EDITORIAL

In what sometimes seems to be a rather futile attempt to keep the few remaining brain cells alive I am persuaded to dabble in crossword solving. Sometimes this is a hugely satisfying experience; equally it can be a deeply frustrating exercise – it all depends on whether you’re on the same wavelength as the setter. However there are also times when it can be surprisingly educational. Recently I came across a particularly intriguing clue – “Duck! It’s Captain Hook’s bo’sun”. Well, without being much of a crossword wizard, it wasn’t too difficult to establish that Captain Hook’s bo’sun was Mr Smee, but how was he a duck? At this point no doubt some would invoke the power of the Internet, but my instinct is to reach for my Desert Island Discs luxury – a dictionary – and according to my 11th edition Chambers “smee” is defined as “names for various duck, such as smew, pochard, wigeon and pintail”. I’m not sure whether the occasion will ever arise again to make good use of this nugget of information but I do find it fascinating that it seems that you can learn something new, in this case about birds, just about anywhere and anywhen! All you need is an open and enquiring mind (preferably with a few active brain cells left in it!).

John Parker

*** Please submit any material for the next issue by 11th July to –
e-mail: exegroupnews@btinternet.com or post: John Parker, 2 St Sevan Way Exmouth, EX8 5RE

Group Leader’s Report

What fantastic weather over the period since Easter, and I suspect like me you have been taking advantage. I have had several trips to my local patch, near Killerton. It is already good for butterflies, brimstone, peacock, small tortoiseshell and orange tip in good numbers. The migrant birds are also building up; a lot of chiffchaffs, blackcaps and a few house martins and swallows. I was asked by the editor of our local parish magazine to write something about the birds around our village so I decided to do a dawn walk and see what turned up. I started some 45 minutes before sunrise and it was quite chilly but I was cheered right away by the sound of a tawny owl calling not far away. However I am afraid that was pretty much the highlight. Obviously in the cold there is no insect activity so no hirundines were active but there was plenty of birdsong while it was too dark for the passerines to feed. Still it was an enjoyable 2 hour walk and home to a full english!

Below you will see the announcement that we have a new website. We now have a site linked onto the RSPB site, which has several advantages, not the least of which is that it saves us money. We owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Val Tressider who ran our previous site for a number of years and in spite of failing health would have been happy to continue. However our Newsletter Editor, John Parker, very kindly agreed to take on the challenge of the new system and has done a sterling job in setting it up. Well done John and many thanks.

Finally, by the time this edition is published our indoor talk season will have finished until next September, but we still need your support at the Spring Fayre in Topsham on Saturday 16 May. Lots of goodies and a vast selection of plants. See you there!

Roger Tucker
NEWS AND NOTES

Our Local Group website

The “digital age” began quite some time ago, even if it is still being embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm. So for quite a while now our Local Group has had a website, in order to provide ready access to information about the group and its activities. Currently this is located in some space that we rent on a private computer somewhere; for the most part we don’t have any need to know where. The main benefit of this arrangement has been that we’ve had almost total freedom to use the space however we pleased. And we have every reason to be grateful for the sterling efforts of Val Tressider, our “Webmaster”, who has made such good use of this capability for us over the years. Time marches on however; Val isn’t getting any younger (which of us is?), technology is changing all the time, and money is getting tighter – so we’ve been looking at our options.

In keeping with its significant communication role, the RSPB has a substantial website operation, and includes a pretty slick system for sharing some of its space with Local Groups. Because this space is part of the main site it’s safe and secure, run by a sympathetic “landlord”, with all maintenance (backups, bug-fixes, etc.) taken care of. It’s also designed to be operated by people who have no experience of website technology. And it’s free – in money terms at least.

For fairly understandable corporate branding reasons, the RSPB dictates the overall “look and feel” of each site – the overall structure of each group’s site is fairly rigidly standard. However, because it’s been around for a while now, it covers all the basics clearly and simply, and within this structure a group has complete control and responsibility for all the content.

So we’ve decided that it’s time to join many other Local Groups under the RSPB umbrella. This saves us some money, but does mean a change of address for our current web-site users. The new site can be found at …

www.rspb.org.uk/groups/exeter

The “old” site will be withdrawn in the near future.

Big Garden Birdwatch

Fewer finches visiting our gardens, but more visits made by wrens, robins and blackbirds

More than 585,000 people across the country spent an hour during the weekend of 24th and 25th January watching their garden and recording any feathered friends that made a flying visit - nearly 100,000 more than in 2014. In south west England 64,622 people took part. Overall more than 8.5 million birds were spotted, making it another bumper year. All birds in the top 20 showed an increase in numbers compared to 2014, apart from the three finches - chaffinch, goldfinch and greenfinch.

The average number of robins seen visiting gardens was at its highest since 2011, helping it climb three places to number 7, its joint highest ever position in the rankings. Blackbird was another climber, moving to number 3 and becoming the UK’s most widespread garden bird after being spotted in more than 90% of UK gardens. Despite being the UK’s smallest garden bird, twice as many people saw wrens in their garden this year compared to 2014.

