



EXETER AND DISTRICT LOCAL GROUP

Nature is in crisis. Together we can save it.

NEWSLETTER 191

SPRING 2023

Editorial

Hello everyone – I hope you are all keeping well and looking forward to spring with hopefully some better weather to come. As I write this it was minus 4c outside my front door a little earlier, but with bright sunshine and a song thrush in full voice! A truly uplifting sound. This in itself is exciting as song thrushes are unusual around here, it is several years since they were regularly seen and heard in our local gardens.

Anyway, I hope you will enjoy this newsletter, there are some interesting reports of our recent outdoor events and also talks given by some excellent speakers. And, of course, there is a great programme of events and talks planned for the next few months.

With all very best wishes

Liz Saunders

Please send copy for the next issue by **20th April 2023 (slightly earlier than usual)** - by email to: els.bullfinch@outlook.com (please note new email address) or by post to: 20 Crockwells Close, Exminster, EX6 8DL

From the Group Leader

As we start a new calendar year, it is a good time to look forward to local group activities over the coming months. We have some enticing indoor meetings to look forward to - I would particularly like to highlight the talk by Peter Rock on Urban Gulls, which will be particularly relevant to those of us who live in coastal towns. A group of us will be going to Cornwall for a few days birdwatching in March, and in the summer, Mike Langman will be taking a small group on a boat trip into Lyme Bay. Further details of our future events are shown elsewhere in this newsletter and on our website, of course.

For the next season, starting Autumn 2023, we will need several new volunteers to step up to help run this group. Chris and Marilyn Steel have been serving as RSPB volunteers for over 30 years, lately as Treasurer and Sales Organizer respectively (with various other jobs too). After that length of service, it is not surprising that they are looking to stand down from the AGM this Autumn and hand over to new people. Andy Rook has also indicated that he plans to stand down as Membership Secretary and spend more time on other things. Cilla Ingram is finding the role of Social Organiser increasingly hard going, not least since she is spending less time in Devon. For myself, I am finding it difficult to find the time needed to lead the group, largely due to increased family commitments, though I would be willing to continue organising the outdoor meetings. My 5-year term as Group Leader finishes at the 2023 AGM (as does Chris's term as Group Treasurer), so it seems an appropriate time to hand over to a new leader.

I hope that we can find new officers and committee members from within the group, as far as possible. I may not be aware of everyone's particular skills, so, while I will be talking to some people over the coming months, I would be very happy to hear from any potential volunteers. If you're not able to volunteer for a committee post, there are many other roles where your help to run the group would be very welcome.

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Talking of new volunteers, I am very pleased to welcome Alice Kelly as our new website editor. Alice is a second-year student at Exeter University, studying for a BSc in Geography. She enjoys birdwatching and is interested in wildlife conservation. We are very grateful to Jenny Ingram who edited the website for several years.

Richard Swinbank

NEWS AND INFORMATION

Autumn and Spring Fayres

First of all, we had a lovely morning in November for our Autumn Fayre (our first since November 2019). Thank you to everyone who helped in any way to make the event a success. We raised £603.92 on the morning and another £20 was added a few weeks later by Rosemary Partridge who took some jewellery items to her local jeweller!

Now on to the next Fayre! Our Spring Fayre and Plant Sale will be taking place on Saturday 13th May at the usual time (10 am until 12 noon) at the usual venue (St Margaret's Church social area in Topsham).

We need lots of plants so please help us by planting seeds now and nurturing any possible plants....and then donating them to us.

We will also be very grateful as usual for any cakes or other homemade produce, prizes for the raffle and bottles or chocolates for the tombola. Although we are always very pleased with the amount raised for the RSPB at these events, it would be great to get even more people 'through the doors'....please help by spreading the word and encouraging people to come and support us.

Marilyn Steel



Exotics – To list or not to list that is the question

While standing outside Turf, Richard, Audrey, Paul and I had an interesting discussion about exotics. I thought I might share some thoughts with you.

