



From the Chair – Anne Brenchley

First of all, many thanks to Ciera Atkins for being the guest Editor of our Spring Newsletter. I'm sure you'll agree that Ciera did a fantastic job commissioning so many young birders to contribute to the newsletter and taking over my 'From the Chair' slot to share her thoughts with us. Diolch Ciera!

Well, the last couple of months have seen the height of the birding season and many of us have been



actively taking part in some kind of bird conservation activity, even if it is just sending in important records of sightings. The UK-wide Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) celebrated 30 years in 2023 and incredibly four surveyors from Wales contributed to the survey every one of those 30 years with breaks only for Foot and Mouth outbreak and the Covid-19 pandemic. What an achievement. We're delighted that one of those four surveyors shares his BBS memories with us in this issue.

Ringling activities can help improve our knowledge of bird biology, movements and population demographics. Ringing is not a casual activity but demands considerable training, patience and time commitments. A summary of ringling activities is published annually in our *Welsh Bird Report* but this only tells part of the story. The winter of 2023/24 has been phenomenal for Siskins and Giles Pepler has an update for us on that story.

And yet, there still so much that we don't know. At home, we have a camera attached to a Starling nestbox above the kitchen window. Five eggs hatched and Ian and I ringed five nestlings and an adult on 28 April. Despite the fact that there was a size difference between the nestlings, it was still a surprise that it took four days for the young to fledge – successfully. Naively I thought passerine young all fledged together. So even if you are not able to contribute to a long-running project, your observations and records make a very valuable contribution to that collective knowledge. Please enter your records online, even of common birds (after all what is common now may not be so in years to come), onto *BirdTrack*, your Local Environmental Records Centre or send electronic records or paper records to your County Bird Recorder. You can find more information on all these ways of submitting your sightings on our website here: www.birdsin.wales/record-your-sightings/ Every little helps. Of course, we need to be recording species other than birds too. Many birders in the quiet summer months turn their attention to invertebrates and it's never too late to learn about them. We have a fascinating piece in this newsletter by Clare Ryland about an oil beetle workshop she recently attended. Clare shares with us what to look out for and how to record them.

This newsletter is full of information and I hope that you find it interesting. If this encourages you to find out more or take part in a local initiative, we would like to hear from you.

Action for Birds/Gweithredu Dros Adar

WOS Conference 2024

Aberystwyth University

Saturday, 16 November



Our annual conference is probably the highlight of the 'WOS year', bringing together birders from across Wales to enjoy a variety of talks, to catch up with old friends and to make some new ones.

Our theme this year is *Action for Birds/Gweithredu Dros Adar* and the entire day will be a celebration of projects and grassroots conservation work being undertaken across Wales. We'll have talks on projects being undertaken on a variety of species including eagles, Kestrel, Black Grouse, Swifts, Rooks, Woodcock, Curlew and Green Sandpipers.

You'll also be able to find out what WOS has been up to in 2024 and our partners, BTO Cymru and RSPB Cymru, will join us to present updates on the important work they've been up to over the last twelve months. Our President, Iolo Williams, will be there too and, amongst other things, he'll be presenting the WOS Lifetime Achievement Award to someone who's made a lasting contribution to ornithology in Wales.

Talking of awards, for the first time at the conference, we'll be presenting the winners of this year's WOS Photo Competition (more info below) with their prizes and a 2025 WOS calendar with a selection of winning photographs will be on sale on the day.

All this as well as the usual stalls, the WOS raffle and an excellent lunch will be on offer.

More info to follow in our September newsletter including how to book your place but, in the meantime, please save the date. We'd love to see as many of you there as possible.

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News

2024 WOS Photo Competition

Calling all photographers: from those with large lenses to those who only use the cameras on the phones in their pockets . . . the 2024 photo competition is now open for entries.

The format is the same as in 2023, with three categories: a **Main section**, a **Flocks section** and a **Young Photographers section**. There are some important changes for everyone to note:

- the **closing date** has been brought forward from the end of the year to **30th September**. This is so that we can present prizes at the Annual Conference on 16 November and use a selection of the winning photos for a 2025 WOS calendar, which will be on sale at the conference. All prize winners will be offered free places at Conference and a complimentary copy of the 2025 calendar.
- the **prize fund** has been increased substantially.
- there is more detailed guidance on what editing is acceptable on photos which are entered.

We hope there'll be lots of splendid entries and that the earlier closing date doesn't deter you from entering.

This year's judges are: Steve Stansfield (Director of Operations at Bardsey Bird Observatory and Chair of the Welsh Bird Rarities Committee); Gary Jones (Gary Jones Wildlife Photography), Kate Fox (currently assisting on Bardsey Island), Jasmine Canham (BTO Youth Ambassador) and Iolo Williams.

To find out more, go to www.birdsin.wales/the-2024-wos-photo-competition/ where you can find full details and download your entry forms. To whet your appetite, please turn to page 20 to see some wonderful photos from the 2023 competition, which didn't quite reach the shortlisting stage.

Charity Fundraiser for WOS

For the past five years wildlife photographer Gary Jones has been hosting charity evenings with Iolo Williams where they've raised funds for wildlife charities close to their hearts. This year, Iolo chose WOS to be the beneficiary of funds raised during the event.

On Monday, 11 March, 300 wildlife enthusiasts gathered at the Village Hotel St Davids in Ewloe for an 'Audience with Iolo Williams'. The evening was a great success. Highly entertaining and very enjoyable.



We'd like to thank everyone who attended the evening and, of course, Gary (above) and Iolo too. Diolch yn fawr! Thanks to your efforts a very generous sum of money was raised for WOS.