However, two species in this year’s top 20 still give cause for concern. House sparrow and starling are still on the ‘red list’, highlighting just how valuable our gardens can be. The results also showed a drop in finch numbers this year. This continues a long term decline of 53% since 1979, which is likely due to Trichomonosis. The trichomonad parasite lives in the upper digestive tract of the bird, and its actions progressively block the throat; the bird dies of starvation. Birds with the disease show signs of general illness, for example lethargy and fluffed-up plumage. Finches are frequently seen to have matted, wet plumage around the face and beak, and uneaten food in and around the beak. If trichomonosis is suspected, it is recommended to temporarily stop putting out food, and leave bird baths dry until sick or dead birds are no longer found in the garden.
Other continuing declines include starlings and song thrushes, which have dropped by an alarming 80 and 79 per cent respectively since Birdwatch began in 1979. Both species are on the UK ‘red list’ meaning they are of the highest conservation concern. There was also a notable decline in the number of winter migrants spotted over the Birdwatch weekend. Redwing, Brambling and waxwing all dived down the rankings, although RSPB scientists believe this may have more to do with the good conditions on the continent over the winter, reducing the need for these birds to migrate to the UK.

There is slightly better news for the house sparrow, as its long term decline appears to have continued to slow, and it remains the most commonly spotted bird in our gardens. However, it remains a conservation concern as numbers have dropped by 57% since 1979.

The parallel event, Big Schools’ Birdwatch, continued the record breaking theme with more schools and children taking part than ever before. The UK-wide survey of birds in schools had almost 90,000 participants and revealed that blackbird is the most common playground visitor for the seventh year in a row. The top three was rounded off by starling and house sparrow, which is now at its highest-ever position in the Big Schools’ Birdwatch rankings.

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**Exe Estuary Reserves Report**

Winter saw the temperatures fall and the water levels rise, and the Exminster and Powderham marshes once again became home to large numbers of overwintering Canada Geese, and to equally numerous flocks of Teal and Widgeon. On the other side of the river Exe, large numbers of Curlew, Godwit and Dunlin could be seen from the new hide at Bowling Green Marsh. A series of upgrades are in store for the already very popular hide – create a new water feature and garden area, improve the opening hours, and provide family friendly interpretation boards. This will open the hide up to, and help gain the support of, even more members of the public in the area.

Meanwhile, our resident population of breeding lapwing - the most southerly in the country - have returned to the marshes, where they have been making their swooping display flights and distinctive courting calls. As usual, breeding behaviour will be intensively monitored, hoping for a continued improvement in breeding success. The predator exclusion fence on the Powderham site led to a dramatic increase in the success rate of fledglings raised per breeding pair so we’re hoping to see a similar success this year from a newly constructed enclosure on the Exminster side of the reserve. In the upcoming months, these fences will have to be regularly checked and maintained, and the underlying vegetation growth tightly controlled, to ensure their effectiveness.

A lagoon and specially constructed scrapes on the reserve provide valuable water features for many overwintering wetlands birds, and a network of water filled, reed lined ditches are home to a number of Reed and Sedge Warblers. These ditches are cleared of willow and other material on a rotational basis to maintain the water flow. However the pump that ensures the lagoon remains full enough to provide water to the ditches is proving troublesome, so it looks like we’re going to need a new one.

Moving away from the wetlands, the Powderham site has been managed to promote the population of resident Cirl Buntings, with semi-ploughed stubble crop fields providing food and shelter. Monitoring has revealed a near continuous presence of around a dozen Cirls on the site throughout the winter, and it is hoped they will choose to settle and breed on the reserve again this spring. The two bird feeders on the site have proved particularly successful, and the Cirls can regularly be seen at these points, along with a selection of Robins, Blue and Great Tits, Chaffinch, and Reed Buntings. The last few weeks have also seen Greenfinch and Goldfinch perching on the overhead power lines, and flitting in and out of the hedgerows. We have been scalloping the field borders to provide more borderline habitat for these birds, and hedgerows have been created and maintained to promote their future success. The nesting boxes on site (including an owl box that had been over-run with a hornet’s nest) have also all been cleaned and readied for the coming spring.

Further afield …

- At Labrador Bay, we have continued to encourage the Cirl Buntings by creating a mosaic of scrub, grassland and hedgerow, with the occasional log pile and small tree. Along with the crop stubble in nearby arable fields, this variety is particularly important as Cirls explore only a short distance from their nesting site. Recent work has focussed on the cutting, treatment and removal of a large amount of Buddleia, which has been encroaching on the open space. Over the coming
months, sheep grazing will help keep the scrub under control. Work has also been done to open up the footpaths on the site, improving the views and access in this lovely location.

