

CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD CLUB CHAIR'S REPORT 2014

Presented to the Annual General Meeting on March 13th 2015

Reporting on my second year in the Chair, I am reminded that I had hoped to be standing down after completing the remaining years of Peter Herkenrath's incumbency. Unfortunately, with so many other priorities on the list of things to do, I have not had any time to persuade any one else to take on the role, and have by default remained in post! Despite the lack of time and attention that I feel the post should get from me, I continue to enjoy the role and continue to be impressed by the activities of the club and the support of many individuals within the club that help it to continue to flourish.

Cambridgeshire Bird Report 2013

Work on the 87th Annual Report was again a huge collaborative effort starting with the members observing and recording birds in the field and ending with an attractive and informative publication in the hands of members, just over 12 months after the last bird of the year was seen. I undertook the role of Editor, to attempt to raise the significance of the report in the club's annual activities; I am pleased to say we recruited several new section writers which helps share the workload between writers, editor and proof-checkers, but we could always use more help, in particular it is notable that some individuals work on several stages of the report, for example Richard Thomas writes a section and then acts as initial proof-reader; Louise Bacon compiles the database in her role as County Recorder, then wrote a section, and came back in her role as County Recorder to check facts and figures. Undoubtedly the biggest share of the workload falls on Ali Cooper's shoulders, starting with guidelines and advice to writers (and the new editor!) and then coming in at the end of the process to produce and check the final document; now that I have been so closely involved with the process I can confirm that the attention to detail required at this stage is incredible, as errors creep in at every stage of the writing process, and can take many forms, from style, grammar and format to facts, figures and cross references to other sections of the report and previous reports.

Bulletins

Many thanks go to Peter Bircham, who compiles and distributes a electronic bulletin on a monthly basis, and Chris Brown who takes the content of Peter's express news and constructs the traditional 2-monthly bulletin for paper or electronic circulation. The more leisurely process of the traditional system allows late records to be added but of course means the news is somewhat older by the time it lands on peoples doormats. I would encourage as many members as possible to subscribe electronically to whichever bulletin suits them - cutting our postal and paper costs is a positive act in many ways.

Corn Bunting survey: improving on the Atlas.

The Atlas showed that Cambridgeshire is an important place for Corn Buntings, with perhaps 10% of the UK population, but just how accurate was the atlas for this species? It breeds late in the season, and occupies open farmland, a habitat that may not attract birdwatchers undertaking a survey that aims to encompass all species in a tetrad. Therefore, Andrew Tongue and the rest of the Research Committee organised a species-specific survey, in conjunction with our neighbouring counties of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. We did not want to re-survey every tetrad again, so focussed attention on a sample of tetrads, some of which had Corn Buntings in earlier atlas surveys but not the most recent one, but mostly tetrads that were positive for Corn Buntings in the recent atlas. The idea was to resample these tetrads, and see if the number of Corn Buntings detected in the Atlas was a good representation of the true figure.

Forty-seven volunteers participated in the survey, some very enthusiastically, with Steve Cooper taking on an impressive 10 tetrads; in all, 87 tetrads were surveyed. The good news was that of the 22 tetrads with no records during the recent atlas, 6 had records of Corn Buntings during the 2014 survey, meaning that the atlas possibly underestimated the distribution or that the birds had colonised new sites after 2011. The bad news is that Corn Buntings were not found in 21 of the recent atlas positive squares during 2014, suggesting recent losses. Thirty-five squares maintained Corn Buntings and most of these had more than one singing male. Full statistical analysis will be undertaken on the datasets from the atlas and the 2014 survey to determine the accuracy of the population estimate and extrapolate from our random sample of squares to the whole 3 county area, for presentation in the Annual Report and hopefully a national publication. A preliminary glance at the figures suggest the densest populations are in the chalk hills in the south of the county, with incredible counts of 29 and 31 singing males from the two best squares.

