



We need your help!

Brian Gibbs and Julian Thomas on some priority species for 2015

The Somerset Atlas pointed up not only the successes of recent years but also some species which are noticeably in decline. After a discussion at the recent General Committee meeting on plans for follow-up action, we put our heads together and came up with a list of five priority species. We are asking members to make particular efforts to record these species this year.

Little Owl

All owls are perennially under-recorded, but this species shows a national decline of 40% since 1995. Many traditional Somerset sites for Little Owls have been deserted in recent years, although in a few areas the population appears to be stable. Hopefully we can discover other places where numbers are holding up.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

This is probably the species causing most concern in the county. Numbers have dropped significantly in the last three years judging by the number of records received; it was only reported from nine locations in 2014. It's easy to overlook, though, and there are plenty of suitable woodlands in the south and east of the county where it might still live undiscovered.



Wood Warbler

Declining nationally, records have become less frequent from the Blackdowns, Mendip, and the Selwood ridge on the Wiltshire border. Even on the Quantocks and particularly Exmoor, where it appears to be holding its own, coverage of important areas such as the Barle and Exe Valleys, and the coastal woods between Porlock and Glenthorne, has been sparse apart from Atlas years. Visits to these areas would no doubt add important records.



Tree Sparrow

Most breeding sites in the Atlas years were on East Mendip; other isolated pairs in that area may have escaped detection. Last year they were recorded at five places (up from only two in 2013) and a flock of 50+ was recorded in a gamebird feed crop near the Wiltshire border. Already this year they have been reported at garden bird feeders at three or four locations. Winter Atlas records from old haunts around Dunster, the Blackdowns, and Castle Cary suggest there might be more to be found elsewhere too.

Yellowhammer

By far the most widespread of the five, but still of concern as numbers have declined. The focus here is to fill in gaps, if possible, in the south and east and on the fringes of the Levels. More counts of winter flocks would be very useful too; a recent report of about 100 near Misterton is from an area where there have been hardly any records in recent years. A recent posting on the message board highlighted records from the central part of the county, again from areas which rarely make the Annual Report.

Contents

We need your help!	1
Welcome	2
News	3
Nightingales at Cogload	5
Spotlight on... Dipper	6
The strange case of the entangled plover	8
Desert Island Birds	9
Walks and talks	10

Welcome

Hello again!

We are getting used to the idea of large, landscape-scale conservation projects in Somerset, and excellent they are too. Not just the obvious examples of the Avalon Marshes or Steart Marshes, either - Roger Dickey and I recently represented SOS at a meeting of the Somerset Local Nature Partnership, which aims to coordinate action by various conservation organisations and statutory bodies across the county. But we also have a prime example of how the actions of an individual can save a vital piece of habitat on a much smaller scale - see Brian Hill's piece on page 5. If you have any more examples of such small but important victories for Somerset's birds, please let me know. Or indeed if an area is still under threat - SOS does not have the resources to own or run reserves, but we do want to get involved with practical conservation issues and small-scale projects wherever we can.



If you've not seen a copy of the Somerset Atlas yet, an example of the maps is reproduced in this issue (at reduced size to fit the space) to accompany the latest in our occasional Spotlight series, this time featuring a perennial favourite, the Dipper. Sales of the Somerset Atlas are going well, as Rob Grimmond notes in the news pages, but copies are still available.

Elsewhere in this issue is news of developments coming out of the General Committee meeting in February, not least the request for records of priority species which forms our front-page story this issue, but also the redevelopment of the SOS website planned for later this year. We will need new site guides for this, so if you fancy writing a profile of a local birdwatching site you know well, please do so and email it to me. Also included is news of more visitor facilities in the Avalon Marshes, and the usual features, including Desert Island Birds featuring Brian Slade, who I hope will not mind me referring to him as one of the elder statesmen of Somerset birdwatching.

I hope everyone has an excellent spring - always an exciting time of year as our migrants return. Enjoy!

