



Members' Day set for 8 April

Julian Thomas reports

SOS is always seeking ways to improve the services it provides to members, including looking at what other county ornithological societies and local bird clubs do. So we're trying something new this year, a Members' Day on Saturday 8 April, featuring the Society's AGM and a variety of interesting talks on aspects of Somerset birds and birdwatching. Other societies have been successfully offering something similar for a few years now, and we hope that ours will be as well received and become an annual fixture.

The plan for the day is outlined below. The opening address will be given by our President, Stephen Moss. Other commitments mean that he cannot be there in person on the day, but he has promised us an interesting video presentation. This will be followed by the Society's AGM, a shorter and sprightlier affair than in recent years (and, we hope, better attended) - notice of any important resolutions and decisions to be made will be circulated to members beforehand.

The recent county Atlas has given us much information and food for thought, and after the AGM County Recorder Brian Gibbs will give us an overview of the current status of the county's birds. Somerset BTO representative Eve Tigwell and SOS Survey Secretary Simon Breeze will then give short talks on national and local surveys scheduled for this year and how you can take part.

After a break for light refreshments, the day concludes with what promise to be entertaining and informative talks on Dippers, by Liam Marsh, who has studied the species for several years, and on RSPB reserves in the county, by Jane Brookhouse, RSPB Reserves Manager for Somerset.

The venue is Cheddon Fitzpaine Memorial Hall, a modern village hall in a woodland setting just north of Cheddon Fitzpaine village, c. 2 miles north of Taunton near Hestercombe. There is ample parking on site.

Everyone is welcome, so please come along and enjoy the day!

Somerset Ornithological Society Members' Day		8 April 2017
Cheddon Fitzpaine Memorial Hall, Rowford, Cheddon Fitzpaine, TA2 8JY		
Programme of events		
Time	Activity	Chair/Speaker
1300	Doors open	
1330	Introduction and Opening Address	Stephen Moss
1400	AGM	Roger Dickey
1430	Status of Birds in Somerset	Brian Gibbs
1500	BTO and Local Surveys	Eve Tigwell and Simon Breeze
1530	Tea	
1600	Dippers in Somerset	Liam Marsh
1630	Somerset Reserves: the RSPB Perspective	Jane Brookhouse
1700	Members' Day ends	

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Welcome

Hello again!

The big news in this issue is the advent of our first Members' Day (see page 1), which I hope will be both enjoyable and well attended, rewarding the hard work done behind the scenes to make it happen. The range of talks scheduled should be both entertaining and informative. We've struggled to engender much enthusiasm among members for the Society's AGM in recent years, so the hope is that a rather slimmed-down version amid such a range of (let's face it) more interesting subjects will encourage more members to engage with and participate in what is, after all, your Society.

Apologies that, once more, this issue is a little later than I hoped. It is sometimes hard to find the time alongside work and other commitments to put issues of *The Bittern* together, and, perhaps more importantly, I am increasingly struggling to procure enough new and interesting material from other contributors (hint, hint). It is all the more sad, then, to report that the latest instalment of Mike Trubridge's Bramwell Bulletin in this issue will be the last, though thankfully this is only because Mike is moving just over the border into Dorset; he promises me that he will continue to contribute occasionally, which is good news. And thanks to Jeff Hazell for stepping into the breach to furnish me with some tales of classic birding 'incidents' from his regular visits to the Isles of Scilly in the 70s and 80s - Jeff tells me these appeared previously in *Bird Notes* many years ago, but I hope that you find them amusing enough to forgive us both for giving them another airing.

More topical news items in this issue include details of the new hide at Swell Wood, a new monitoring group to keep an eye on the various long-legged wading birds colonising or potentially colonising our wetlands, and the effects of a new national taxonomy on the Somerset List. Plus the usual features, including Desert Island Birds, featuring the newest recruit to the SOS Committee, ecologist and Survey Secretary Simon Breeze.

In the meantime, spring is just around the corner: the evenings are getting lighter, wildfowl and gulls are on the move, and the first summer migrants are just starting to arrive. A perfect time to get out and enjoy more birding, and hopefully I'll also see you at the Members' Day!



