



Car park charges introduced at Ashcott Corner

Julian Thomas reports

In an unexpected move, Natural England (NE) and the RSPB announced on 14 October that they will be introducing charges for parking in their car parks at Ashcott Corner (for Shapwick Heath NNR and Ham Wall RSPB reserve respectively) from 15 November.



The standard charge in both car parks will be £3.00 per vehicle per day.

A letter to SOS chairman Roger Dickey, signed by Simon Clarke (NE's Somerset Senior Reserves Manager) and Abbie Thorne (RSPB's Visitor Experience Manager for Somerset), and copied to me, explains:

'The reason for this introduction is to help raise funds to aid in the long term strategic management and enhancement of these important facilities alongside contributing to the sustainable nature conservation management on both reserves.

Within the Ham Wall car park RSPB members will be able to park free of charge. Natural England proposes to introduce a regular user's annual pass of £30.00 per annum for its Ashcott Corner car park.'

It is, of course, normal practice for the RSPB to charge non-members for using dedicated car parks at its reserves (Arne in Dorset being an obvious example), so it should perhaps come as little surprise that this has eventually been applied to Ham Wall, which is now a showpiece reserve. In practical terms this will make no difference to those who are RSPB members (as many SOS members no doubt also are), though it might be useful to carry your RSPB membership card, as the Ham Wall Facebook page asks for that to be displayed on the dashboard when parked (also usual practice).

NE have less of a history of charging for car parking, but the financial constraints under which the agency has been placed by Government (via its parent department, Defra) are well known, so local managers may have to look for alternative sources of revenue. It may also be that there are more practical concerns about the smaller car park being overwhelmed if it remained free while the larger RSPB one across the road introduces charges.

It is worth noting that for Shapwick Heath NNR the charges only apply to the Ashcott Corner car park - parking at the Avalon Marshes Centre at the other end of the reserve will remain free. Also, registered volunteers have already been contacted reassuring them that they will be issued with a pass allowing free parking - fair enough given the time and effort put in by them.

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Welcome

Hello again!

Well, it's been an interesting autumn. Sadly, Somerset has so far largely missed out on the eastern goodies that have been such a feature of October nationally, though highlights have included the county's first White-tailed Eagle since 1945, our third Pallid Harrier (at Greylake RSPB), and an unprecedented 10 Yellow-browed Warblers found along the coast on a single day (4 October)! One of the star birds nationally does have a Somerset connection, however - former resident Bruce Taylor enjoyed great views of Britain's first Eastern Kingbird on his new home of Barra in the Outer Hebrides (and even gave me a lift from the ferry to the bird - thanks Bruce, and great to see you again).

To briefly touch on the main subject of last issue's editorial, the Government has announced it will write all EU legislation into UK law before the process begins to pick out the unwanted bits post-Brexit. This should be good news, making it harder for the laws based on the Birds and Habitats Directives to be junked, especially as polls indicate there is wide support across the Brexit divide for sustaining and even improving them, but 'Wait and see' remains the operative phrase.

Back home, there have been plenty of new developments on our reserves, including the very recent announcement of the introduction of parking charges at Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath (see p.1), but also some perhaps more welcome additions to visitor facilities here and elsewhere. Meanwhile, some of our rare breeders have had a good season - see Amy King's update on p.4 for more details.

Features include Tom Raven on Patchwork Challenge, which sounds great fun, yours truly on overland skua passage, which has been another highlight this autumn, and a Spotlight which will hopefully help you to enjoy watching a Water Pipit or two this coming winter. Add in the other regular features and I hope this is another enjoyable issue. Unfortunately I have only managed to produce three issues of *The Bittern* this year instead of the usual four, but I do sometimes struggle for suitable material (as well as the time to put it together) - if you would like to write an article you think would be suitable, please contact me.



