



Nature is in crisis
Together we can save it

Guildford and District Local Group

Website: rspbguildford.org.uk

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2025

Openings for special projects

Tony Cummins

In my second editorial as the new group leader I shared my recent discovery about the wide range of activities open to an RSPB local group additional to the ones we already undertook. The reaction might be best described as muted though I did receive feedback from one member but to the effect that the group was fine just as it was. So we have carried on our normal fare of walks, talks, coach trips and fundraising to the usual, splendid effect.

Over the months though opportunities for different ventures have arisen and I think three of them merit a wider audience. The first cropped up in early autumn. A golf club in Woking enquired whether the group could assist with a survey of the birds on its course. Three of us volunteered and had an enjoyable morning wandering round and listing our findings (which included the discovery of a Golden-ringed Dragonfly, a Surrey first for me) followed by our reward of coffee and cake. The club had an obvious commitment to wildlife conservation evidenced by the impressive habitat off the fairways. The club has asked us to repeat our visit this spring and we are looking forward to doing so.

The second initiative arose from a member's suggestion that the group might offer assistance in the education of dog walkers on Thursley Common at this sensitive time of year. The regional RSPB recruitment team responded at very short notice and offered two dates on which they would set up a gazebo on the site which would act as a focal point for volunteers to spread the word about the precious wildlife on the reserve and the importance of leaving it undisturbed. The first event has already taken place and the second is scheduled for 24 May. The group's active birdwatchers are requested to spare an hour or two to attend on that day perhaps as a part of a birding visit.

Thirdly a member recently noticed that the highly popular CCTV feed from the Woking peregrine nest box was inactive and suggested that the group might consider becoming a sponsor for the facility. Use of our funds for such a purpose would be well within our objectives and one that would have RSPB support. Enquiries were made accordingly. As it turned out though the Surrey Bird Club had stepped in and were continuing its own sponsorship in memory of Steve Chastell, the sadly deceased Surrey recorder. Nevertheless, this was precisely the sort of initiative that the group welcomes and members are encouraged to offer further suggestions.

Meanwhile, as spring finally hits us, do all enjoy excellent birdwatching.

AGM 2025

Tony Cummins

The last indoor meeting of the 2024/25 season is the AGM at Onslow Village Hall on 28 May 2025, starting at 7.30pm.

The AGM papers are attached to this newsletter. Any other business to be considered for the agenda or nominations for Committee posts should be notified to the leader in writing by Monday 5 May 2025.

Please put the date for the AGM in your diary; the formal business will hopefully be brief and will be followed by a presentation from *Paul Graber, Tips on Nature Photography*.

As usual the annual plant sale will be held before the meeting starting at 6.00pm. Do come and stock up on plants and veg for your garden.

Coach trip to RSPB Lakenheath Fen

Sue Losson

We still have some places left for the visit to RSPB Lakenheath on 11th May.

Lakenheath Fen RSPB has been transformed from carrot fields into a wetland home for Kingfishers, Common Cranes, Otters and Water Voles. Since 1995, this Suffolk nature reserve has created nearly 500 hectares of reedbeds, grazed fenland and wet grasslands where nature abounds. Wildlife continues to thrive by grazing the grasslands to keep grass at the right length and controlling the water levels to benefit different birds at different times of year.

This reserve forms part of a network of fenland nature reserves close by. These include The National Trust's Wicken Fen, the Woodland Trust's Chippenham Fen and Woodwalton Fen, which is managed by Natural England.

It appears that the visitor centre and café are open! There will be a short stop en route at Weeting Heath, a Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve noted for breeding Stone Curlews.

The price for RSPB members for the coach and driver tip is £35.00. The journey is approximately 3hrs hours 10mins and the coach will leave from the Guildford Spectrum car park at 8am.

The booking form for the visit to this nature reserve is attached with this newsletter.

New Members

Christine Shawyer

A warm welcome to the following new members :

David Ball.....(Woking)	Sean Brett.....(Camberley)
Georgina Cole..... (Burpham)	Richard & Beverly Collins..... (Chiddingfold)
Mary Edwards..... (Gomshall)	Alastair Shaw..... (Guildford)
John & Joyce Turton..... (Godalming)	Lynne Walker..... (Chiddingfold)
Chris & Helen Whiter..... (Pyrford)	

Where is the programme?