Julian Thomas, Editor

email: julian.thomas@somersetbirds.net

phone/text: 07764165417

News

More new visitor facilities on the Avalon Marshes

The new and spacious RSPB car park at Ham Wall has been open for a few months now, and very welcome it is too. Opening times are 7am-6.30pm (Oct-Feb), 7am-7.30pm (Mar-May), and 7am-9pm (Jun-Sep). The planned toilets will take a little longer, though - apparently the RSPB are still awaiting all of the proper local authority permissions to install them.

The piles on which the new hide will stand are in place by the wood between the two viewing platforms, but further work has now been put back until after the breeding season to minimise disturbance, so it is unlikely to open before the autumn.

On Shapwick Heath, Natural England staff and volunteers have been busy adding stretches of walkway to the circular Discovery Trail (see photo, right), which starts from under the gazebo in the car park and which Natural England hoped to complete by the end of March.

Meanwhile, SWT have been creating their own Discovery Trail boardwalk at Catcott, connecting Catcott Heath to the new tower hide at Catcott Great Fen (featured in *The Bittern*, issue 12). Over 300m of boardwalk are now in place, with the last 150m planned by this summer.



House Martin and wader surveys

The BTO is organising a national House Martin survey again this year. This time it is a selection of random 1-km squares to be visited two or three times between late May and mid July to find and count any breeding colonies. There are about 50 in Somerset to survey, and the national results will be collated to provide a scientifically robust population estimate.

You can access 'Find a square' from here: <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/house-martin-survey/house-martin-survey-2015>. This will show you all the squares that are available, and will automatically send details of those you have chosen to Eve Tigwell, BTO Regional Representative for Somerset, who will then register them in your name so you can carry out the survey.

If you know of House Martins nesting, but they are not in one of the survey squares, please enter your records in BirdTrack: they will still be useful, and all BirdTrack data is passed on to Brian Gibbs for the SOS database.

Meanwhile, the SWT newsletter in February included an invitation to take part in a breeding wader survey this summer. It involves locating and monitoring Snipe nests as well as recording habitat conditions and predator activity. Surveys will take place from May to August and volunteers will need to be available for at least three survey days during that period. If you would like to get involved please contact Ellie Higginson on 01823 652473 or email Eleanor.higginson@somersetwildlife.org

Carymoor bird forage crop

At the recent General Committee meeting we decided to donate £200 from Society funds to the Carymoor Environmental Trust to again fund the bird forage crop there. So we'd like here to pass on to members the thanks received for this from Rupert Farthing, Chief Executive of the Trust, who also notes 'We are delighted to be working with the Society on this project which has such great wildlife and education value'. With the crop supporting good winter flocks of Chaffinches, Reed Buntings and Yellowhammers, plus Tree Sparrows and Bramblings in some years, we couldn't have put it better ourselves.

Somerset Atlas update

Following on from the publication of the Somerset Atlas at the end of November, as featured in the last issue of *The Bittern*, Rob Grimmond has contributed this update:

'We had good publicity through our flyer in *British Birds* magazine, *Devon Birds* and some local newspapers such as *The Mendip Times* and *The West Somerset Free Press*. In addition, *Birdwatch* magazine gave the book an excellent review in its January 2015 issue. We are awaiting reviews in other publications.

Sales have gone well, particularly through the *British Birds* flyer and circulation of a flyer to *Devon Birds* members. We have now sold over 350 books, as well as providing copies to eligible sponsors. It is a high quality product that has been favourably received by purchasers.

There are still many SOS members who have yet to purchase a copy but we still have copies left for sale. The price is £35 + £4.95 postage and packing.

To order, please send a cheque payable to "Somerset Ornithological Society" to: Somerset Atlas Offer, Motcombe House, Combe Wood Lane, Combe St. Nicholas, Chard, Somerset TA20 3NH. For enquiries, contact robert.grimmond@somersetbirds.net.'

New website plans

It has long been recognised that the SOS website is in need of a revamp, but it had to take a back seat during production of the Somerset Atlas. Now, however, is the chance to forge ahead. Rob Grimmond is taking the lead, presenting his ideas as to the new site's content to the General Committee meeting at the end of February, and spending March drawing up a shortlist of web designers to invite to tender.

