



Issue 4  
Date April 2022

## Devon Birds Update

Welcome to the Devon Birds newsletter. In this issue you will find details of upcoming events and a report of a recent event held by Plymouth Branch.. There is also an article on wildlife crime by our Conservation Officer Dr Paul Fitzpatrick and an interesting article about breeding Great Crested Grebes from member Aaron Hussain. There is also an opportunity to help the RSPB with their work with Cirl Buntings.

We are always open to news articles and items of interest to our members, so please feel free to forward anything that you feel may be worth publishing in the newsletter. Please email [Communications@devonbirds.org](mailto:Communications@devonbirds.org)

### **Wildlife Crime and Human Impact.**

Sky surfers joyfully clearing the Exe estuary of birds, paddle borders interacting with Grey Seal mothers forcing abandonment of pups, unrestricted dogs on an RSPB reserve impacting Otter location and the still common, poisoned bait or shooting of unwanted raptors; the list goes on, and on.

Wildlife crime is not limited to Badger digging or illegally importing protected species, as all to many of you know it is daily occurrence in our ever more fragile environment. Even interpreting the law is not easy with a maze of existing, changing and new planned legislation(s).

I am a Chartered Environmental Psychologist which means I look at how people interact with nature; all too commonly that is a negative experience for our wildlife. Evidence suggests that the single biggest impact on sensitive habitat is unrestricted dogs, closely followed by recreation and then unmanaged visitor numbers. Devon is of course a favourite visitor location in the summer, and increasingly in the winter as well. We are also a peninsula with the issues of extreme weather meaning that resident and migratory birds have never been more at risk, and that's before we encounter deliberate criminality.

Devon is also of course full of people who care enormously about our birds and wildlife and frequently, harmful actions are due to lack of knowledge rather than any desire to do harm. None-the less, deliberate wildlife crime remains an issue.

Devon Birds is at heart a conservation organisation, and exclusive to birding issues in Devon. We have therefore, as an organisation, applied for membership, and been accepted, to the Governmental Group PAWs (Partnership Against Wildlife Crime) . This is a proactive organisation represented from across the UK assessing impact and addressing wild crime issues.

I sit on PAWs for Devon Birds and am very keen that we build local and national links in our understanding and reporting of wildlife crime, and build relationships which allow briefing, training and cooperation for information sharing. I would value any input from members on any experiences they have encountered to build up a picture of what we are seeing across Devon. Where I can, I will pass issues onto the appropriate bodies, but even when this is not possible I would value your input.

I can be emailed on [winterbirder@outlook.com](mailto:winterbirder@outlook.com) Thank you.

Dr Paul Fitzpatrick is an Environmental Advisor to Devon Birds Council.

## Can you help the West Country's special ciril buntings this spring?

The RSPB are appealing for volunteers to help carry out this year's Ciril Bunting Survey across Devon and Cornwall between April-August.

Last year volunteers recorded ciril buntings in almost 60% of the 2km by 2km survey squares.

Six of these survey squares recorded cirils for the first time.

This year extra volunteer support is especially needed in the South Hams and South Teignbridge area.

Just over 30 years ago ciril buntings were in a state of serious decline and had already vanished from Cornwall and Somerset. With the support of the RSPB, farmers and landowners have been able to bring the cirils back from the brink.

The RSPB are appealing for volunteers across Devon and Cornwall to help them carry out their annual Ciril Bunting Survey, between April-August of this year. **People can register to take part in the survey on the Ciril Bunting Action Hub, visit: [bit.ly/RSPBCirilHub](https://bit.ly/RSPBCirilHub)**

Here volunteers can select a 2km by 2km survey square local to their home on the RSPB's map and plan a survey route through their chosen patch along Public Rights of Way and covering the areas that ciril buntings are likely to make their homes. No specialist skills are needed to take part other than an interest in birds and a pair of binoculars. The Ciril Action Hub offers guidance on how to identify cirils by sight and sound.



*Photo Credit: Cirl Bunting, adult male feeding in straw, on a Devon farm by Andy Hay ([rspb-images.com](https://www.rspb-images.com))*

Volunteers will be asked to visit their chosen survey square twice – first visit before the end of May and second visit anytime from June to the end of August, leaving two weeks between visit one and two. They will then record information about any cirl bunting they see or hear and submit their findings either online or via post.

