

Committee Profile: Dr David Wood - Chairman

I'm one of the many birders who developed a fascination with nature in general, and birds in particular, at an early age, and have enjoyed it as a central part of my leisure (and other) time ever since. With the benefit of hindsight it was easy for my dad to pass on his interest in birds, for our house on the Lizard Peninsula was blessed with some great sites within half an hour's journey.

Weekly visits to Hayle Estuary and Marazion Marsh provided the basis for my continuing enjoyment of gulls, wildfowl and waders, and regular excursions with the local YOC and Cornwall Birdwatching and Preservation Society introduced me to new venues, the most memorable of which came in the shape of the latter's annual trip to the Scilly Isles. The crossings introduced me to the pleasure (and pain) of seawatching, another aspect of birding that continues to hold a particular attraction, although opportunities nowadays are severely limited!

These interests and the excellent opportunities afforded by nearby sites combined to provide my first rarities - Ring-necked Duck at Loe Pool, the first of the Helston boating lake Ring-billed Gulls and a Cory's Shearwater at Porthgwarra - all accepted by the Rarities Committee before I finished secondary school in the early 1980s.

Finding my own birds is still what inspires me most and while there's no doubt that birding expectations in Sheffield are different to what they were in Cornwall, there are still many satisfactions to be had. At the level of the birds, species such as Rough-legged Buzzard, Great Grey Shrike and Waxwing were all new to me, partly because the wealth of birds on the doorstep at home meant that twitching never seemed necessary.

The emphasis on local birding has stayed with me, and I very rarely venture outside the Sheffield area, with Redmires a well-watched patch that has provided some memorable moments (often with children in tow), such as Great Northern and Black-throated Divers together one November afternoon or the regular Hen Harrier roost that has vanished with increased disturbance from dog walkers, now made 'official' since Yorkshire Water opened a path around the back of the reservoirs.

Sheffield may not feature highly on the national birding map, but Bittern, Bearded Tit and Bonxie in our recording area, plus Honey Buzzard, Red Kite and Osprey on the garden list can't be bad!

Other satisfactions in Sheffield have been the chance to promote birds and birding via involvement on the Group's committee over the past few years, a role in recording our local avifauna via the Annual Report and most recently the New Breeding Atlas project, which is a major opportunity to have an impact on the national picture via our recording efforts at a local level. What we see and know about our local birds in a wide variety of habitats will add to knowledge of the status of breeding birds over time, both around Sheffield and more widely. I've been delighted to see the completion of the fieldwork for the new Breeding Atlas, and am excited about what the results are starting to tell us.

One of the great things about birding is that it's like those Martini ads: 'Any time, any place, anywhere'. While my spare time is short these days, I've been lucky enough to be able to combine my professional life with some great birding: a year in Peru after graduation realised a childhood dream to see Condors, to visit Machu Picchu and the Amazon (as well as meet my future wife!), and my work and family mean periodic visits to Spain and South America, on which I usually manage to find a little time for birding.

Another thing that maintains my interest is the constant possibility to learn more about birds, not only in Peru or Spain, but right on your doorstep: the new gull id guide I got for Christmas is already proving fascinating reading, while watching the feeders in the garden has taught me the pecking order in Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Bullfinch (in that order), and I've also discovered the courtship rituals of Tawny Owls over recent weeks from the kitchen window.

New experiences and a constant challenge, combined with travel and romance - how many activities can give you all that? If the next thirty years' birding are half as rewarding as the last, those boyhood walks around Hayle (which I've now enjoyed with my own kids) will have served me very well indeed.

David Wood