- At Chapel Wood work has focused on the removal of invasive species, including Beech trees, whose dense canopy hinders the regeneration of the native woodland species. We are also trying to control access throughout the site, with some informal footpaths being blocked to minimise disturbance in sensitive areas. At the same time, work is being planned to refurbish the official footpath, including reconstruction of the steps along this route, to continue to make this great site accessible.

Tom Pace (Exe Estuary Reserves)

Aylesbeare Reserves Report

The new year continued the usual round of winter work: clearing scrub and coppicing gorse – usually cold but with the comfort of a bonfire to huddle round at lunchtime. On our own patch Harpford East and Lower Woolcombes attracted a fair bit of attention but we also had sessions on Firebeacon Hill, for Sidmouth Town Council, and in Blackhill Quarry, helping Aggregate Industries to prepare the worked out areas for return to public access.

We try to use a variety of management techniques to maintain plenty of slightly different habitats, and one of these is controlled burning - or “Swaling”. Burning the older heather and gorse rejuvenates it by making space for new seedlings (whereas mowing causes regrowth from old roots). Some nutrients are returned to the soil as ash, but there is a net loss to the smoke. Swaling needs dry conditions with very little wind, so that it’s possible to light the vegetation but keep the flames under control. All too often our winter weather is unsuitable but this year it was kind so, after mowing suitable firebreaks around the area to be burnt (with a special mower which picks up the debris) and with the help of 30 students from Bicton College, we managed some successful burns.

The little herd of Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies stolidly survived the winter, keeping the vegetation under control. We now have GPS tracking on one, so I can find out where they are from the comfort of the office! Someone is still tying one of the gates open, endangering the lives of the ponies and setting up potential road accidents. If anyone finds an open gate, please close it and let us know.

By March Spring had definitely sprung: the snowdrops were over but were followed by wild daffodils (we had a good show on Venn Ottery Common), primroses all over the place and then early purple orchids. All the butterflies which over-winter as adults were seen on the wing during the sunny bits of March: comma, small tortoiseshell, red admiral, peacock and (my favourite) the brimstone. Some of them will be sunning themselves on handy stones, but the brimstones always seem to be busy flying very deliberately...somewhere. Bumble bee queens have been active for a while now: the first ones out in my garden were the white-tailed, now buff-tailed and tree bees are more in evidence, while the appearance of smaller worker white-tails show that those queens have already found nest sites and raised young. On the reserve the heath bumblebees will make the most of the heather flowers.

With the breeding season really underway now the winter work program has finished. So remember: any fires you see now are unintentional and need to be reported to the fire brigade.

Nicky Hewitt (Administrator)

Nature: This general election’s missing issue?

West Country’s leading nature charities unite to put nature on the agenda

The National Trust, RSPB and The Wildlife Trusts are calling on people across the West Country to put nature at the heart of debate in the run up to May’s General Election and encourage candidates to support nature. Together the three charities have produced South West Nature 2015 - a new website that details landscapes, wildlife and the issues these face, across all 55 Westminster constituencies in the south west.
Speaking for the partnership, Harry Barton (CEO of Devon Wildlife Trust) said; “Nature is the missing issue from this general election. We need greater political commitment to nature’s recovery and fundamental changes in how we value, use and interact with nature. This is as relevant to the stunning wildlife we have in our seas as it is to our internationally famous landscapes. What happens in the next parliament, and the decisions our elected representatives make, are going to be crucial to the nature we cherish and depend on.”

The charities are encouraging people to visit the website – www.swnature2015.org - or to find it on their local Wildlife Trust website, and discover the big nature issues where they live, then ask their local parliamentary candidates to show that they care about nature and that they will work individually and within their party to look after wildlife and natural spaces.

Sarah O’Brien, SW External Affairs Advisor speaking for the National Trust said: “The South West has some of the country’s most stunning landscapes and richest habitats, all surrounded by our world class coastline. Our natural environment is important in its own right, but it also underpins our economy, health and our wellbeing. Yet nature is in decline. It is vital that we halt this decline and secure nature’s recovery in a generation, not only for its own sake, but for what it does for us.”

Simon Brenman speaking for the SW Wildlife Trusts said: “Our environment is under more pressure than ever before. The State of Nature report found that 60% of UK species we know about are in decline and many of the “free”, but invaluable, services provided by nature are under threat, such as pollination, resilience to flooding, clean water supply, and food production.”

The charities, who have the support of hundreds of thousands of people across the West Country, say that nature is crucial to our economy, health and wellbeing.

Mark Robins, speaking for the RSPB in the South West said; “The West Country trades on the relative quality of its natural environment. It’s one of the principle reasons why people choose to live, work and do business here.”

“But we need leadership, not only to commit to the recovery of nature, but also to make the most of the opportunities a thriving natural environment provides for healthier and more prosperous communities”.

To find out more visit www.swnature2015.org.