Plans may develop and change as we go through the process and work out what is and is not feasible for technical and budget reasons, but currently the wish list for the new site includes:

- A bird news forum. There are various different models as to how these work, but birders being able to post sightings rather than a daily round-up is seen as one of the best features of the current forum. A separate discussion forum might also feature.
- Pages for society news and information, *The Bittern*, membership, committees, and society history. Also links to useful information such as tide tables.
- An official SOS Twitter feed, with a link from the site. Not just for society news, either - many local birders now put out their bird news primarily via Twitter rather than the messageboard. This way non-Twitter users should be able to access all the latest sightings news.
- New and revamped site guides, with details of access and what you're likely to see. The site guides currently on the website are very much an incomplete set and need to be rewritten from scratch, preferably by observers familiar with the sites. The current list also includes several out-of-county sites, though we could continue to feature some such sites if demand justifies it.
- A photo gallery, and perhaps links to local photographers' own websites.
- Pages facilitating submission of records for the Annual Report (either directly or via BTO's BirdTrack), and giving details of the SOS Rarities Committee, news of accepted rarity records, news on ringing and ringing recoveries, and an up-to-date Somerset List.

We want the new website to be one that people can easily use and navigate around (and that members will want to use fully, rather than bookmarking the messageboard and just going there, as is often the case now). It will take several months of development and testing before it goes live, but hopefully when it does it will be a resource that serves the membership and of which the Society can be proud.

Nightingales at Cogload

Brian Hill tells a tale with a happy ending

Cogload junction, just west of the A361 near Durston, is the farthest point of my regular walk from my home village of Creech St Michael along the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. It is generally worth the walk even in winter, but in spring, the presence of singing Nightingales make it doubly so.

Since the scrub surrounding the Hinkley Point site was systematically razed to accommodate the new site access, it is very likely that these Nightingales are not only the most western birds in Somerset, but quite probably birds at the extreme limit of their world distribution. For this reason alone they are important.

At least in Somerset, where they have always been scarce, Nightingales show stubborn site fidelity, breeding in isolated pockets of scrub in no great numbers at favoured sites within the County. This factor alone makes them vulnerable. A garden site between Creech and Cogload was 'landscaped' recently destroying a small area of scrub where one or two pairs bred annually leaving the Cogload birds the only ones I know of locally west of the A361.

The breeding area is not large. It is a modest area of mixed shrubs and undergrowth, including reed and bramble directly underneath the bridge where the two main lines divide. It is, in fact, between the two railway lines (see photo below). Safe from trespass and other disturbance, it is an ideal site and in 2014 there were three singing males, one of which I confirmed as paired. It is probable the other birds were too. Another bird was singing a little way to the east.



I was disturbed then, to say the least, to notice one day that the embankment to the west of the bridge had been totally cleared of scrub right down to the soil. The only conclusion I could draw is that Network Rail intended to continue east and remove the scrub between the tracks, thus destroying this isolated population.

I'm sure I'm not alone in believing any dealings with large corporations are fraught with problems. Even if I could find someone to discuss the problem with, I had little hope of sympathy or even understanding and, to me, the matter was urgent. After all, how important are three pairs of Nightingales to the likes of Network Rail?

How wrong I was.

Firstly, contacting Network Rail by phone was a breeze compared to other major companies, banks and utility firms included. The website is excellent, easy to navigate, and it highlights a 24-hour telephone contact number for routine enquiries. I phoned it. With a minimum requirement to 'press button one etc.' I was soon talking to a helpful gentleman who not only logged my enquiry but very quickly understood its significance. It was now evening and he promised that somebody with direct responsibility would call me back the following day. Contact was followed up by an email confirming this.

The following morning I was phoned by an equally helpful lady called Pat who had made the necessary contact with the maintenance crews. Cutting a long story short she reassured me that the area used by the Nightingales would not be touched, and nor was it. She also informed me that they had logged the fact that it was an important site for the species.

Full marks then for Network Rail. Clearly the safety of the travelling public comes first, Nightingales or not, but it is good to know that species protection along their vast area of track, much of it important to wildlife, is something they take seriously.