John Shawyer

You may have noticed that a programme has not been distributed with this newsletter. As there are no walks or talks in August, the next programme, which will run from September, will be distributed with the summer newsletter in July.

For your diary:

11 May 2025 – Guildford Group coach trip to RSPB Lakenheath Fen

28 May 2025 – AGM and plant sale Onslow Village Hall

24 May 2025 – RSPB recruitment, Thursley

4 June, 8 July – Visit to Knepp 23 June – 1 July 2025 Guildford Group birding break to Shetland

30 June 2025 – Garden bird survey results to paulhicks2006@yahoo.co.uk

9 July 2025 – Deadline for items for the next newsletter to Len Walker editor@rspbguildford.org.uk

9-13 October 2025 – Guildford Group birding break to Devon

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: in England and Wales no 207076, in Scotland no SC037654

Group walks - Winter 2025

Malcolm Toyer

Despite the weather gods seeming to be against us at times with the scheduled programme, we have enjoyed some splendid walks in the first quarter of the year.

Eight of us set off for the **Isle of Sheppey** on a freezing -5°C morning. At Leysdown, we were rewarded for our efforts with close views of waders, including Oystercatcher, Redshank, Sanderling, Turnstone, and Grey Plover. Shelduck floated offshore, while Herring, Black-headed, and Common Gulls were present. A large flock of Brent Geese landed in front of us, and we began spotting numerous Red-throated Divers—eventually estimating at least 75!



Common Gull – photo by Gillian Pullinger

Along the track to Shellness, Golden Plovers shimmered in the sun alongside a few Ringed Plovers. A Marsh Harrier drifted past, Stonechats flitted through the undergrowth, and a pair of Reed Buntings perched obligingly in the bushes. At the RSPB Raptor viewpoint, we saw Lapwing, Red-legged Partridge, and Corn Bunting. More Marsh Harriers appeared, followed by a female Hen Harrier with its distinctive white rump. A Peregrine sped past, then a Sparrowhawk, while a Kestrel watched from a telegraph pole. From the

reedbeds came the squeal of a Water Rail and the explosive song of a Cetti's Warbler. Some of the group continued to Elmley, adding Black-tailed Godwit to the list. A Barn Owl flew over the car park, and we spotted Short-eared Owls both perched and in flight. Some enjoyed close views of Bearded Reedlings, while a few lucky individuals glimpsed the resident Little Owls. The trip total: 45 species seen, two heard.

Seventeen of us began the walk at **Sidlesham and Church Norton** to the sound of singing Song Thrushes. The Ferry Pool revealed plenty of ducks (Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Shelduck,) and a small group of Black-tailed Godwits. A few yards further on, we enjoyed super views of a male Kingfisher by the sluice gate.

Along the path to Church Norton we saw large groups of Golden Plover (200+) and Knot (400+). Skeins of Brent Geese were constantly flying directly over our heads. We eventually reached the beach and enjoyed some sea-watching. A distant bird was identified as a Long-tailed Duck! A few Red-throated Divers flew past, plus a couple of auks which were probably Guillemots. After lunch at Church Norton a Mistle Thrush gave good views perched high in a conifer by the Churchyard. The highlight of our return walk was seeing a hunting female Sparrowhawk. There were also three Red Breasted Mergansers in the main channel and other small birds such as Yellowhammer were seen. After the main walk some of us were successful in seeing one of the long-staying Long-eared Owls at a nearby location. A total of 57 species were seen during the course of the day.

Ten members met on a dank and cold morning for an outing to **Warnham Mill**. There were plenty of Mallards and Tufted Ducks out on the mill pond, interspersed with Coots, a Gadwall and three Egyptian Geese. Further out were a Cormorant, a Grey Heron and seven Pochards. A lucky few saw a Kingfisher streaking across the water. At the feeder screen the standout bird was a male Siskin. For company it had numerous Blue and Great Tits plus a few Goldfinches, Long-tailed Tits and singles of Coal Tit and Greenfinch. On the ground a Redwing hopped into view amid many Chaffinches and a few each of Dunnock and Nuthatch. More of the same tits and finches were on the second set of feeders, but a Pheasant or two strolled around with two Moorhens. A couple of Reed Buntings foraged while Blackbirds came and went. On the boardwalk Wrens were in good voice but elusive for viewing. A confiding Robin was a big hit when it was enticed to feed from the hand. A Great Spotted Woodpecker perched high overhead while a Song Thrush piped in the distance. A small flock of Redwings fed on the adjacent golf course and a Goldcrest hopped around in a low bramble. Returning to the feeders the activity had heated up with more Siskins, and a couple of Bramblings coming and going. Then Redpolls began arriving until their number reached six; one being particularly red in colour. Finally, back at the feeder screen the morning was crowned by the sight of a female Bullfinch. Despite the unpromising conditions the walk had proved to be most productive with 41 species identified.