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**A couple of outdoor meeting updates from Richard Swinbank …**

*** Nightjar walk at Stover Country Park ***

As a change from our usual nightjar walk on the East Devon commons, we will be visiting Stover Country Park on the evening of **Thursday 11th June**. Jon Avon, who is a ranger at the park and a former Chairman of Devon Birds, has very kindly agreed to lead the walk for us. We will meet at the visitor centre at **8.30 pm**, and take a walk around part of the park, before waiting for the nightjars to appear as it starts to get dark. Please come prepared with insect repellent and a torch. A bat detector would also be useful if you have one.

There is no charge for this walk, apart from the normal car parking charge at Stover, and there is no booking deadline as such, but the number of places is limited. Please contact me as soon as possible to book your place, preferably via email at richard.swinbank444@btinternet.com. Or, if you don’t have email access, please phone me on 01404 813666 (evenings or weekends). If you find that you can’t come after all, please remember to let me know.

*** Birdwatching trip to Suffolk ***

In late January we plan to run a birdwatching trip to Suffolk, visiting the RSPB flagship reserve, and home of Springwatch, at Minsmere, together with other local sites. As this newsletter goes to press, we haven’t finalised the arrangements, but we expect to be staying for 4 nights at a hotel conveniently located in the pleasant seaside town of Southwold.
I will shortly be sending out further details of the trip to the “Outdoor meetings” mailing list, and they will also be posted on the (new) website. To subscribe to the mailing list, or just request details of the trip, please contact me at richard.swinbank444@btinternet.com. If you don’t have internet access, phone me on 01404 813666, and I can post a booking form with further details to you, or ask me at one of the outdoor meetings.

**Items of Interest** – a couple of items you may have missed

**Record breaking little terns**

2014 was the most successful year for the little tern colony at Chesil Beach since records began, building on the prior success of the partnership project. Following serious decline in breeding pairs, a group of conservationists decided something must be done. The Chesil Beach little tern project is a partnership between the RSPB, Chesil and Fleet Nature Reserve, the Crown Estate, Dorset Wildlife Trust, Natural England, EU PANACHE Interreg Project and the Portland Court Leet.

Thirty three pairs of little terns occupied the colony on Chesil Beach in 2014 and as many as 60 chicks made it to fledging: an all-time record for the colony and a testament to the perseverance and commitment of the team who watch over the terns. The RSPB-led team relies heavily on volunteers to assist in protecting the terns from a variety of potential dangers.

RSPB Project officer Morgan Vaughan has affirmed the importance of the invaluable volunteer base; “The commitment and dedication of our volunteer warden team has never ceased to amaze me. Local people want to see their little terns succeed and this translated into well over 1200 volunteering hours given this year”.

The little terns migrate from the West African coast to breed in Britain but are threatened by a number of factors such habitat loss, rising sea levels and predation. They are also very susceptible to changing weather conditions which can have a noted impact on breeding success. As they are the only colony of little terns in the South West of England, helping guarantee the security of the Chesil breeding site through the project, which includes electric fencing, makes all the difference in fledging success for the little tern, one of the UK’s rarest seabirds. The major factor in the terns’ success has been the implementation of round the clock warden patrols. This is vital to minimize disturbance from predators and people who unwittingly might stray too close to these ground nesting birds.

Securing funding for forthcoming years will now be the next hurdle in order to ensure a continuing bright future for the only little tern colony in the South West.

**Pig power**

In October last year the RSPB recruited the help of some unusual volunteers to help give nature a home on one of its reserves. A herd of six Mangalitsa pigs were introduced to its Arne nature reserve, in Dorset, to help restore a seven hectare site back to its natural heathland through wild grazing.

Unlike traditional pigs found in the UK, the Mangalitsa pig is unusual as it grows a hairy ‘fleece’ much like a sheep and is the only pig in England to have this distinctive long coat. These six rare breed pigs and six Berkshires were to get their snouts stuck into the land at Arne – covered in bracken and pine needles up to six inches deep in places – for around six months, the aim being to create a perfect habitat for species like the Dartford warbler, stonechats, smooth snake, nightjar and sand lizard.

Mark Singleton, RSPB Dorset reserves operations manager, said: “Usually we would hire diggers and other machines to remove all the pine needles from the site but these pigs are able to do the same job in a much more environmentally friendly way, and are much more fun.

David Burton, senior advisor at Natural England, said: “There are many benefits to conservation grazing. Grazing animals helped shape many of our semi-natural habitats, which developed rich and diverse wildlife communities. Our grasslands, meadows, moorland and heathland habitats were all shaped by human activity and grazing is often the most effective and sustainable way to maintain them and their huge variety of plants and wildlife.”
One of our main fundraising events of the year will take place on
Saturday 16th May from 10 am until 12 noon
in the social area of St Margaret’s Church in Topsham

As well as supporting us on the day, you can help by donating …

books, toys and games;
bric-a-brac and quality items;
toiletries and jewellery;
cakes and other home-made produce;
bottles for the bottle stall

… and of course PLANTS!! – house plants, bedding plants and small shrubs are all needed.