As I write this, Nightingales in the African savannah are becoming restless and already preparing for the hazardous journey north. It is good to know that the Cogload Nightingales should still have a home to return to. These birds are easy to hear from the canal towpath and for now, at least, are immune from human interference. The area directly opposite the bridge is best. With perseverance and good fortune they can sometimes be seen singing from within the deep cover.

They sing best during fine windless evenings just after arriving, generally in the third week of April, but evening song tails off when the birds are paired. Undoubtedly dawn is the best time to hear them, when the males engage in lengthy territorial duels around sunrise, joining in the general May dawn chorus. Magic, and long may the magic continue!

Spotlight on... Dipper

Alastair Stevenson on his favourite British bird

There are five species of dipper worldwide, all in the genus *Cinclus*, in the family Cinclidae. Three occur in the Americas, one only in Asia, and one across Eurasia, the last being our familiar Dipper (or White-throated Dipper as it is more officially known outside Europe), below in a stunning photo by Gary Thoburn. The name comes from its dipping or bobbing movements, which help dippers communicate visually, as well as by blinking their pale upper eyelids, as a series of courtship and threat displays.



Like their relatives elsewhere, Dippers are birds of fast-flowing rivers and streams, and they are specially adapted to their chosen habitat. They are unique among passerines for their ability to dive and swim underwater, for at least 30 seconds. Their wings are relatively short but strongly muscled, which enables them to be used as flippers underwater or to be held outstretched which helps the birds to stabilise their weight and walk along the bottom of the streambeds. They also swim on the surface. Dippers have dense plumage and a large preen gland that is ten times the size of similar-sized birds, which helps to generate oil to keep their feathers waterproof. They have a high haemoglobin concentration in their blood which allows a greater capacity to store oxygen and lowers their metabolic rate underwater. They have solid skeletal frames, and 4,200 feathers compared to 3,000 on similar-sized birds. Other adaptations for a semi-aquatic lifestyle include nasal flaps to stop water entering their nostrils, and relatively long legs and sharp claws, enabling them to hold onto rocks in swift water.

Dippers feed primarily on insect larvae such as caddis but will also take freshwater shrimps, tadpoles, worms or small fish such as minnows. Foraging takes up to 60% of the day. As well as feeding underwater they will forage along stream banks, turning over stones, debris and leaves.

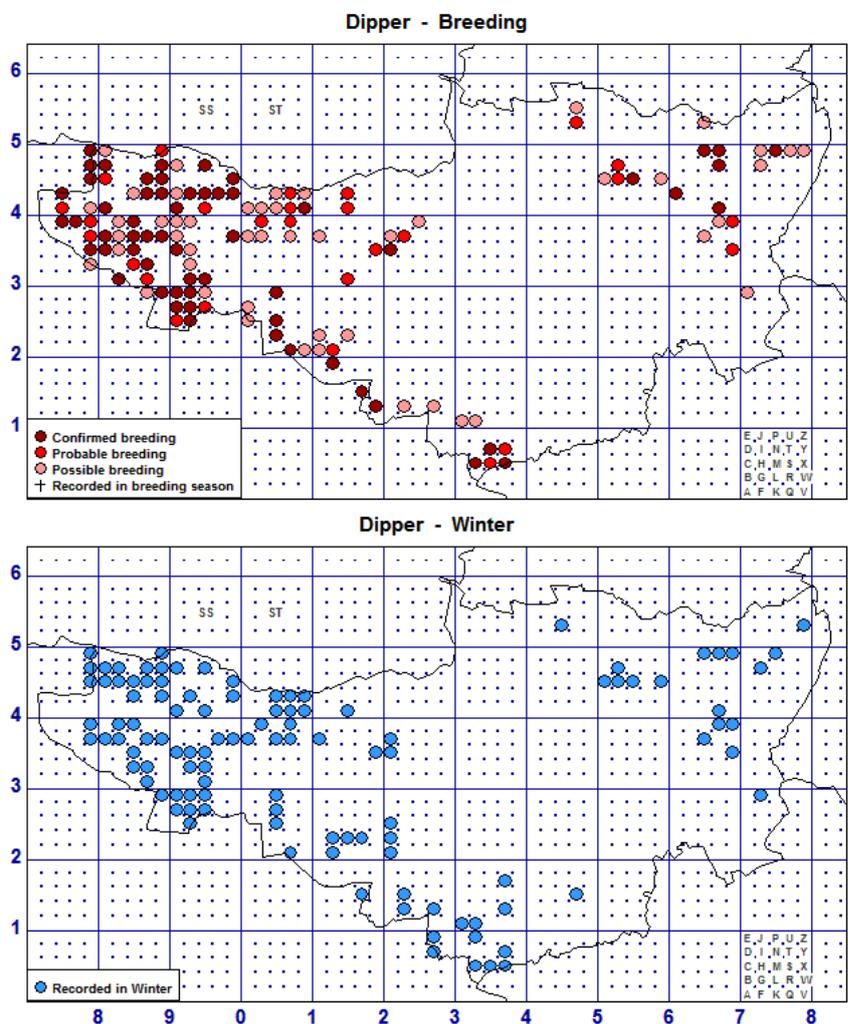
Dippers are monogamous, and usually pair only for the duration of the breeding season. Nest sites are traditional, and used by successive generations of birds. One site is said to have been used for more than 120 years. Dippers are strongly territorial and will fiercely defend their territory, which usually covers around 1.5km of suitable river or stream, but can vary from 300 metres to 2.5km.

