

BIRDWATCHING *Group*

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NEWSLETTER MARCH 2023

TONIGHT'S MEETING (16th March)

The meeting will commence with our Annual general Meeting, starting at 7:15pm.

The AGM is your opportunity to express any comments (or complaints) on the way that the Group is run and to make suggestions.

The Committee are always keen to attract new members onto the Committee. We need new members to bring fresh ideas to the running of the Group. Being a Committee member is not a difficult task; we only meet for a couple of hours in the evening about 3 times a year. We have vacancies on the Committee.

Our speaker tonight is John Gardner with a talk entitled "Bird Life at Home"

John is a professional commercial photographer but has had a life-long interest in birds since being a small boy. He became semi-professional as a wildlife photographer with his work occurring in books, magazines and on calendars. He is president of Wakefield Naturalists' Society and undertakes a large amount of bat conservation work.

The talk "Bird Life at Home" is a look at the birds he's been photographing in the UK over the past 12 months as he hasn't been abroad since lockdown. Although it is mostly Yorkshire birds, there is a wide variety of birds included in the review, some of which illustrate just how much the bird life has changed over the past 50yrs. Within 30 mins drive from his home it is possible to see breeding spoonbill, little egret, black necked-grebe, Cetti's warbler, red kite and even common cranes!

John last visited us in March of last year.

Please welcome John for what I am sure will be a very entertaining evening.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2022 – 2023

Introduction

After the last two years of Covid restrictions and uncertainty during the 2021-22 season it was a with much more optimistic outlook that our new season started and some sort of normality could return to our planned programme, albeit with the changed day of the indoor meetings from Fridays to Thursdays. Our first meeting on the 1st September was anticipated to be a good indicator as to how the change impacted attendance and membership numbers.

It was reassuring to see so many familiar faces return and an excellent turn out for the meeting.

We did not realise that the Covid fallout wave still had to hit us with other issues.

Membership

It is good to see that our membership numbers have gradually started to build up again as confidence in social mixing has grown, and to see old faces returning as well as new members joining. Currently there are 38 registered members. This is still below the pre pandemic numbers but is a good sign that things are returning back. We hope to build on these numbers and if you have friends or relatives with an interest in birding encourage them to join, they would be made very welcome.

Indoor meetings

Whilst our original programme of indoor meetings had been planned well in advance of the change of meeting day to Thursday it did mean that our whole programme had to be re-planned and one to one contact made with each of the speakers to see if they could accommodate the change, As you can imagine this was a lengthy and frustrating process. The job fell to Jenny I who had just agreed to take on the Booking secretary's role. Needless to say, not without some difficulty and time she achieved it. The programme comprised of

1st Sept	Tony Parker	Moore Nature Reserve
13th Oct	Paul Hobson	Coast and Islands
3rd Nov	Keith Offord	Skydancers
1st Dec	Robert D	Jamaica
12th Jan	Mike Lane	A Digital Lane Returns Again
9th Feb	Brian Anderson	Feathers and Wings
16th Mar	John Gardner	Bird Life at Home [tonight]
4th May	T&E Hoare	Swifts [still to come]

In all the presentations made what is quite notable is the outstanding quality of the digital photography.

Thanks to Jenny, our programme secretary for providing a varied and wide ranging series of speakers under difficult circumstances.

Field Trips

The Bird Group is the only such group within the area that organises a full programme of day field trips by coach. It is one of the reasons why the group is so valued by its members.

The Guild has had to revise its financial arrangements, post COVID due to the need to cover banking charges. All Charities with a turnover in excess of £10000 pa are charged by banks to operate current accounts and this has meant the Guild has to pay a fee for cash deposits and withdrawals, card usage, cheques and transfers.

To cover this we and others are asked to pay £2.75 pp to the Guild for each trip. Additionally every trip must be self financing and no trip can run at a loss. This has impacted on the way we run our coach field trips and has meant that we have raised the cost to £30 pp per trip and perhaps more significantly has meant that unless the trip has sufficient numbers to cover its costs it has to be cancelled.