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News

Car park charges introduced at Ashcott Corner

(continued from p. 1)

The RSPB car park has specific opening times, whereas the NE one is open all the time. It is not yet clear whether there will be any times when charges do not apply, for instance early morning and late evening when the RSPB car park is closed. Nor is there any indication in either case of any exemptions for disabled badge holders. I had quite a long conversation with Simon Clarke about these proposals, and while the central principle of charging being introduced is not negotiable, he made clear that both NE and RSPB would value any comments. He is realistic about expecting some adverse reaction, but I would add a request (should it be needed) that you please be both civil and constructive if you do comment.

Both organisations can be contacted by post at: The Avalon Marshes Centre, Shapwick Road, Westhay, BA6 9TT. The RSPB can also be contacted by phone on 01458 860494 or by email on ham.wall@rspb.org.uk. For Natural England the equivalents are 01458 860120 and somersetavonandwiltshire@naturalengland.org.uk

One issue that has already been raised in conversations with other birders is that of people trying to avoid the charges by parking on the road outside. Please don't - one of the main reasons for the RSPB creating their car park was to avoid the adverse reaction from local residents to cars lining the road, especially during the winter Starling roost season. It would be a shame if the same problems arose again. It would also be a shame if the introduction of parking charges caused fewer people to visit these great reserves (a potential issue of which I know the reserve managers are already well aware), but time will tell.

New screen at Steart Marshes

WWT Steart Marshes is developing nicely, but one of the lesser-visited areas is Stockland Marsh, west of Stert Drove and south-west of the main car park. A freshwater grazing marsh which floods in the winter, it attracts plenty of wildfowl and waders (including Teal, Wigeon, Pintail, Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, and Green Sandpiper), and last winter also a Cattle Egret and a few Water Pipits. WWT have now erected a new screen which overlooks the east side of the marsh. It's about 1.5km from the main car park, and should provide great views of the birds on the flooded field in front of it, and elevated views over the whole area.



Meanwhile the RSPB has introduced a more modest development at Ham Wall - a grit tray for use by Bearded Tits and other birds near to the Avalon Hide. This should prove useful for both birds and birders/photographers alike.

A rather larger RSPB project is replacing the old hide at the heronry in Swell Wood, above West Sedge Moor. The new hide is currently under construction, so more details hopefully in the next issue of *The Bittern*.

Rare and prospective breeders update

Amy King, RSPB Species Recovery Officer, reports

The breeding population of Great White Egrets increased this year to 7-10 breeding pairs, 5 of which successfully fledged 10 chicks across the Avalon Marshes. A colour ringing scheme was also trialled to develop knowledge in areas such as breeding behaviour, foraging habits and dispersal. This has so far proved a success, with three 2016 fledglings currently wearing a red ring engraved with a white three-letter code on the left tibia (AAA, AAC, and AAF). In order for this to be as useful as possible, we are now relying on people to report any sightings of these individuals to the coordinators. Any information is appreciated!



Monitoring efforts also continued on Little Bittern, Glossy Ibis, and Night Heron, all proving much harder to track down. However, we can confirm 4 barking male Little Bitterns, a pair of Glossy Ibises, and the presence of Night Heron on the Avalon Marshes, proving the management taking place in this area really is paying off!

Another species worth mentioning is the Crane. This year the Great Crane Project birds produced three fledged chicks, in Somerset, Wiltshire, and Wales. This is the first time Cranes have bred in Wales for over 400 years so was a real milestone for the project! A ringing effort was also carried out on the birds in Somerset, with the team ringing a wild bred UK crane for the first time. Keep an eye out for this juvenile,



with a colour combination of Red/White/Green (read top to bottom) on the right leg.

Next year we hope to continue this exciting work, so if anyone is interested in finding out more about how you can help, please do contact me and I will give you more information. For re-sightings, please also contact myself (amy.king2@rspb.org.uk 01458 252805) or Alison Morgan (ajm@alisonmorgan.co.uk).

