



EXETER AND DISTRICT LOCAL GROUP

Nature is in crisis. Together we can save it.

NEWSLETTER 203

SPRING 2026

Editorial

Hello everyone – here we are again, a little later than usual, with information about our forthcoming programme of walks and talks.

We still have two more very interesting indoor meetings coming up this season, the first is on Wednesday 18th March, 7.30pm at our usual venue, St Thomas Church Hall, this is a really great illustrated talk on 'Sea Eagles' by Zoe Smith. Finally, this spring, we have a fascinating 'Zoom' talk at 7.30pm on 22nd April by Ralph Todd entitled 'Return of the Osprey'.

If you have any interesting wildlife experiences to relate, please do send me a short article and/or a photo, and I will include them in the next newsletter.

We were all very disappointed to hear about the forthcoming closure of the RSPB shop at Darts Farm, it will be much missed. We send their staff and volunteers our very best wishes for the future.

Liz Saunders

Please send copy for the next issue by **20 April 2026** – by email to: els.bullfinch@outlook.com
or by post to: 20 Crockwells Close, Exminster, EX6 8DL

NEWS AND INFORMATION

From the Group Leader - Spring 2026

We are well through February already, nevertheless I hope it is not too late to wish you a Happy New Year.

It would be helpful if someone turned the taps off! I have read that some places have not had a dry day since the beginning of the year. (e.g. [North Wyke near Okehampton](#)). The Government website says, '[Devon and Cornwall received 191% of the January long term average rainfall, which was exceptionally high for the time of year, and the wettest January on record.](#)'

I hope that you have not been directly affected by the recent flooding across our area. It has, at the very least, made and continues to make travelling very awkward at times and we have already had to cancel one outdoor meeting.

The reserves in the Exe Estuary and neighbouring sites have of course also been affected with Storm Chandra at the end of January in particular bringing flood damage to many areas. Such flooding has impacts on bird populations, including the destruction of nesting sites (two swans' nests were washed away in Dawlish), forced displacement, and increased mortality for some species due to exhaustion (so far this year [14 Puffins have been washed up exhausted on the Cornish coasts](#)). It is forcing some birds to flee their habitats and the high water levels are reducing available feeding and nesting sites.

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When the mudflats are submerged by high water and flooding, birds are forced to search for food in more limited areas, such as the Bowling Green Marsh, which acts as a high-water sanctuary. It is also estimated that birds may spend an extra 15% of energy foraging and feeding, resulting in them spending less time resting. While a few birds, specifically scavengers like Crows and Ravens, may benefit from the carrion left by flooding, the overall impact on most migratory and wader populations is considered detrimental.

Let us hope that in the coming weeks drier weather arrives and this allows nature to recover.

Meanwhile, I hope that you will be able to join me at our upcoming spring events both indoor and outdoor.

Steve Manktelow



Snowdrops at Staverton - Rob Brennan



La Brenne - May 2025

In May last year I had a week's birdwatching trip in La Brenne, situated in the department of Indre in central France. This is an area that offers great birding opportunities, but is not as widely known as it deserves to be. That may be partly because it has limited visitor accommodation; my group was based at the Auberge de la Gabriere, a country inn overlooking one of the etangs (lakes) that have long been used for rearing fish.

On the first morning at Cherine National Nature Reserve, we were exceptionally lucky to find a Purple Heron posing very close to our hide, offering a great photo opportunity.



Purple Heron

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Raptors on show included the ubiquitous Black Kites, nesting Osprey, Montagu's Harrier, Peregrine Falcon and Short Toed Eagle. Cetti's Warbler and Nightingales were often singing very close but sadly were elusive and not seen by me.

On day 3 we drove close to a colony of Bee Eaters that could be seen at their nest holes and perched in nearby trees. I had hopes of seeing Hoopoes which had been heard through the week but not seen; fortunately, on day 4 we were driving past a garden where a couple of these birds were feeding, offering good photo opportunities.



Hoopoe



Black-crowned Night Heron

Other notable species seen included Black Crowned Night Heron, Yellow Wagtail and Black Woodpecker. A Squacco Heron was observed on a track that we were driving down, but unfortunately my photo through the front windscreen was less than perfect. Butterflies, moths and orchids added to the wildlife interest during the week.