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News

Avalon Marshes New Colonists Monitoring Group

Chris Baker, RSPB Saving Nature Scheme volunteer project coordinator, reports



A group of local birders and volunteers - the Avalon Marshes New Colonists Monitoring Group - is trying to build a better understanding of the wetland bird species starting to colonise the Avalon Marshes. The group have set up a central email address for any sightings of Great White Egret, Little Bittern, and other potential newly colonising species during the breeding season. Messages sent to this email will not be publicised on social media or birding sites, and the information will be used to help protect and monitor the species - helping to secure their future in Somerset.

Please send sightings to AvalonMarshesColonists@gmail.com

I have taken over the volunteer project coordinator's role this year from Roger Lucken, who has decided to stand down for family reasons, and will be monitoring this email. A small number of nominated contacts at SOS can also access all information received [*currently Brian Gibbs as Recorder and myself as Assistant Recorder - Ed.*]. This initiative is supported by the Avalon Marshes Partnership.

The group are also looking for more voluntary assistance, particularly with evening surveys - contact me at the AvalonMarshesColonists email if you would like more information.

New heronry hide at Swell Wood

The heronry at Swell Wood above West Sedgemoor is the largest in south-west England and rightly attracts many visitors. However, the old hide there was showing its age and so the RSPB spent last autumn replacing it with a brand-new one. Completed in November, it is built from local and sustainable materials, with a 'green roof', and offers a much better view of the trees used by the nesting herons.

The hide is, at the time of writing, temporarily closed as a precaution, to allow the herons to get used to the new structure and to reduce any potential disruption from visitors during the important period when they are establishing territories and nest-building, but the RSPB plan to reopen it by mid March at the latest once the herons have settled down.



Effects of BOU adopting IOC taxonomy on the Somerset List

Those of a listing bent may already have been following the saga of how the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU), in an unforeseen, abrupt, and still controversial move, disbanded its own Taxonomic Sub Committee (TSC) in November 2015. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that, BOU has since been considering with which of several World checklists to align the British List taxonomically, and recently decided to adopt that used by the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) Checklist. The other possibilities were Clements/Cornell, Howard and Moore, and Birdlife International, and it came down to a casting vote between IOC and Birdlife. The IOC Checklist agrees with previous BOU taxonomy on the vast majority of species, but there are some differences, and list-minded birders nationally have already been poring over the two lists to identify these. The new taxonomy will be in place as of 1 January 2018.

So what does all this have to do with Somerset? There are four species currently on the Somerset List which will be affected. The only resident species is Lesser Redpoll (*Acanthis cabaret*), which will be re-lumped with Common (Mealy) Redpoll (*A. flammea*), a much more widespread species which is a rare but increasingly regular visitor, chiefly in winter and spring. So the county list will drop by one there.

The other two affected species recorded in Somerset are both rare visitors. The two subspecies of Bean Goose on the British List will be split, as Taiga Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis*) and Tundra Bean Goose (*A. rossicus*). Both have already been recorded in the county, so this is a net gain to offset the redpoll 'lump'. There is, however, a complication. *A History of the Birds of Somerset* notes that many older records of bean geese are probably of the Taiga (sub)species, which regularly winters in Norfolk and Central Scotland, but the Tundra (sub)species is the more regular vagrant over much of the UK, and most recent records in the county have been of this form (though one at Brean on 10 December 2011 was a Taiga bird). It might take a while to disentangle the two and set the record straight, but certainly all future bean geese found in the county will have to be scrutinised in the field that much more closely.

The last of the four is a true vagrant - Isabelline Shrike (*Lanius isabellinus*), which will be split into two: the nominate race, often called Daurian Shrike (*L. isabellinus*), and Turkestan or Red-tailed Shrike (*L. phoenicuroides*). There are two Somerset records to date, both in the west, a first-winter bird on Minehead golf course on 22-24 September 1989, and an adult male on Porlock Marsh on 3 June 2003. The Porlock Marsh bird (below right) was a fine example of a Turkestan Shrike, and attracted visitors from as far away as Norfolk seeking listing 'insurance', though this handsome bird was well worth seeing just for itself. The Minehead bird, however, as with almost all first-winters of this complex, is more problematic to identify with certainty. *A History of the Birds of Somerset* notes it as also being *L. (i.) phoenicuroides*, but it does not appear in the list of those accepted as such by the *British Birds* Rarities Committee (BBRC). Unless its true identity can be proved, it may end up unsatisfactorily as either/or.