What's going to happen to this money? Well, we're currently working on creating a new, larger than usual, one-off grant which we hope will fund an exciting conservation project. Something that will make a genuine difference. We hope to award this grant early in 2025 and we'll be announcing the details very shortly, so please keep an eye on our website and social media channels for more information.

In the meantime, Gary has kindly agreed to be one of the judges for our 2024 Photography Competition. We also strongly recommend you visit Gary's website (www.gjwp.co.uk/) to enjoy his stunning wildlife photography.

Deadline imminent for WOS Funding

If you have an idea for project, or one that is already up and running, that will help the conservation or study of birds in Wales or will engage people in nature conservation we'd love to hear from you.

This year, we are offering project and community grants of up to £1000 (more in exceptional circumstances) with further continuation funding a possibility.

The deadline for the next funding round is only days away: **30 June**. The deadline for the following funding round is **31 December**.

You can find out more about both the conservation and community engagement funding opportunities and how to apply for them on our website www.birdsin.wales/grants-awards/

If you're unsure whether your project fits the bill, or you'd like some advice about how to complete the application process, get in touch with us for a no obligation chat. Please use web@birdsin.wales We'd much prefer it if you did that rather than not submit a funding bid!

Sustainable Farming Scheme

With time rapidly running out to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises it was with great frustration that we learnt of Welsh Government's decision to delay the implementation of its Sustainable Farming Scheme. This means another year lost in supporting farmers to transition into producing food sustainably, tackling climate change and restoring nature.

We hope the Welsh Government uses the next twelve months wisely, to make sure that the SFS is both effective and adequately funded so that it delivers for farmers and nature alike.

It's worth reading both Wildlife Trust Wales' response to the delay here: www.rb.gy/3p7f3w and RSPB Cymru's response here: www.rb.gy/82kxkk

Milvus news

We're busy pulling together the next edition of our journal, *Milvus*. We've already had papers submitted on woodland bird communities in south Wales, Hen Harrier population status in Wales, Welsh Red Kite population modelling and the wintering Green Sandpiper population in the Ely Valley. We have two papers generated from WOS' 2022-23 National Breeding Rook Survey. One on Rook population and distribution in Wales and another on our experiences of delivering a national volunteer survey. We'll also have short communications on both White-tailed and Golden Eagle records in Wales.

You can find out more about submissions to *Milvus* here: www.birdsin.wales/milvus-submissions/. If you have an idea for an original research paper (up to 5000 words) or a short communication (up to 2500 words) for the journal, its editor, Dr Rachel Taylor, would be delighted to hear from you. Email: milvuseditor@birdsin.wales

Help us plan WOS' future

We're planning for WOS' future and, to help us make sure we get it right, we'd like to hear from you. WOS' membership and impact in Welsh conservation is growing but, as the Welsh saying goes, *nid da lle gellir gwell* (it's not good if you can do better). To help inform our thinking and to make sure that we reflect your views to the best of our ability we sent out a questionnaire to all members towards the end of May. Some of you will have received it in the post but the majority will have received it as a link via email. If you can't find it your Inbox, please check your spam folder. Many thanks to all of you who've already submitted your responses. If you've yet to do so, we would be very grateful if you fill in the questionnaire as soon as possible. It should take you no more than c10 minutes of your time. Please note that **the deadline for submissions is 30 June**.

WOS Lifetime Achievement Award

Please note that the closing date for nominations for this year's Lifetime Achievement Award has been moved forward to **31st July**.

If you know of someone who you think has made a lasting contribution to ornithology in Wales and who deserves this award, please get in touch. For more information, including previous recipients and guidelines for submitting your nomination, please visit this webpage: www.birdsin.wales/lifetime-achievement-awards/



Dr Steph Tyler receiving her WOS Lifetime Achievement Award from Iolo Williams in 2015

Avian 'flu RSPB Cymru update

Good news! There have been no incidences of avian 'flu reported on RSPB Cymru's reserves so far this year. However, numbers of several coastal species appear to be down on some of the society's reserves. We hope to be able to share with you some more detail once the data gathered from the reserves have been double-checked.

Sandwich Terns fail to return to the Inland Sea, on Ynys Môn

Birders were delighted to hear that a new colony of Sandwich Terns nested on an inaccessible island on the Inland Sea, Ynys Môn in 2022. Sadly, we've heard from RSPB Cymru that the birds did not settle to breed there this year. Fingers crossed that they return there again in the near future.

The following two stories were sourced from WOS' annual Welsh Bird Report editor, Julian Hughes' excellent Bird Notes Blog (www.birdnotes.wales/blog). A weekly update of bird sightings and news from North Wales which is also published in the Daily Post every Thursday.

Bad weather sets back Denbighshire's Little Terns

Storms at the end of May were a challenge for some nesting birds. 80% of Little Tern nests were lost at Gronant, the largest colony in Britain & Ireland.

Sand blown across the site buried an unknown number of eggs as well as the electric fence that protects the birds. It's expected that most, if not all, of the terns will lay another clutch, and providing there is good weather over the coming weeks, there is still plenty of time for the season to be successful.



You can watch a live stream of Gronant's Little Terns courtesy of, and funded by the North Wales Little Tern Group. Click on this link to visit the group's YouTube channel:

www.youtube.com/live/hLgFcYkSbYw

Call of the Corncrake returns to Enlli

It is almost 70 years since the rasping call of Corncrakes was heard regularly on Ynys Enlli (Bardsey), although one does stop briefly on the island every few years. However, three different Corncrakes were heard on the island during May.