I could recommend the area for a great chance to see continental species unlikely to be seen in the UK. I booked my trip with Naturetrek, which offered travel by Eurostar and TGV from St Pancras International and Paris, which I find much more civilised than flying.

Richard Farr – who also took the photos!

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Outdoor Meetings

Tuesday 3rd March – Morning walk in Dawlish Countryside Park.

We will spend a morning at Dawlish Countryside Park and walk along Shutterton Brook to look for Cirl Buntings and other passerines.

Meet at 9.30 am at the car park off the A379, half a mile south from Crofton Holiday Park. (what3words [outhouse.promises.peach](https://www.what3words.com/outhouse.promises.peach); EX7 0PA). Car parking is free.

Saturday 21st March – Morning walk to Bowling Green Marsh

We complete the winter programme with another visit to **Bowling Green Marsh**, in the hope of seeing wildfowl, waders and other spring migrants.

We will meet at **9.30 am** at Holman Way Car Park, Topsham (SX968881; what3words [leader.income.fish](https://www.what3words.com/leader.income.fish); EX3 0EN). Car park charge.

Saturday 11th April – Full day at Ham Wall & Somerset Levels for Bitterns and wetland birds. Meet **10.00 am** at Ham Wall car park. ST 44954 39538 (postcode BA6 9SX)

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Tuesday 28th April – Morning visit to **Berry Head** for newly arrived spring migrants. Meet **9.30** am at Berry Head car park. SX 94074 56183 (postcode TQ5 9AW).

Sunday 10th May – Full day visit to **Venford** for woodland and moorland birds. Meet **9.30** am at Venford Reservoir car park (north side of dam) SX 683783.

Thursday 21st May – Morning visit to **Yarner Wood** for woodland birds. Meet **9.30 am** at Middle Trendlebere Car Park. SX 781793 (not Yarner Wood reserve car park).

INDOOR MEETINGS

Wednesday 18th March

Talk by Zoe Smith – ‘Sea Eagles’. 7.30 pm at St Thomas Church Hall

Wednesday 22nd April

A Zoom talk at 7.30 pm by Ralph Todd – ‘Return of the Osprey’



LOOKING BACK

OUTDOOR MEETINGS

Bowling Green Marsh – 10th December 2025

It was a lovely morning, sun was out, little wind, all very pleasant. About 20 people started off and we looked over the river. Not a lot, but Brent Geese, one Great Crested Grebe on the far side, but it was high tide so not much nearby.

There were few little birds in the hedgerows, which is worrying. Several Blackbirds and singles of Blue Tit, Great Tit, Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush. There was very little at the viewing platform as no mud was exposed due to high tide. Once we got to Bowling Green there was quite a lot about. Ducks on the lagoon featured lots of Wigeon, a few Pintails, a pair of Gadwall, Teal, several Shovelers and Shelduck, as usual. The only Mallard was one seen by Richard hiding in the reeds. There were lots of Canada Geese, and a few very odd ones, a so-called Swan Goose, some hybrids of what I do not know, with very funny head markings.



Great White Egret - Steve Manktelow

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Avocets and Redshanks - Steve Manktelow

There were very few waders except Avocets, over 100, Redshanks and a few Black-tailed Godwits, but no Snipe nor Lapwing sighted, which is unusual for this time of year. A single Great White Egret was feeding at the back of the reserve, only seen occasionally, when it lifted its head above the reeds. There was also one Curlew in the field coming down the path from the platform.

After the walk we enjoyed an excellent Christmas lunch, brilliantly organised by Jane, thank you so much. It was great fun, enhanced by a birders quiz, which caused the conversation to keep going, and of course the arguments or should I say discussions, about the answers.

Ann Crawford

Field Trip to Slapton Ley on Saturday 10th January 2026

10 brave, some might say foolhardy souls, met at the parking area on Sands Road just outside the village of Slapton having slowly slid their way, literally, all the way from their various starting points. Hats off to all the drivers who coped so well with the very tricky and icy conditions.

The weather rewarded those efforts with clear blue skies, bright wintery sunshine and very little wind - amazing conditions for a spot of bird watching in early January.