Reward offered after Crane found shot dead

Sadly not everyone shares our love for these birds, and shortly after Amy provided the update above on the Great Crane Project, it was confirmed that the most successful breeding female (known as 'Swampy') had been found dead in August in a maize field near Ilchester, and that an autopsy had shown several shotgun pellets in her body. The RSPB has offered a reward of £1000 for information about the circumstances of her death, to which another £1000 has been added by an anonymous private donor. If you have any information, please ring Avon and Somerset Police on 101, quoting crime number 5216228321. For full details see: <http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk/blogs/damon-bridge/swampy-shot-dead>

Patchwork Challenge 2015

Tom Raven on his success in this fun birding competition

Patchwork Challenge (PWC) is a national fun challenge, run by some dedicated birders, which was set up to encourage more people to get onto their local patches more often. The basic format is that birds are allocated points based on how common they are. For instance a Robin scores 1 point, Black-necked Grebe 2, Yellow-browed Warbler 3 points, Little Bittern 4 points, and real vagrants the maximum of 5 points. There are bonus points for the rarer birds and, importantly, bonus points for finding the bird. Birds seen outside the patch whilst the observer is in the patch are viable ticks.

The size of the patch covered cannot exceed 3 square kilometres. There is no limit on the number of patches an observer wants to cover and more than one observer can have the same basic patch. Living in Glastonbury, my patch covers parts of Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath reserves. Centred on Ashcott Corner car park, it is actually a fair bit under the permitted area and is a complex shape, but basically it stretches from the western end of Noah's Lake to the western edge of Street Heath.

Having become aware of PWC through other Somerset birders who had already taken part, my first year was 2014 and I managed to scrape together 157 points. I got some good birds, but missed a fair few, which was frustrating. What it did do was 1) get me onto patch much more often and 2) highlight the relatively limited number of species that one observer can connect with. Towards the end of the year I could feel my competitive levels rising: I knew I had a really good patch, so surely I could do better in 2015?

The year started off well with Goosander and Whooper Swan (both 2 pointers). The patch is excellent for 2 pointers (Marsh Harrier, Bearded Tit, Cetti's Warbler, Bittern, Little Egret), but it seems a little ridiculous for my patch that Great White Egret gets 3 points! February and March saw my score build gradually. I should point out that there are many different sub divisions of the challenge, but one of the most important is the Comparative League. The score for this is calculated from the points accumulated in the current year compared with those of the previous year, expressed as a percentage.

April is always a good month for scoring points, with most of the summer visitors arriving and always the chance of something a little more unusual. I had an outstanding month of patch birding, which culminated in me finding Britain's third Hudsonian Godwit in the final week. This exciting find earned me 15 points (5 + 5 for mega status + 5 for finding it). A total of 57 points for the month propelled me to the top of my mini league (of which there are several), Inland South.

I didn't drop this lead for the rest of the year, mainly due to a string of quality birds, many of which I was lucky enough to find, a difficult task on my patch given the huge number of birders who visit it. These included Cattle Egret and Pectoral Sandpiper (both worth 6 points). Being able to share these with other birders was a real benefit. By the end of the autumn I was vying for the top spot in the Comparative League nationally. I had been visiting the patch two or even three times a day when I could, often before and/or after work. I was feeling fairly stale by now, but the thought of winning the whole competition outright spurred me on. And my phenomenal year was completed by my lucky discovery of Somerset's second Dusky Warbler, picked up by call in early December, a very well received early Christmas present.

I was consistently very lucky throughout the year and, despite missing some good birds, including Purple Heron, I ended up winning the national and Inland South mini league Comparative Leagues. For this I was rewarded with a subscription to the Rare Birds News website (which has been invaluable this year) and a substantial book token from NHBS, one of the very generous sponsors of the challenge. I am also the proud owner of a new pair of excellent Bresser binoculars, courtesy of Forest Optics, all because a mega rare godwit dropped onto my patch one damp Friday evening in April.