It is the first time since 2005 that the island held one through the spring but it's the first year with multiple residents since 1956. It is quite possible that the trio of males have attracted a female or two. Proving breeding will be a challenge, but if confirmed would be the first in Wales since 1992, when pairs bred in Anglesey and Denbighshire following a small influx.

New Razorbill record set on Skokholm

News from Skokholm's 'X', formerly Twitter account (@SkokholmIsland): "We have brilliant news! A whole Skokholm mean total of 4333 Razorbills on ledges is a new record, more than reversing the decline seen last year and smashing the 2022 high of 3965". The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales team on Skokholm also said on 'X' that it was lucky that the outbreak of avian 'flu on the island last July occurred at the very end of the breeding season, just as birds were spreading out across the ocean for the winter. There are fewer birds on some parts of the island e.g. the North Gully but "most have survived, indeed increases elsewhere mean that the average whole Skokholm count has dropped by just 3 to 4989 adults".

The Siskin Spring – part 2! By Giles Pepler

In the Spring newsletter I sketched out some details about the extraordinary numbers of Siskins caught by north Wales ringers from the middle of February to the second week in March, expecting the numbers to drop rapidly thereafter. In fact, we had several more weeks of exceptional numbers, running through into mid-April and with a final trickle into May and, at Bagillt, a further 300 were ringed, bringing the spring total to over 1000 captures, when re-traps were included. Other ringers reported similar numbers, with over 20 being caught in one south Wales garden during a Garden Constant Effort Site session.



Female Siskin

After reporting a preponderance of males and older birds in February/early March the later birds redressed these balances with a lot of first year females, suggesting that males were moving earlier to establish territories on their breeding grounds. These grounds could be well to the north and east of Wales, with ringed birds being controlled (re-caught elsewhere) in Suffolk and Norway, as well as some local movements. Given how messy the Siskin nest looked on the recent series of *Springwatch* there'll be a lot of mess in Scotland and north-east Europe this year!

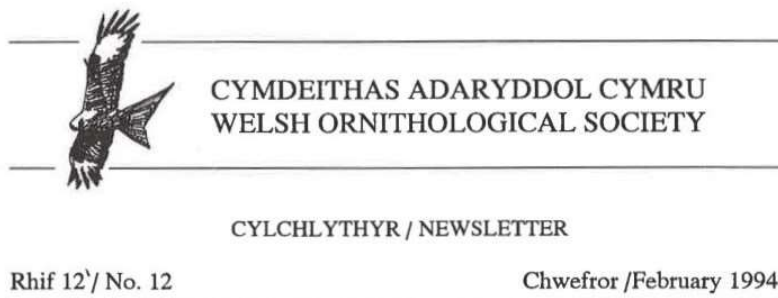
Whilst the Siskins dominated the sunflower heart feeders when they were still in large numbers, Goldfinches and Lesser Redpolls moved in as Siskin numbers declined. They were clearly on the move too: a Bagillt-ringed Goldfinch was caught by another ringer on the northernmost tip of the Isle of Skye twelve days after ringing and a Lesser Redpoll ringed in southern Berkshire turned up at Bagillt ten days after ringing. Two ringers also caught Common Redpolls as well as Lessers.

I hope to write up the highlights of the 'Siskin Spring' as a short communication in *Milvus* next year, when I've gathered more comprehensive information and there's been time for more ringing recoveries to come through – and we should know if the phenomenon is being repeated in 2025.

Penblwydd hapus BBS!

The BTO's Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) is celebrating its 30th birthday this year. BBS monitors breeding birds across the UK thanks to the dedication of almost 3,000 volunteers who visit a randomly selected 1-km square each spring. Of course, hundreds of volunteers in Wales too have participated in this important and very enjoyable survey. Perhaps you're one of them?

WOS has supported BBS since the very beginning. It even made the front page of our newsletter back in February 1994!



Breeding Bird Survey

For some thirty years the Common Birds Census (CBC) has monitored breeding birds and has become the standard against which all other schemes are measured both here and abroad. The CBC, however, is limited in its coverage of habitats and regions, and expansion is difficult because of the time consuming nature of fieldwork and analysis. For this reason the spring of 1994 sees the launch of a major new annual scheme to monitor terrestrial breeding birds in the United Kingdom. Unlike previous national, and annual bird monitoring schemes, the new Breeding Bird Survey (which is supported by the BTO, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) will be based on randomly chosen 1km squares of the National Grid, rather than relying on observers to choose their own site. This results in coverage of a wider range of habitats over a wider geographical area than any previous project and as a consequence a wider range of species will be monitored. Mass participation by volunteer observers will be essential for the scheme's success and our aim is to cover two to three thousand 1km squares on an annual basis.

Quick and simple fieldwork

Fieldwork requires just three visits per year: during preliminary work carried out in 1992 and 1993 (the BTO's Pilot Census Project) observers spent less than 90 minutes per visit in the field. The first of the three visits is to record habitat and mark your survey route, whilst the second and third are to record bird numbers. An 'early' visit should be made between 1st April and mid-May and a 'late' visit between mid-May and the end of June. Observations are recorded directly onto field sheets and then summarised at the end of each visit. At the close of each season these sheets and summaries are returned through regional organisers to BTO HQ.

The results of preliminary work in 1992 and 1993 have been extremely encouraging, and will guide the development and introduction of the new scheme. If you have relatively good skills of bird identification, by sight and sound, and have got a small amount of time spare and want to get involved then take on a single square. If you've more time then do more squares!