Shortly after 10am the group made its way slowly and carefully, given the ice, past the Slapton Ley Field Centre and on up through the village stopping to note Rooks, Jackdaw, Green Woodpecker, Robin, Blue Tit, Greenfinch and House Sparrows en route. Turning into an even icier Marsh Lane, a gateway overlooking a large undulating grassy field, afforded us glimpses of Meadow Pipits as they flew off out of sight, typical! Thankfully we all got great views of them later. Song Thrush and Chaffinch were added to the list in this area.



Wren – Mark Barron

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Turning off Marsh Lane, into the reserve itself, the path leading to an icy boardwalk and then onto the Ireland Bay bird hide provided the perfect setting to watch Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Redwing, Firecrest, Long Tailed, Great and Coal Tits, Mistle Thrush (how are those necks?!) and Buzzard.

Water Rail and Cettis were heard, but as is usual, not seen.

On the Ley Mute Swan, Great Crested Grebe, Tufted Duck, Canada Geese, Little Egret and Grey Heron were spotted.

Moving out of the reserve we stopped at Slapton Bridge before continuing onto the beach for a brief sea watch which gave us Pied Wagtail on the strand line and Guillemot, Shag, Great Crested Grebe and a bottling Grey Seal on the mill pond of a sea.

Returning to our cars we stopped again at Slapton Bridge and had a challenging time spotting the Kingfisher sitting in the reeds - well worth the effort though.

The group then drove the 2 miles along the coast to Torcross where a much needed lunch break was further delayed by another sea scan for an elusive Red Throated Diver.

After lunch, sitting on the benches overlooking the tank in the warm winter sunshine, we wandered towards the town adding Dunnock, Black Headed and Herring Gull, Moorhen, Coot and Mallard to the ever-growing list of sightings.

Nothing new was noted during a further sea watch, but the Shag obligingly demonstrated the fact that they, unlike the Cormorant, leap clear of the water before diving - a useful ID tip to try and remember (Shag & Jump both have 4 letters, which might also help).

Returning to our cars the group thanked Steve for organising and leading the field trip and wished each other less stressful homeward journeys!

Post Scripts:

Apologies to those who were delayed by the conditions and were unable to connect with the group and had to do their own thing.

Chris and Steve remained on site and were eventually rewarded with seeing the Black Necked Grebe in the reedbed near Torcross. However, this was eclipsed by the sight of 3 Otters playing in the middle of the Ley.

Diane Brooker

Stover Country Park - 5th February 2026

I read on the BBC website that for some parts of south-west England and south Wales, it has rained every day of the year so far, and the nine people who came out to the walk at Stover Country Park certainly felt the full force of that rain shortly into the morning walk.

The walk started in the car park, and we hung around to see what birds were there. A Song Thrush could be heard singing in the distance and there were a few Blue Tits flying around.

We then headed off towards the lake past the Community Workshop, where a group of volunteers were about to start some wooden bench making in the dry warm workshop.

We weren't that hopeful as to what birds would be on the lake, as there hadn't been that many when Jacqui did her reconnaissance walk a few days earlier. On the lake we saw Mallard, Tufted Duck, Moorhen, Coot, Mute Swan, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull and several Muscovy Duck.

Carrying on away from the lake and walking down one of the swollen rivers, that's when the heavens opened. I am sure a few of us wondered if the walk should be abandoned, but in a true die-hard spirit, we carried on.

Looping around the top of the lake, we started to see a few more birds and were treated to a flock of at least twenty Siskin and a few Chaffinches busily feeding away in a birch tree. Further on, we saw a good number of Nuthatches and Coal Tits that were attracted down by some bird food.

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Nuthatch – Steve Manktelow

Walking down part of the Ted Hughes Poetry Trail towards the weir, there was still a lack of water birds, just the odd Coot and Mallard swimming around. There was hope there might be a Grey Wagtail at the weir, but not today as maybe the very fast flowing water had put it off.



Coal Tit – Steve Manktelow

We then walked towards the Aerial Walkway, stopping on the way to watch more Coal Tits and Nuthatches. On the feeders at the walkway birds were flying in and out, and we carefully checked each Coal Tit just in case it was a Marsh Tit, as they had been seen here before. Our luck was out once again today. We did see a Stock Dove at the feeders looking for scraps of food on the ground.