It was an overcast and slightly misty start for eleven of us at **Farlington Marshes** although later the sun came out. A first glance over the mud and remaining water revealed numerous Redshank, Oystercatcher, Pintail and a couple of Little Grebe. Gulls were well represented and amongst the Black Headed, Common, and Herring Gulls were one or two Lesser Black Backed. It became apparent that there were also a number of Mediterranean Gulls. Walking down to the sea wall through the scrub Greenfinch and Song Thrush were singing and gave good views. Standing looking over the lake Lapwing wheeled around in the sky and landed again. We started to see large numbers of Canada Geese and Brent Geese, more Pintail and Teal and some Shelduck. A Marsh Harrier was picked out sitting on the ground at some distance away. Grey Plover and Curlew were on the seaward side of the wall. A couple of people saw a lone Avocet fly in. Further round the sea wall a Peregrine perched on a small island. A nice surprise was a pair of Spoonbill which we began to see in the distance. At times throughout the walk they flew around giving some great views. After some discussion we eventually settled on having seen Rock Pipit, one Water Pipit and more numerous Meadow Pipit throughout the day.



Dartford Warbler – photo by Andrew Kingston

Harbour Seals, Red Breasted Merganser and Great Crested Grebe were all in the harbour in the main channel. Huge numbers of small waders, mostly Dunlin, wheeled around in spectacular formations and were feeding on the water's edge, along with some Turnstone. By The Deeps an unexpected Dartford Warbler flicked around in the brambles, Shoveler, Tufted Duck were on the water and eventually two Ringed Plover could be seen. We were treated to a couple of fly-pasts from a Marsh Harrier and a Buzzard drifted over our heads. We had our lunch out by the sea wall. Setting off again there were a pair of Stonechat in one of the fields. Near the visitors' hut a Chiffchaff put in an appearance. A bonus three Goldfinch flying over the car park as we finished brought the day's total number of species to 59, and to cap it all off, the sun was out by this time.

At **Titchfield Haven**, fifteen of us enjoyed a sunny start and scanning the Solent, four Eiders were offshore, while numerous Sanderlings scurried along the tideline near some Ringed Plovers. A Red-throated Diver flew west, and several Brent Geese and many Gadwall were on the sea. Among the perched gulls were a dozen Mediterranean Gulls, two Common Gulls, and a Lesser Black-backed Gull. Passing the harbour at the Visitors' Centre, we saw over sixty Turnstones, some just feet away on the pavement. At the east-side feeders, two Jays fled while a Reed Bunting and Dunnock remained on view. Further on, we searched for a reported Tawny Owl.



Mediterranean Gull – photo by Malcolm Toyer

Despite precise directions from a volunteer, only one fortunate member glimpsed it among the ivy. Birdsong accompanied us, with Chiffchaffs, Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Robins, and Wrens in full voice. A Grey Wagtail appeared briefly before we reached

the Meadow and Knights Bank hides. From there, we spotted Curlews, Lapwings, Canada and Greylag Geese, Highland Cattle, Mute Swans, and ducks including Shelduck, Shovelers, and Tufted Ducks. Cormorants perched on fences, a female Stonechat made an appearance, and Marsh Harriers were seen frequently, peaking at four. After a seaside lunch, we explored the west side. Water levels at Meon Shore hide were high, but over a dozen Avocets and Black-tailed Godwits foraged. Around forty Oystercatchers roosted with a similar number of Wigeon, while Teal swam nearby. Black-headed Gulls dominated the islands, and eventually, two Snipe emerged, joined by a Redshank. Pumfrett and Spurgin hides were quiet, but a Marsh Harrier flew past, and we added Buzzard and Kestrel to our raptor sightings. A young Red Fox,

unbothered by our presence, provided close views. Our final sighting was a distant pair of Common Scoter on the sea. In glorious spring sunshine, we tallied an excellent 61 species.