The aim of the challenge is to get people out birding locally more often and it has certainly worked with me. Hopefully this short article will encourage some more people to do similar, whether indulging in the challenge or not. For more details about PWC, see: <http://patchworkchallenge.blogspot.co.uk/>

Overland skuas

Julian Thomas explains an interesting phenomenon and how to take advantage of it

Overland skua passage from the Wash to the Bristol Channel in autumn is by now a well-known phenomenon - I wrote a light-hearted article on it in the old *Bird Notes* back in 2003 and even had a rather more scientific note on it published in *British Birds* in 2007 (*Brit. Birds* 100: 503-505). But we have learned some more about the circumstances and timing of it over the past decade or so, so it's about time for an update. Longer-term members may recognise some of what follows from those previous articles, but in that time SOS has gained many new members who may not be too aware of this phenomenon, so I thought it best to lay it out again in full.

Seawatching is now a regular part of the Somerset birding scene. Skuas are the most regular seabirds seen, and all four Northern Hemisphere species are now annual or nearly annual off Somerset - Arctic, Pomarine (often shortened to 'Pom'), Long-tailed, and Great (usually referred to by seawatchers by the old Norse name used in the Shetlands, 'Bonxie').



Long-tailed Skua

Brian Gibbs

In the 1990s most skuas seen were blown up-Channel by westerly gales. There were a few skua records which did not fit this pattern, however, and this got a few of us wondering. How were we to explain the juvenile Long-tailed going west over Ham Wall on 3 September 1999, for instance, or the three Poms following the main drain west through Shapwick Heath on 10 September 2001? By the turn of the century we knew that there was a tiny but regular spring skua passage up-Channel and overland to the North Sea, birds having been seen on numerous occasions towering up inland from Severn Beach. Was the same happening in reverse in the autumn in suitable conditions?

A few of us (chiefly Brian Gibbs, Roger Musgrove, Clive Sawyer, and myself), decided to test this out, and in autumn 2002 we identified apparently suitable conditions on six days between late August and early October. On none of these days were local weather conditions suggestive of skuas being blown up-Channel, yet we recorded a total of 74 skuas on those days off either Minehead or Hurlstone Point (49 Arctics, 18 Bonxies, 6 Poms, and a distant probable Long-tailed).

The theory goes like this: strong winds with a northerly component (anywhere from NW to NE) in the southern North Sea push birds passing along the Norfolk or Lincolnshire coasts into the Wash. With a helpful tailwind, some skuas cross the coast and head off inland. The small number of inland sightings (usually in rainy or murky conditions) suggest that they cross within a broad band that spans roughly from Birmingham to Oxford, following rivers down to find the sea again in the upper reaches of the Bristol Channel, thus completing the shortest sea-to-sea crossing across the broadest part of England, and saving themselves the extra distance and effort of flying around East Anglia to the English Channel.

It is not unique: there are several other proposed overland routes across Britain, and observers in Lothian and the Thames estuary had recorded skuas heading inland for a number of years before we cottoned on. A few observers in landlocked Cambridgeshire, too, had wondered where the skuas occasionally seen in

their county had come from, and noted that they normally appeared in periods of northerly or north-easterly winds, often associated with heavy rain - they too persevered, and numbers of skuas have since been seen on several occasions flying up the R. Nene at Foul Anchor, just 6 miles or so inland from the Wash. In that autumn of 2002 we managed to correlate sightings off West Somerset with sightings in Cambridgeshire (including a remarkable flock of 25 Bonxies seen over Peterborough). Not to the point of being able to track individual birds, but we had enough to be able to show that all these sightings were part of the same movement. What is unique is that the Wash-Severn route is the first (and so far only, as far as I know) where observers have been able to show conclusively where birds head back out to sea, completing a full route. Watches over subsequent years have provided more and more evidence for this. We're a little bit proud of that - and all because Roger Musgrove one day said 'What if...?'