Walking back to the car park, we quickly stopped in the hide to see if there were any water birds hiding in the reeds, but if there were, they stayed well hidden.

We didn't see many species of birds, possibly the highlight being the flock of Siskin, but being out with the group and dodging most of the bad weather was all part of a great morning's walk.

Afterwards, a few people headed off for lunch at The Welcome Stranger pub in Liverton.

I'd like to thank Jacqui for leading today's enjoyable walk around Stover Country Park.

Jonathan Pearce

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Exe Estuary Boat Trip – 17th February 2026

When Steve had to choose a day for the Stuart Line boat cruise on the Exe Estuary a few months ago, he used some sort of magical foresight to select a day when there was a break in the weather. Although overcast and cold, there was no real wind to speak of and most importantly, no rain.

As people formed an orderly queue to board the boat, there is always a feeling of excitement brewing. I am not sure if this excitement is due to the anticipation of which birds we will see, or the excitement caused by the smell of the hot pasties wafting from the boat. Probably a bit of both.

The boat set off at 13:00 and we left the dock at Exmouth and went down the river to look at the sandbanks just off Dawlish Warren. We saw various Gulls, Cormorant, Shag, Curlew, Oystercatcher and a quick appearance of a Grey Seal. In the past Divers and Eider had been seen here, but the guide said they were probably further out to sea, as they only occasionally head into the mouth of the estuary.

The boat then turned and headed upstream, keeping close to the sand dunes at Dawlish Warren.

Further upstream we started to see small groups of waders on the shoreline, either feeding at the water's edge or just resting. There were Dunlin, Knot, Avocet, both Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwit (kindly standing next to each other, as I find these two species hard to differentiate) and Redshank.

Along the muddy channels of the estuary, the odd Grey Plover and Greenshank could be seen running around, and on more rocky channels there were Turnstone.

Another bird that kept the boat company was Red-breasted Merganser, as a number kept swimming and flying close by, a real good opportunity to see these stunning birds.

As we headed towards Topsham, there were large flocks of Brent and Canada Geese, both on the water and flying in. It is always a thrill to see Brent Geese and listen to sound they make.

In the distance we could see a flock of around three hundred Golden Plover, and as if on cue, they all took to the air and the colour of them could really be seen against the grey sky. Suddenly a large flock of Lapwing flew up from Exminster Marshes and circled over the river ahead. Had something spooked the Lapwing and the Plover?

Arriving at Topsham we are treated to a wonderful sighting of a male Goldeneye, the only one I believe that has been on the river this year. To top it all, the Goldeneye decided to give us a flypast, so he took off, flew down past the boat, turned around and flew directly overhead. A good picture opportunity for those with cameras.



Male Goldeneye – Mark Barron

It was now time to head back, so the boat turned around and made its way towards Exmouth. The tide was much higher now, so most of the waders had moved off elsewhere. It is always a good idea keeping an eye open as something good will often crop up. About halfway down the river, a male Marsh Harrier was spotted flying over a reed bed in search of prey. It was a good sighting of this bird, and everybody was pleased with its appearance. Had this been the bird that spooked the Lapwing and Golden Plover?

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Grey Seal – Mark Barron

As we got closer to Exmouth and near Dawlish Warren, a Peregrine was spotted sitting on a sand bank. This bird had been around for a few days previously, so it was good it decided to stay for us.

We were soon back in the dock at Exmouth, and by now it was certainly chilly, and looked like rain was coming in, but luckily for us on our cruise, the rain had held off. I'd like to thank Steve once again for organising this trip.

Jonathan Pearce



INDOOR MEETINGS

The Colour of Birds

A Talk by Roger Avery on 19 November 2025

Roger explained the importance of the colours of birds and how they affect their behaviour, particularly among their own species. He explained that many scientific experiments show that by changing their colours, it can affect their behaviour to each other. For example, by removing the colour of their red breasts, Robins become less aggressive. Experiments also showed that by painting over the red blobs on the bills of Herring Gulls and painting them in a different place, the chicks pecked at the red blobs and not on the bill when they wanted to be fed. Bewick's swans possess a unique pattern of yellow and black on their bills which functions like a human fingerprint, allowing them to recognise each other.