Twenty three people attended the **Horsell Common** walk on the warmest day of the year so far. We set off along the river meadows following the river Bourne. Three or four pairs of lapwings were displaying in the fields, hopefully settling to breed for a third consecutive year. Walking on we saw Egyptian, Canada and Greylag Geese together with Mallards and a pair of distant Mandarin. Several circling Red Kites and a couple of Buzzards were above, with a single perched Kestrel. We saw and/or heard a good selection of resident passerines in the bordering hedgerows and trees.



Firecrest – photo by Alan Rines

In addition, small groups of Redwings were still present. Of the summer migrants the Chiffchaffs had arrived in force, and a single Blackcap was heard. On the heathland Stonechats were displaying and a few Dartford Warblers were seen by most of the group, together with several pairs of Long-tailed Tits in the birches. A detour onto the McLaren fields gave us singing Skylarks and parachuting Meadow Pipits, and as we headed back to the heathland via the pine woods the highlight of the walk had to be excellent views of two Firecrests showing in close quarters in the sunlight. Little Grebe, Coots, Cormorants and a Moorhen on the wetland brought the morning's total to 55 species.

Bespoke Pheasant spotting kit

John Axtell

A little while ago I heard an experienced birder explaining to a relative newbie the importance of getting a good quality spotting scope; "a good scope will bring the birds so much closer, so identification is that much easier". That made me smile as it reminded me of this photo. My wife Sue and I were enjoying one of our holidays in the Lake District (staying at a wooden cabin in the woods called "The Love Shack" - cue for a song!).



Posing Pheasant – photo by John Axtell

We decided to go to the RSPB reserve near the Morecombe coast - Leighton Moss. We had a good day out there, especially as the new viewing tower had just recently opened. If I remember rightly they had some feeders near a family area and it wasn't too far from there that we encountered a female pheasant sitting to the side of track. It didn't fly off in alarm, but just watched us as we passed, but then to our surprise it walked after us, looking at us expectantly. I can only presume it was semi-tame, lurking

near the feeders for scattered seed, and had become used to humans nearby. I had been carrying my spotting scope over my shoulder with its tripod, but put this on the ground to get a close-up of the bird with my DSLR camera, whereupon it fluttered right up to perch on top, still looking at us in anticipation. When I mentioned this to the editor of this newsletter, he asked "what happened to the bird afterwards?" I'd have liked to have said "lunch"! But as it didn't get any from us it got 'fed up' and disappeared into the undergrowth, no doubt getting into position to ambush the next birders that came that way.

Sketches of The Gambia. Part 3, Raptors

Tony Cummins

In both of my first two articles about The Gambia I focused on a limited number of birds, the big five and then the seven bee-eaters species found there. As a result I had the space to provide a pen picture of each. Raptors though pose a greater challenge; including owls and vultures the trip list contains no less than thirty of them. So rather than attempt a description of them all I have decided to present my own tongue in cheek and entirely subjective Raptor Awards.

Ubiquitous Raptor: There are only two nominations in this category, Hooded Vulture and Yellow-billed Kite. Both were daily sightings and no other species came close in terms of numbers. One other species of kite, Black-winged, was identified as were four more vultures.



Hooded Vulture – Photo Tony Cummins

The winner is Hooded Vulture for the arbitrary reason that I discovered late that the Yellow-billed Kite is a sub-species of the more familiar Black Kite and was disappointed that it was not a lifer for me. A subsidiary award of *Best-looking Vulture* goes to Palm-nut Vulture; for a vulture the species is rather attractive with its white body and black wings. Lacking any trace of conventional beauty, the other vulture species seen (White-backed, Griffon and Ruppell's Griffon) were never in the running.

Owl of the Trip: We identified five owl species, Northern White-faced, Greyish Eagle, Verreaux's Eagle, African Scops Owls and Pearl-spotted Owlet and all are nominated. The first three owls were large, impressive specimens; each was pointed out to us by rangers on local reserves. Their daily role was to find the owls' roosting perches and then escort birders to them in return for small tips. The award

winner in a strong field is Verreaux's Eagle Owl, the scales having been tipped by its bizarre pink upper eyelids. A subsidiary *Cutest Owl* award goes to Pearl-spotted owlet because it is so tiny and cute.