How to get involved

Each region has its own scheme organiser who, in liaison with BTO HQ, is responsible for allocating squares to volunteers, ensuring that they have adequate instructions and recording sheets, and for coordinating the return of data. In most cases the local organiser is also the BTO's Regional Representative (RR) and in the small number of areas without an RR squares are allocated directly by BTO HQ. If you would like more information on taking part in this exciting project please contact either your local BTO Regional Representative or Steve Carter, BTO, National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU, tel. (0842) 750050, fax 0842 750030.

*Steve Carter and Richard Gregory
Census Unit, BTO*

Incredibly, four BBS volunteers in Wales have participated in the survey every year since it began. They are **Heather Coats, Andy King, Jerry Lewis** and **John Lloyd**. In fact, Andy's contribution to the survey over the years is mentioned in the 2023 BBS Report <https://rb.gy/8qpuyu>. Over the last 30 years, Andy's completed 204 survey visits to 15 different squares, putting him ninth on the all-time list of visits completed!

We're delighted that John, the BTO's Honorary Wales Officer, agreed to share with us his memories of the survey and what he's experienced over those thirty years.

30 years of BBS – by John Lloyd



I'm just one of four people in Wales to have done a BBS every possible year since its start in 1994? This came as a genuine surprise to me, but it also brought back so many memories.

My involvement in the survey goes back even further than 1994. I took part in its forerunner, the two-year Pilot Census Project in 1992-93, and its rejected methodology with the oh-so-useful 5 minutes stop every 200 metres, at least when going uphill. You'll see what I mean when you look at the photo of my pilot square (below right).

I recall the BTO's 1990s computer which was in love with trig points. The summit of Pen y Fan with its surrounding steep escarpment was quickly dismissed but the summit of Waun Fach (altitude 811m) remained, spurring prolonged negotiations with the then Forestry Commission over vehicle access through the nearby forest. In the early days of organising the survey at a county level the squares were supposed to be allocated strictly in the order they were on the paper. This was totally impractical in my large, sparsely populated Welsh county with a big army range in the middle.



The surveyors were genuinely proud and possessive of their square and committed to the project, but there's always one....an

American ecology professor who had never heard of a line transect and proceeded to argue for another method. I gave her a steep square and she soon gave up....

I did four squares on the Epynt military range at a time when security became more and more of an issue. The safety briefing of the 90s, which included the immortal instruction "do not fall down any hidden holes", was superseded by ever more complex procedures which meant that, in the end, I was driving 80 miles to do squares 5 miles from home.

The military's Range Control often didn't know what was happening on their range. I was once assured that all was quiet in the BBS squares and yet I stumbled into a platoon level fire fight. "Can you see where they are, Sir?" asked a corporal. I told him and walked on. The Chaffinches and Skylarks were in close attendance. They knew how soft a touch the squaddies were!

BBS always made an appearance on the agenda of the BTO's Regional Network Committee. At one meeting under my chairmanship, whilst considering a particularly detailed habitat survey of BBS squares, Jeremy Greenwood, Director of the BTO at the time, said "it shouldn't be too bad, I can see from one end of each transect of my BBS to the other". "Not in Wales. We have things called hills and trees" was the put down from the chair.

At the start, I used to carry a 1:25,000 map with the transect sections all neatly drawn out and a compass on a clipboard in addition to the field recording form. Now I just carry a mobile phone with the OS app and another app which gives me my 10-figure grid reference (and the field recording form of course). No more wandering off at tangents and a precise ending to each transect section.

On the square I have done the most along the Chwefri valley between Beulah and Newbridge (photo right), I have noted the same declines as elsewhere. No more Yellowhammer and Stonechat have gone as well. Ring Ouzel, never annual, have not been present for a long time. This square provided me with the most unlikely sighting, a Golden Eagle who wandered these hills for a few lonely years. Unfortunately, it turned round before entering the square so it didn't count.



Most of the birds recorded on a BBS square are every day species doing normal things but there's often an unexpected delight; the most recent of which was a Tree Pipit catching insects in mid-air as though it was a flycatcher.

I'm really proud and happy to have contributed to the survey at all levels. So how long will I continue? For as long as I can, but my legs are beginning to whisper about the appeal of Jeremy's flat Norfolk square!

Cardiff University Ornithological Society . . . back with a bang!



The COVID-19 pandemic had a very negative impact on the university experiences of young people, including those activities run by student societies. Now that things have returned to normal, how are they faring? Here's how the Cardiff University Ornithological Society is faring and how it's had a positive effect on one of its members.

Hi, my name is Liliana Sneddon, I am a nature enthusiast, recently converted bird-nerd and currently the President of Cardiff University Ornithological Society. I joined the bird society in my first year of university mostly because I was trying to get involved in anything to do with nature and to meet some likeminded people. I had always enjoyed being outdoors, appreciating the birds I saw, but not paying them too much attention – how things have changed!

The society has had a revival since COVID, thanks to our previous committee's hard work, and has become a place where everyone from the most experienced birders to complete novices can meet, learn, and have fun. Over the last few years, we have led activities such as guided walks, residential trips, and chances to have a go at bird ringing, all aimed at fostering people's love for nature and providing experiences they may not have otherwise had access to.



CUOS members ringing Pied Flycatchers with Dr Rob Thomas at Nant Brân wood

As a group we also get involved in national monitoring schemes including the BTO's monthly wetland bird surveys and weekly nestbox monitoring during the spring. Through being a part of the society, I have been able to gain so much valuable experience and many wonderful memories, everything from the delight of seeing my first nest of blue-tit eggs to making friends for life.