**This year the RSPB are putting a special shout-out for surveyors in the South Hams and South Teignbridge area, which had low coverage last year.**

Just over 30 years ago cirl buntings were in a state of serious decline and had already vanished from Cornwall and Somerset. With the support of the RSPB, farmers and landowners have been able to bring the cirl bunting back from the brink.

**Cath Jeffs, RSPB Conservation Officer, said:** “Taking part in the Cirl Bunting Survey is a fantastic opportunity to get to know the amazing wildlife on our doorstep. As well as hopefully spotting a cirl or two, volunteers will discover the other farmland bird species they share their local patch with. And most importantly, survey volunteers will be contributing directly to science. The data that volunteers help us gather over the coming years will allow us to spot trends in cirl numbers, so that we can identify any early warning signs and act quickly to help to help ensure the cirl bunting population does not become in danger of being lost from UK again.”

**Cath continues:** “The volunteer support we received for last year’s survey was fantastic and with the results just in we’re pleased to say that nearly 60% of the survey squares which

returned their data, recorded cirles in them. In fact, six of these locations recorded cirles for the first time since surveys began in the late 1980s – this is really positive news”.

Eighty years ago, cirle buntings were widespread across southern England and parts of Wales, but by 1989 they were down to only 118 pairs mainly confined to Devon. These plummeting numbers were due to changes in farming practises, which made it hard for the cirles to find food and suitable nest sites.

In 1992 the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (a government-funded agri-environment scheme, CSS) launched a cirle bunting 'special project' option for farmers. Under guidance from the RSPB, farmers provided low input spring barley crops which, after harvest, were left as weedy stubbles until the end of March. This created an important source of winter seed food for the cirles.

In 1993 the RSPB employed a cirle bunting project officer in the south west to work directly with farmers and landowners to encourage them to provide more homes for the cirle buntings. By 1998 cirle bunting numbers increased to 450 pairs and in 2016 they passed the 1000 pair mark.

During last year’s survey, volunteers Tracy and Simon Gould, made the fantastic discovery of the very first cirle bunting on farmland at Shillingford Organics on the outskirts of Exeter. Owner Martyn Bragg, has been carefully managing this field, with guidance from the RSPB, to give cirle buntings a home for the past 23 years and finally they have arrived. Martyn is “over the moon”.

**Tracy and Simon said:** “We signed up to carry out the RSPB survey initially for the 2sq km square containing both our home, and our local veg box grower - Shillingford Organics. We were delighted to encounter our first singing male cirle bunting at Martyn’s farm, announcing his presence after all these years of waiting, in ‘bold as brass’ fashion, from the dip of a telegraph wire above a wide hedge line.”

**For further information and to arrange an interview, please contact:**

Morwenna Alldis at [engmediaenquiries@rspb.org.uk](mailto:engmediaenquiries@rspb.org.uk)

## Devon Birds member Aaron Hussain has been watching the Great Crested Grebes at Stover Country Park



Great Crested Grebe pair. Stover Country Park, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022. Aaron Hussain

Spring is very much upon us and a favourite time of year for many. It is characterised by profound changes in our natural surroundings and the behaviour of familiar species. Things come to life again and nature begins to sow the seeds of future generations. For many of us it is a time to catch our feathered friends in full action. They are battling for the right to breed, frantically collecting material for nest-building and eventually, for those successful in producing young, feeding helpless offspring. For me, the most captivating parts to observe are the courtship displays and rituals. In gardens, parks, woodlands, rivers and lakes across Devon, birds sing and display with all their might to convince potential partners that they have what it takes to rear young successfully, and none more so than Great Crested Grebes (GCG).

Preferring relatively deep and clean waters, where they can dive in search of aquatic prey, this magnificent bird is found on lakes and reservoirs across Devon. Building floating nests of vegetation, constantly renewed as old material rots away, the charming romance that then plays out is a must-see.