Dippers nests are usually made in the middle of their territory, and consist of an intricate cup-shaped structure of moss, grass, stems and leaves. The nest takes around 28 days to construct, and is often in crevices such as bridges, waterfalls, caves or a hole above the water line, or occasionally on rocks. Four to five eggs are laid at daily intervals, between March and May usually. Incubation normally lasts around 16-17 days, and the young are then brooded by the female alone for the next 12-13 days. Nestlings are fed by both parents, for a fledging period of around 20-24 days. Young Dippers are independent of their parents within a couple of weeks of leaving the nest. A second clutch may be laid 10 days after fledging the first clutch, and exceptionally a third clutch may be attempted.

Nationally, Dipper numbers have declined by 30% in the last 30 years. Current numbers are estimated to be around 12,000 pairs. Contributory factors to this decline are the pollution and acidification of streams, turbidity caused by erosion, channelisation, the creation of dams and reservoirs, an increase in mink numbers and possibly recreational disturbance. Of particular concern is the increasing use of stock barriers across streams, particularly wire barriers which the fast-flying birds find difficult to see, increasing the risk of injury or death.

In Somerset, Exmoor is the premier site. Numbers are notoriously difficult to estimate but 75 to 100 pairs on Somerset Exmoor and up to 150 pairs in Somerset as a whole may be realistic.

Dippers are more easily observed in the winter, and particularly in January to April when the small overgrown streams are more accessible and the birds can be found singing. They can be found singing at other times of the year as well, though: one was singing regularly last autumn on the River Avill. Both sexes sing. The song is a subdued, slow, squeaky, scratchy warble, with some notes repeated several times. The call is a short, sharp 'zit, zit', that carries over the sound of running water. Dippers are sedentary and highly territorial, even in winter, though they sometimes move downstream. I saw one on a stream in the middle of Porlock Marsh in December last year, and there are winter records from the streams of Taunton.



The strange case of the entangled plover

Bruce Taylor on an unexpected encounter

It was late spring several years ago. That particular year, a pair of Little Ringed Plovers had settled at a local site and the indications were that they were attempting to nest. After discussions with the RSPB and the owners of the site, it was decided that I should keep a watch to work out where they were nesting, then protective measures could be put in place. It should have been a straightforward exercise, as the birds were displaying and mating and all I had to do was observe from a safe distance to pinpoint the location of their nest.

