

The Gloucestershire Tetradder

Gloucestershire Bird Newsletter
Number 42 December 2018



Welcome to the 42nd edition of The Gloucestershire Tetradder. Seasons greetings to you all, and I wish you a bird-filled 2019. In this edition we have updates on Project Owl and other surveys, including a new winter survey from BTO (who consulted us about our own while developing theirs). There are updates from Mike Smart about our Curlews and a visitor from Iceland. Finally, there are details of the next raptor group talk, with New Naturalist author Richard Sale.

Gordon Kirk

BTO Project Owl

Thank you to everyone who is taking part in the Tawny Owl surveys; we've had a great response and I'm told that we're in the top ten counties in terms of participation. A particular welcome to those of you who are new to BTO surveys. Here's a quick summary of what you are finding out...

TOPS

The **Tawny Owl Point Survey** ran from mid-August to mid-October and 33 brave souls headed out in the dark, making a total of 138 visits to 70 different tetrads. Tawny Owls were detected in 37 tetrads (53%), which is very much in line with the provisional national figures, although the full analysis is ongoing and will enable comparison with previous national surveys. We are still waiting to hear whether TOPS will be repeated in the Spring.



Tawny Owl by Richard Baatsen

TOCS

Your response to the **Tawny Owl Calling Survey** has been brilliant, with 195 sites registered in the county as I write. New people are still signing up, as this survey runs right through to the end of March. You can take part in the survey from your garden, or any other green space, and it's a very simple survey, asking you to listen out just once a week, for 20 minutes, between sunset and midnight. You don't have to take part every week, but the hope is that most volunteers can contribute at least six weeks. As well as mapping where Tawny Owls are (and aren't), the survey aims to find out more about how hooting and calling varies through the year, so not hearing an owl is just as important as hearing an owl. Please consider joining our happy throng of surveyors by registering your garden or a place you visit regularly. Currently just over 50% of the 20-minute sessions have produced Tawny Owl hoots or calls (remarkably similar to the result above), but over 80% of sites have produced an owl on at least one occasion. At one end of the spectrum, one persistent surveyor has been a #ZeroHero in all 10 of his sessions so far, whereas three people (all in the Forest of Dean) have #HeardAnOwl in all nine of their sessions. Thanks again to all involved, and please keep up the good work.

BTO Winter Bird Survey

This is a new survey for BTO, with the principal aim of surveying English farmland for birds and Brown Hare by surveying squares that are normally surveyed in the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) in spring and summer. Again, you have responded superbly, with 61 squares allocated to date. You can survey up to once a month, namely in each of December, January, February and March; you follow your usual route and record in the same way, but the habitat recording is different. You cannot enter data online until the New Year, but if you've registered your square please get started in December and keep your paper forms. All the forms and instructions are on the website, but please contact me if you need assistance.



If you don't normally do a BBS survey this is a great way to get a feel for what it is like – you can still express your interest in squares that haven't already been allocated, so please have a look online and see if there is one you fancy. The link is here <https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/english-winter-bird-survey> If you've cut your teeth on our own winter survey (see below) this would be a good way of moving up a level in terms of rigour to see what is involved in a more formal survey – please have a go!

Glos Winter Bird Survey

Our local Winter Bird Survey is also running as usual this winter. This will be the fifth year; it covers the whole county, with one area running for even longer. If you're not already signed up, this is a long-term survey that will provide a baseline to which we can later refer back, to look for bird population trends. It's also a good way to see what wildlife surveying is like and to gain practical experience – it's an easy survey to start off with.

If you'd like to start taking part please contact Andy Lewis at glosbirdsurvey@btinternet.com for details. You'll be allocated a 1km square picked at random to walk around on a February morning of your choice, counting all the birds you find.

The results go to the County Recorder, and can also be seen on the BTO's BirdTrack website www.bto.org/birdtrack Log in as **glosbirdsurvey** with password **BewicksSwan** (note capitals).