GCGs have a beautiful, ritualised, courtship ceremony involving calling, preening and synchronised head-shaking, culminating in a graceful “waltz” on the water which is so elaborate and enchanting that it changed the course of ethology (the study of animal behaviour). It was biologist Julian Huxley who made a simple and profound observation in 1914. Prior to him, Charles Darwin had theorised that it was the male who fought for the right to copulate with the female, but both GCG sexes have similar plumages during breeding, and this theory doesn’t fit for this species (you can’t win them all Charlie). Huxley spent hours watching GCGs at Tring, observing and recording many aspects of their ceremony. He noticed that the right to copulate is a mutual agreement. He published his findings in *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London*, and they were so well received

they changed the practice of collecting and displaying specimens in museums to a preference for observation in the wild, and by the 1920s and 30s ethology was a well-established subject.

It's on early spring mornings at the water's edge where you are most likely to witness their bonding spectacle, with either male or female first producing twanging calls. If the other bird responds, they are greeted with several displays and dances consisting of different poses and actions. Firstly the pair begin to reconfirm their partnership by performing synchronised head shaking, bill dipping and preening with head plumes fanned out wide. Further testing the strength of their bond, you may be lucky to observe the famous "ghostly penguin dance" in which one bird approaches the other from beneath the water and invades its partner's personal space, rearing up out of the water with the neck arched down in a ghostly manner. The desired reply is the ritualised "cat posture" where the watching Grebe ruffles its feathers half-open in a behaviour aimed to defuse any tension between the pair and strengthen the bond further. It is at this stage that you may see magic happen; the pièce de résistance, the "weed dance". Beginning with some subtle head shaking, bobbing, and preening the Grebes part. Then each bird dives below the surface to collect a mass of vegetation. Once resurfaced they charge towards each other with heads down and meet almost in a clash. Raising from the water breast-to-breast and frantically paddling to tread water, they vigorously shake their weeds side to side. Only lasting a few seconds, it is a spectacle to watch and something I've only witnessed a few times.



Great Crested Grebes "Weed Dance". Stover Country Park, 4th April 2022. Aaron Hussain

We are fortunate to have GCGs breeding at Stover Country Park and over the last few weeks I have had the pleasure of running photography workshops for private clients and staff from organisations such as Devon Wildlife Trust and Avalon International. The aim of these workshops is not only to observe these fantastic behaviours, but also to help others develop their photography skills and learn about species behaviour and field-craft to increase their chances of getting that iconic shot.

Always arriving before sunrise, we found the Grebes most days courting on a corner of the lake just 10m or less from our viewpoint.

Their time was divided between the first stages of courtship displays (such as calling, preening and some head bobbing and shaking), and building their mating platform. They occasionally stopped to fish, often parting for this activity, but soon reconnected, again performing rituals to strengthen their bond.



Great Crested Grebe with Perch. Stover Country Park, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022. Aaron Hussain

Over the course of the week, we watched the intensity of their rituals increase and then, after many long days, we finally witnessed magic happen. The pair both surfaced with weed between their beaks and rushed towards each other to perform the “weed dance”. This lasted for a matter of seconds, with the pair not getting as high out of the water as we would have liked, but we managed to get a few shots we were pleased with. The GCGs have now begun to build their nesting platform, and all who frequent Stover eagerly await the arrival of young, which I hope to update you on soon.

I run many workshops not only in Devon and across the UK but also globally in locations such as Europe, Indonesia, Borneo, China, Japan, and Costa Rica. My advice to any budding photographers out there trying to capture their subject in that iconic moment is always to be ready. Spend time observing your subject first and become familiar with their patterns. Find a spot where you can get down low and can cover a wide angle with your lens and keep an eye on the light. Also take time to learn your camera settings and parameters. Ensure that shutter speed, aperture and ISO are all set for what you intend to photograph and spend time playing with these to see what is possible in the light you have. Different behaviours play out at different speeds and a good knowledge of light and what each setting allows will enable you to increase your technical skills and your chance of getting the image you desire. This, combined with patience and perseverance, are the keys to successful photography.

For our GCG workshops the light was constantly changing between intense sun and soft cloud cover. Light cloud helps to soften the light whilst still giving nice illumination. We had some good opportunities to increase shutter speeds without compromising too much on ISO. On darker, more overcast days this may not be achievable. Most importantly though, remember to have fun! Going home with that iconic image is not always what it is about, sometimes just getting out, spending time in nature, and meeting like-minded people to share nature with is more beneficial to us than capturing a single image. Be in the moment, share your enjoyment with others and treasure the experience for all its elements.