There will also be a number of less significant changes to the genus and precise order of some species: the SOS Rarities Committee (SOSRC) has yet to consider any of these changes, but there will almost certainly be a few in *Somerset Birds* 2018, if not before.



Turkestan Shrike, Porlock Marsh, June 2003

Paul Bowyer

Bramwell Bulletin

Mike Trubridge on colour-ringed swans

In March 2014 I came across a dead Mute Swan on the edge of some very extensive floods on Witcombe Bottom, to the east of the village of Long Load. This bird was carrying a yellow Darvic ring on its right leg with black lettering CIC, together with a standard metal ring on its left leg, ZY 6604. I reported this record to the BTO and in due course I received a reply from Chris Perrins of Oxford University, who told me that the bird had been ringed as a two-year-old at Abbotsbury Swannery on 20 July 2013. This was the first time that I had come across a Darvic-ringed Mute Swan, although I was already aware of the ringing programme at Abbotsbury. This programme began in the late 1960s and expanded in 1980 when the first roundup of swans took place. Since then roundups have taken place every second year in late July. This biannual catch usually accounts for 700-900 swans and includes 150-200 unringed birds. Most of these swans have gone to Abbotsbury to moult, with many departing soon afterwards, although some will overwinter there. Any swan that hatched at Abbotsbury receives a white Darvic ring, while all the immigrants are given yellow Darvic rings.

Now that I was aware of this ringing programme and that birds were likely to turn up in my birdwatching areas, I began to look much more closely at all Mute Swans I came across. Since March 2014 I have recorded 21 different yellow Darvic-ringed Mute Swans, five of them on more than one occasion, and two white Darvic-ringed swans, all within a five-mile radius of my home in Low Ham, near Langport. Apart from the two white-ringed birds which hatched at Abbotsbury, we only know where one bird originally came from: ATS was ringed as a cygnet on the north side of Dorchester in 2011 and was then caught in the 2015 roundup at Abbotsbury, when it had a yellow Darvic ring added. The oldest Mute Swan I have come across so far is YUX, a female who was ringed at Abbotsbury in 2005 as a one-year-old, and was still going strong when last seen in October 2016.

Between March 2014 and the end of 2016, I have logged 30 sightings of Darvic-ringed Mute Swans, a figure that includes four sightings where I was unable to obtain all three letters. This has involved 23 different birds from a wintering population of about 170 swans, which means that 13.5% of swans in my search area have Darvic rings. Yet a quick look at the annual report *Somerset Birds* from 2009 to 2015 shows that in this seven-year period there are just 11 records of Darvic-ringed swans! I don't think I have suddenly discovered a hotspot for ringed birds: I suspect that birdwatchers are simply not looking for Darvic rings, or perhaps are not aware of them on Mute Swans in the first place. So I encourage everyone to have a closer look at these birds in the future.

However, reading the three letters on the Darvic rings can be quite frustrating at times. The letters are read from the bottom upwards - except yellow CAB, somebody put the ring on upside down on this bird! It can be difficult to get close enough to a bird out of the water to read the lettering, unless the swan is on its nest or has young cygnets. Swans on the ground are usually



quite wary and take off before you can get close enough to read the ring with either a telescope or binoculars. However, swans on the water are much more approachable and with care it is normally possible to read all three letters. The Darvic ring is always on the bird's right leg, so you have to make the swan swim past you from left to right, which sometimes requires a bit of gentle coaxing. Even then it is not easy, especially the first letter, which is the last one to emerge from the water and sometimes is not visible at first - the bird needs to be paddling quite fast for all three letters to be visible. Occasionally, though, the birds are very obliging and just sit there quietly on the water. Providing the water is clear in such circumstances and you are close, it is very easy to read the letters and on one occasion I even managed to read the metal ring on the other leg when the bird turned round!