My newfound love of birds and involvement in the society has also resulted in me doing a placement year in Costa Rica studying bird communities and their habitats – where I sit now, listening to the sounds of the rainforest from my desk!



Some CUOS members urban birding in Cardiff

Cardiff Ornithological Society is only small, but it has made a big difference in my life and the lives of other students. It has been really wonderful to see how, through their participation in the society, people's love for the natural world and passion for the environment has grown. Both current and graduated members are now part of other groups in Cardiff, and beyond, working for a brighter future or have moved onto careers in conservation and science.

It may seem like such a simple thing, facilitating a walk through a local park while sharing knowledge and joy for nature, but it can have such a far-reaching impact on individuals, their careers, and their commitment to protect our environment.

So often young people can be overlooked or their opportunities to access nature disregarded, but it is such a vital and precious thing for a young person to feel connected to the nature around them. This connection can inspire change, improve career opportunities and is also great for our mental health, so I am very proud to be part of a society doing its little bit to get young people into the outdoors and enthralled by the wonders of our natural world.



Liliana Sneddon (right), CUOS President who kindly authored this piece

In Search of Wales' Kestrels (Cudyllod Coch) by Anne Brenchley



*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

From 'The Windhover' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, briefly studied at St Beuno's College in Llanelwy/St Asaph and here drew a lot of inspiration from Welsh literature and the nature around him. The sight of a Kestrel obviously had a major impact on Hopkins' work and formed the basis of what is now considered to be his most famous poem.

Many youngsters growing up in the 1960s and 70s, who became interested in birdwatching, probably became members of the Young Ornithologist's Club (the junior branch of the RSPB). The YOC symbol was the Kestrel. Kestrels would then have been the commonest bird of prey in much of the UK and it was at this time that the Welsh population was probably at its peak. Sadly, this is no longer the case. A sighting of a Kestrel is notable and **WOS is now urging all birdwatchers to note Kestrel sightings and to make these sightings public by reporting them on either BTO BirdTrack, to your Local Environmental Records Centre or to your County Bird Recorder.** According to the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), the UK population has declined by 47% between 1995 and 2022 but there is no equivalent trend for Wales because the species occurs here in too few of the squares monitored.

WOS and other conservation partners (Natural Resources Wales, RSPB Cymru and BTO Cymru) are keen to understand the current distribution of breeding Kestrels and, if possible, to calculate a population estimate. This, in due course, will enable us to understand some of the factors involved in the decline of this once common bird of prey. Detailed survey work may not be suitable for everyone but we would very much appreciate it if you could record your sightings of them from now until the end of August and, if you can, please note breeding evidence. You can gather useful breeding evidence, without actually finding a nest, something that only dedicated fieldworkers with appropriate licences can do. This could include seeing an individual hunting in suitable habitat, seeing a pair of adults together, observing birds visiting possible nest sites (nestboxes, holes in trees or old farm buildings) or carrying food for young. Your sightings could potentially help inform a future Wales Kestrel survey, so next time you see a 'windhover' please remember that record is important. We want to know about it!

Swift Update

Help the Swift housing crisis. Cardiff Swift enthusiast Julia Barrell has set up a Senedd petition calling on Welsh Government to require all new buildings in Wales to incorporate Swift bricks. These are purpose-built nesting cavities that, when built into the fabric of a house, require no maintenance from the owner. WOS, RSPB Cymru and the North Wales Wildlife Trust (NWWT) are amongst the organisations backing the proposal and we would encourage you to sign it.



To view and sign the petition please copy and paste one of the following links into your browser:

<https://deisebau.senedd.cymru/deisebau/246264>
(Welsh language)

<https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/246264>
(English language)

2024 **Swift Awareness Week** runs from 29th June – 7th July. Here are just a few events you might like to attend:

Efyrnwy Fywiog/Vibrant Vyrnwy will be hosting a Swift Awareness Walk at RSPB Vyrnwy on 28 June. 6.30pm–8pm. It's a free event. Email to book: vibrantvyrnwy@rspb.org.uk.

The North Wales Wildlife Trust are hosting a number of Swift Walks at Penmachno (29 June); Porthaethwy/Menai Bridge (2 July); Bethesda (3 July) and Caergybi/Holyhead (5 July). For more information, please contact ben.stammers@northwaleswildlifetrust.org.uk



If you're running an event to mark Swift Awareness Week, please contact us (web@birdsin.wales) and we'll promote it on our social media channels. Please also consider sharing the links above to the petition at your events.

Fishguard Swifts - update



Following the success of the Swift box sponsored by the Pembrokeshire Bird Group last year, the owner of the site has erected more boxes on the side of his barn (photo left).

Despite the birds not arriving back until almost the end of May, 2 boxes are already occupied. Up to 8 birds have been reported on site so signs are encouraging for the Fishguard birds this year. We'll keep you posted!

Oil Beetles – charismatic but threatened

The summer birding lull often leads birders to turn their attention to other forms of life – particularly insects. Often less studied than birds but equally, if not more threatened, we can all play a part in searching for and recording different insect species. **Clare Ryland, WOS Secretary**, recently attended a ‘Natur am Byth!’ workshop and learned a lot about one of Wales most fascinating family of creatures.



Oil beetles are conspicuous, charismatic insects with one of the most extraordinary life-cycles of any British insect, being nest parasites of solitary mining bees. They are associated with wild-flower rich habitats such as unimproved grasslands, woodland edges, coastal grassland, dunes and heath and have a predominantly western distribution. A reduction in the quality and quantity of solitary bee habitat has contributed to the decline of oil beetles – 3 of the UK’s oil beetle species are now presumed extinct (*Meloe autumnalis*, *M. cicatricosus* and *M. variegatus*), while the remaining 5 species have all suffered declines.