When *British Birds* showed an interest I started to do a little more digging, and came up with some admittedly conjectural evidence that overland passage was happening long before we became aware of it. A paper by Fox and Aspinall in 1987 (*Brit. Birds* 80: 404-421) gave details of Pomarine Skua records in November 1985. On 10 November that year there were large movements of Poms along the east coast in strong northerlies, and several inland records, including in Cambridgeshire and Wiltshire.

One record of which they did not seem to be aware, however, was of a remarkable flock of 33 Poms in Minehead Bay the same day. Given



Pomarine Skua

Brian Gibbs

the weather charts for that day, it seems likely that these too were overland birds. Intriguingly, some earlier Somerset records of Poms in October 1879, including birds in the Parrett estuary, Minehead Bay, and inland at North Curry, may also tie in with reports of unprecedented numbers along the east coast in north-easterly gales at that time.

So far so good, but the best bit, perhaps, is that we have also managed to show that these movements are predictable, based on east coast weather patterns, and have little to do with conditions in the Bristol Channel. So they offer obvious chances for more Somerset birders to catch up with skuas in the county.

The peak period for sightings is in the afternoon, suggesting diurnal migration of birds crossing the east coast in the first couple of hours after dawn. Originally we thought the best time for sightings was 3-5pm, indicating a crossing time of maybe 8-9 hours, but with experience over the years that window has moved forward, particularly earlier in the autumn when dawn on the east coast is that much earlier. The best time in recent years seems to be 1.30-4pm, with a few stragglers into the evening after that. Another window, which usually produces fewer birds, is early morning (before 9am) if conditions on the east coast are suitable the previous evening to induce migration overnight.

Birds are often relatively close (at least through a scope) as they pass Minehead, but they can at times be frustratingly distant. On some predicted overland passage days no skuas are seen at all. It's impossible to be sure, of course, whether they are passing too far out to be visible or not at all. The tides in the Wash appear to be a factor though - at low tide it is a large expanse of mud similar to Bridgwater Bay, and is perhaps off-putting for seabirds to cross, whereas at high tide, especially springs, this is not an issue.

Occasional watches off points further up-Channel (e.g. Brean Down and Clevedon) have drawn a blank, even on days when overland skuas have been seen further west. The birds presumably migrate quite high up, and some can still be so when passing Minehead, so perhaps the narrowness of the upper stretch of



Great Skua ('Bonxie')

James Packer

the Channel, and the presence of Steep Holm and Flat Holm, put them off from coming down to sea level there? There are occasional sightings from places such as Kilve, but, as with the Levels records that got us so interested in the first place, these tend to be on days of low cloud and murk.

And so to the present day: numbers of skuas passing on overland days are always variable, but 17 September this year illustrated just how good it can be. Conditions could hardly have been better for overland passage: strong north-westerlies in the southern North Sea right through from the previous afternoon, spring high tides in the Wash just before dusk the previous day and just after dawn, clear

skies, and just enough of a north-westerly at the Somerset end to hopefully push birds a little nearer.

Skuas making the overland crossing during the night under a bright moon passed Minehead between dawn and 0840, then no more by about 0920. They were mostly distant, but 4 Arctic Skuas, 2 or 3 Bonxies, and an adult Pom were logged, and a few other skua-shaped specks were just too far out to be sure of, never mind identify to species. Some of the same birds were seen off Hurlstone Point, but others seemed to veer further out beyond sight before reaching there.

