

SOMERSET ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD VIRTUALLY AT 2.00 P.M.
ON 12th DECEMBER 2020

1. Apologies for absence were received from Julian Thomas and James Packer.
2. Minutes of the AGM of 21st September 2019 were agreed as a true record, proposed by Brian Gibbs (BDG) and seconded by Alison Everett (AE).
3. There were no matters arising.
4. Chairman's Report

Roger Dickey (RCD) welcomed all participants to the AGM. A virtual meeting was a new experience for the Society.

He said that a year ago the Society was in a good position to discuss what was going on in the County in the field of nature. Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) and the Somerset Environmental Centre (SERC) were putting initiatives together. There was much optimism.

Then in 2020 everyone hit a brick wall and it became impossible for the NGOs to get together again. Despite this Georgia Stokes, CEO of the SWT was due much credit for getting people to talk to one another. RCD felt that, although the Society was quite insular, he hoped that it could start making a more significant data contribution.

COVID-19 had given the Society's General Committee (the Committee) time to reflect on what the Society could contribute to the discussion on nature in the County. For example, should reserves become wildlife museums? People seem to have become resigned to losing species in the County, yet acknowledge some gains, such as herons and waterfowl.

RCD said he would like to return to one of his favourite subjects, Nightingales. If they were still present on the continent in good numbers, why were there no population increases here, especially as global warming might be expected to push populations of such species further north? Or was it simply because the scrub has gone? He questioned whether Somerset was well set up and wondered whether it was under-managed or over-managed.

RCD also asked why Somerset could not do what Knepp Estate has done in Sussex. It could be done but it would mean some agriculture being given up or some development being stopped. Who would tell farmers that they would have to give up something for more wildlife? He was trying to get people to look at the evidence for change and record nature. He felt that the Society was not good at recording properly.

The Society had published another excellent Bird Report. Thanks were due to both recorders and those responsible for putting it together. The Report was always a good read and provided much useful information, e.g. the Ringing Report.

The experience of COVID-19 had caused the Committee to think seriously about what the Society should be trying to achieve. Indeed some proposals had already been set out prior

to this AGM.

Finally, RCD said that the Society had said goodbye to Brian Hill at the 2019 AGM. The Committee believed it important to recognise his contribution to the Society and would offer him Life Membership.

5. Treasurer's Report

Eve Tigwell (EMT) ran through the 2019 financial statement and said that the Society's finances continued to be healthy. Income and expenditure had both risen slightly. In response to a question from Roger Forder, EMT said that the costs of the Bird Report in 2019 had been less than the year before because the printers had previously delayed submission of bills.

RCD thanked EMT for her work as Treasurer. The Society's financial position meant that there were funds available for some projects, e.g. bird food at Cary Moor. The Committee was always open to considering good projects.

The report was accepted, proposed by Denise Wawman and seconded by Roger Forder.

6. Membership Report

Dick Best (DB) said that membership remained steady and that it had been around the 500 level for a number of years. Turnover was similar to other years but there had so far been fewer applicants.

There then followed a wide-ranging discussion on recruitment. RCD believed the Society did not have enough student members. There were a lot of young people who helped out at reserves that perhaps the Society should be targetting. DB said it was difficult to see how the younger birding community could be targeted.

Sarah Nason (SN) asked how proactive was the Society's recruitment. SWT had put a lot of effort into this area and had increased its membership during the COVID-19 pandemic. She asked whether it would be good not to be just a "birdwatching" organisation.

RCD said there were so many areas that the Committee wished to develop. He welcomed SN's offer to provide input and believed that any lessons learnt by SWT would be of help.

Rob Grimmond (RG) suggested that the big challenge was how to attract young people to a bird club in an era of digital communication. RCD said youngsters were more likely to want to go out and do something, e.g. ringing or surveying. EMT said that the age profile for surveying had changed considerably in recent years. Not that many years ago it was mainly retired people who did bird surveying; now many are in their 20s. She and RCD had discussed the idea of more survey work in the County, so perhaps it was something to develop.

RCD asked BDG whether the age profile of recorders was known. BDG replied in the negative, since the majority of records came in from Birdtrack. About 75% of records nowadays came from the Avalon Marshes.

SN asked whether more could be done with SERC. RCD said he and BDG saw SERC regularly.

RCD thanked DB for his report.

7. Election of Officers and Committee Members

Elections of the following were endorsed by the Meeting, proposed by Denise Wawman and seconded by Sarah Nason:

Chairman:	Roger Dickey
Hon Secretary:	Rob Grimmond
Treasurer:	Eve Tigwell
Membership Secretary:	Dick Best
Indoor Meetings Secretary:	Dan Watson
Field Meetings Secretary:	Alison Everett
Recorder:	Brian Gibbs
Assistant Recorder:	Julian Thomas
Surveys Secretary:	Simon Breeze

General Committee: Dave Dawe

8. Future of Indoor Meetings

RCD said the Committee had been considering the future of Ruishton meetings for some time. On average, just 30 or so people were attending them. It was costing good money to spend money on speakers and bookings for just a small number of people. Consequently, the Committee had decided to end regular meetings at Ruishton. Instead there would be two Members' Days each year, one at Cheddon Fitzpaine, the other at Ruishton. One would be held in spring, the other in the autumn.

There had been some debate about staging virtual talks. In response to RCD's concerns that it might be difficult to get speakers, Roger Forder said that he and his wife were responsible for arranging virtual speakers for their local RSPB Group and that, in their experience, it was easier to get speakers (and at the same time perhaps increase attendance). RG suggested that there is scope for at least a few virtual meetings or talks a year. He offered to start it off by doing a talk himself in the New Year. Because of the continuing uncertainty over the length of COVID-19 restrictions, he felt it important to keep in touch with Members. EMT agreed that Zoom talks worked well and was prepared to do talks herself.

9. Future of Field Meetings

RCD said field meetings would continue because they were invaluable, especially to make new Members welcome. It was hoped that numbers attending could be increased further.

Holding some meetings outside of the County could be an added attraction. AE said that field meetings were reasonably well attended when the weather was good. More leaders would be most welcome.

10. Electronic Newsletter

RCD believed that The Bittern had in the past failed because it was too frequent and there was a lack of input from Members. The Committee believed that it would be better to circulate two editions per year between each Members' Day. It still needed contributions for it to work. Julian Thomas had confirmed he would be happy to continue as editor. Restricting circulation to email would enable the Society to offer a benefit to Members.

11. Subscription Increase

EMT said there had been no change in subscription for some time. The Committee needed to increase the subscription to cover the increasing costs of producing and issuing the Somerset Bird Report. So from 1st January 2022, the subscription would increase to £18, which still represented good value.

10. Any other business

There was no other business.

12 people attended the meeting, which ended at 3.05 p.m.