Unfortunately, at this point the birds suddenly became much more secretive, in itself probably an indication that breeding was occurring. Also, the weather turned hot and sunny, making my task more challenging as I tried to view a distant patch of shingle at long range through the heat haze. I returned to my observation spot day after day, spending hour after hour discreetly watching the birds from a distance, but to no avail. I lived and breathed Little Ringed Plovers for the best part of two weeks, and to be honest, it started to get to me. Not being able to pin them down despite a huge input of time and effort was doing my head in. Late one Friday night I decided enough was enough and I needed a break from this routine. I would go somewhere completely different to look at an entirely new range of birds: one that wouldn't include the elusive LRPs!

The alarm clock went off the next day at 4am and after a quick coffee Kathy and I were in the car and heading for Ham Wall. We pulled into the car park just after five and set off along the path towards the reserve. The air was refreshingly cool, the veil of mist was lifting and a beautiful sunrise was revealed as we approached the first viewing platform. We paused for a while: bitterns were booming, hobbies were hawking and cuckoos were, well, cuckooing. It was a beautiful start to the day: one of those mornings filled with promise when all feels well with the world. I could feel the frustrations of my previous fortnight's efforts slipping away. There wasn't another soul out and about and we couldn't help feeling that the rest of the world was missing out on such a beautiful dawn.

After a while, we moved on towards the second viewing platform. After perhaps 40 metres, I caught a small movement from the corner of my eye. Up ahead on the edge of the path, it was nothing more than a brief flash of white. I didn't stop walking and didn't raise my binoculars; I just assumed there'd be something like a Chaffinch feeding on the edge of the pathway. But what stopped us dead in our tracks seconds later, struggling frantically next to my feet, was a bird I was all too familiar with, and it certainly wasn't a Chaffinch. I had a moment of pure incomprehension: why was there a Little Ringed Plover at my feet when we'd come all this way to get away from them? Why was it so close? Why wasn't it flying away? Had the intensity of the previous two weeks' birding affected me even more than I had imagined, so I was now seeing LRPs everywhere? Did I need to see a doctor, or were the men in white coats about to come and get me? Had I in fact birded too much, and now begun to pay the terrible price? Was I losing the plot?

Kathy brought me back down to earth when she exclaimed, "It's a Little Ringed Plover!" thus confirming she could see it too, and I hadn't actually lost the plot: I was still master of my faculties, though at a loss to explain why the bird was still at my feet. It struggled to get away, but to no avail: clearly something was wrong. I bent down and placed a hand over the bird to stop it hurting itself. A quick examination revealed the problem: around one of the bird's legs was a long piece of grass with a seed-head tangled inextricably between the bird's toes. The grass was still rooted to the ground, preventing the entangled bird from flying off.

A bit of careful untangling soon freed the LRP. It didn't appear to be any the worse for the experience and flew off strongly as soon as I released it. We were left wondering whether this bizarre event had actually happened, but luckily Kathy had taken a quick photo (right) to prove it really had! How on Earth had the bird got so tangled up, and what was it doing there by the path in such an unlikely place? How long had it been there? Of all the species it could have been, why was it this one? And what are the odds of one birder going to this site specifically to get away from that species then literally stumbling across one in such odd circumstances along the way?



Strange, bizarre and true...!

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 one of the mainstays of SOS for probably more years than he cares to remember, the notoriously camera-shy **Brian Slade**.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Probably when my brother decided out of the blue to build an aviary and keep birds.

What is your favourite birding memory?

After watching a pair of breeding Hoopoes at Berrow [in 1977], seeing the youngster with his parents. Another would be seeing young Bearded Tits at Berrow for the first time.

Where was your favourite birding trip?

Many good trips to Portland Bill but probably a trip to France with Brian Hill, Brian Rabbitts and [son] Andrew to see Cranes, sea eagles plus lots of other interesting birds.

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

Watch a lot of football and cricket on TV, listen to CDs, paint and draw animals and birds, and I love playing with my granddaughters (I did not know dolls could be so interesting).

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

Without doubt the beach between Berrow and Burnham, now not so good because of the huge increase over the past few years of dogs with almost continuous disturbance on beach and golf course.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Swallow	Beautifully designed and hopefully summer not far away
Firecrest	A little gem
Bearded Tit	Magical
Red Kite	Beautiful and graceful
Avocet	Must have a wader

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

Book: probably the new Somerset Atlas to remind me of home.