Mandarin Drake – Martin Chambers

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Bird colouring also plays an important part in birds' mating behaviour. The colourful males display while the drab, more camouflaged females hide in their nests. Some birds are very well camouflaged; for example, the vertical pattern of Bitterns' plumage makes them almost impossible to see in the reeds, their colouring and shading exactly matching their surroundings. The grey-brown, mottled, streaked and stripey plumage of the Nightjar also provides the ideal camouflage as they nest on the ground.

Diana Chambers

Wild and Ancient: Orkney

A Zoom talk by Peter Exley on 3rd December 2025

Peter's talk explored the landscape of the Orkneys as well as the wildlife that is found there. Nestled off the northern mainland of Scotland, Orkney is an archipelago of islands with distinctive names (often Viking). They have been occupied by humans for over 6,000 years. The climate is surprisingly warm, but stormy (c.40 days p.a. on average) with high rainfall. Orkney's Old Red Sandstone was formed around 380 million years ago in the Devonian period, when it lay south of the equator. This rock breaks into square slabs or slabs with 45 degree shapes, which can be seen in some of the neolithic era monuments.

The islands are remarkable for their archaeology: on Papa Westray some of the oldest inhabited buildings in Europe may be seen, dating from c. 3,700 BC. At Scara Brae, archaeological evidence shows that people lived much like modern humans, with beds, a dresser, a firepit, and pots. Four sites on Mainland are now designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Later Vikings colonised the islands in the 9th century and remained into the 15th century.

Orkney is also home to remarkable and abundant wildlife: seabird cities, breeding waders, Hen Harriers and Short-Eared Owls, seals and cetaceans. Magpies are absent, but Hooded Crows are a common corvid. Birds that winter on the River Exe, such as Oystercatchers and Curlew, breed on Orkney in significant numbers. Twite, with their forked tails, are the northern equivalent of Linnets. About a hundred pairs of Red Throated Divers nest, but Great Northern Divers do not, and Black Throated Divers are not usually seen. Interesting facts that Peter imparted include that Gannets that have recovered from bird flu show a black iris. Puffins and Fulmars have a dusky "eye pad" around the eye, and it is thought that these act like sunglasses in reducing glare when flying over the sea.

Orkney has an abundance of stunning flowers, including the UK's only truly endemic species, the Scottish Primrose. Bog-grass or Cotton Grass thrives in the wet conditions. As the growing season is short and soils are acidic, some plants have to find their nitrogen in different ways, e.g. fly catching (Sundew and Common Butterwort), while Bog Asphodel is semi-parasitic on other plants. Some plants like Clovers and Vetches fix nitrogen in nodules on their roots. All plants seem bigger and brighter, perhaps because of the good light.

The Great Skua, or Bonxie in the local language, is a predator that has fallen prey to bird flu, with up to 80 per cent of the population lost. The Pentland Firth is an effective barrier to mammals, but human activity has led to the introduction of the Orkney Vole which is related to the Belgian species. Stoats, which are now being trapped, may have reached the islands in fodder, and Hedgehogs are another threat to ground nesting birds.

This report samples just some of the information imparted in Peter's fascinating fact-filled talk. Now retired from the RSPB, Peter leads natural history trips for Ace Cultural Tours.

Richard Farr

Devon from Shore to Moor

A talk by John Walters on 21st January 2026

John Walters is a life-long naturalist who explores the natural world through field sketching, photography and video. Based in Buckfastleigh, he gave a fascinating illustrated talk on the ecology of our local area, from shore to Dartmoor.

On the sea shore, John uses an ultraviolet torch to spot the small creatures living in the rockpools at Wembury at night, illustrated with photos of 'devil crabs', giant woodlice and rock anemones, and we

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learned about their fascinating life cycles. We saw giant bluefin tuna leaping from the water and diving below as they hunt for garfish off the South Devon coast. They are the largest in the world and arrive in late summer and early winter. Dolphins were also seen at Berry Head, as well as a rare visitor, the Hoopoe.