There are a great many non-natural birds in Britain now. There are differing opinions as to how they should be classified. There are several that have escaped from collections over the past 200 years; that includes such birds as little owl, parakeets, mandarin ducks and more recently Egyptian geese. These are all accepted as part of the British bird grouping. Then there are the introduced, mostly reintroduced; that includes cranes, white-tailed eagles, storks and red kites, they are all accepted. Then there are the ones which appear and live somewhere happily for years, no one knows where they came from, that includes the hooded merganser at Radipole and the whooper swan at Abbotsbury and the blue-winged Ethiopian goose. There are those which have naturally appeared on our shores and stayed like avocets and little and great egrets. Then there are the vagrants which appear here usually blown on the wind. These are the ones which excite the twitchers who go to Shetland and the Scillies to find them. Lots of warblers this year seem to have turned up. Those are accepted as vagrants. Then the really difficult one, those that appear with flocks of something else which they have joined, not ringed but no one knows their origin. Those are the most contentious ones like the snow goose and the bar-headed goose at the moment on the Exe. When doing your lists, they are your lists so you can do as you want, but what about the lists for walks for groups like the RSPB? It is a thought and debatable.

Ann Crawford

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Richard adds:

I remember the discussion, prompted by the question whether or not to put the exotic geese we were seeing on that day's bird list. When I first took up birding, we were advised to list all birds that were 'apparently wild'. That's the general approach that I adopt when completing bird lists. However, Paul argued that we should omit the bar-headed goose (obviously escaped from a collection) but count the snow goose (which likely came across the Atlantic a few years ago). Both exotic geese were associating with the Canada goose flock.

It's interesting to note that, in the new (3rd edition) of the Collins Bird Guide, pheasants are now listed in the appendix under 'introductions', and only the wild pheasants from the eastern extremes of the region are included in the main text. It could be argued that we shouldn't include them on our lists for that reason. On the other hand, surely it is important to list them since they are (for better or worse) a significant component of the eco-system.

I'll stick with my current approach, both for my own use and group walks. You can decide after the event how to categorise the birds you have seen, but that's hard to do if they're not even on your list. As Ann says, it's really a personal decision what you do (or don't) include on your bird lists.

Richard Swinbank



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Outdoor meetings programme

This section includes full details of our planned birdwatching walks up to May, plus news of a boat trip into Lyme Bay in August. Please check the website (or our WhatsApp group) for any late changes. There is no advance booking for the walks, but you will need to book and pay for the boat trip in advance. We encourage you to share cars to travel to the walks. However, we no longer meet up for car sharing at the 'Barn Owl' / Steakhouse, due to parking restrictions imposed a couple of years ago.

The walks are free of charge for our local group members – although donations to the RSPB are always welcome. There is a charge of £2 (part day) or £3 (full day) for non-members, with the first one free.

We are also running an extended trip to Cornwall from 3rd to 6th March 2023. We now have a full group. I have sent out more information to those who are booked on the trip.

The walks will take place (more or less) whatever the weather – please wear appropriate weatherproof clothing and waterproof footwear, and don't forget your binoculars. Assistance dogs only.

Sunday 19th February – Morning walk around Otterton and Ladram Bay

This will be a circular walk, mainly for farmland birds. We hope to see flocks of finches, and it is also the best site for curlew buntings in East Devon. We will also look out over the sea at Ladram Bay, where we will look for divers and sea ducks. Please note that the paths will be muddy.

Meet at the roadside by Otterton football ground, opposite the Stantway Farm buildings (SY089849, EX9 7JJ) at 9.30am. Limited roadside parking. No toilets.

Saturday 25th March – Morning visit to Exminster Marshes

At this time of year, many of the ducks and waders that have spent the winter on the estuary will have left. But we should be starting to see some newly arrived spring migrants, perhaps including a garganey if we're lucky.

Meet at RSPB car park (SX953872; EX6 8DZ) at 9.30am. No toilets.

Thursday 6th April – Full day visit to Ham Wall and the Somerset Levels

We will spend the morning at the RSPB Ham Wall nature reserve, where we hope to see marsh harriers, great white egrets and, if we're lucky, bitterns. We should also see a wide range of other

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birds around the extensive reedbeds. In the afternoon, we will move on to Shapwick Heath or another local site.

Meet at 10.00 am in the Ham Wall car park (ST449396; BA6 9SX).

Bring a packed lunch and your RSPB membership card (for the car park). Toilets available.

Saturday 22nd April – Full day visit to Slapton and the South Hams

We will start with a morning walk at Slapton. At this time of year, we hope to see good numbers of newly arrived swallows and martins. The ley holds a good range of wildfowl, and we will also look for birds on the sea and in the adjacent woodland and reedbeds. In the afternoon we will move on to Beesands or another local site.

Meet at 9.30am at the small car park opposite the caravan site between Slapton village and the beach (SX825447).

NB. There are no longer any toilets next to Slapton beach car park. Bring a packed lunch.