Now whenever I am out on the Somerset Levels and there are Mute Swans around, I always try and check them for Darvic rings. Not only does this make a walk even more interesting, but the results are adding to our knowledge of these impressive birds. So the next time you come across some Mute Swans, have a good look and see if you can spot a yellow or white ring on their right legs. And if you do, please report any such occurrences to Chris Perrins, who will be delighted to hear from you: chris.perrins@zoo.ox.ac.uk

Scilly birding stories

Jeff Hazell tells some amusing tales from Octobers past on the Isles of Scilly

The invisible flycatcher

Barnaby Lane on St Agnes is a difficult place to watch birds, flanked for the most parts with a tall thick hedge of *Pittisporum* that has very few gaps. We, that is three of us, were stood leaning over a small gate and looking along the inside of the hedge, trying, without much luck, to catch a glimpse of a particularly elusive Red-breasted Flycatcher that we knew was feeding anywhere along the field side of this hedge. You might ask, why not enter the field to make the task easier? But all land on the islands is private, especially the bulb-fields, unless permission for entry has been given.

Anyway, as I've said, we were trying quite hard to see this bird, leaning as far out over the top bar of the gate as we could stretch, with binoculars clamped firmly to our eyes. This state of affairs had lasted for perhaps half an hour when along strolls Eric, our fourth companion. 'What are you three doing?', he asked somewhat quizzically. 'Why, trying to see a Red-breasted Flycatcher', we replied as we glanced around. 'Here, let me have a try', said Eric, 'you three look exhausted!' 'You're welcome', we replied, knowing full well how difficult it all was.

We stood back, to let Eric have the gateway to himself, and then it happened. At that time, knitted bobble-hats were very popular with birdwatchers and Eric had a particularly fine one with a prominent bobble. He had been stood, leaning out over the gate for not more than three minutes when, without turning, he said 'No sign of it from here'. 'Stay completely still', we replied in unison, 'it's just alighted on the top of your bobble!' The bird sat fairly motionless on his bobble, except for the odd flick of its wings and tail, for perhaps 30 seconds giving all three of us a very close view before it flew off and quickly disappeared behind the hedge. And do you know Eric never did see it. Though as he said later, 'I don't expect I shall ever get that close to an R.B. Flicker again!'

The Scops Owl that never was

It was a warm night, with just a very light drizzle starting to fall and the four of us had just returned from the Turks Head pub to the Little House, our place of lodging whilst staying on St Agnes. The kettle had not long boiled and John, whose turn it was, had just passed around the evening cups of coffee. Suddenly we all froze with cups partway to mouths. 'Wasn't that the call of a Scops Owl?', asked Eric. 'Yes, I believe it was', I replied, and the other two agreed. 'It sounded as if it was close outside', said Rob. As two of us

made for the door John said, 'Stop! Don't open it until we've turned out the light. If it's close the sudden light might startle it and make it fly off.'

The kitchen light was quickly switched off, and as the door was opened we again, quite clearly, heard the monotonous repeated 'kiu' call. Once outside we were startled by a low whispered call from the adjacent Atlantic Cottage, and there, leaning out of an upstairs window, was a well-known Cornish birder. 'Did you hear it, the Scops Owl?', he asked. 'Yes', we replied. 'I saw it briefly, it was on the top of the house', he said. Just then the call was heard again, though fainter and obviously further away. 'It sounds as if it's coming from the direction of the Old Lighthouse', said the Cornish birder, 'We may have a chance of seeing it there if it was to fly across in front of the white-painted lighthouse'. In spite of the drizzle and the fact that I had on only a lightweight tee shirt I joined the others on a fast walk/trot for five minutes until we came to the lighthouse. Here we met several other birders and eventually there must have been about twenty of us, all searching the island in the damp murky darkness as we chased after the calls from place to place for at least half an hour.