Luxury item: presuming I had my bins around my neck, possibly a solar-powered CD player and lots of discs by Emmylou Harris and Shania Twain.

Walks and talks

Here are details of all SOS walks and talks and a selection of events organised by the RSPB and Somerset Wildlife Trust in April–June 2015. Most events mentioned here are specifically related to birds, but a few are of more general wildlife interest.

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.



April

1	Talk	SWT	The Steart Marshes Project. 1930–2100. Alys Laver (Senior Conservation Officer with WWT) will explain the development of the new reserve at Steart looking at what has been achieved so far and what might be expected in the future. Shapwick Village Hall, Station Road, Shapwick TA7 9NJ. Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £2.50, children free.
3	Event	RSPB	Heron Above. Discover the herons at Swell Wood (ST360238) whilst they are building the nest and feeding their young. Tel.: 01458 820252, email: swell.wood@rspb.org.uk . Also 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11 April.
11	Walk	RSPB	The Big Bittern Count. Ham Wall. 0500–0715. A unique opportunity to join our warden team for their annual Bittern count. Take part in the survey and help us monitor our Bittern population. Please bring a head torch, warm clothing and sturdy footwear as we walk through uneven terrain. Booking is essential – £15.00 per person. Tel.: 01458 860494, email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk .
12	Walk	SWT	Stoke Wood. 1400–1600. Ged Keele will lead a walk through Stoke Wood National Nature Reserve of approx. 2.5 miles with a steep climb but plenty of stops! Please park tidily on roadside near to Rodney Stoke Church (ST482498). Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £1.00
12	Family event	SWT	Owl Extravaganza with Taunton Watch Group. 1430. What is a pellet made up of? Can you work out what our owl had to eat? Join Taunton Watch Group at Lyng Court, West Lyng, TA3 5AP, to find out all about owls and dissect their pellets. Booking is preferred so please email tauntonwatchgroup@gmail.com

15	Walk	RSPB	Brean Down. Meet 10 am at the NT car park (ST297587; TA8 2RS; fee for non-members of NT). Taking the less strenuous route to the top and looking for early spring migrants as well as Peregrine and Raven. Further details from leader, Denise Budd, 01278 784117. Price: Car parking fee.
16	AGM	SOS	Annual General Meeting followed by a quiz (birds and general knowledge). Starts 1930 at Ruishton Village Hall, Ruishton, nr Taunton, TA3 5JE (ST268270).
16	Talk	RSPB	New Zealand's Wildlife Gems. 1930. An illustrated talk presented by Ed Drewitt, author and broadcaster. New Zealand has a wealth of wildlife, including unique birds found nowhere else in the world: Ed will take you on a tour of New Zealand's landscapes, bird life, whales, dolphins and sea lions. Millennium Hall, Seavington, near Ilminster TA19 0QH. Price: Crewkerne RSPB group members £2.50, non members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free. Tel.: 07803 928717, email:birders@csndesk.eclipse.co.uk.
16	Talk	RSPB	Urban Gulls: What's all the fuss about? 1930. Bristol-based gull expert Peter Rock reviews efforts to manage increasing numbers of urban gulls, ranging from the hopeless to the ridiculous, and suggests how we can more effectively manage the situation. St Pauls Church Hall, Walliscote Road, Weston-super-Mare, BS23 1EF. Price: £2.50 local RSPB group members, £3 visitors. Tel.: 01934 622793.
18	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic. Ham Wall. 0600–0900. Join the RSPB on an early morning walk and listen to the booming of the Bitterns. Booking is essential by contacting the Ham Wall office by phone or email – £5.00 per person Tel.: 01458 860494, email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk.
19	Walk	RSPB	Hodderscombe, the Quantocks. 1030. Meet in the National Trust car park in Holford (ST155410). Hoping to see and hear spring migrants in this picturesque part of Somerset, following for the most part off road bridleways. Please note we will carry our packed lunches for this all day walk, which includes some steep slopes. Price: free (there may be a charge for parking). Tel.: 07803 928717, email: birders@csndesk.eclipse.co.uk.
19	Walk	SWT	Great Bustards. 1130–1330. A visit to the Great Bustard Reintroduction site in Wiltshire hopefully to see the bustards displaying. Other birds in the area include Stone Curlews. Booking essential as numbers limited. For details of meeting place and time and booking contact Mick Ridgard – tel.: 01373 463875, mobile: 07731 546783, email: Mridgard@aol.com. Not suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. £12.50.
25	Walk	SOS	Brean Down. Leaders: Julian Thomas and Nigel Cottle. Focus: spring migrants. Meet at 0815 at bird garden car park (fee payable: £4 all day) (ST297587, TA8 2RS). Duration probably c. 4 hours: bring a drink and a snack.
30	Talk	SWT	The Somerset Levels and Seashore. 1930–2100. Nigel Phillips, naturalist and photographer, will talk about the Levels, how they were formed, and their wildlife. As SWT's Living Seas Ambassador, he will also talk about Somerset's coastal waters. St Catherine's Church Hall, Park Road, Frome BA11 1EU (ST774478). Suitable for wheelchair users/limited mobility. Adults £ 2.50 Children £1.00.