Tuesday 9th May – Morning walk at Steps Bridge & Dunsford Woods

A morning field trip to look for woodland and riverside birds along the upper Teign valley. At this time of year, the bluebells should be in flower. We should see a range of flycatchers and warblers in the woods, and dipper & grey wagtail on the river.

Meet at 9.30am at Steps Bridge car park (SX802882; EX6 7EQ). No toilets

Sunday 21st May – Full day visit to Hodder's Combe and Steart Marshes

In the morning we will explore the oak woods of Hodder's Combe, in the Quantock Hills. We will be looking for a range of woodland birds, including Wood Warblers. Steart Marshes provides a flood defence for local communities and is home to a thriving nature reserve managed by the WWT. In the afternoon, we look forward to seeing good variety of birds at Steart, including breeding waders.

Meet at Holford Green car park (ST155410; TA5 1RY, on the western side of Holford) at 10.00 am. Bring a packed lunch. Toilets at main Steart Marshes car park.

Lyme Bay Boat Pelagic Cruise from Brixham, Friday 11th August

The mixing of the currents off Berry Head and deeper water in Lyme Bay attracts a good range of feeding seabirds, including shearwaters, gannets and skuas. We will join Mike Langman and skipper Dave on Kelly's Hero for a special 4-hour charter for seabirds, particularly shearwaters and terns.

There is also a good chance of seeing grey seals, porpoises and dolphins. If the sea is too choppy the trip will be cancelled, but we will aim to try again as soon as possible. Please note the date has been changed from that originally listed in the programme.

We will only be taking a very small group of 8 people. Provisional arrangements are that we will meet at 0820 on the quayside at Brixham harbour, ready for departure at 0830. Further information is shown on Mike's website <https://mikelangman.co.uk/walks/> under the heading 'Seabirds Pelagic Cruises – Brixham Departures'. I will send more information nearer the time to those who have booked.

The price will be **£52** for members of the RSPB Exeter & district local group, or **£56** for non-members. To book your place, please give me your name(s) and address (postal or email) and phone number. Please send your bookings to me by email to richard.swinbank@mac.com or by post to Richard Swinbank, 9 Broad Oak Close, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, EX11 1XW.

If you book by post, please include a cheque payable to "RSPB Exeter Local Group" and a stamped addressed envelope. If you book by email, I will confirm whether you have a place, and, if so, ask you to pay by bank transfer. Places are likely to fill very quickly, and we will operate a waiting list. We will not be able to offer a refund for cancellations unless we can fill your place.

Richard Swinbank



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RSPB Indoor Meetings and Zoom talks, February to April 2023

We are once again holding our indoor meetings at the United Reformed Church (URC) Hall, Exeter EX1 1QD and very much hope that you will join us for the following talks. Admission is £5 for local group members and £7 for anyone else, including refreshments in the interval. There is one more Zoom meeting on a Wednesday evening when we have speakers who live too far away to come to Exeter in person. Invitations will be e-mailed to members. Non-members will need to buy a ticket via Eventbrite at the cost of £3. All meetings start at 7.30pm.

14th February: Mike Langman – Wildlife of Lyme Bay

After 40 years of mostly watching from land Mike found his sea legs and started guiding on small charter boat wildlife cruises. Discover some of Lyme Bay's special wildlife that can be seen from boats or shore. Seabirds, Cetaceans, Sharks and even huge Tuna will feature in the evening's talk.

1st March Zoom: Ralph and Brenda Todd – On the Trail of the Crane – Part 1 A Journey through Western Europe

This talk takes a look at the crane family and some of the conservation issues that surround them.

Ralph and Brenda have been interested in natural history and particularly bird watching for most of their lives and over the past 40 years have been lucky enough to travel extensively. They have led birdwatching tours for a number of companies. They have also been actively involved with the RSPB for many years and in 2019 received the 45 year long service badge for their volunteering works with the Society.

14th March: Peter Rock - Urban Gulls

Peter will describe the species and their behaviours, why they breed in town, what they do to annoy people, some to the point of anger and what they are telling us about ourselves. The urban gull issue is nowadays a rather large issue and he will say what we've done about it so far - and what not to do.

Peter is an expert on urban gulls having been studying the Bristol population nesting on roofs since 1980. He has ringed a great many chicks with individual colour rings so that he can keep track of their habits and location. He has written papers about urban gulls and his advice is sought by many.

18th April: Neil Gartshore – Lesvos: Jewel of the Aegean

Neil Gartshore is the owner of Calluna Books and author of 'Best Birdwatching sites in Dorset' and has also since 2015 been responsible for publishing 'The Birdwatchers Yearbook'. He is an experienced wildlife guide and gives talks on a variety of wildlife subjects.