Despite at least one observer watching again from Minehead from 1130, there were no more skuas seen until just after 1345, but then a pretty amazing couple of hours unfolded. In the next 30 minutes 18 Arctics and a sub-adult Long-tailed appeared in a rush; there was a lull of 20 minutes or so, then 7 Arctics, 2 Poms, and another sub-adult Long-tailed over the course of a busy 10 minutes - 29 skuas in an hour! Another five skuas, all Arctics, were logged in the next hour - possibly more in fact, but some birds were landing on the sea and drifting back up-Channel with the tide, so the numbers here err on the side of caution. All land-based observers had left by 1600, but Jon Mattick, out on his boat for a fishing competition, logged a further two Arctics and a Pom between 1600 and 1700. An absolute minimum of 44 skuas passed Minehead that day - quite possibly the largest number seen off Somerset in a single day, though strangely not one Bonxie was seen in the afternoon!

Bear in mind that this was exceptional, and the numbers and species vary from day to day, but most overland passage days produce interesting sightings, so I'll finish off by reiterating what I said in that *Bird Notes* article 13 years ago. If you want to see skuas off the county, but are put off seawatching by the prospect of early morning starts and trying to keep your scope steady in a wet, howling gale, keep an eye on the national weather forecast, pick the right conditions any time from mid-August to mid-October, and try it. Watching groups of skuas beating by on a calm, sunny afternoon is an experience not to be missed!



A sight to brighten any seawatcher's day – two adult Pomarine Skuas

Brian Gibbs

Spotlight on...Water Pipit

The Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*) may not be brightly coloured, at least not in the winter plumage we most regularly see, but it is far from uninteresting. For many years it rather went under the radar, as it was considered to be the nominate race of the same species as our familiar Rock Pipit (*Anthus petrosus*). That changed in 1986 when the BOU split the two, and birders started to take a bit more notice of it.

In the breeding season they are birds of the high mountains of central and southern Europe, denizens of the same areas as Ring Ouzels, Alpine Accentors, and even Snow Finches. Most other species of the high Alps are either long-distance trans-Saharan migrants or only move short distances to lower altitudes. But Water Pipits are the odd ones out for two reasons: firstly, good numbers of them regularly move north for the winter to take advantage of our mild maritime climate; and secondly, at this time of year they prefer low-lying wet meadows, watercress beds, and saltmarsh - very different from their summer haunts.

While we don't have many watercress beds in Somerset, we do have plenty of suitable habitat, and the numbers of Water Pipits recorded is generally on the increase, perhaps mostly due to increased observer awareness. The fringes of Bridgwater Bay are areas where one or two may be found most years - the Axe and Brue estuaries and Huntspill Sluice are traditionally good sites, and Steart Marshes increasingly so. Inland, most of the Levels are potentially suitable, but perhaps not surprisingly the most regular and numerous sightings are from reserves such as Shapwick Heath, Ham Wall, and Greylake. They are worth looking for any time between late October and March.

In winter plumage they are subtle, grey above and white below, heavily streaked but noticeably paler and with neater streaking than Rock Pipit, and with a prominent white or off-white supercilium. Some Meadow Pipits (with which they often associate) can look greyish, but never quite so as a Water. Water Pipits are also slightly larger, and have dark legs. These fieldmarks are shown well in an excellent photograph (below) taken by Les Moxon at a frozen Greylake RSPB in 2015.

Occasionally one hangs around into April and starts to attain breeding plumage, which is (unusually among our regular pipits) very different from that in winter. Then the largely unstreaked underparts, pink-tinged breast, and blue-grey cap make it a bird well worth seeing all over again.



Desert Island Birds

Based loosely on the famous radio show, each issue we will feature a prominent (or not so prominent) Somerset birder. This issue's castaway is SOS committee member **Dave Dawe**.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Unlike many of the other desert island birders who started at a very young age, I have only been at it for about 7 years, as at this time my life had a change of course. Since then I have been well and truly hooked and birding now plays a huge part in my life.

What is your favourite birding memory?

On a damp February evening whilst doing the gull roost at Wimbleball, finding two juvenile Iceland Gulls and two Glaucous Gulls (a juvenile and an adult). The following night five white-wingers came into the roost, including Somerset's second-ever record for Kumlien's Gull.