Best Raptor Name: The contenders come from the goshawk family. The first is the Shikra, a small hawk that closely resembles our own Sparrowhawk. Then there is the Dark Chanting Goshawk whose plumage is similar to that of a female Peregrine but is a rather more striking bird thanks to its red bill and legs. The Gabar Goshawk also deserves a mention; it is a paler, more petite version of the Dark Chanting and in many ways is a more appealing bird but its name is sadly too ordinary. The Shikra also misses out because its name scarcely indicates that it is a bird rather than an eastern deity; in fact in Hindi the word means hunter which does not evoke the sense of mystery aroused by the words Dark Chanting Goshawk.

Buzzard of the Trip: As we found only two buzzard species, Lizard and Grasshopper Buzzard the decision on the award was not a difficult one. Both were smallish but striking birds. The Lizard Buzzard however was very similar in appearance to two of the goshawks referred to above down to its red bill and legs. The Grasshopper Buzzard was in contrast unmistakable; its rufous plumage seemed to glow in the sun and the fact that it treated us to excellent views sways the vote in its favour.

Top Eagle Award: This was the most difficult of the categories to decide. There were nine eagle species to choose from including a fish-eagle, a hawk-eagle and three snake-eagles. I think though that by appearing in the Big Five the African Fish Eagle rules itself out of the running as further recognition would border on greed. The three snake-eagles (Beaudouin's, Brown and Western Banded) did not make a great impression on me, the latter two being a fairly monochrome brown while Beaudouin's at least had a white breast with brown barring. Wahlberg's Eagle is ruled out on similar grounds leaving four finalists. They are Long-crested Eagle, among the nominations for its cute lapwing-style crest; African Hawk-eagle with striking brown and white plumage and a seriously intimidating look; Martial Eagle, the largest eagle in Africa and even more intimidating in appearance; and the Bateleur with its black body, brown wings with overtones of chestnut and white and red face and legs. The most distinctive of the eagles, it would surely be a contender for the best-dressed eagle prize if something so frivolous were to be awarded. It matters not as the Bateleur wins the Top Eagle Award.

Honourable Mention: Ospreys are dear to our hearts but for a large part of the year we all know that they are absent wintering in Africa. It was not a surprise to see Ospreys on the trip but their number was. Early on our first morning at a coastal location we counted no less than thirty feeding off the beach. A report on raptors would be remiss if it failed to mention this once in a lifetime phenomenon.

I recently received a Birdweather PUC as a present. The PUC, or Portable Universe Codec to give it its full name, is a smart device that goes in your garden and identifies birds by their calls. It uses the BirdNet system which can identify 6,522 different species of birds by their calls. You install the BirdWeather app on your phone to set the system up and then use the app to monitor what is in your garden.

The results so far have been excellent. It is reporting all the birds we are seeing. In addition it is reporting birds we know are around, but because of the woodland nature of the garden we don't often see them. Examples are tree creepers, siskins and firecrests. You can also playback the recorded call if you doubt an identification. For example, it identified a chiffchaff yesterday and when I played it back there was no doubt it was correct.

Now the downsides. It uses three AA batteries and because it is running all day and night a set of batteries only lasts a day. I now have two sets of rechargeable batteries to keep the costs down. Also, we have had a couple of clearly false readings. The hooded crow is our male crow with a very strange call. But we have also had some strange reports, usually overnight. These include wigeon, curlew, cormorant and golden plover. I doubt these are valid.

To learn more about the PUC visit birdweather.com. On their website there is also a live map of all the PUCs around the world. You can view my birds by finding my PUC in Effingham and scrolling through the birds list on the left hand side.

“ROBINS” report

Fond adieu to Carol Lewis

After some 12 or more years (I lost count!) as Pin Badge/Cash box Minder Coordinator, this is my final ROBINS Report. We are hoping to pass on the role, which may or may not necessarily be a committee membership. However, following the recent rationalisation of pin badge sites, our group of minders is much diminished and the remaining few, with their years of experience, pretty much look after themselves – so not a difficult job!