He described the different lichens and mosses and the life among them along the rivers from the coast to the top of Dartmoor. Living on damp moorlands and peat bogs, the rare Sundew Plume Moth manages to avoid getting stuck on its food plant and being eaten. In a video, we saw the beautiful but ephemeral hair ice, also known as ice wool or frost beard, that grows overnight on rotting wood in wintertime.

On the moor, there were photographs of the elusive winter visitor, the Ring Ouzel, 'silver' Robins, paintings of Redwings from Scandinavia feeding on winter berries and the delightful Long-Tailed Tits huddled together on a branch. In winter, two Nightjars were photographed well camouflaged on the ground having migrated from South Africa, and the secretive Jack Snipe that comes from its breeding ground in Scandinavia and Russia to nest in wet grasslands and reedbeds. We also saw a Meadow Pipit, Kestrel, a Cuckoo's nest with eggs, a Woodpecker feeding its young, Adders of different colours and the Common Lizard.

John's selection of cards for sale during the interval were very popular. He has published a number of guides and books, including *The Wildlife of Dartmoor*.

Diana Chambers

Hungary – Nature's Jewel in Europe

A Zoom talk by Mary Braddock on 28th January 2026

Bird enthusiast and wildlife photographer Mary Braddock has visited Hungary frequently, and illustrated her talk with some remarkable photos.

The country is predominately low-lying, the Great Hungarian Plain being its main geographical feature, with mountains at its northern and western borders. It is drained by two main rivers, the Danube and the Tisza. Winter and spring months are very wet causing floods which the Tisza Dam was built to mitigate, but in hot, dry summers the lakes shrink, concentrating fish and birds into a smaller area.

Extensive wetlands favour a variety of water birds, and Mary showed us photos of Bittern, Squacco Heron, Purple Heron, and a juvenile Night Heron with plumage confusingly like Bittern. Whiskered Terns breed inland where the lakes are ideal: we were told that they pick insects off the water rather than diving in, and construct nests on lily pads which float if the water level should rise. Where there is water there are ducks, and a photo of a handsome male Garganey showed its bold white eyestripe: they are able to fly up straight off the water, in a similar way to Teal to which they are related.

Great Bustards are birds of the natural steppes, and a number of photos of the males, showed stages of their "foam bath" display in the lek, which is for the benefit of the onlooking smaller females who may mate with a male that sufficiently impresses.

Hoopoes are hole nesters, and Mary had captured a bird at its tree hole with two young, and achieved what photographers hope for: a shot with the bird's impressive crest fully erect. They feed on invertebrates and the substantial Mole Cricket is a prey item favoured for its high nutritional value.

In sandy areas European Bee Eaters excavate their nesting holes, and Mary's favourite shot was of four birds showing their wonderful colouration from a number of different angles.

Hungary offers species of Woodpecker that we don't expect to find in Britain: Middle Spotted, which is rather smaller than the Great Spotted, Grey Headed, and the large Black Woodpecker which may be detected by its distinctive Kla! Kla! Kla! call. Also, one of the smaller species, the Wryneck, one of which was seen at Turf Lock last year by some lucky members of the group.

Among the raptors, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Common Buzzard, the star must be the stunning male Red Footed Falcon with its grey black plumage, deep orange cere and legs. The giant raptor, the White Tailed Eagle, though often called Sea Eagle, actually flourishes in this landlocked country with its extensive wetlands habitat.

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Common Cranes are memorably seen flying to roost in huge numbers; they now often winter in France or Spain where it is warm enough, and avoid a longer migration.

These were just some of the highlights of Mary's wonderful illustrated talk.

Richard Farr

Istvan Bartol is a freelance nature photographer and birdwatching guide, working in the Kiskunsag National Park, Hungary. He runs a family lodge with seven ensuite rooms.

Contact him for further information: email: bartol.istvan@gmail.com

birdphotohideshungary.com

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1090861251116094/>

100 Club

Congratulations to the following winners

November monthly draw

Ms J Burdett

January monthly draw

Ms S Collins

December monthly draw

Mr J Norton

February monthly draw

Mr G & Mrs J Turner

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

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Kingfisher – Rob Brennan

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