Refreshments, a raffle and RSPB Sales Goods will also be available …

… and admission is still only 20p!

You can bring any suitable items to Topsham on the Friday (4-5pm), or on the day from 8.30am, or deliver them to us in advance or, if this is a problem, we may be able to collect them from you.

Please contact: Marilyn and Chris Steel at 12 St Loyes Rd, Heavitree, Exeter EX2 5HL.
Tel: 01392 258786 or email: csteel_steelfoundry@hotmail.com

Thank you in advance for any help you can give. We hope to see you there, with your family, friends and neighbours!

Marilyn Steel

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Congratulations to the following winners for the last few months.

January
Mr and Mrs Swain
Ms Jane Spencer
Mr and Mrs Clews
Mr and Mrs Babb
Mr M Shepherd

February
Mrs E Saunders
Ms J Spencer
Mrs V Palmer
Mr and Mrs Murray
Mr and Mrs Avery

February (extra draw)
Mr and Mrs Eldridge
Mr P Fogg
Miss J S Gant
Miss S Bowers

March
Mr and Mrs Shipley
Mr and Mrs Murray
Mrs P Hancock
Mr RH Brennan

Not already in the Club? Like the chance to be a winner, as well as give just a little bit more to the RSPB? Then contact Liz Saunders (see details below) – she’d love to hear from you.
LOOKING BACK – TALKS AND TRIPS

Tuesday 13th January, indoor meeting – “Africa 100 Not Out” by Mike Mockler

On a cold, wet and windy evening, with flashes of lightning thrown in, it was very tempting to stay at home. But those who made the effort to come to this talk were well rewarded.

Mike explained that the title of his talk came about when, having completed 100 visits to Africa, he was asked to write an article about his experiences. This must have been some time ago, as his total of visits is now about 120! So no doubts that we had an experienced speaker! Mike has a great love of the 4 countries in which he leads wildlife trips, namely Zambia, Namibia, Botswana and Tanzania. He puts this down to the scenery, the wildlife and the people. He does not like mass tourism and his trips are all to less frequented areas and smaller, but nonetheless luxurious, camps. He spends time watching wildlife, not just 'ticking' them and moving on to look for the next species!

He started with the sad fact that there are now no black rhino left in Zambia, due to poaching, and he reinforced this with a picture of scores of skulls laid out. In Kenya however, they are going to great lengths to protect their rhinos, which was a bit more encouraging. And from there on, his talk was one of almost entirely pure delight.

The 4 countries are so different, particularly Namibia with its desert scenery and huge sand dunes. Game is sparser here, as one might expect, but, surprisingly, elephants have adapted to survive in these conditions. We also saw leopard and Thornycroft giraffe.

On to Botswana, one of Mike's favourite countries. It is almost dead flat, containing wetlands and also a dry part which was once an inland lake. Here he met up with a family of meerkats and spent much time with them, becoming accepted as 'one of the family'. To the extent that, when the alarm was given by the lookout meerkat that there was danger from above in the form of a Marshall eagle, the female remained agitated until Mike conformed with the other meerkats and looked up and watched the eagle. These meerkat photos were simply delightful. In fact, wonderful shots of many colourful birds, also mammals, particularly cheetah with cubs and the hard-to-see aardvark.

After the break, Mike took us into Tanzania and the Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area. The crater lake area is particularly important for rhino survival as access is difficult. Lovely picture of male kori bustard displaying, also one of white-crowned shrikes, boldly attacking a chanting goshawk. Then on to the huge Serengeti National Park, famous for the wildebeest migration. Mike was lucky to be present when a wildebeest was giving birth. The youngster was standing within 5 minutes, suckling within 10 minutes and able to run with the herd within 15 minutes of birth - all beautifully captured on camera. More heart-warming shots, this time of a pride of lions lazing. How does he get so close whilst the lions remain totally unconcerned? Amazing. And then there were the elephants; 3 generations of females and a calf standing on a slippery bank by the river. The calf slipped into the water and the look of concern on the face of the its older sibling was incredible, as were the shots of it and the calf's mother using their trunks to get the little one back up onto the bank.

Superb photos of a cheetah at speed, showing how it stretches out to full length with back curved downwards, then with back arched as the hind paws go far in front of the fore paws. Finally, an exceptional photo of cheetah with 6 cubs. Mike had taken the cricketer David Gower on safari and had found this family feeding on a carcase and somehow - he didn't tell us how! - he made them all look up simultaneously at the camera. Apparently this photo has pride of place in David's home!

I cannot do justice to this talk on paper. The pleasure was in the content and superb quality of the photos, Mike's obvious empathy for the animals and birds, and the friendly but very professional delivery of his presentation.

Thank you Mike, and also Carolyn for arranging this very special evening.

Pat Thomson
**Saturday 17th January, field trip to – Broadsands and Brixham**

Our trip to Broadsands didn’t start off too well. It was an icy morning and we arrived to find the car park was still locked, though it was well past 8 am. Parking is not permitted on the road near the car park, so most people took their cars up the hill rather than risk a fine, though at the cost of a really slippery walk back down.