On other memorable days, I have also been lucky to witness:

- 205 Red-throated Divers passing Minehead
- 29 Bonxies passing Hurlstone
- 160 Common Scoter passing Hurlstone
- 38 Shag at Hurlstone
- 90+ Goosander roosting at Wimbleball.



Where was your favourite birding trip?

A recent trip to Scotland with Angie where we had typical highland birds like Ptarmigan, Black and Red Grouse, Corncrake, Crested Tit, White-tailed and Golden Eagles, plus more - all new birds for me.

Favourite foreign trip was when we went to Southern Spain to see the raptor migration across the Straits of Gibraltar: being at eye level with Griffon and Egyptian Vultures accompanied by 100s of Black Kites, Honey Buzzards, Booted and Short toed Eagles just blew me away.

What do you do when you're not watching birds?

I'm fortunate in having a fishing boat moored at Porlock Weir from where I take trips out along the Exmoor coast, on occasions anchoring to monitor the only Fulmar colony in Somerset at Glenthorne.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

Exmoor is where I enjoy most of my birdwatching - I like the solitude - but my main passion is seawatching, mostly carried out at Hurlstone Point. Summer and winter, I just love it down there. I enjoy the odd twitch but generally only as far as adjoining counties.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Ring Ouzel: It's that moorland thing, just a shame I never got to see them breeding in Somerset.

Cuckoo: Such a clever and crafty bird and you never tire of hearing one.

Manx Shearwater: I always look forward to the first one of the year off Hurlstone and had the privilege of a night stay on Skomer island to hear and see them come in.

Puffin: Such characters when they come ashore to breed, then they spend the rest of their life offshore - amazing for such a small seabird.

Robin: Being a professional gardener, it's always good company on the worst winter's day.

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

Presuming I already have my bins and scope, the book would be *Flight Identification of European Seabirds* - taking that I'm on a European island, I don't want anything passing without being able to ID it. Luxury item would be a Thermos flask because I never go birding without a brew.

Walks and talks

Here are details of all SOS indoor and field meetings and a selection of events organised by the RSPB and Somerset Wildlife Trust in November 2016-January 2017.

All SOS events are free to members and non-members alike, but there is a charge for some provided by other conservation organisations. We try to include either a grid reference or a postcode (for satnav users) for the meeting points. Charges and booking details are given where known for non-SOS events, but please check with the organisers.



November

3	Talk	SWT	Wild Art at the Museum of Somerset. 1900. Stephen Moss and artists Andrew and David Neal share inspirational stories on wildlife and art. The Museum of Somerset, Taunton Castle, Castle Green, Taunton TA1 4AA. Booking required, phone 01823 255088. Cost: £9.50 (£8 for SWT members).
5	Talk	RSPB	The Great Crane Project. 1930. Roger Lucken will provide an update and overview of the project, looking at the problems, lessons, and achievements, and what the future holds for cranes in the UK. St Paul's Church Hall, Walliscote Road, Weston-super-Mare BS23 1EF. Cost £3.00.
6	Walk	SWT	Sand Point. 1400. Leader: Ged Keele. Meet in NT car park (ST330660). Cost: £1.
8	Talk	SWT	Sun, Sea, and Sooties. 1930. Ascension in the South Atlantic is the tip of an underwater volcano and most of the fauna and flora have been introduced over the last few hundred years. Roger Dickey has been conducting bird surveys on the island for 25 years and his talk will touch on all aspects of Ascension's wildlife, culminating with his beloved Sooty Terns. The Parish Rooms, Market Square, Somerton TA11 7NB. Cost: £2.50 SWT members, £3.00 non-members.
12	Walk	SOS	Avalon Marshes. Leaders: Alison Everett and Stephen Moss. Focus: reedbed and wetland birds. Meet at 0930 at NE Ashcott Corner car park (ST448396, BA6 9SX).
16	Talk	SWT	Born to Bird. 1930. Teenager Mya-Rose Craig is an avid birder, blogger, and storyteller. She will recount some of her experiences as she became the youngest person to see 3,500 species. She will also talk about her birding in Britain and her desire to inspire young people to become interested in birds, wildlife, and conservation. St. John's Church Rooms, Yeovil BA20 1HE (ST556160). Cost: £2.00.
17	Talk	RSPB	Safari in Africa. 1930. An illustrated talk presented by wildlife photographer David Boag. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster, TA19 0QH. Cost: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
19	Walk	SWT	Westdown Quarry and Asham Woods. 1000. Leader: Eve Tigwell. Meet at Westdown Quarry, opposite Dead Woman's Bottom, west of Nunney (ST715462).
19	Talk	SWT	An Evening with Mike Dilger. 1930. TV wildlife presenter Mike will give an illustrated talk, 'The Trials & Tribulations of a Wildlife Presenter', going through his favourite wildlife filming experiences, punctuated with wonderful and amusing anecdotes. Queen's College Theatre Foyer, Trull Road, Taunton TA1 4QS. Tickets: £13.50. For booking details see SWT website or phone to book on 01823 652400.