Sufficient to say that nobody was successful and the four of us had only wet hair and clothes and cold coffee on our return to show for all our efforts. It wasn't until the following evening, in the pub, that we learnt that it was a pair of wags with a tape recorder moving around the island and having a great laugh at all our expense. We never ever found out who this pair was - I don't expect they relished the early bath (in the sea) that they were promised if we ever did!

The static 'Yank'

'Did you see that?', said Ray to the group of birders gathered near St Agnes Pool. 'See what?', they replied. 'Why, that dark thrush that just flew overhead from a seaward direction and landed amongst the grass by the old cricket-pitch.' The group carefully made their way in that direction until one of them declared, 'I can see it. It's in the longer grass just to the left of the pitch, towards the back.' With careful manoeuvring they eventually managed to reach a position where, without getting too close, they could now make out the bird in question. 'Why, it's an American Robin', said one. 'A juvenile', said another. For the next five minutes or so they all earnestly watched this rare transatlantic vagrant, one of them even remarking on how it once pecked at the ground in the manner of a Blackbird. However, the jubilation gradually subsided, especially after someone was heard to say 'Why isn't it moving?'

They approached closer - it didn't fly. Closer still, and still no sudden flight. Why? Because the bird was 'stuffed'. Ray had placed it there sometime earlier to see what, with his help, might eventually transpire. It just goes to show that you can see what you believe, but that you shouldn't necessarily believe all that you see!

'Eureka', I've found it!

It was a fairly quiet day on the island of Bryher, quiet that is by Scilly standards. I was completely alone, or so I thought, taking my time to sit and watch a superb little adult male Siberian Stonechat in winter plumage. This was a bird that I had been fortunate enough to find some four days earlier when there was a large crowd of birders on the island all hoping for a view of a Common Yellowthroat - an American warbler that was present at that time. Now, having relocated this Siberian vagrant I was delighted to have some undisturbed time to observe it more carefully as it fed using weed-stems as vantage posts in a field near the Island Supply Store. My composure was suddenly shattered by a loud smashing noise, accompanied by a loud cry of triumph, as a person came crashing through the long vegetation immediately to my right. As he, this unknown birder, spotted me, he called out loudly, 'It's a Desert Wheatear and I've found it!' I tried to calm him down, saying that by carrying on like he was he was sure to frighten off the bird. But he was absolutely hyper, completely ignoring my plea and leaping around like a man possessed, saying, 'it's a Desert Wheatear and I've f***** found it!' It took me fully five minutes of calm, careful reasoning to convince him of his error and that he was in fact looking at a Siberian Stonechat that I had been carefully watching for at least half an hour.

Later, that same day, when I was in the Bishop and Wolf pub on St Mary's, this same person approached me somewhat sheepishly and offered me a pint. He said, 'I hope you'll not tell anybody about what happened today and especially don't mention my name.' I took the pint, saying, 'Your secret's safe with me' - and it still is, though I hope you think, as I do, that it all makes for a good story. Incidentally, a winter male Siberian Stonechat does bear a passable resemblance to a miniature Desert Wheatear!

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 Survey Secretary **Simon Breeze**.

How and when did you get into birdwatching?

Growing up next to a nature reserve comprised of lakes, reedbeds, and woodland played a pivotal role in my fascination for birds and wildlife. A lot of my our time (me, my brother, and a gang of mates) outside of school was spent exploring, climbing, watching wildlife, and no doubt getting up to no good. I still remember when I was around seven accidentally coming across a female Mallard on a nest, and its tenacity to stay put despite my presence.

What is your favourite birding memory?

Difficult to pinpoint just the one as I take pleasure in the everyday encounter, be it watching the subtle behavioural interactions of common birds or observing rare and scare birds, and the pleasure of the new and intriguing. One memory of a birding encounter that stays with me however was whilst canoeing in Cardigan Bay, off the coast of the small seaside village of Borth. Testing out my new canoe I headed out across a still and serene late summer bay and to my delight was surrounded by Manx Shearwaters as several hundred passed further out, with several circling my canoe coming within metres of me.



Where was your favourite birding trip?