To ensure that the groups membership was aware and supportive of these new arrangements we undertook a survey. The outcome was clear and supportive of the committee. From March 2023 coach trips will be at a fixed price of £30 payable in full before the trip and would not be refundable unless it is the committee who cancel. It does mean that if the trips are to remain viable and continue we need the members to support them.

Weekend Away 2023

Another element of the WGBG is the annual weekend trip away organised by Barbara. Its no small feat to plan, as well as a lot of responsibility taken on by Barbara. Organising the itinerary, timetable, accommodation, travel, access to reserves, collecting the funds and ensuring that all the finances balance at the end and meet with the Guild's Financial regulations. As an unpaid volunteer much credit must go to Barbara for taking on the task and making such an enjoyable and relaxing event. Mention must also go to Steve M who greatly assists Barbara in the itinerary and transport for the trip.

The 2023 weekend was to Somerset with visits to Slimbridge, Avalon, Ham Wall and ending with Steart Marshes on the Sunday. To my regret I was unable to make it. Key sightings included Bar-headed Goose, Great White Egrets, Cetti's Warblers, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Glossy Ibis and a very spectacular Starling murmuration. Everyone will have their own star sighting but from what I heard a last minute sighting of a Spoonbill rated very highly.

Newsletter

It has been a busy year keeping in track of the various changes that have occurred and keeping in touch with the membership and informing them has been an important element. Without the help of Robert's editorship and circulation of the Newsletter it would have made communications more difficult.

It is the members' Newsletter and as such is a great way to share birding trip tips and appearances. Please send any articles or local birding information to Robert.

Whilst hard copies of the Newsletter are available at the meetings the preferred method of delivery is online and we encourage all members to sign up.

WGBG WhatsApp Group – Cheshire Birders

2022 saw the setting up of our own on line messaging service. With 28 members signed up it has been well used and provides a fast way of sharing information instantly. New members who wish to participate and to be added, speak to David S who acts as the administrator of the group. Thanks to David setting it up.

Christmas Lunch and Buffet

On the 1st December we were given a talk on Jamaica birding by Robert and this was followed by the annual Christmas buffet provided by Jenny. The buffet along with our Christmas Lunch is a good chance for members to socialise and catch up. This year's Lunch followed our morning car trip to Marbury Country Park. David Swann and Julie Finney made arrangements for us to eat at the Bergamot and Spinner which proved an excellent way to finish our birding year.

Conclusion

The post Covid fallout is still affecting all of us, and whilst the worst effects of the pandemic appear to be behind us it has brought about changes. WGBG membership numbers are building again but we are still some way short of the pre COVID levels. Whilst we have responded to a number of changes and without a negative effect we still need to increase our membership. As a committee we do try to encourage people to join, however it remains that word of mouth remains one of the best ways of attracting new members.

To this end, if each registered member were able to recruit one other new member or encourage a lapsed member to rejoin we would be in a considerably better position. For our coach trips to continue we need to ensure that the numbers add up, and the larger the membership the greater chance of that being met. Currently it is always touch and go for Steve to hit the 25-30 per trip need to be viable. The bigger the membership the greater the chance of the numbers being met.

The message is

1. Can you recruit a new member(s)?
2. As an existing member, please support the coach trips or we could lose this unique element of our Group

One last message, we need a viable and active Committee to run the group. Currently there are two vacancies so if you feel you are able to give a small amount of time to help out please consider doing so. If you need more information on what is entailed speak to myself or any of the other committee members.

STUART M
CHAIRMAN
COACH TRIPS

Our next coach trip is on Sunday 23rd April to Anglesey, departing from the Guild at 7:30am.

Anglesey is well known for the RSPB reserve at South Stack Cliffs. Here you can experience the magic of a seabird colony. Guillemots, razorbills and puffins all nest here. Cough, ravens and peregrines can often be seen along the cliff edge, and gannets and Manx shearwaters can often be seen passing out to sea.

We may also visit other locations such as Newborough or Penmon Point for other species.

There are toilets and a cafe at the South Stack reserve.