20	Walk	RSPB	Seaton Wetlands, Axe Estuary, Devon. 1030. Meet at the car park for Black Hole Marsh, accessed through Seaton Cemetery (SY247915). Another part of the estuary will be visited in the afternoon. There may be muddy areas but much of the route should be wheelchair accessible. Free.
24	Talk	SOS	More Birds than Bullets: the Army Ornithological Society. 1930. Roger Dickey's talk encapsulates the people, places, activities, and achievements of the Army Ornithological Society through both recent conflict and peacetime soldiering. The interest and love of birds connects them all and crops up in the most unexpected of places. Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).
25	Talk	SWT	Whales, dolphins, and seabirds off SW England. 1930. Tom Brereton of Dorset-based charity Marinelife describes the results of 20 years of at sea surveys off SW England which highlight the remarkable diversity of species to be seen in our waters. Parish Hall, North Street, Ilminster TA19 0DG. Cost: SWT members £2.00, non-members £3.00, children free.
26	Event	RSPB	Binocular and Telescope Day at Ham Wall. 1000-1600. Time for a new pair of binoculars? Drop in to Ham Wall reserve car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX) to meet experts for advice and information. You are welcome to try before you buy. Also on 3 and 17 December and 28 January.

December

3	Walk	SOS	Stear Marshes. Leaders: Brian Gibbs and Dick Best. Focus: Wintering waders, wildfowl, raptors. Meet at 0930 at main reserve car park (ST254444, TA5 2PU).
17	Walk	RSPB	Big Wetland Duck Watch. 1000-1200. In the winter tens of thousands of ducks and waders visit West Sedgemoor. Join RSPB guides for a rare opportunity to witness this wildlife spectacle. Adults: £5 (£4 for RSPB members); children £3 (£2 for Wildlife Explorer members). Payable on the day, but booking essential. Directions will be provided on booking. West Sedgemoor office - tel.: 07774 620879, email: west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk.

January

11	Walk	RSPB	Big Wetland Duck Watch. As 17 December. Also 21 January.
19	Talk	RSPB	'The Frozen North'. 1930. An illustrated talk by wildlife photographer Mike Mockler, including stunning images of birds and other wildlife from Finland, Norway, Spitzbergen, and Japan. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster, TA19 0QH. Cost: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
22	Walk	RSPB	West Sedgemoor and Greylake. 1030. A visit with a warden to the raised barn hide overlooking West Sedgemoor reserve for views of wildfowl and raptors, followed in the afternoon by a short visit to Greylake reserve nearby. Paths in morning may be muddy, but good boardwalks in the afternoon. Meet and park at Dewlands Farm at the bottom of Red Hill near Curry Rivel (ST381264). Free.

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