Back during my University days I was lucky enough to win a two-week overland tour to Kenya and Tanzania (a competition I don't even remember entering....). With a head full of the wonder of Zoology (and Ornithology) the sheer variety of birds seen among spectacular and iconic settings was truly incredible.

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

My mission is to show my five-year-old son the wonders of wildlife, so weekends are often spent out and about across the countryside and nature reserves. Natural history continues to drive my passion and intrigue so I enjoy getting out and about biological recording, including moth trapping, bat surveying, and locating ancient trees. Music and art are also big interests of mine, and when time allows I enjoy jamming with friends and illustrating wildlife.

Where do you currently most enjoy birdwatching?

Living in Street, I'm split between the various parts of the Avalon Marshes for most of the year; however, I try to get out across the Polden hills as much as possible.

What are your five desert island birds, and why?

Again, extremely difficult and I'm split between whether to choose a representation across the families, the striking and beautiful, what would be most likely and fitting on a desert island; however, in the end I went with birds that hold a fondness in my life.

1. **Kestrel:** Having grown up on 'Kestrel Close' and this being my first raptor seen as a child out across my local patch, I still marvel at this beautiful bird and its motionless hover.
2. **Secretary Bird:** Watching a bird hunting snakes and lizards on the Masai Mara was a jaw-dropping moment.
3. **Common Myna:** Coming across a bird mimicking goats, chickens, and screaming children whilst taking a break from trekking in a rural village in Nepal.
4. **Pied Flycatcher:** Whilst working on nature reserves within Mid Wales this was one bird I always longed to see after a long winter.
5. **Kingfisher:** Difficult not to like. From early memories of seeing a flash of blue darting up a local stream, to seeing them across the marshes today, this stunning bird brightens up any birding experience.

Choose a book and luxury item, and explain why.

If following tradition a bible is often chucked in, therefore my bible would be *On the Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin. Otherwise another difficult decision; however, I believe the best book is often the one that you are currently enjoying and presently this is *Feral* by George Monbiot. This book depicts a glance at what could be possible if our intensely managed countryside were left to 'rewild' in suitable areas.

I'm hoping that a pair of binoculars is an essential item; if so I would take along my guitar to while away the hours whilst looking out across the ocean for passing seabirds.

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 March-June 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.



March

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|----|------|------|---|
| 11 | Walk | RSPB | Beginners' Guide to Bird Watching. 0930-1230. Have you ever wondered which bird is which and want to learn more? Then this is the event for you. Come along and learn how to identify some of the fantastic birds that call Ham Wall their home during the winter. Meet at Ham Wall RSPB car park, Ashcott Road, Meare BA6 9SX, ST449397. Cost: £6 non-member/£4 member, £3 child non-member/£2 Wildlife Explorer. Booking essential. A car park charge (£3) will apply to non-members; this charge will be refunded if you join the RSPB on the day. Contact: email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk, phone: 01458 860494. |
|----|------|------|---|