May

1	Walk	RSPB	The Moor at Night. West Sedgemoor. 2000–2200. Join the RSPB on a night adventure and discover the secrets of the moor. A unique opportunity to visit areas of West Sedgemoor usually not open to the public. Please bring a head torch and wear sturdy footwear. Booking is essential by phoning the West Sedgemoor office – £10.00 per person. Tel.: 07774 620879, email: west.sedgemoor@rspb.org.uk.
3	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic. Ham Wall. 0600–0900. Join the RSPB on an early morning walk and listen to the booming of the Bitterns. Booking is essential by contacting the Ham Wall office by phone or email – £5.00 per person Tel.: 01458 860494, email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk.
3	Walk	RSPB	International Dawn Chorus. Swell Wood. 0630–0830. Join the RSPB on an early morning walk at Swell Wood. Followed by breakfast at the Crown Inn in Fivehead. Booking essential – £10.00 per person. Tel.: 07774 620879, email: swell.wood@rspb.org.uk.
9	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic. Ham Wall. 0600–0900. As 3 May.
9	Walk	SOS	Alfred's Tower. Leader: Bruce Taylor. Focus: deciduous and coniferous woodland birds. Meet at 0900 at NT car park (ST749353, BA12 6QD).
23	Walk	SOS	Horner and Cloutsham. Leaders: Brian Hill and Nigel Cottle. Focus: resident and summer migrant birds typical of Exmoor hanging oak woodlands and streams. Meet at 0930 at Horner car park (SS897454, TA24 8HY).
26	Family event	RSPB	RSPB Holiday Club. "Whose poo?" Ham Wall. 1400–1600. Meet at the "Mini-marshes" (next to the car park, ST449397, BA6 9SX) and go on a "poo" trail. Can you identify whose poo it is? £3.00 per child. Tel.: 01458 860494, email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk.

June

13	Walk	SOS	Meare Heath. Leaders: Alison Everett and Jeff Hazell. Focus: reedbed and wetland birds. Meet at 0930 at Ashcott Corner car park (ST449397, BA6 9SX). New members are especially welcome.
21	Walk	RSPB	Garston Wood RSPB reserve and Langford Lakes local reserve, Dorset. Meet at 1030 in the Garston Wood car park (SU004195, SP5 5PA). A walk through this ancient woodland in the morning and then drive the short distance to Langford Lakes, just off the A303, for an afternoon visit. Directions: from Sixpenny Handley take the Bowerchalke road (Dean Lane). Keeping right proceed for approximately 1.5 miles (2.4km) and the car park will be reached on the left-hand side of the road, indicated by a finger post on the right-hand side of the road. Price: Free (there may be a charge for parking). Tel.: 07803 928717, email: birders@csndesk.eclipse.co.uk.

Photo credits: Brian Gibbs (p1), Natural England (p3), Brian Hill (pp5 & 10), Gary Thoburn (p6), and Kathy Taylor (p9).



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