The main responsibilities of coordinator have been to liaise with Kostas Smponias, our RSPB Community Fundraising Officer whenever necessary and to provide advice or assistance to any of the minders. Kostas is always available to help with the difficult queries!

And now, for this final article and the past financial year, I'm happy to report, according to the data from ROBINS, that we seem to have raised a rather nice £1390 in cash and contactless sales. Quite a pleasing amount considering we now have remaining only 5 sites/sources of varying levels of income – some more reliable than others. I've been lucky to work with a loyal, supportive and enthusiastic group of minders over the years, and I have to emphasise that it is their hard work, not mine, responsible for the huge contribution our group has made the RSPB funds from pin badges and collections over time.

So this is a final 'Thank You' to all past and current minders – and long may the fund-raising continue!

How was 'that' lost?

Mike Grimshaw

Throughout all vertebrate creatures, including ourselves, the method of reproduction is remarkably similar: the male fertilizes the female by releasing sperm directly into his mate.

But for the vast majority of birds, this is not the case. This short article explores the strange situation of avian reproduction. Read on if this interests you, but if you would rather not know, then this article is not for you.

Virtually all species of birds have lost the male copulatory organ, and mating is achieved by what is called the cloacal kiss, whereby sperm is transferred through the momentary coming together of male and female. It is strange that the penis, essential for internal fertilization, has been lost in all avian species except for a handful. Why should this be the case? What evolutionary advantage has been gained by this arrangement? A number of theories have been proposed, none of which seem entirely plausible.

Possible theories include that the loss of the penis enables the female to be more selective about which male fathers her offspring and gives her more control. Another suggestion relates to hygiene: since most birds have a single exit from the body used for urination, defecation, and mating, external sperm transfer may reduce the risk of internal infections. An even more implausible suggestion is that losing the penis reduces weight in creatures that need to fly, thereby increasing efficiency. However, the weight lost is so small that this hardly accounts for such a major evolutionary change. It is thought that this adaptation occurred very early in avian development but has not yet been revealed in the fossil record.

Moving on to those birds that have retained a copulatory organ reveals many differences from the mammalian world. The families of birds that fall into this category include:

- Ducks, Geese & Swans
- Ostriches, Rheas, Kiwis, Emus, Cassowaries
- Screamers, Tinamous
- Chickens, Quails, Pheasants, Guinea Fowl, etc.

The structure of the avian copulatory organ differs significantly from that in mammals; it is formed from tissue in the cloacal wall and achieves erection by filling with lymphatic fluid instead of blood. Strangely, this is a low-pressure system not ideal for producing an erection. Of these species, ducks are particularly interesting as they display the largest penises and engage in coercive and multiple matings. Indeed, the Lake Duck found in South America has the longest organ of any vertebrate relative to its body size at 46.5 cm.

Continuing with ducks in more detail: we often witness female ducks being mated by several males in what we might describe as mass rape. However, interestingly, only 3% of offspring conceived this way result from forced mating. This suggests that females may have more control or influence over what happens than it first appears. Research at the University of Sheffield has shown that the structure of a duck's vagina is complex and twisted clockwise while that of the male's penis twists counter-clockwise. Moreover, as the complexity of a male's member increases, so does that of the female's vagina, which contains side structures where sperm can be deposited. This enables females to select their preferred mate and control penetration depth. The situation demonstrates an active arms race between the sexes; erection only occurs when male and female come into direct contact, at which point the male's penis is fired into the female at a velocity of 1.5 meters per second and collapses almost immediately!

Returning to birds in general leaves us with a mystifying situation regarding the loss of the phallus. In chickens, research indicates a possible answer: female chickens may prefer to mate with males with smaller members to gain more control over which male fathers their offspring. If this holds true generally, then the loss of the penis could be explained by female selection. Considerable evolution has been driven by female choice—particularly in selecting males with colourful plumage or other attributes—so why not for this particular adaptation?

Further reading and references:

1. *The Ascent of Birds* by John Reilly
2. *Sperm Compecccon in Birds* by T R Birkhead & A P Møller

Guildford Group garden bird survey

Paul Hicks

Results: Winter 2025 (December 2024 to February 2025)

A fairly average winter for temperature and rain, with storms and frosts balanced out by milder and calmer periods. It was a noticeably dull winter, however, with sunshine in Surrey about 80% of the expected level. Small birds appear to do well when the weather is not too harsh and this is reflected in the numbers.