4 species are found in Wales, all of which are priority species for conservation and as such are listed under Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

Oil beetles get their name from the oily substance which is exuded from their joints when threatened. This oil is foul tasting and acts as an irritant to deter predators, giving the beetles the common name ‘blister beetle’ in North America. It also contains cantharidin, which is desirable to a number of insects. Male red-headed Cardinal beetles (*Pyrochroa serraticornis*) have been observed biting and licking oil beetles to obtain cantharidin – this is then passed to the females during copulation and then to the eggs.



Life Cycle

Eggs are laid in the ground, and on emergence the triungulins (between 0.5mm and 2.5 mm in length depending on species) climb onto a flowering plant, typically yellow in colour, and wait for one of their host bees to visit. Oil beetles display a strong preference for yellow flowers with dandelions, buttercups, Lesser Celandine and hawkbits being especially favoured.

The triungulins climb onto the bee and position themselves on the thorax between the wings – this position prevents the bee from dislodging them. Once inside the bee’s nest the triungulins change into a more typical beetle grub which eats the bee’s pollen and nectar stores as well as its eggs. They remain underground and emerge the following year as adult beetles. The adults cannot fly, so dispersal is at the mercy of the host bees.

Oil Beetles in Wales

There are 3 diurnal spring-active species in Wales: Black Oil Beetle (*M. proscarabaeus*), Violet Oil Beetle (*M. violaceus*) and Short-necked Oil Beetle (*M. brevicollis*).

Additionally, there is one nocturnal autumn/winter-active species, the Rugged Oil Beetle (*M. rugosus*).



Black Oil Beetles (*M. proscarabaeus*) (left) are found in meadows and coastal grasslands with the largest Welsh populations on the coastlines of Gower and Pembrokeshire. The adults are diurnal and are active from February to June. They are large beetles, up to 3cm in length, black with violet-blue reflection or all black in colour. They have a roughly square-shaped thorax and the males have a strong kink in the antennae. Black Oil Beetles are very similar to Violet Oil Beetles but have an almost straight base to the thorax with a very small rounded tooth at the base. There is no depressed area at the base of the thorax. The orange triungulins hatch within a few weeks of the eggs being laid and are active on flowers in June and July.



Violet Oil Beetles (*M. violaceus*) (left) are found in meadows and open woodland across Wales. The adults are diurnal and active from March to June. They have a roughly square-shaped thorax and are black with violet-blue reflection or all black in colour. As with Black Oil Beetles, males have strongly kinked antennae whereas females have only a slight kink in the antennae. They are very similar to the Black Oil Beetle but have an indented or V-shaped lower edge of the thorax. Violet Oil Beetles also have a distinct sharp tooth at the base of the thorax. The eggs take nearly a year to hatch, with the triungulins (which can be black or orange) active on flowers in spring when the adults are also present.



The Short-necked Oil Beetle (*M. brevicollis*) (left) is found in coastal grasslands, dunes and heath from March to June. It is very rare with its known range restricted to 9 areas in Britain and Ireland. The first Welsh record since 1944 was at a single site in Pembrokeshire in 2015. It's a small beetle, up to 2.4cm in length with a rectangular-shaped thorax which is wider than it is long. The antennae are short, straight and slightly thickened at the tips. Short-necked Oil Beetles are shiny, blue-black in colour. The brown triungulins, which measure just 0.5mm in length, are active on flowers in June and July. The Hairy-saddled Colletes Bee (*Colletes fodies*) is the suspected host of the Short-necked Oil Beetle in Pembrokeshire - research is still ongoing to confirm this.

The Rugged Oil Beetle is rare and known only from a small number of sites in Monmouthshire and south-east Powys. The adults are nocturnal and active from late September through to early April. This is another small beetle, up to 1.9cm in length and found in chalk and limestone grassland. It has a rectangular-shaped thorax with a narrow groove in the middle. It has roughened wing cases and straight antennae. The largely yellow triungulins are active on flowers from April through to July. The National Oil Beetle Recording Scheme organised by Liam Olds collates records for Oil Beetles across the UK. Please help with the conservation of these insects by submitting any sightings using the *iRecord* website (www.irecord.org.uk) or app. You will need to record the date of sighting, the location (preferably a 6-8 figure grid reference) and a photograph.

When photographing Oil Beetles please:

- Do not handle the beetles!
- Take photographs from above to show the thorax

Oil beetle sightings can also be shared on social media using the hashtag #OilBeetleHunt

Many thanks to Liam Olds, Buglife Cymru for the generous use of his presentation and photographs, and to Anna Hobbs (*Natur am Byth!* Shril Carder Bee Senior Project Officer Bumblebee Conservation Trust) for her help.



The Oil Beetle project is part of the 'Shril Carder Bee project' under the 'Natur am Byth!' programme', more information about oil beetles including identification aids can be found on the Buglife website at www.buglife.org.uk/projects/oil-beetles



Two new Dragonfly Hotspots in Wales



In other invertebrate news, two new sites in Wales have been designated as Dragonfly Hotspots by the British Dragonfly Society www.british-dragonflies.org.uk/. Newport Wetlands and Magor Marsh on the Gwent Levels lie close to each other, are connected by freshwater ditches and will be celebrated as one combined Dragonfly Hotspot! The other site is RSPB Conwy. Both sites will officially be made 'Hotspots' early in July during Dragonfly Week, Saturday 6 July to Sunday 14 July, making them only the second and third sites across Wales to be given the status. They join Llangorse Lake which was designated a hotspot back in 2022.