14	Walk	RSPB	Forest of Dean. 1000. Leader: Tom Rogers. An all-day walk in the lovely Forest of Dean with target birds being Hawfinch, Crossbill, and Brambling. Meet at Parkend Green (SO614079, GL15 4JE). Price: Car sharing petrol contributions only. Contact: email: helen.daniels@blueyonder.co.uk; phone: 01761 415264.
14	Talk	SWT	Wildlife Crime. 1930. PC Dave Pepper, Wildlife Crimes Officer, gives a broad-ranging talk covering the prevalence of wildlife crime in the county and the different forms that it can take (poaching, badger baiting, etc.). He will outline the law regarding bats, breeding birds etc., and then tell us how we can assist the police with reporting crimes. The Parish Rooms Market Square, Somerton, TA11 7NB. For more information please contact William Murray on email william@hurcottmurrays.co.uk or phone 01458 270071. Cost: SWT members £2.50, non-members £3.00.
16	Talk	SOS	Three Seasons of Worldwide Fieldwork. 1930. A talk by Alex Rhodes, young naturalist, writer, and film-maker from Bristol (Twitter: @Alex_RhodesUK). Ruishton Village Hall, Cheats Road, Ruishton, TA3 5JD (ST268250). All are welcome. Refreshments available. Free.
16	Talk	RSPB	Wildlife Photography Tales from Somerset and surrounding Counties. 1930. Robin Morrison is a keen photographer who will show us the wonderful wildlife of Somerset and neighbouring counties. Millennium Hall, Seavington, nr Ilminster, TA19 0QH (ST407147). Contact: email: denise.chamings@talktalk.net, phone: 01460 240740. Cost: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
18	Walk	SOS	Cheddar Reservoir. 1400. Leaders: Julian Thomas and Dave Dawe. Afternoon visit including the gull roost. Meet at the car park on the Cheddar side, at the end of Sharpham Road (ST446535, BS27 3DR).
18	Walk	SWT	West Mendip Watch Club. 1400. Cycling at Shapwick - Get your bikes out of the shed and join our West Mendip Watch Club for a family friendly bike ride on the beautiful Somerset Levels. The terrain is on cycle paths and largely flat. Location details available at time of booking. Booking is essential, please contact the West Mendip Watch Leader Sarah Ayling by emailing rrh1@btinternet.com. Cost: free.
19	Walk	RSPB	Ham Wall. 1030. South Somerset local RSPB group walk. Meet at Ham Wall RSPB car park, Ashcott Road, Meare (BA6 9SX, ST449397). Bring a packed lunch. Contact: email: birders@csndesk.plus.com; phone: 07803 928717. Cost: free (car park free for RSPB members, £3 charge for non-members).
25	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic at Ham Wall. 0600-0900. Join RSPB staff on an early morning walk to listen to the eerie booming of the bitterns. Meet at Ham Wall RSPB car park, Ashcott Road, Meare (BA6 9SX, ST449397). Stout footwear or wellingtons recommended. Booking essential. Contact: email: ham.wall@rspb.org.uk; phone: 01458 860494. Cost: £6 non-member/£4 RSPB member/£3 child non-member/£2 Wildlife Explorers.
25	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.
30	Talk	SWT	Stewart Marshes. 1930. Alys Laver, WWT Senior Conservation Warden will outline how the newly created wetland reserve provides salt water marshes and fresh water wetlands for wading birds and wildfowl, an accessible area for public interest and enjoyment, and protection for Stewart village from flooding. St Catherine's Church Hall, Park Road, Frome, BA11 1EU (ST774478). Contact: Mick Ridgard (email: mridgard@sky.com, phone: 01373 463875). Cost: adults £2.50, students and children £1.00.

April

1	Event	SWT	Identification of Whales, Dolphins, and Seabirds Course. 1000. Joint MARINElife and SWT training day to learn how to observe and identify whales, dolphins, and seabirds together with data recording methods used for scientific research. Meet at SWT Callow Rock Offices, Shipham Road, near Cheddar, Somerset, BS27 3DQ. Tea/coffee available, but bring packed lunch. Also, bring along pad/pen to take notes. Booking essential: see details on SWT website and email completed booking form to bookings@marine-life.org.uk . Cost: £50 (£45 for SWT members).
8	Event	SOS	SOS Members' Day 2017. 1300-1700. A variety of interesting talks and the Society's AGM. Cheddon Fitzpaine Memorial Hall, Rowford, Cheddon Fitzpaine, TA2 8JY. See page 1 for details.
8	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic at Ham Wall. 0600-0900. As 25 March.
15	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.
20	Talk	SOS	The Birds of Cornwall. 1930. Keen photographer Steve Rogers will give a talk on the birds of Cornwall. Ruishton Village Hall, Cheats Road, Ruishton, TA3 5JD (ST268250). All are welcome. Refreshments available. Free.
20	Talk	RSPB	Saving Nature in the South West. 1930. Nick Bruce-White (RSPB Regional Director for South West England) will talk about the needs of nature in the south west, what threats and challenges are posed to nature within the region and what the RSPB, its supporters, and its partners can do to create a world richer in wildlife, through saving threatened species, restoring degraded landscapes, or inspiring people of all ages to connect with nature. Millennium Hall, Seavington, nr Ilminster, TA19 0QH (ST407147). Contact: email: denise.chamings@talktalk.net , phone: 01460 240740. Cost: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
22	Walk	SOS	Brean Down. 0815. Leaders: Julian Thomas and Brian Hill. Walk in search of spring migrants. Meet at NT car park (ST296585, TA8 2RS); charge for non-members of National Trust. Note early start time. Stout footwear and a snack and drink recommended.
22	Walk	RSPB	Coach trip to Gigrin Farm, Rhayader, Wales. 0800. Leader: Tom Pinckheard. Joint Bath local RSPB group/Bath Naturalists' Group field trip to the Red Kite feeding station at Gigrin Farm, also on the lookout for summer migrants. Departure from Avon Street Coach park, Bath. Phone 07444 699575 for details. Cost: TBA, around £20.00.
22	Walk	RSPB	Mr Boombastic at Ham Wall. 0600-0900. As 25 March.
22	Walk	RSPB	Brownsea Island. 0915. South Somerset RSPB group field trip to this island in Poole Harbour. Meet promptly in the NT car park at Shell Bay, Studland (SZ035863, BH19 3BA) to catch 0930 chain ferry to Sandbanks as foot passengers and then take the 10 minute boat trip to the island at 1000. Fees apply for ferries, landing (free for NT members), and Dorset Wildlife Trust reserve entrance (free to any Wildlife Trust members). Contact organisers for details: phone: 07803 928717; email: birders@csndesk.plus.com .