Our final coach trip of the season will be on Sunday 7th May to Hodbarrow and Walney Island reserves, departing from the Guild at 7:30am.

Hodbarrow lagoon is the largest stretch of coastal open water in northwest England. Little, common and sandwich terns nest on the artificial shingle island in front of the hide and wildfowl and waders breed and over-winter on the lagoon. Whitethroats, lesser whitethroats, sedge warblers and willow warblers sing from the gorse scrub around the reserve. Wheatears bob around on the rocks by the sea wall. Several pathways take you through the different habitats of the reserve and along the sea wall. This is a RSPB reserve but entry is free.

South Walney reserve forms the southern tip of a shingle island lying at the end of the Furness Peninsula and is run by Cumbria Wildlife Trust. Every spring, large numbers of lesser black-backed and herring gulls return and begin to set up nest territories. Other breeding birds include eider duck, greater black-backed gull, shelduck, oystercatcher, ringed plover, mallard, moorhen and coot. There is an admission charge for non-members of the Trust.

Please book your place on both trips at the desk.

SUMMER CAR TRIPS

The Committee proposes to run 2 local car trips over the summer.

Goyt Valley, Wednesday 17th May

The woodland around Errwood reservoir and the upper Goyt Valley attracts numbers of summer migrants such as pied flycatcher, redstart, common sandpiper, tree pipit, and cuckoo. The uplands at Danebower hold ring ouzel, wheatear, meadow pipit, dipper, red grouse, short-eared owl and hobby. All have been seen on our trips here in recent years.

Meet at "The Street" car park at Errwood reservoir dam (map ref SK 013 757) at 8am.

Burton Mere Wetlands (Dee Estuary), Saturday 17th June

Burton Mere Wetlands straddle the border between England and Wales. Many years of hard work have restored reedbeds, fenland and farmland. There are 3 main hides and several viewpoints as well as 3 nature trails. Ducks, waders and other water birds can be expected here. Summer visitors include the aerobatic hobby, marsh harrier and warblers. Ducklings are well on their way and are actively feeding. Western Cattle Egrets, Bittern, and Bearded Tits have bred here in recent years. Non-breeding regular visitors include black-tailed godwits and spotted redshanks.

RSPB members should remember to bring their card; otherwise there is a £6 entrance fee.

Meet at the reserve main car park at 9:30am. Burton Mere Wetlands is off the A540 (Chester High Road) and just 10 minutes from the M56. Look out for the brown signposts on the A540. The post code for sat-navs is CH64 5SF. We may move to the nearby Denhall Lane later in the afternoon.

WEEKEND AWAY TO SLIMBRIDGE AND SOMERSET LEVELS – 24-26 FEB 2023

DAY 1 - Slimbridge

The stopping off point on the first day of our annual weekend away to the Somerset Levels was Slimbridge Wetland Centre. Our starting point was Rushy Pen hide providing us with a good assortment including shelduck, tufted, redshank, teal, pochard, pintail and Bewick's swans. At the very back of the water was a pleasant view of a scaup.



Bewick's Swan

Moving on to Willow Hide we were hoping for a glimpse of a water rail but it wasn't to be. There was the usual assortment of birds on the feeders including blue tits, chaffinch, blackbird, dunnock, long-tailed tits and robin.

Having completed a basket willow weaving class the week before the trip I was also very interested in the variety of willow along the pathways and the different colours. I never realised there was so much.

Our next port of call was Estuary Tower and what a treat was in store for us. A lot of stairs later we were rewarded with magnificent views over the Severn Estuary looking over to Forest of Dean and the surrounding areas and not to forget the multitude of bird life.

Whichever way you looked there was something of interest and very friendly volunteers on hand to point out anything of particular interest. Barnacle geese and white-fronted geese could be seen immediately in front of us. The warden told me they were not as active as they can be



Pintail



Ross's Goose & Barnacle Geese

and this was probably due to the fact they were getting ready to start their long migration back north. Amongst this group there was also a solitary Ross's goose and a snow goose (blue morph). There was also a close up view of a flyby of Bewick's swans.