Great Crested Grebe breeding behaviour. Stover Country Park, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2022. Aaron Hussain

If you would like more information about what Aaron is doing in Wildlife Photography workshops, please contact him through email ([aaronhussain@outlook.com](mailto:aaronhussain@outlook.com)) or via phone on 07496462369)

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## Extra WeBS counters needed

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) provides valuable data on waterbird numbers and distribution, both nationally, in Devon and more locally. Participation through monthly counts is (usually) enjoyable and provides counters with a local patch where regular seasonal events unfold and unexpected occurrences occasionally add excitement. In Devon, there are nearly 80 active sites, comprising estuaries, stretches of open coast, coastal marshes, a few sections of rivers and a great variety of leys, lakes, reservoirs, ponds and pits. Currently volunteers are needed for the following sites: **Torbay** (to join a small team); **Grand Western Canal** (Greenway to Fossend); **Blackhill Quarry, Bystock Pools** and **Squabmoor Reservoir** in East Devon (current counters planning to retire); and **Clovelly Fishing Lakes** in North Devon (owner's permission required).

Please contact me if you are interested, or would like further information on WeBS. The 2021 *Devon WeBS Report* is available on request, and a summary of the 2020 report was published in the 2020 *Devon Bird Report* (pp 181–184). Further information on WeBS is also available on [www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs)

**Peter Reay** [peter.p.j.reay@btinternet.com](mailto:peter.p.j.reay@btinternet.com)

## Upcoming Events

Below is a list of the upcoming events for Devon Birds Branches

Apr 25	09:30 – 13:00	East Devon Field	Aylesbeare Common. Meet at Joney's Cross car park at SY057897 (opposite entrance to RSPB Aylesbeare on A3052). AM only. Pre-booking required.	<a href="#">Map</a>
Apr 25	19:30 – 21:30	South Devon Indoor	Wildlife, Surveyors and Developers, where do birds fit in? Speaker: George Bemment. George surveys buildings; anything from garden sheds to stately homes and sites, as part of the process for planning applications. When surveying buildings the main things that George is looking for are birds and bats. Bats get a lot of press but birds get less attention. Her talk covers the sort of species she encounters and the upsides and downsides of the job.	<a href="#">Map</a>
Apr 26	09:15 – 14:00	Taw & Torridge Field	Simonsbath to Cow Castle. 9.15am meet at Barnstaple Leisure Centre car park (Pay to park & car share) or ENP Simons bath car park (donation) at 10 am. SS773394. Leader: Steve Skirth (steveskirth@gmail.com)	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 5	09:30 – 15:30	East Devon Field	Trendlebere Down - Yarner Wood Reserve. Meet at second car park on right of downs (signed as 'Middle' car park) at SX781796.AM-PM. Pre-booking required.	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 9	08:30 – 11:30	South Devon Field	Birdwatching Walk - Identifying common birds by song and call. Challacombe Down. Leaders: Nick & Sara D'Agorne. Nick & Sara D'Agorne use bird sound more frequently than sight to identify the birds they see. They will lead you on a tour of a well known Dartmoor walking and birding location, giving you an insight into bird identification through calls and song. Email Jeff Hacon <a href="mailto:jeff.hacon@devonbirds.org">jeff.hacon@devonbirds.org</a> by 6th May for further details.	<a href="#">Map</a>