May

13	Walk	SOS	Hodder's Combe. 0830. Leader: Alison Everett. A walk in one of the best Quantock combes, looking for summer visitors such as Wood Warbler, Redstart, and Pied Flycatcher. Meet at car park (ST154411, nearest post code TA5 1RZ). Note early start time. Stout/waterproof footwear recommended. Free.
14	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.
18	Talk	RSPB	'The Secret Life of the Tawny Owl'. 1930. A showing of this film, an amazing insight into the lives of these often heard, but rarely seen, owls over the course of a year, narrated by Chris Packham. By kind permission of film-maker Dave Culley. Also bring-and-buy plant sale. Millennium Hall, Seavington, nr Ilminster, TA19 0QH (ST407147). Contact: phone: 01460 240740, email: denise.chamings@talktalk.net. Cost: South Somerset RSPB group members £2.50, non-members (including national RSPB members) £3.50, under 18s free.
21	Walk	RSPB	Wareham Forest, Dorset. 1030. South Somerset local RSPB group field trip, which will explore the forest and heathland during an easy walk of approximately 4-5 miles. Meet in the car park for the Sika Forest Trail, on minor road to Bere Regis c. 2 miles NW of Wareham (SY908894, BH20 7PE). Bring a packed lunch. Contact: phone: 07803 928717; email: birders@csndesk.plus.com. Cost: free.

June

3	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.
10	Walk	SOS	Haddon Hill. 0930. Leaders: Brian Gibbs and Dave Dawe. A walk to look for birds and butterflies. Meet at car park (SS969284, TA4 2DS). All are welcome. Free.
10	Walk	RSPB	Winterbourne Downs RSPB Reserve, Wiltshire. 1030. South Somerset local group field trip. A walk around the reserve in the morning and a stop at Langford Lakes (SU214401) just off the A303 on the return journey if time permits. Meet in the reserve car park (SU217400), near Newton Tony. Contact: phone: 07803 928717; email: birders@csndesk.plus.com. Cost: free.
29	Walk	RSPB	Evening Walk for Barn Owls at Ham Wall. 1900. Led by a voluntary warden, organised by South Somerset local RSPB group. Meet at Ham Wall car park, Ashcott Road, Meare (BA6 9SX, ST449397). Contact: phone: 07803 928717; email: birders@csndesk.plus.com. Cost: free.

Photo credits: Joe Stockwell (p.2), John Crispin (p.3 top), Julian Thomas (p.3 bottom), Paul Bowyer (p.4), Gary Thoburn (p.5), Simon Breeze (p. 8), Brian Hill (p.9).



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