There were approximately 14 common cranes spread out in little groups across the estuary and we even saw some in flight which was a first for me. The cranes were released in Somerset as part of the Great Crane Project and several have

adopted the Severn Estuary as their permanent home. There were also great white egrets.

Flocks of lapwing and starlings synchronised in flight over the estuary providing a good spectacle. As for the raptors we could not have asked for more! A merlin was perched on a post in the distance, a red kite flew very close to the hide. A marsh harrier flew back and forth and a sparrowhawk joined the party disturbing birds on the ground, not forgetting the kestrel and the buzzard. Finally, a distant peregrine was perched on a log on the ground for quite a while.



Common Cranes

To the side of the hide a very vocal group of wigeon had gathered in large numbers grazing on the grasslands and occasionally getting disturbed by the raptors resulting in huge flocks flying back to a nearby pool for safety and then when the coast was clear they would all head back to the grasslands on foot - they were very entertaining.



Wigeon

After this, lunch was in order followed by a trip to the Discovery Hide. The star of the show here was a white-rumped sandpiper (an American bird) with close up views of it busily feeding. From here we could also see avocets, black-tailed godwit, shoveler, and snipe.

The rest of the afternoon was spent at the other hides where we saw golden plover and more views of the marsh harrier and merlin. We finished off in Peng Observatory to watch the swans being fed. It was a great day with lots of good sightings and a very satisfied group of birders got back on the coach anticipating a nice meal and two more days of birdwatching to go.

ANNETTE R

Day 2 - The Avalon Marshes

We boarded the coach around 9am for The Avalon Marshes Centre, more specifically, Shapwick Heath and it was amusing to see at least thirty Feral Pigeons sitting in a row on our hotel roof. The weather was dry all day with intermittent sun and cloud and a keen wind in places.



Great Egret

On the journey, Grey Herons were seen flying over, a Buzzard was close by in an orchard and groups of ewes and lambs were in the fields.

Due to a weak bridge near Ham Wall we knew the coach had to go to the Centre at the other end of Shapwick Heath for our drop off point and there was no availability for the

coach to park there that day.

Setting off down the two mile path to Ham Wall, two Great White Egrets were in flight over the reeds and a pair of Stonechats were seen on the fencing. A Song Thrush was heard and seen by some as were Redwings. A male Marsh Harrier was displaying on the left, tumbling down from a good height and had been spotted by sharp eyes. Water fowl on the pools included Gadwall, Tufted Ducks and Shoveler with Great Crested Grebe, Wigeon and Pochard appearing too.



Shoveler

Approaching the bridge a trio of Bullfinches flitted among the branches and a Cetti's Warbler was, as usual, heard but not seen. A Red Kite flying overhead had been seen near the Ham Wall Coffee Stand by some of the group and at an impromptu offer stop further along, a Goldcrest was busy finding food on the bushes by the path.



Glossy Ibis

As there was a rather chilly wind and the birds only appeared to be more of the same at the Viewing Platform 1, some returned to the picnic area for a late lunch then decided to slowly walk back along the Shapwick path.

Modern phone technology is great. Within a few minutes of the first sighting, phones rang to inform about the arrival of a Glossy Ibis on the pool overseen by Platform 1. Soon many of the group had converged on the platform. Not one but two Glossy Ibis were there. Easily seen by binoculars and the naked eye but superb views though colleague's telescopes.

By late afternoon people were making their way back along the path to find a suitable viewing point for the Starlings, sharing their experiences, while a group of interested Highland Cows emerged out of the trees on the other side of the Canal to watch.

Several people had heard the Bitterns booming near Noah's Hide but none had the good fortune to get a view. Others had seen two Whooper Swans, a Water Rail, Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Chiffchaff. Marsh Harriers had been constantly seen as were the Great White Egrets and Cormorants.

As 5 o'clock approached and Long-tailed Tits foraged in the bushes, more people gathered on the Shapwick path in open areas to await the murmuration of the Starlings. Non-birders were there too, including families with young children and an air of anticipation was almost tangible as watches were consulted and the skies constantly checked. Then the first few Starlings arrived. For the next twenty minutes, groups of



Starling Murmuration (photo by Michael T)

Starlings flew in from all directions and merged into the one big murmuration. The skies were clear, the wind had dropped and we were mesmerised by the shapes made as they flew in a constantly changing formation, silhouetted against the sky. At first a Marsh Harrier was in the midst of them looking for its supper and later a couple of Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk tried their luck.