I should be very grateful for volunteers to write up a talk for the Newsletter and website, particularly when we have two talks in a month. Please let me know if you can help.

Helen Baker
Indoor Meetings Organiser

LOOKING BACK

OUTDOOR MEETINGS

Open Morning at Bowling Green Marsh – 30 October 2022

On Sunday 30th October we held our Open Morning at The Lookout, Bowling Green Marsh. It was well attended and the weather was kind to us.

We saw 37 different bird species including bar-tailed and black-tailed godwits, spotted redshank, snipe, Egyptian geese and greenshank.

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Many thanks to Paul Bray for the photo of the spotted redshank and to Emma Whitton for all the other photos.

Many thanks to everyone who attended and for use of The Lookout.

Cilla Ingram



Spotted redshank – Paul Bray



Wigeon – Emma Whitton

Morning walk from Powderham to Turf Lock – 5 November 2022

Nine hardy souls set out, some with umbrellas expecting some pretty foul weather. In the event it was not too bad as the breeze was from the south and not too strong and it did not drizzle all the time.

Not much was found in the churchyard, so we went along the footpath beside the railway. A few bits and pieces in the bushes, not a lot. There were several smart stonechats on the posts beside the field and on the brambles. There were large numbers of jackdaws and rooks in the fields and overhead. We went over the monstrous bridge over the railway and then we were on the banks of the Exe. As we walked along there was the usual small group of shelducks paddling on the edge of the water and a flock of black-tailed godwits appeared. As the tide rose, we spotted wigeon and oystercatchers. Then we saw some mute swans with two black swans, which are often in the area. We could hear curlews, though it was a while before we could actually see one! There was a small flock of linnets in the field and on the path, with their bouncy flight. A pair of reed buntings turned up on the grass at the edge of the river. We thought that there was a distant flock of fieldfares on the top of some trees, but too far to identify.

Once we got to Turf Lock, it got a lot more interesting. There were lots of geese on the sandbanks, mostly Canada and brent. Careful searching revealed a snow goose and then the bar-headed goose. Both seem to appear every winter now with a flock of Canada geese. There were also two Egyptian geese, so we got our share of exotics! There was a group of three avocets and a grey plover. As we were leaving the area Paul saw a flock of golden plovers flying near the Goat Walk. We then explored the fields opposite Turf as Paul had promised us winter thrushes. There they were in the treetops. They were mostly fieldfares with the odd redwing. Then suddenly a yelp from Paul and the resident kingfisher flew across. I missed it and we had been looking for it for a while. In fact, it was an unusual walk in that there were several birds that appeared once for a short time and then went off, so I do not think everyone saw everything. It all makes it very challenging. On the way back it was really more of the same, but Paul found a small group of pintails and that was about it.

My thanks to Cat for ably leading us, Paul for bringing up the rear and for Richard and Paul for bringing and sharing their 'scopes as the rest of us felt we could not cope with cold wet hands, rain covered glasses, and optics, umbrellas, all at the same time!

Ann Crawford

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Rook near Powderham – Cat Holt

Visit to the Lower Otter Restoration Project – 24 November 2022

There was a good gathering of us risking the wind and the rain, to learn about this development at Budleigh Salterton. It was an interesting visit, led by Dr Sam Bridgewater, Head of Wildlife and Conservation at Clinton Devon Estates. Sam explained the ideas behind the project and some of the problems. The whole project has been 10 years in the making, and must be finished by March 2023, when the funding for the EU “Interreg” project finishes! Nature has to be persuaded to change direction, to return the estuary to something closer what it was nearly like 200 years ago, before man interfered. The project is very complicated and entailed negotiations involving the EU, the UK Government, Local government, Budleigh Cricket Club, the Environment Agency, Natural England, RSPB and more. Not easy. There is a road going across the site, which is being raised and diverted, with a new road bridge, the busy coast path and a new footbridge, and the River Otter beside it, and so on.

The old cricket pitch is now a lagoon, as the water can only get out through a pipe which keeps blocking up. There will be a breach made in the embankment so that the area on the west side of the valley will become a new tidal saltmarsh. A new footbridge will take the coast path across the breach. The western footpath is having more alterations, being raised and broadened. The salt marshes at the bottom of the estuary will remain much the same, as they are one side of the footpath, blocked off from the alterations. The lagoon areas will have islands so that the waders can nest on them. This year little ringed plovers nested and successfully fledged some young. The project team are very careful about removing scrub etc and they have had environmentalists checking what was around. The area just south of White Bridge was a municipal dump and there were willows and scrub growing over it, and a few dormice were relocated. It has all been done very thoroughly.