Once we had assembled, we could see some good birds in the nearby trees, including a Goldcrest and a Blackcap. We then set off round the rear part of the car where I had seen a Yellow-browed Warbler a couple of weeks earlier, but no luck this time. A walk along the stream did produce a flock of Goldfinches and a Chiffchaff, though. We then looked for the Cirl Buntings where Mike Langman often leaves seed for them. After dog walkers and a runner had moved on, the birds gradually started to appear, first some Dunnocks and Robins, then both Cirl and Reed Buntings. Then Mike himself appeared and gave us an update on what was about – he hadn’t seen the Yellow-browed Warbler either, but there was plenty out on the sea.

And so to the sea – there were quite a few Great Crested Grebes, then we spotted some Black-necked Grebes, and a distant Velvet Scoter. Further scanning around showed a Grey Heron on the cliff, with a nearby Peregrine. We continued our walk around the headland towards Elberry Cove. A stop on the headland revealed the juvenile Red-necked Grebe that Mike had told us to look out for and a Great Northern Diver. Elberry Cove itself didn’t produce anything extra, but the walk back to the car park gave us good views of a singing Song Thrush.

We decided to head for Brixham Harbour for the afternoon. As on last year’s walk, we ate our sandwiches in Battery Gardens, which overlook the harbour entrance. The local residents keep the bird feeders well topped up, giving us plenty to look at, including Long-tailed Tits and Bullfinches. The walk from the Gardens round the harbour and to the end of the breakwater is quite a long way, but we were rewarded by close up views of Turnstones, behaving like the flocks of pigeons that were also feeding by the quays, almost under the feet of passers-by. There was a Blackcap singing its heart out from an ivy-covered wall, but, try as we might, we couldn’t spot it. Our main aim was to see Purple Sandpipers on the breakwater, and eventually we did see some after walking to the far end. There were also a few distant Guillemots (a very small fraction of the hundreds that gather on the cliffs the other side of Berry Head). Then we had the long walk back to the cars, satisfied by a good day’s birding.

*Richard Swinbank*

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**Sunday 1st February, boat trip on – The River Exe**

A lot of people assembled on the quay, mostly looking like Michelin men. It was sunny, but there was a very cold wind. We were well prepared for the cold, which was wise.

We started to go out to the area round the area of Dawlish Warren. We saw a large number of Cormorants but very few Shags, as they have gone to nesting sites. There were Great Black-backed Gulls trying to break open mussels, and also a lot of Oystercatchers. On the area near Powderham, where the Kenn joins the Exe, we saw the usual Greenshank. We were also delighted to find a Spotted Redshank that sometimes goes to that area too.

The showiest birds were the Avocets, hundreds of them. They were far up the river, and for a long time they were settled on the water’s edge. Then, as the boat got nearer, they took flight, and were stunning especially in the sunshine. The black and white wings were dramatic, and ideal for photography. They really stole the show, and we were very lucky to see so many together.

The other dramatic birds were the Red-breasted Mergansers. There were about twenty of them and they showed well, both swimming and flying. The males are very smart with dark green head and a white collar. The females have a red head, and both have a crest which sticks up, rather like a punk hair style. They come here in winter from Scandinavia where they breed. There were small flocks of Dunlin flying alongside the boat, and overtaking it, with their silver under-wings shining in the light.
For me the fun bird is the Sanderling. They are small white birds, rather compact, which run up and down the water's edge, in a very distinctive way, because the lack a hind toe. They are winter visitors, and some are passage migrants, between Siberia or Greenland and South Africa. The reason for all this rushing around is because they eat small molluscs, worms and crustaceans that live in the sand at the water’s edge. They have great charm.

It was a lovely day on the river, if cold. No great unusual birds, but lovely to see the usual suspects all the same.

Ann Crawford

Tuesday 10th February, indoor meeting –
“The Wildlife of Devon from Shore to Moor” by John Walters

John is a wildlife artist, photographer and writer who lives in Buckfastleigh on the edge of Dartmoor. The talk covered everything from insects through amphibians, mammals and birds.

He showed photographs of many of these including frogs changing colour once they arrive in the ponds to mate and spawn. Amazing pictures of the octopus fungus changing from what appears to be a large white ball into a bright red fungus with long octopus like tendrils. We saw shelled slugs eating worms and ash black slugs, the world's largest, and the amazing mating process. We learnt that there are 270 different species of bee in the UK, including cuckoo bees and ivy bees which cross the English Channel. Apparently only female bees can sting, a tip that we all need! The amazing heath potter wasp, which can be found on Bovey Heath, which forms a pot, a bit like a Grecian urn, in which it lays its egg, then fills the pot with caterpillars as food for the larva before sealing the pot which the grub eventually breaks out.