Slimbridge Wild Winter Weekend January 5th and 6th, 9.30am – 5pm



The next Slimbridge event will celebrate wintering ducks, geese and swans and feature a host of special birding events including Bird Watch Mornings with swan researchers, guides in the hides to help with bird identification, special talks from WWT's experts, bird ringing demonstrations and more... (see the website for more details as they are announced).

...and your very own BTO representative will be very pleased to see you in the South Lake Discovery Hide!

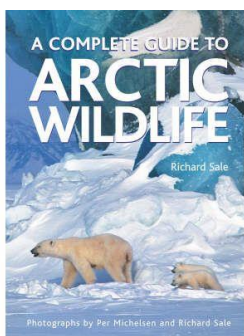
Cost: Included in admission ticket price and free to WWT members (with the exception of the Bird Watch Morning events).

Disturbance at Aylburton/Guscar

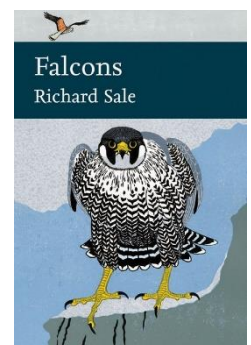
One of the most important areas for waders in the lower Severn area is Aylburton Warth/Guscar Rocks. Although not a nature reserve, is owned by the Environment Agency. There is increasing concern about disturbance at the site from dogs, and also from boats approaching it and even mooring there at high tide (when the waders need the site as a roost). There are a couple of sailing clubs nearby. Birders have raised concerns with Natural England, but it is difficult for them to take action unless they have more evidence. Helpfully, they have said that they would welcome information. If you witness any disturbance there, please make a note of the date, tide conditions, exact location, and the boats (or dogs) involved – photos would be useful. Send these details to NE on west.midlands.enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

Gloucestershire Raptor Monitoring Group talk, January 30th - Richard Sale

GRMG's next talk in on Wednesday 30th January at The Gala Club, Fairmile Gardens, Gloucester, GL2 9EB - doors open at 7:00pm for a 7:30 start.



The speaker is Richard Sale, raptor researcher, Arctic enthusiast and author. His New Naturalist book "Falcons" was described by British Wildlife magazine as 'one of the best New Naturalists on birds, and one that is likely to remain the last word on British falcons for a long time.' He wrote 'the most comprehensive guide to Arctic Wildlife', and is co-author of the just-published work on the Steller's Sea Eagle, the first English-language study of this species. Richard will talk about falcons and about the Arctic, enabling him to draw on his vast experience of both topics - for example his recent studies include breeding Merlins in Scotland, Hobbies in England and Steller's Sea Eagles in eastern Russia.



Richard will bring some copies of his Steller's Sea Eagle book which he will sign and sell on the night for £30. He will also be happy to sign any of his published work which is brought along to the evening.

This is a ticketed event. Tickets are £7.50 each and are available online from The Bristol Ticket Shop using this link....
<https://www.bristolticketshop.co.uk/eventdetails.aspx?e=20000>

If you are unable to buy online please email glosraptors@gmail.com to reserve tickets and pay on the door.

Curlew news *Mike Smart reports...*

In the last Tetradder, I reported gloomily on the poor 2018 breeding season for Curlew in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire: the floods in March (and again in April) delayed the onset of nesting - I suspect that many Curlews just gave up and didn't bother to nest; then the heatwave in May and June meant that (in addition to the problems of predation and hard ground limiting food availability), many farmers cut their hay very early. The usual number of pairs were present in the Severn and Avon Vales (14 in Worcestershire and 17 in Gloucestershire) and one or two half grown chicks were seen, but it appears that not a single chick fledged in the vales, not even the pair that nested for the first time in living memory on the Dumbles at Slimbridge, which were the victim of a May high tide.