As life usually throws up wobbles: there are proposals in the not too distant future for electrical inter-connector cables that may be laid from France via Alderney, arriving in the UK at Budleigh Salterton. So further works may have to be done around the western footpath!

We are very grateful to Sam Bridgewater for a very interesting morning, and we are also looking forward to his talk on the project in January.

Ann Crawford

Bowling Green Marsh – Topsham – 13 December 2022

Eleven of us set off from the car park in freezing temperatures (well it was literally 0 degrees) to walk to the nature reserve. The day was clear, dry and bright. Along the road we saw blackbirds, woodpigeons, a collared dove, jackdaws, and a magpie. In the Goosemoor viewing area three yellowhammers were seen in the hedgerow – very unusual for this walk. There were small groups of wigeon out on the river and the small patches of unfrozen water. The surrounding trees brought

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snapshots of great tits, blue tits, robin, house sparrows and a wren. As we passed under the bridge back onto the road, a bullfinch caught our attention high up in the trees.

Several other members joined us on the way to the hide, making 15 of us in all. Out on Bowling Green Marsh, the birds were hunkered down in the cold. A range of water birds were observed, including groups of black-tailed godwit, teal and shelduck, with Canada geese at a distance. A couple of cormorants were strategically positioned on posts out on the water.

At the RSPB Lookout we were greeted by Kerry and offered hot drinks, which were much appreciated. From there, we were able to observe lapwings spread out across the grass. Avocets and ducks, including mallard, pintail, and shoveler were around the edge of an area of open water. Meanwhile a grey heron picked its way carefully across the ice. The windows steamed up, making viewing quite difficult, so we were all forced back out into the outer hide, where we were rewarded with a view of a snipe.

Just outside the hide, the feeder gave us a dunnoek and yet another robin to add to our list. As we walked out, we could easily have missed the moorhen foraging around on the grass between camouflaging cattle dung! We searched for the cattle egret that had been reported to us, but we didn't see it. However, we did see a little egret. A song thrush was spotted along the path, and a pheasant. From the viewing platform, black-headed gulls, a few herring gulls and a common gull were seen out on the water. Moving on, turnstones and dunlins entertained us on the pebbles next to the Goat Walk. At the quay some were lucky enough to see a kingfisher fly past. We also spotted a lone curlew on the other side of the river. We saw forty-two species overall, despite the chilly weather.

We were all relieved to get into the warmth of the St. George and Dragon to enjoy the Christmas lunch organised by Cilla. The quiz created by Cilla and Paul was difficult to do, but teamwork made it fun. Everybody seemed to enjoy the challenge, and all were pleased with the prizes. A big thank you was given to the organisers and Richard for all his work year-round.

Maggie Roberts

Broadsands, 7 January 2023

After successfully navigating through the Brixham Road roadworks & diversion the group assembled at the Broadsands car park.

Whilst there was some concern that the wet and windy weather might make it difficult for us to see many small birds, this worry was quickly dispelled as we wandered around the edge of the car park. A small flock of goldfinches and a pair of bullfinches were easily identified, although a fast-moving goldcrest was more difficult to see as it flitted around the trees. It was pleasing to see a flock of colourful circling buntings and familiar house sparrows in a hedgerow.

As we arrived at Broadsands beach the sun came out and we were pleased to see a great northern diver fishing in the bay. Much further out to sea, but still visible with the aid of binoculars, we could see a group of several gannets. These large white birds with black wingtips could be seen climbing into the sky before plunging down into the water with a big splash to catch their food. A flock of around 30 common scoter was also seen, with the aid of a telescope.

Leaving the beach area, we walked along the coast path to Elberry Cove, from where we saw a grey heron, oystercatchers and a pair of great black-backed gulls. A single grey seal was also seen popping its head out of the water before diving below again to catch its dinner. As the weather deteriorated, we headed back to the car park but were rewarded with a view of a chiffchaff on way.

Thanks go to Emma and Dave for co-leading this successful and enjoyable walk.

Mark Barron

Exe Estuary boat trip, 19 January 2023

Twenty-one of us joined the Stuart Line Birdwatching cruise from Exmouth. Unfortunately, several people had had to drop out due to illness, but the rest of us enjoyed the cruise on what turned out to be a bright and calm morning. Derek Carter provided a very informative commentary during the trip up

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to Topsham. He was ably assisted by Jo King, who helped to spot the birds and told us all about the Exe Estuary oystercatchers later in the trip.