John has tremendous patience when filming or photographing, but also has a few tricks to avoid having to sit for hours waiting, for say a chrysalis to hatch by taking it home and putting it in the fridge and then bringing it out on a warm day so that it hatches almost immediately. So don't forget to check what's in the fridge before having a midnight snack in the dark!

Roger Tucker

Sunday 15th February, field trip to – Axe Estuary Wetlands

10 of us assembled in the car park on a very grey day. It was also quite cold, as it was so dank. However, off we went. It turned out to be a good day out, as after a short time the sun can out, it was good company and Don led us, and his enthusiasm and knowledge were infectious, and so we all learnt a lot about the reserve, and the birds present. We saw most of the usual suspects but nothing unusual, which is what was expected.

We started off towards the Tower Hide, and on the way had an excellent view of a Goldcrest, in the brambles. We had a good look round from the hide. There were a lot of Teal around; they are such pretty little ducks and the green on their heads and wings are very attractive at this time of the year. Then to the Island Hide, where a Snipe was sighted, as well usual birds such as Shelduck and Redshanks. We went to the information centre, where a lot of us had a welcome cup of coffee, and admired the Egret just outside the hide. Then we moved on to Colyford Common where there were a lot of Canada Geese, and Wigeon on the fields.

After lunch, we went to the beach to sea watch. As we arrived Don was telling us that often flocks of Wigeon desert the fields and go to sea. On cue, there was a flight of them, which then settled on the sea. There were a lot of gulls out to sea, but too far to see if there were any rarities among them. There was not a lot else except a small flock of distant black birds, maybe Scooters.

Finally, we looked up the river but there was not a lot there. Thank you Don for giving us such an enjoyable day.

Ann Crawford
Saturday 28th February, field trip to – Chew Valley Lake

This weekend’s bird watching trip was to Chu Valley - great, I thought, never been to China before! So I eagerly packed my bins, scope, and sandwiches only to find we were going to Chew Valley Lake in Somerset, eerm! It’s nearly the same. Anyway, the day started off a bit dull but things looked up when we arrived at Herriot’s Bridge as we spotted many ducks such as Pochard, Tufted Duck, Teal, and Mallard. There were also some great views of the many Goosanders and Great Crested Grebes but the best sight was the beautiful Kingfisher in all its glory perched on a branch waiting for its next lunch.

Before our lunch at the Chew Valley Lake Centre, we had a stroll around the woods, where we had some great views of a Goldcrest going in and out of the ivy. We entered one of the hides with views across the lake where we spotted a party of Goldeneyes and other ducks. On the way back to the cars, a Treecreeper treated us to a display of how to climb a tree. After lunch we moved further round the lake with views of a couple of raptors - a hovering Kestrel and a majestic Buzzard. We finished a fantastic bird-watching day off with a two-minute sky display by a Great White Egret.

Richard Winfield

Tuesday 10th March, indoor meeting – “Birds Around the Exe Estuary” by Dave Smallshire

A special thanks to Dave Smallshire for stepping in at the last minute when the programmed speaker was unwell.

The Exe estuary is large and shallow covering about 20 square kms. The construction of the railway and canal meant that the estuary was constrained and much of the salt marsh was lost. It does however have a wide range of habitats and a whole raft of protective legislation. In the winter there are regularly more than 7000 wildfowl, 9000 waders and 14,000 gulls giving a total of approximately 30,000 birds. A monthly count has been made since 1980 and the wader numbers are slightly down from when they started the counts, which may be due to the birds not coming as far across Britain if the weather is milder on the East Coast or in the Netherlands; numbers peak from November to February. Wildfowl numbers have shown a steady increase, they peak from October to January mainly due to the widgeon.

At the mouth of the estuary, Pole Sands and Dawlish Warren play an important part in protecting the estuary. Dave took us on a short virtual cruise of the estuary showing the many different birds that are found in the varying habitats. He showed us pictures of many of the birds we commonly see and also the occasional rarities. Dawlish Warren in particular is a great place for unusual birds. As a confirmed gull lover he was lucky enough to see 10 species of gull in one day.

Dave finished up by showing us a most interesting map of where the birds come from to the estuary. Over 300 species have been recorded around the estuary.

It was a most interesting talk and we learned a lot about the estuary just on our doorstep.

Melanie Parker

Wednesday 18th March, field trip to – the Otter Estuary

On a bright mid-March walk 8 birders collected to walk part of the Otter. Unfortunately the visibility was not good with a haze lying over the sea making sea watching rather difficult with only the gulls, cormorants and shags being clearly visible together with one guillemot. A wheatear was seen on the cricket field and a ringed plover just beyond. Good views of some of the passerines as we walked up stream with several wildfowl on view. Later, on the mud we had an excellent view of a spotted redshank and redshanks and a common gull flying down the estuary.

Roger Tucker
Sunday 29th March, field trip to – Labrador Bay

What a morning it was! The walk lasted less than 40 minutes, since the rain and wind were so bad that it was only good weather for ducks, as they say. Definitely not for bird watchers!

