

Day and season permits for birdwatching available from:

Woodford Lodge,

Stoke Hill,

Chew Stoke,

Bristol,

BS40 8XH,

Tel: 01275 332339

E: Woodford.lodge@bristolwater.co.uk

Web: www.bristolwater.co.uk

**Congratulations to the
Bristol Ornithological Club
on your 50th anniversary**

from Calluna Books,
publisher of
The Birdwatcher's Yearbook

2017 edition
available at £17.00
including postage
(RRP £19.50)



CALLUNA BOOKS
Specialists in out-of-print
NATURAL HISTORY BOOKS
Books bought & sold

Log on to the website for our stock list
or contact us for a copy of our
latest catalogue

T: 01929 552 560
E: enquiries@callunabooks.co.uk
W: www.callunabooks.co.uk

Visitors welcome by appointment
Neil Gartshore, Moor Edge, 2 Bere Road
Wareham, BH20 4DD

Bristol Libraries

www.bristol.gov.uk/libraries

offer many congratulations to the Bristol Ornithological Club
on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

Bristol Reference Library holds a complete archive of '*Bird News*' and '*Bristol Ornithology*', and we continue to add new editions to the collection. It has been a pleasure to welcome researchers making use of these publications and we look forward to many more years of collaboration with local bird-lovers.

The Reference Library, on the first floor of Bristol Central Library, holds a very significant resource of Local Studies items, many of which relate to a range of local academic and recreational societies. Our trained staff are always happy to help with any enquiry and we encourage readers of this publication to visit the library and view our collections.

londoncameraexchange
Lakeside Optics



**Congratulations to the
Bristol Ornithological Club
on your 50th anniversary.**

**The London Camera Exchange
Sponsors of BOC Photo Competition
2016**



ABOUT TIME FOR AN UPGRADE?...WE OFFER GREAT PART EXCHANGE DEALS ON YOUR OLD EQUIPMENT

**DON'T MISS THE
2017 CHEW VALLEY BIRD FAIR**

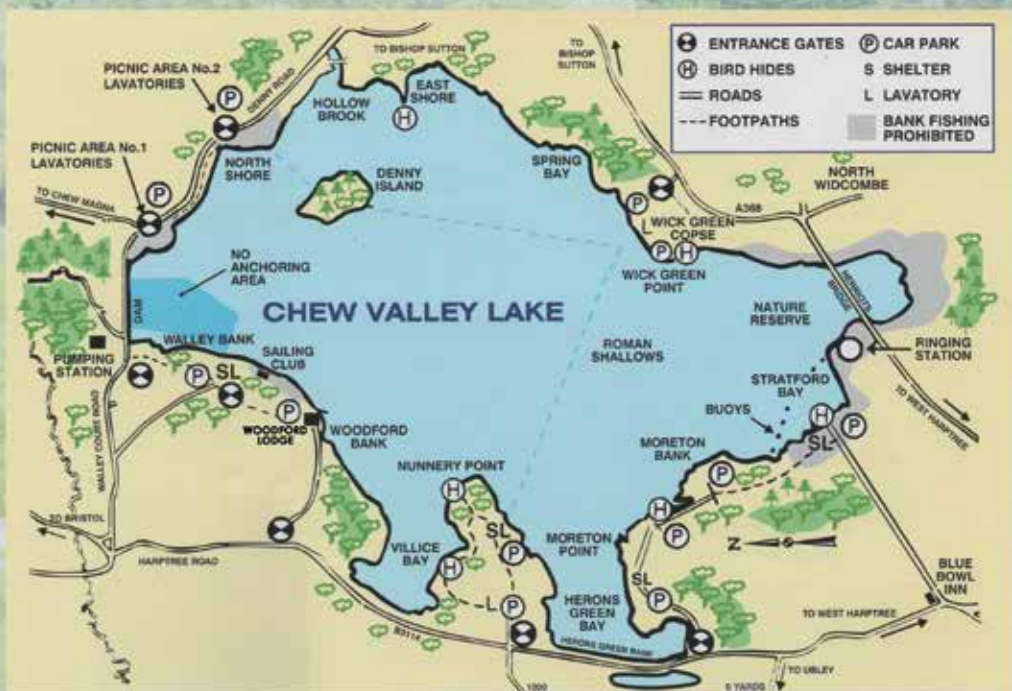
FRIDAY APRIL 21ST AND SATURDAY APRIL 22ND



www.lakesideoptics.co.uk 01275 332042

Find us next to the Salt & Malt restaurant Walley Lane, Chew Stoke BS40 8XS
Also at the London Camera Exchange 13 Cheap St. Bath BA1 1NB

At Lakeside Optics we have fantastic lake and woodland views, great walks, local bird hides, restaurant and ample parking - we are an excellent location to try out the latest binoculars and telescopes



Bird hide passes and car park permits available from us.



and finally...

A great many people have given their services over the past 50 years to ensure the Club's success:

- *Bird News* has appeared each month without a break [12 x 50 = 600];
- in addition, the Club has maintained its own journal, *Bristol Ornithology*;
- since 1979, it has partnered the Bristol Naturalists' Society to produce the *Avon Bird Report*;
- most months a small number of individuals meet as the Committee to plan the running of the Club's activities, headed by the Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. There have been around 550 such meetings. Certain stalwarts have put in many years on the Committee; and
- the programme of indoor meetings, Tuesday walks and field trips, both locally and further afield - and there have been too many of all of them to count up - could not have taken place without leaders and organisers.

At this landmark Anniversary, the Club offers to everyone who has contributed to this record a sincere and heartfelt

THANK YOU