Dragonfly Hotspots are carefully chosen for the range of dragonfly and damselfly species they support, their ease of access, and for the opportunity they afford to learn more about these iconic wetland insects. RSPB Conwy is home to around 18 of these species and Newport Wetlands/Magor Marsh are home to around 20, many of which depend on the network of reeds and ditches both sites provide in abundance.

Events will be held at Newport Wetlands and Magor Marsh on 6 and 7 July and at RSPB Conwy on 13 July to mark the occasion. Please visit these reserve websites for more information.



BTO Breeding Bird Survey Report 2023



The BTO published its latest Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) Report in May. It can be viewed online here: www.rb.gy/8qpuyu. A total of 2,751 squares were surveyed across the UK last year, of which 300 were surveyed in Wales. That total for Wales is down from 315 in 2022 and down from a peak of 343 in 2015. We clearly need more BBS volunteers in Wales and, although it's too late to take part in the survey this year, how about promising yourself that you'll take part in 2025? You can find out more about this survey here: www.bto.org/our-science/projects/breeding-bird-survey

A date for gull watchers diaries

Following a hiatus of 20 years, the BTO ran another Winter Gull Survey (WinGS) in January. Though weather conditions were very challenging during the key survey period, volunteers covered 38% of all sites across the UK. This is a two-year survey, and another winter count will be held in January 2025. In the meantime, an autumn count is being planned for **29 September**.



The purpose of the autumn survey is to capture seasonal peaks of gull species such as Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed gulls which are present in high abundances on passage and can be captured in post breeding aggregations. The BTO will be conducting comparisons between wintering numbers and autumn counts to assess changes in species peaks and distributions across seasons. This data is useful for effective conservation action where all aspects of the groups temporal movement ecology are considered. For more information about how to participate in this survey please visit the survey webpage: www.rb.gy/9qx8aw

New BTO Blackbird Survey



The BTO is looking for volunteers to help them find out how Blackbirds are doing in our gardens and to understand why they are declining in some areas. The new **Blackbirds in Gardens** project will help us understand how Blackbirds use gardens and the potential effects of the Usutu virus (which has already impacted on the Blackbird population in London) on their population in the UK. If you have access to a garden, have an interest in garden birds and can

recognise a Blackbird by sight, then this survey could be for you! You can find more information about the survey here: www.bto.org/our-science/projects/blackbirds-gardens/taking-part The project is part of the Vector-Borne RADAR project run in partnership with the Animal and Plant Health Agency, the UK Health Security Agency and the Zoological Society of London.

A tough breeding season for Blue and Great Tits by Giles Pepler

Many of you will have watched the sad progress of the Blue Tit brood on *Springwatch* where eight eggs hatched and the chicks then perished one by one until only one was left to fledge. This was mirrored by a disastrous breeding season for both species at the Rhydymwyn nature reserve where Ian Spence and I monitor a number of nestboxes.

We now have completed nest records for 43 nest boxes which were occupied by Blue or Great Tits in 2024 – 21 Great Tit nests and 22 Blue Tit nests. In a normal year, we would expect around 85% of these nests to produce fledged young, with Great Tit broods up to 8 and Blue Tit broods sometimes in double figures. Later broods at the end of May and into June tend to produce fewer young.

This spring only four of the Great Tit nests produced young ready to fledge (19%) and only five of the Blue Tit nests (23%) reached this stage. Egg laying was significantly later than usual: one Great Tit box was completely unoccupied on 23 April, but birds started building at the end of April and this subsequently became one of the very few successful broods, with 4 very well fed young ringed on 5 June.



Can you count them? A successful Blue Tit brood in 2023. But it appears that 2024 was a far tougher breeding season for our tits.

Elsewhere the situation was almost uniformly depressing, with both Blue and Great Tit nests deserted at the egg stage, incomplete hatching from initial clutches and most or all of the chicks disappearing or dying when the feathers were just starting to come out of pin. It has been soul destroying to visit boxes and record observations such as 'Blue Tit – 9 May: 10 eggs hatched - 19 May: just 2 dead young'.

We think that poor food availability was the main cause of the very low breeding success. The *Springwatch* Blue Tit parents were bringing in very few of the usual caterpillars and in north-east Wales, days of heavy rain are likely to have washed the usual main food source off the trees – if the caterpillars ever hatched in the first place. Anecdotally, four garden nests where there was supplementary food in feeders close by, all produced healthy fledged young, including a splendid brood of 9 Great Tits and three sizeable broods of Blue Tits.

When the monitoring records from the BTO's Nest Record (www.rb.gy/efrvtx) and Constant Effort Site (www.rb.gy/bwz6pn) schemes come through towards the end of the year, it will be interesting to see whether our depressing experience of multiple failures is mirrored elsewhere in the UK. From brief correspondence with a few other nest recorders, it seems that it may have been a poor season in many parts of the UK, but nothing as bad as Rhydymwyn.

Do you monitor nestboxes? Whether it's only one or two boxes in your garden or a larger nest box scheme elsewhere. If you do, please let us know how they've fared this year. We'd be interested to hear how tits, Nuthatches, Pied Flycatchers, Barn Owls etc have done around Wales. If we get a number of responses, we'll create a short summary in the next edition of the newsletter. Please contact newsletter@birdsin.wales

Fishguard's Celebrity Magpie – an 'aberration' by Clare Ryland



On 24th March BBC online ran a story featuring a Magpie with abnormal plumage which had been photographed by Terry Wright, a visitor to Fishguard earlier that month. The story gained traction and appeared in several national and regional newspapers as well as being picked up by various online news websites.