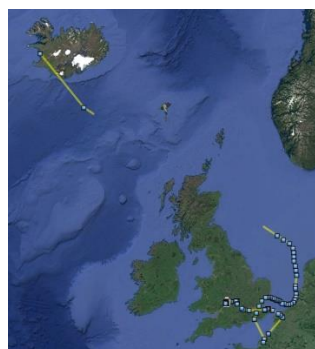
And this situation was reflected all over southern England. A meeting of the Curlew Forum in November 2018 reviewed the results of breeding surveys carried out this summer all over southern England (mostly south of a line from Shropshire to the Wash): of 258 breeding pairs recorded, there were 109 cases of confirmed breeding, of which 47 failed at the egg stage, and only six were confirmed to have produced chicks. This shows in stark reality why Curlew is such a high priority for conservation efforts. (For much background information, see the Curlew Forum website www.curlewcall.org). The one ray of hope came from the Lower Derwent National Nature Reserve in Yorkshire, where - because a large area of land is under conservation control - it is easier to manipulate cutting dates and to harvest hay "inside out", from the centre of the field outwards, as is done in Scotland for Corncrakes and other ground nesting species.

We clearly need to undertake urgent measures to help productivity and are planning, with the support of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and Natural England, to develop a West Midlands conservation project, involving better monitoring, protection of nests with electric fences, raising of chicks in captivity for release on the breeding grounds, and much closer liaison with farmers. In Gloucestershire next year, from March 2019, we need more Curlew watchers to make regular repeat visits to nesting sites, and to help find and monitor nests. Any offers of help gratefully received!

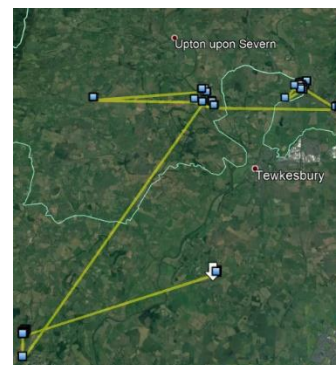
Greenland Whitefronted Goose with navigation problems

Mike Smart reports again...

Many Tetradders will have seen the note on The Gloster Birder website about the Greenland Whitefront fitted with a satellite transmitter (see entry for 17 November); there's also a note on www.glosnats.org . For those who haven't, a Greenland Whitefront with a transmitter fitted on her neck was seen by the Avon at Twyning on 17 November. Greenland Whitefronts nest in Greenland, and normally migrate through Iceland en route to wintering sites in Ireland and the west coast of Scotland, where they usually arrive in late October or early November. They occasionally overshoot Ireland and turn up in western England; the "Birds of Gloucestershire" notes observations in the county in about 20 winters since 1945, mainly at Slimbridge. So, you would naturally think that a bird turning up in mid-November would be an overshoot. But the satellite transmitter, placed on the bird in Iceland in September 2017, tells a different story: on her autumn migration in 2017, she had indeed overshoot Ireland and ended up on the coast of Brittany, returning to Wexford via Cornwall. In autumn 2018 she went on further adventures: she left Iceland on 24 October and was carried eastwards, right round the north coast of Scotland, flew over the coastlines of The Netherlands, Essex and northern France, before turning back and landing on the sea (for the first time since leaving Iceland it would seem) in Kent. She then readjusted her compass and set off due west passing over Heathrow, and arriving in south Worcestershire on 28 October. The map below left shows the route taken.



But that is not all: she seems to have joined in with the large group of mainly Canada and Greylag geese that winter in the Severn and Avon floodplain in north Gloucestershire and south Worcestershire, and her movements have been tracked in November and December. She joins the Canadas and Greylags to feed and gather at communal daylight loafing grounds, often at Ripple in Worcs, or at Twyning in Gloucestershire. At night she goes with the other geese to roost, sometimes at Kemerton, sometimes at Bredon's Hardwick, sometimes (especially now that there is a little shallow surface water) at Coombe Hill (see the second map below). It rather looks as though she has decided not to go back to Wexford this winter but to spend the time with the geese in the Severn Vale.



All of which goes to show that it's worth looking at those Canadas and Greylags: they are interesting in themselves (they go on a moult migration to the Lake District of Glasgow in July) and they may well attract other passing geese. And if global warming means you don't see thousands of Russian Whitefronts on the Severn estuary, flocks of over a thousand Canadas and Greylags are still an impressive sight.