Just 20 submissions, and these included three new contributors; four years ago we had 30! Bird sightings were up to 55, two more than last winter and six more than two years ago and just two below our winter high. The average per garden was 23.4, one more than last year. The lowest was 14 and the highest 36 with three more gardens above 30.

For our more regular visitors there was very little change in levels versus previous winters with the top five omnipresent for the last three years. Notable changes were:

- Blackcaps were down to a quarter last year but recovered to a more normal 45%.
- Similarly, Coal tits have been at three-quarters the past three years but recovered to a more normal 90%.
- Goldcrests were at a low of 14% last winter but doubled that this year, though this is still half of their high in 2018.
- Treecreepers were present in four gardens, as high as we have seen them.
- Song Thrush numbers collapsed to just half our gardens last year, versus three-quarters the year before and well below their high of 88% seven years ago, but did not make a significant recovery this year at just 55%.
- However, Wrens were down to a low of 55% last year from nearly three-quarters the year before and their normal level of around 90% but did recover to 70%.
- Red Kites were up just 4% versus last year but this is a new peak at 40%.

Among the less common visitors we had sightings of a Merlin, a little Egret, a Firecrest, a black (melanistic) Pheasant and our first ever Water Rail.

You can contact me on paulhicks2006@yahoo.co.uk or at Hobsons Choice, The Marld, Ashtead, Surrey, KT21 1RW. The next period is Spring 2025, running from March through May, with submissions due by the end of June.

Species	%	Species	%	Species	%
Blackbird	100	Song Thrush	55	Treecreeper	20
Blue Tit	100	Feral Pigeon	50	Bullfinch	15
Dunnock	100	Greenfinch	50	Herring Gull	15
Great Tit	100	Redwing	50	Tawny Owl	15
Magpie	100	Blackcap	45	Common Redpoll	10
Long-tailed Tit	95	House Sparrow	45	Grey Wagtail	10
Robin	95	Jackdaw	45	Kestrel	10
Coal Tit	90	Stock Dove	40	Mallard	10
Woodpigeon	90	Red Kite	40	Marsh Tit	10
Goldfinch	85	R-n Parakeet	35	Pied Wagtail	10
Carrion Crow	75	Siskin	35	Chiffchaff	5
GS Woodpecker	75	Sparrowhawk	35	Firecrest	5
Jay	75	Goldcrest	30	Little Egret	5
Starling	75	Pheasant	30	Little Owl	5
Wren	70	Mistle Thrush	25	Mandarin	5
Collared Dove	65	Buzzard	20	Merlin	5
Chaffinch	60	Green Woodpecker	20	Moorhen	5
Nuthatch	55	Grey Heron	20	Raven/Water Rail	5

The RSPB is the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so that our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We also play a leading role in a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

Bird Themed Crossword Number 65

Peter Bryant

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Be warned!

Many (but by no means all) of the answers are the names of birds or birding terms

Across

1. A short prison sentence for insider informant (1,6,4)
6. Ring off in a tizz seeing vulture (7)
8. Religious image identifies cuckoo on nest initially (4)
9. This goose might be baked! (4)
10. Early spring migrant loves rich pastures to start with (1,1,1)
12. We write about journey's end in Welsh river (3)
13. Presenter's food for green woodpecker (3)
14. Removing two thirds of waterfowl reveals night bird (3)
16. Alongside peewit habitat in part (4)
18. Reef shorebird? (4)
19. An easy target, this type of duck (7)
20. Holly next to one that moves stealthily to see 1 across (11)

Down

1. Vagrant insectivore is rapid in pursuit of chough (6,5)
2. Seabird found in Colchester neighbourhood (4)
3. Agitated flier is bird never seen before (5)
4. Make bad mistake over tailless seabird (4)
5. Reinterpreting death of wren as something that is warm and fluffy (4,7)
6. Jack Russell backtracking on Welsh 'tits' (heads not seen), actually long-legged waders(7)
7. Creating a cosy home leads to surprising end to tennis maybe (7)
10. House of astrologist records type of 14 across (3)
11. Intimate Sandgrouse namer is half-cut (3)
15. Aquatic pipit? (5)
17. You can run but not see birds from here (4)
18. Joint differential for 6 down - which is thick on stone curlews (4)

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