A search of the Pembrokeshire Bird Blog www.pembsbirds.blogspot.com/ revealed that sightings of this bird, or another very similar one, were first reported in 2014 and that it has been seen on and off around the Fishguard Fort area ever since. Photos seem to suggest that it is the same bird.

The bird was variously described as leucistic or suffering from vitiligo. Intrigued by our new local celebratory, I contacted Hein van Grouw, Senior Curator of the Bird Group, Dept. of Life Sciences at The Natural History Museum in Tring, who specialises in plumage aberrations in birds. He was delighted to help and explained that the bird is neither of the above, nor is it albino.

The diagnostic feature which differentiates between albino and leucistic birds is the colour of the eyes – albino birds have pink eyes – and any bird with only the slightest amount of melanin left cannot be an albino. This rules out the Fishguard magpie: it has dark eyes and the plumage is not fully white. Similarly, the bird does not suffer from vitiligo, a form of which can occur in birds, but is then referred to as Progressive Greying.

In leucism, part of or all the melanin-producing cells are absent in the skin from birth (hatching), resulting either in a plumage with white patches, or a fully white plumage: feathers affected by leucism are fully white. In the Fishguard Magpie the affected feathers still have normal melanin, mainly in the tips of the feathers, whilst the bottom part of the affected feathers is white (absence of melanin). The coloured (melanised) feet and beak underline that the bird is not leucistic.

Hein advises that it is hard to categorise this particular aberration, which is heritable, but the effect of the mutation is that the melanin synthesis stops before the feather is fully grown, resulting in a melanised initial part of the feather (top), whilst the rest of the feather develops without melanin and is therefore white.

This heritable plumage aberration has been recorded throughout the Eurasian Magpie population with records from several European countries, both recent (last 25 years) and historical (more than 100 years ago).



The original bird which featured in research carried out in the Netherlands

Following research begun in the Netherlands almost 30 years ago it is known that this inheritance is recessive, meaning that two normal Magpies who both carry the gene must pair up. Theoretically, 25% of their offspring will be 'white'. The amount and absence of pigment varies from individual to individual, with some being 'whiter' than others, the amount of pigment however does not change within the bird's lifespan. The gene is probably far more widespread than might be expected, based on the many records of 'white' magpies all over Europe. The common belief that colour-aberrant birds do not live long (due to being predated) is not supported by data, so the bird currently being seen in Fishguard may well be the original bird first seen in 2014 and, if it breeds, all of its offspring will be carriers of the mutation and could contribute to spreading the gene more widely.

Keep a look out for the bird if you come to Fishguard, it tends to frequent the area around Fishguard Fort on the A487.

Many thanks to Hein van Grouw for all of his help with this article, and for the use of his photograph, and to Terry Wright for the use of his photographs.



2023 WOS Conference Silent Auction Update

Those of you who were able to attend the 2023 WOS Conference in Aberystwyth will remember we ran a Silent Auction, the prize being a private tour and tasting for 6 people at the award-winning Dyfi Distillery.

Josh Pedley, who made the winning bid, emailed us recently with the following feedback:

Just to let you know that I went to the Dyfi Distillery tour and tasting yesterday evening and it was absolutely fantastic! Danny was a brilliant host, his passion for Gin must surely be unparalleled. He was so knowledgeable and enthusiastic and he had some great stories to tell too, which kept us thoroughly entertained! And not to mention the gin sampling too, not just gin and tonic, but showing us other ways to enjoy his gin too. A fantastic all-round experience that lasted over 2hrs in total.



And we also stopped in to see Telyn and Idris at the Dyfi Osprey project enroute.

You can find out more information about Dyfi Distillery on their website www.dyfidistillery.com

If you own a business and, like Dyfi Distillery, would consider offering WOS a prize (no matter how large or small) to be auctioned or raffled at our Annual Conference, we'd naturally be delighted to hear from you! For more information, or a quick chat, please contact newsletter@birds.in.wales

2023 WOS Photography Gallery . . . the best of the rest

You'll have already read about WOS' 2024 Photography Competition on p3 of this newsletter. We're sure we'll have some fantastic photos from this year's competition to share with you in a future newsletter. In the meantime, to whet your appetite for those, here are our favourite photos from the 2023 competition which didn't quite reach the shortlisting stage. None of these photographers have been featured in the newsletter before and we're delighted to publish them now.



Reflective Mallard by Nick Perry



Kestrel feeding young by Vaisey Bramley



Red Grouse by William Lambourn



Sparrowhawk by David Gilbert and Loaded Puffin by Jessica Crumpton



Green Sandpipers by Justin Taylor

And finally . . .

Many thanks for your support for WOS. We are an entirely voluntary organisation with no paid members of staff. Without you we wouldn't be able to publish our various journals, offer our conservation, student or community grants, organise an annual conference, engage in environmental consultations, campaign on behalf of biodiversity, maintain our website or produce this newsletter. Please tell others who care about birds and all wildlife about us and encourage them to join us. WOS membership is growing, but we still need many more members to ensure that our voice is louder and can be heard more clearly in the Senedd and elsewhere. Here's wishing you all good birding!

WOS would like to thank all the photographers who kindly allowed us to use their images in this newsletter: Ben Andrews (RSPB Images), Vaisey Bramley, Jessica Crumpton, David Gilbert, Hein van Grouw, Gary Jones, William Lambourn, John Lloyd, Steph Miles, Liam Olds, Giles Pepler, Nick Perry, Clare Ryland, Liliana Sneddon, Ben Stammers, Justin Taylor and Terry Wright.

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