When we set off the water level in the estuary was quite high due to recent heavy rain, despite it being close to low tide. We quickly turned into the mouth of the Exe, to explore the lower estuary while there was still plenty of mud and sand. We got great views of several shags perched on buoys, with their plumage showing a green sheen in the sunshine. A little further on, there was a grey seal on a pontoon, while on the other side of the boat we saw a common (or harbour) seal on a sandbank. That was the first time I had seen a common seal on the Exe Estuary.



Common seal – Cat Holt

On the way past Cockwood we saw a few greenshanks along the edge of the river, and several great crested grebes. We also spotted a small grebe in the distance – unfortunately it looked like a little grebe rather than the hoped-for black-necked grebe. As we moved up the channel, we encountered small groups of ducks, including wigeon, mallard and red-breasted merganser. The numbers of waders also increased, with scattered groups of avocets and redshanks along the water's edge, and dunlin out on the mudflats. Passing Turf Lock, Derek pointed out the golden plover flock; they were in a field rather than their usual place on the estuary mud.

Nearing Topsham, we encountered larger flocks of black-tailed godwits, their black and white tails showing clearly as they took off. We had a look for the spotted redshank that is spending the winter around Topsham. We weren't sure that we had seen it at the time (so I missed it off the bird list), but Jo later confirmed its identity in her photographs.

Reaching Topsham Quay, it was time to turn round and head back towards Exmouth. It was also time to eat the pasties that we had ordered, accompanied by soup – very welcome on a cold boat trip. On the way back, we had further sightings including a grey plover (which I had missed on the outward journey) and closer views of sanderlings and turnstones near Dawlish Warren. All too soon, we were back at Exmouth, having enjoyed a good morning's birdwatching trip.

Richard Swinbank



INDOOR MEETINGS

Hedgehogs

A Zoom talk by Pat Morris on 26 October 2022

Pat has studied hedgehogs for some 60 years and his students at Royal Holloway College, London, undertook investigations to help answer questions about them. These prickly, smelly little animals are very popular.

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Hedgehogs occur in suitable habitat throughout the UK including the Isle of Man and some of the Scottish Islands. They avoid high mountain tops and wet ground. As they are mainly nocturnal, check for their presence by looking for their little-finger sized droppings, containing many beetle remains. They are our only spiny mammal and when fully curled up head and legs are completely hidden. Hedgehogs are true hibernators and should weigh at least 450 grams (c1lb) at the start. In the autumn they have to build up their fat reserves. White fat keeps them alive during hibernation and brown fat helps them become active again. Hibernation sites include rabbit burrows, hollow trees, and under garden sheds or brambles. They gather a large pile of leaves and shuffle around until the leaves lie flat providing protection from cold, rain and snow. We are too tidy and bonfires are a potential trap. Always check carefully for a hedgehog before lighting one.

Hedgehogs range widely at night. An experiment with radio-transmitters showed that they can travel over 1km a night and males have overlapping territories, simply keeping out of each other's way. A viable population of perhaps 32 individuals needs about 90 hectares (0.9 sq km). Pat is often asked whether it is good to feed them. It appears that they use this as supplementary food, taking some and then going on to feed naturally. Several will come to one feeding station in a night. An analysis of road-kill stomachs showed that beetles were most frequently taken followed by earwigs, caterpillars, millipedes, worms, spiders and slugs. Dead birds, eggs and chicks are also eaten which can be a problem if for example a hedgehog discovers a tern colony.

Mating is done carefully and is preceded by a lot of snorting with the male following the female around. Four to five young are born. Their initial white spines come through soon after birth. Later they acquire some 7,000 adult spines. The young become independent from about six weeks. Those that survive their first year may live to be three or more. By six years their teeth are very worn as earthworms contain a lot of grit.

We don't know the size of the UK hedgehog population but there has undoubtedly been a considerable decline since the 1960s. Threats include:

- road traffic
- mowing machines cutting back roadside verges
- trimmers used to cut back coarse vegetation in gardens. Always check first as these machines can inflict terrible injuries.
- litter such as polystyrene cups and six-pack holders which they get caught in
- garden netting not securely fastened or left lying around
- garden ponds with steep sides and no ramp
- cattle grids with no ramp
- weedkillers, insecticides and turf enhancement chemicals which directly or indirectly reduce their food supply
- the much increased badger population. Badgers not only eat hedgehogs but are also competitors having a similar diet. One badger eats as much as five hedgehogs. An Oxford study suggested that where the badger population exceeds 13 per 10 km² the hedgehog population is likely to become extinct



Blonde Hedgehog - Pat Morris

Intensive farming has driven hedgehogs from large areas of countryside leaving gardens and parks as important habitats. Pat asked us all to look out for hedgehogs. Injured or underweight hedgehogs can be taken into care at Hedgehog Rescue Centres and rehabilitated where necessary. A hole at the bottom of garden fences allows them to go from garden to garden. The Hedgehog Street website has lots of tips for making our gardens hedgehog friendly.