Everyone was quiet and we could hear the whooshing of the Starling's wings each time they changed direction then as the skies darkened they made one final turn and sank instantly into the reeds.

A warden present, said it was one of the best he had seen all this season.

We left for the coach full of admiration for the Starlings, having had an experience that day which many of us will never forget.

TINA G

Day 3 – Burnham Marsh & Steart Marshes

Sunday, our final day, dawned bright and sunny with plenty of blue in the sky.

Our first stop was Burnham on Sea where the estuaries of the rivers Parrett and Brue flow into Bridgewater Bay and on into the Bristol Channel. At the end of South Esplanade we walked slowly along a paved path by the side of a large channel where several boats were moored up.



Canada Geese at Steart Marshes

Looking across the water towards the distant nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, there was a long, low sandy spit with plenty of Oystercatchers present. Closer to us, we watched a flock of about 40 Redshank fly along a channel. Turnstone and Mallard were seen in the small creeks. A pair of keen eyes spotted a Meadow Pipit resting on the bow of a pilot boat. It was so well camouflaged it took a couple of minutes for us all to get on to it. A handsome Stonechat vied for our attention, hopping from

one teasel to another. There were few passerines along the path, Blackbird, Wren and the melodious notes of a Song Thrush which everyone heard but nobody could find!

Our final destination of the day was Steart Marshes, a WWT open reserve some 45 minutes away. On arrival we met our two guides who took us round the area giving us interesting facts and figures about the history and construction of the reserve. Once the decision was made to breach the sea wall and allow the River Parrett to flood in, this now occurs about 100 times a year. On an exceptional high tide, the back marshes are also covered.

From Mendip Hide we had spectacular views of a male Hen Harrier as he flew slowly across the reserve in front of us, his colours gleaming in the sunshine. There were plenty of Canada Geese grazing on the marsh with a stranger in their midst, a Bar-headed Goose, an escapee originally. They all seemed quite comfortable with the situation and finally flew off to rest on the river. On the pools around the reserve we saw Wigeon, Teal, Mallard and Shoveler. Grey Heron, Great White Egret and Little Egret were also seen. There were plenty of the usual corvids around including a cronking Raven and smaller birds such as Skylark, Reed Bunting and a small flock of Linnets. Patience was more than well rewarded for one of our members who staked out a Cetti's Warbler and saw it as it finally flew away. Other raptors seen were Marsh Harrier, Kestrel and Merlin.



Bar-headed Goose

It was a pity that we were too late for the Golden Plover and Lapwing; there had been a few thousand of them here over wintering on the marshes. They had left for Europe a fortnight previously during a spell of warmer weather. I remember them well from our visit in 2017.

It was great that Robert was able to join in today and buzz around the reserve in the buggy. He certainly gave it some welly driving up the slopes!!!

As we climbed aboard the coach to start our journey home, there was one last surprise in store. From our elevated position (mine certainly!) we had cracking views on one of the smaller pools, of a Spoonbill feeding with 2 Great Black-backed Gulls nearby. A fitting finale to a most successful and enjoyable weekend.

Our total count for the trip was 89.

Photos by Robert D, unless indicated otherwise

BARBARA P

A gallery of photos from the trip is available in Google Photos on the following link...

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/3SqmMz1RCDo9p67D7>

More Starling photos...



Photo by Michael T



Photos by Jules R

Videos of the murmuration shot by Jules R are available on YouTube on the following link...

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLd4Cd3g9nN55WXYiu64Kg9HX--qrQ8fQt>

NEXT MONTH'S MEETING

Our final indoor meeting of the season will take place on Thursday 4th May, starting at 7:30pm. Our speakers will be Tanya and Edmund Hoare who will give a talk on "Swifts".

Hope to see you all then.