We met John White, the local volunteer warden and our event guide, at the car park. He furnished us with facts about the RSPB reserve, and told us that over 20 pairs of Cirl Buntings had bred last year - what a success story! Some birds have been relocated to Cornwall to start a new colony there.

Despite the weather, we did manage to find 16 bird species, including several Cirl Buntings, in that short time - a success story of our own.

Richard Winfield

Did You Know …

A beaver’s strong and muscular tail has a variety of physical and metabolic uses.

- It provides propulsion and acts as a rudder when swimming.
- If it feels threatened it will slap its tail loudly on the surface of the water to warn others before promptly diving out of sight. The sound travels well above and below water and may also let any predator know it has been spotted or scare off whatever has upset the beaver.
- In winter, the tail is used as a fat store, allowing the beaver to draw on extra calories if the food cache of submerged wood doesn’t meet all its needs.
- In summer, a beaver’s thick fur can be too warm so the exposed tail helps them to regulate their body heat.
- If it’s busy and building up a sweat on land it can stay cool by keeping its tail in water, even when the air temperature reaches 25 degrees Celsius.
- On land the tail can act as an extra leg, providing support or balance when a beaver is propped up on its back legs gnawing on a tree or while using the special grooming claws on its hind feet.
- Finally, there’s a slightly less savoury use … Beavers, like other rodents and rabbits, are caecotrophic - they ingest green faeces and pass food through their gut twice to extract as many nutrients as possible. The tail makes a handy plate for eating these green faeces as they emerge. Nice!

LOOKING FORWARD – TALKS AND TRIPS

Outdoor Meetings Programme

For outdoor meetings, weatherproof clothing and waterproof footwear are recommended.
- Barn Owl = car share meeting point, SX 962928

Tue 12th May 2015 : a morning trip to … Exminster Marshes

A considerable amount of work has been done in recent years to improve the habitat in this RSPB reserve. We will take a morning walk around the marshes, hoping to see some spring migrants as well as waders and wildfowl. If the weather is fine, there will be an option to stay on for a walk to the Powderham marshes side of the reserve too.

Meet: 9.30 am at the RSPB car park (SX953872)
No toilets
Sun 24th May 2015 : a day trip to … Bennett’s Cross and Challacombe

Full day meeting, with a circular walk to Challacombe, looking for moorland birds including Wheatear and Whinchat. Challacombe is a good area to find Redstarts and Spotted Flycatchers, as well as the Swallows and House Martins that nest in the farm buildings.

Meet: 8.30 am at the Barn Owl (SX962928) or 9.30 am at Bennett’s Cross car park, on the B3212 1 km north-east of Warren House Inn (SX680817)

No toilets

Bring and carry lunch

Thu 11th June 2015 : an evening trip to … Stover Country Park

As a change from our normal nightjar walk, we will be visiting Stover Country Park for an evening walk led by one of the rangers. We will take a walk around the park as dusk falls, hoping to see a variety of wildlife, including bats as well as nightjars. Please bring a torch and insect repellent. A bat detector would be useful if you have one.

Meet: 8.30 pm at Stover visitor centre (SX 833750). Car park charge.

Limited numbers - please book in advance with Richard Swinbank (richard.swinbank444@btinternet.com)

Sun 28th June 2015 : an all day trip to … Ham Wall and the Somerset Levels

In the morning we will visit the RSPB Ham Wall reserve, where we should be able to see some of the Bitterns that now breed regularly in the reserve. In the afternoon we will visit either the neighbouring Shapwick Heath, or perhaps another reserve elsewhere on the levels (to be decided).

Meet: 8.30 am at the Barn Owl (SX962928) or 9.45 am at the new Ham Wall car park (ST449396)

Toilets at Ham Wall may be open by the time of our visit

Bring lunch

Sat 11th July 2015 : a morning trip to … Venn Ottery Common

As an alternative to our usual summer walk at Aylesbeare, we will be visiting the nearby Venn Ottery common. Our morning walk will take us to both the RSPB reserve and the neighbouring Devon Wildlife Trust reserve. We will look for a range of specialities, including the rare Southern Damselfly, dragonflies and butterflies as well as birds.

Meet: 9.30 am at Venn Ottery Common car park (SY066915), on road between Venn Ottery village and the B3180. Limited parking, so please share cars. No toilets

Sun 16th August 2015 : a morning trip to … Black Hole Marsh and Colyford Common

This will be a morning visit to Black Hole Marsh and Colyford Common reserves, where some rare migrant waders have previously been seen at this time of year.

Meet: 9.30 am at Axe Wetlands car park, accessed through Seaton Cemetery (SY249915)

Toilets and drinks at the field studies base

I have a mailing list for e-mail reminders and updates about the outdoor meeting programme. If you would like me to include you in this list, please e-mail me at richard.swinbank444@btinternet.com

Richard Swinbank

giving nature a home
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