We thank Pat for an excellent talk about a fascinating animal which most of us will have encountered at some time. I am sure he encouraged us to make our gardens more hedgehog friendly and possibly to buy one of his books on this very attractive mammal.

Helen Baker

UP THE CREEK – AND BEYOND

A talk by Rupert Kirkwood, alias The Lone Kayaker on 8 November 2022

If you didn't get to this evening talk, then you missed something special. Rupert treated us to an amazing evening illustrated primarily by video clips of his close encounters with nature and other sights around Devon and Cornwall.

Rupert was a vet who took retirement after an injury, and has since dedicated himself to pursuing his hobby of kayaking around the coast and rivers of the south west. Though sometimes paddling with friends or family he often travels alone which he says allows minimal disturbance to the wildlife he delights in observing.

Among the photos and footage he showed us were shots of a great crested grebe swallowing a pike – with some difficulty! Also, non-avian spectacles like a badger and (separately) a squirrel swimming across a river. Using a Go-Pro camera underwater enabled him to take video shots of the mesmerizingly beautiful barrel jellyfish, and the awesomely fearful looking basking shark, with its enormous gape, though in fact it is a harmless species that feeds on plankton.

Rupert admitted that birds remain one of his primary interests, and he has spent a lot of time observing ospreys, particularly young birds that haunt the rivers of the south west on their autumn migration. By approaching quietly in his kayak, and taking care not to get too close, he has been able to observe, video and photograph this species. Interestingly he has noticed some ospreys' preference for bass over the more numerous grey mullet. Also, he observed that the young birds' skills at catching fish improved noticeably over a couple of weeks that they lingered on the river.

On a sombre note, he highlighted the devastation wreaked by bird flu on the population of gannets, which has affected 65% of the population of this usually long-lived species. Also, he told us that 85% of the UK great skua population have died from the same disease, something that has not received much attention in the press.



Humpback whale – Rupert Kirkwood

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Other video clips showed dolphins, whales and bluefin tuna, as well as shearwaters, petrels and an endearing young little auk that actually climbed aboard his kayak! A list does not do justice to this fascinating talk, but if you missed it Rupert has a Facebook page and you can find his blog at <https://thelonekayaker.wordpress.com/>

A large audience showed their appreciation and Richard Swinbank thanked Rupert for an excellent presentation.

Richard Farr

Members Evening – 6 December 2022

Four members volunteered to give short presentations and Richard Swinbank also produced a quiz, **Birds from Words**. Cilla Ingram produced an excellent light buffet with assistance from Chris Lane and contributions from others.

The first presentation was “**Arty**” **Wildlife Pictures from Costa Rica and at home by Martin Chambers**. Martin had worked on this for the last year using photos from a holiday in Costa Rica and from the UK. In the Costa Rica section I was struck by the very colourful birds and the lush vegetation. Local music provided a fitting background. Many familiar species appeared in the UK section.

Next came **Gardening with Nature in mind, an illustrated talk by Anna Mace-Leska**. This talk featured Anna’s Warwickshire garden which she had developed over some 20 to 30 years before her recent move to Devon. She used no pesticides or herbicides and strived to provide natural food for wildlife with a big diversity of plants which she selected because they were bird or pollinator friendly. Open flowers are generally preferable though some bees have a long proboscis which enables them to forage in tubular flowers such as foxgloves. She left perennials to die back over winter just removing any rotting parts and left long grass round the pond and in the orchard as this benefits butterflies, moths, crickets and hoverflies amongst others. When necessary she cut the long grass back by hand so as not to injure creatures which might be hiding in it. Plants like self heal were allowed to grow in cracks in the paving. Toads were welcome and useful visitors.