Winter Garden Bird survey

Rebecca Buisson organised a Winter Garden Bird Survey, along the lines of a survey that has been running in Bedfordshire for several years and similar to the BTO Garden Bird Survey. The survey takes the form of a simple tick list for presence during each week from early October to the first week of March, with each survey week commencing on a Sunday so as to get at least chances of a bit of weekend time in each week's survey. At time of writing, 34 volunteers had sent in their data with more expected soon. Analysis will commence once the results are all in, but several recorders reported 'extra' species not on the standard form which covers a selection of 46 regular garden species. Louise and I participated and enjoyed the survey, logging a total of 41 species over the winter period. Six species were recorded virtually every week but others came in more infrequently. It was interesting to see that the only Great-spotted Woodpecker came right at the start of the survey, while there were still a few walnuts on the neighbour's tree, but Greenfinch and Reed Bunting left it to the end of the winter to arrive, perhaps when their wild seed sources had been exhausted. Fieldfare and Redwing arrived in middle of November and stayed for 5 weeks, and we had two brief appearances from Blackcaps.

Membership and Subscriptions

Club membership remains healthy, with around 300 paid up members at the time of writing and another 80 who are either slow renewing or are perhaps leaving the club. However, the increase in subscriptions that was brought in for 2014

has not been acted upon by many members who pay by Standing Order. While 2014 was given as a period of grace, it is disappointing that some 120 members are still paying at the old rate at the time of writing, for their 2015 subscriptions. Our new Treasurer, Roger Swain, has worked hard throughout 2014 to get to grips with the club accounts, wrangle with the various banks over the seemingly unprecedented requirement to change the mandate to new signatories, and attend to the problem of underpayment of subscriptions. Our Membership Secretary, Bruce Martin, has been trying to stand down after many years of service and hoping to hand the role on to a new person in good order, but this problem makes for a difficult transition for both posts. So few of us use the Standing Order payment method nowadays that it is understandable we are unfamiliar with the process of adjusting the amount, and banks are similarly unfamiliar with the system in some cases, but I would encourage all members to check and adjust their subscriptions as soon as possible. Please contact the Treasurer if you are unsure whether you are indeed paying the correct amount! We are unlikely to raise subscriptions for many years to come.

Club meetings

Our indoor meetings continue to be well attended, with audiences around 50 per talk, which is a good reflection of the high standard and varied subjects that Vicki Harley has been able to arrange for us. Topics since our last AGM have included photography, habitat management, birdwatching in Britain and abroad and cutting-edge research. Our thanks not only go to Vicki for the quality of the programme, but also to the many individuals who help run the meetings, taking names and payment at the door, making refreshments, donating raffle prizes and helping with the chairs, it really helps to keep the evening running smoothly. Summer field trips are less well attended but numbers have to be restricted for a successful trip and they are particularly appreciated by those new to the area or new to birdwatching.

Conference: Woodland Birds

Once again the club held an excellent full day conference, this time on the subject of Woodland Birds. Vicki Harley pulled out the stops to get an excellent line up of speakers, from local amateurs to nationally recognised scientists. A video clip of a Hawfinch defending its nest against a Grey Squirrel, the incredible efforts of Ken Smith to study Great-spotted Woodpeckers, and his wife Linda's description of the creation of a huge new woodland in Hertfordshire will remain with me for a long time, as will the detailed life histories that are being put together for species like Marsh Tit and Wood Warbler. Several talks also looked at the woodland itself, from a bird perspective and a tree perspective; the latter in particular is something few of us take time to consider and maybe should do more often!

Bob Scott Prize

Unfortunately no entries were received for this award in 2014, however I have been working with a number of students to give them bird survey training and experience, and am hopeful that the results of their work in 2014 will be written up and may well be a contender for this award in future.

Council activities

We have continued to work on consolidation and cataloguing of the club's archive, mainly thanks to Mike Foley, and myself and Louise Bacon have been liaising with national authorities and neighbouring county clubs on improving the way we record, report, monitor and safeguard our Rare Breeding Birds, particularly in the light of the rapid changes underway at the moment in both birds and information technology. Roger Swain has settled in well to the role of Treasurer, and there have been no other changes to council which is a nice settled situation to be in. As we move into 2015, Clive Sinclair has stepped up to take on the role of Membership Secretary which will give Bruce Martin a well earned break. Particular thanks go to Michael Holdsworth as an efficient secretary and host for council meetings, keeping me on track and keeping a careful eye on all proceedings.