May 9	09:00 – 15:00	Mid Devon Field	Venford Reservoir. Meet at Venford Dam car park, the second car park beyond the dam, at SX688708. Morning walk. Leader: Ian Gasper	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 12	09:30 – 14:00	Mid Devon Field	East Anstey Common/Whiterocks Down, Exmoor. Moorland and woodland birds. Park on the side of the road south of Whiterocks Down, between Five Cross Ways and Venford, East Anstey Common at SS869290. Bring a packed lunch. Leader: Paul Pratley	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 16	09:00 – 14:00	Plymouth Field	Venford Reservoir for woodland migrants. Meet at the car park at 685712. (Please note steep walking in & out of the valley). Leader: Liz Harris Tel: 07812135891	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 16	19:30 – 21:30	South Devon Indoor	Changes during the life of a wildlife enthusiast. Speaker: Dave Smallshire. Dave has travelled widely to watch and photograph wildlife. He is a former co-editor of the Devon Bird Report, gives commentaries on Stuart Lines' Exe Estuary birdwatching cruises, is the Dragonfly Recorder for Devon and co-author of Britain's Dragonflies, Atlas of Dragonflies in Britain and Ireland and State of Dragonflies in Britain and Ireland 2021. The presentation will cover his experiences and changes in wetland and farmland wildlife, survey and monitoring, and how advances in communications and technology have changed wildlife recording.	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 18	09:00 – 14:00	Mid Devon Field	Meldon Quarry area, meeting at Quarry car park at SX567922. Variable habitat of woodland, river, moorland and quarry. Interesting for the birds, butterflies and bluebells. Pied and Spotted Flycatchers are likely, Cuckoo possible. Leader: Annabelle Strickland	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 23	09:30 – 13:00	East Devon Field	Soussons Down Plantation, Dartmoor. Park off the road opposite Warren House Inn at SX675809. AM/PM. (Visit Challacombe Farm PM). Pre-booking required.	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 25	09:00 – 14:00	Taw & Torridge Field	Malmesmead to Brendon Common. 9am meet at Barnstaple Leisure Centre car park to car share (parking fee) or 10 am at Malmesmead NT car park (parking fee).	<a href="#">Map</a>

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SS791478. Leader John Towers (johndtowers@gmail.com  
Tel.01598710273)

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May 26	09:30 – 14:30	Plymouth Field	Ham Wall Reserve, Somerset for wetland species. Meet at Ham Wall RSPB car park Ashcott Road at ST449396. Leader: Doug Herdson Tel: 01752405155/07910078599	<a href="#">Map</a>
May 31	09:00 – 14:00	Mid Devon Field	Challacombe Farm and Soussons forest. Meet outside the drive to Challacombe farm and park on the grass verge at SX695795. Leader: Roger Jewell	<a href="#">Map</a>
Jun 8	20:45 – 22:30	Plymouth Field	Cann Woods for Nightjar. Meet at car park at SX547596. (Bring a torch and a Bat detector if you have one) Leader: Chris Marcol Tel:07976359647	<a href="#">Map</a>

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## Devon Birds Plymouth Branch Outdoor Meeting, Saltram NT Park 26.03.2022



Our aim was to introduce birdwatching for the less experienced and knowledgeable for members and passersby to identify migrants and resident birds.

Saltram NT Park was chosen as a suitable central venue in Plymouth to attract the many visitors, who may be interested in wildlife of the locality. Saltram has a good mix of woodland and borders the River Plym with mud flats and a bordering scrape namely Blaxton

Meadow. Previously access across the wall forming the scrape was permitted, causing disturbance to resting or feeding waders. Since the exclusion of the public, many more birds have used the scrape particularly over the winter months.

Telescopes and a Devon Birds banner were set up by the hide looking onto the scrape and also on the hill opposite. Saturday proved to be a busy time for dogwalkers and families. Seven helpers answered questions, why we were here and what were we looking for. A moderate amount of interest was shown.

During the morning 41 species were identified. Eleven Little Egrets and flock of 20 Redshank were feeding or resting below us. Circling Buzzards and a Peregrine alarmed the gulls and waders. Three Stockdove were seen and one went into a hole in a nearby tree. Woodland birds included Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Chiffchaff and Linnet and others. A similar activity is planned in August.

Birds identified -

Cormorant, Little Egret, Canada Goose, Shelduck, Mallard, Female Red Crested Pochard, Buzzard, Peregrine, Pheasant, Moorhen, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, Redshank, Greenshank, Curlew, Black Headed Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black Backed Gull, Great Black Backed Gull, Stock Dove, Wood Pigeon, Green Woodpecker, Great spotted Woodpecker, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Goldfinch, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Nuthatch, Jay, Carrion Crow, Linnet, Mandarin Duck, Ring Necked Parakeet, Pied Wagtail, Chiffchaff  
Liz Harris

## **New Website update**

Development of the new website is near to a conclusion and we hope to have everything in place soon. Unfortunately the web developer currently has COVID and so we may be a little delayed.