After the buffet and quiz, we had **Mic Morgan’s presentation, Sea Eagles in Norway and Birding in Lake Kerkini in North Greece**. The Norwegian cruise enabled Mic to take photos of the magnificent coastal scenery and also of the sea (or white-tailed) eagle, the largest bird of prey in Norway. Amongst the other species seen was king eider. They visited Bergen and Mic mentioned how very clean the city is. The visit to Greece took place last November and they stayed in the north by Lake Kerkini, close to the Bulgarian border. Birds seen included Dalmatian pelican, spoonbill, greater flamingo, cattle egret and great grey shrike. Here again there was beautiful scenery.



Avocet – Poole Harbour – Richard Swinbank

We concluded with **Richard Swinbank’s talk, A Brief Tour of Poole Harbour**, showing photos taken on the Group’s short break in Poole last April. There is a full report of the trip in the Autumn Newsletter so I won’t go into details here but it was good to see the places visited and some of the birds.

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We thank the four speakers for their very enjoyable presentations covering a wide range of subjects, Richard also for the quiz and Cilla for organising the refreshments.

Helen Baker

The Lower Otter Restoration Project

A talk by Dr Sam Bridgewater on 10th January 2023

Sam Bridgewater is Head of Wildlife and Conservation at the Clinton Devon Estates and he is responsible for overseeing The Lower Otter Restoration Project which will transform the Otter Valley between Otterton and the sea.

A map from 1808 shows the Otter valley as it was, with a shingle beach and the River Otter meandering across its flood plain. However, this was a time of food shortages and it was thought that canalising the river would release more land for agriculture. A red line on the map showed the river's proposed course. Canalisation went ahead but the reclaimed land was wet and not as productive as had been anticipated.

Since canalisation the floodplain has been partly blocked by South Farm Road and White Bridge and also by the aqueduct carrying Budleigh Brook. A section near the sea became home to Budleigh Salterton Cricket Club and there is also an old municipal dump in the middle section. The 200 year old sea defences and a number of the other structures are showing their age and climate change is resulting in sea level rise and more storms. It seems certain that sooner or later the embankment holding back the river will fail. One section almost did so and was only saved by very expensive repairs.

About 10 years ago it was decided that a radical scheme was required and after much consideration and consultation plans to return the area to more natural conditions were agreed. Impact assessments were done as species such as dormice, harvest mice, beavers and nesting Cetti's Warbler (Schedule 1) are present. Timing of the work was crucial as trees and hedges and other vegetation had to be removed and this cannot be done during the bird breeding season. Clearing small patches at a time would encourage small mammals to move back into safe areas.

The plan is now being realised and work is nearing completion. The Cricket Club has been relocated. A new creek network has already been prepared. South Farm Road is being raised with a road bridge spanning tidal creeks. Budleigh Brook has a new meandering course and the aqueduct has been removed. The South West Coast footpath has been retained and work on a new bridge to provide access to it is nearly complete. The footpath along the western side of the valley has been improved. The tip will be capped and planted with native trees. The final stage will involve breaching the embankment to give the River Otter access to its flood plain and it is hoped that this can be done within the next two or three months. In the meantime, all the vegetation is being kept very short to discourage protected species from coming in and setting up home.

When completed, the current grazing land will revert to mudflat which should be colonised by ragworm, furrow shell, mud shrimp etc and should attract Brent geese, curlews and black-tailed godwits amongst others. Before Christmas, after heavy rain and with work still in progress, over 100 godwits were present. Estuaries are also very important nurseries for fish such as goby and bass. Monitoring the impact of the work is essential and surveys were done to record what was present at the site before work started and future surveys will show how it is colonised as the scheme matures.

There has been considerable opposition to the scheme. The Estate is keen to learn from mistakes that have been made and Exeter University is looking at their engagement with the public to see what went well and what was not so good. The Scheme is part of a wider project, Promoting Adaptation to Changing Coasts (PACCo), which also supports the Saane Valley Project in Normandy. Information is shared with this and other similar projects to benefit their work. A Citizen Science project gives people the opportunity to learn about the site and train to undertake monitoring of birds, fish, carbon storage etc. The aim is to ensure that carbon released during the work is more than offset by the carbon stored when everything is finished.

We thank Sam for a most interesting and informative talk about this major project. I am sure I am not the only one very much looking forward to visiting when the work is finished.

Helen Baker

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100 Club

Congratulations to the following winners

November 2022 - £10 draw

Mrs S Collins
Dr R Swinbank

December 2022 - £10 draw

Mrs A Mace-Leska
Mr T Steel

January 2023 – £10 draw

Mr G & Mrs J Turner
Mr R Farr

*Anyone can be a winner; you don't need to be Local Group member.
Spread the word.*

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And you can find us on Facebook



www.facebook.com/groups/RSPBexeterLG/

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