

Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club was held in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE, on Tuesday 24 May 2016, with Chris Storey in the Chair. Twenty members were present.

1. Apologies for absence were received from Sir James Barlow, Anthony Bayliss, Mark Beaman, Bruce Beehler, Robert Cheke, Michael Dawson, Edward Dickinson, David Fisher, Tom Gladwin, Jeremy Greenwood, Kenneth Heron, Amberley Moore, Alex Randall, Frank Steinheimer, Simon Tonge and Frank Zino.

2. Minutes of AGM 2015 The Minutes of the 2015 AGM held on 19 May 2015 which had been published (*Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 135: 193, and on the BOC website) were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. Chairman's Review, Bulletin Editor's Report, Trustees' Report and Accounts for 2015 The Chairman introduced his Review and the Report and Accounts, copies of which were available at the meeting. In respect of the Review, he added that during the past year great progress had been made under David Wells' editorship on the next BOC checklist by Robin Woods on the Falkland Islands. The Club was also much in Nigel Redman's debt in its production.

The BOC had given notice at the end of 2015 of the termination on 31 December 2016 of the administrative agreement with the BOU. The decision to end this arrangement had been taken in light of the decline in the Club's subscription income and the continuing rise in BOU charges. The Club was grateful to the BOU, and Steve Dudley and Angela Langford, for their continuing help and advice over the years. Furthermore, the BOU and the Club had come to the view that the book / *Bulletin* storage facilities at Peterborough should be dispensed with, the stock digitised and any redundant copies disposed of. The precise details were yet to be finalised.

The meeting noted Dr Robert Prÿs-Jones' report on the Club meetings at the Barley Mow and the very successful joint meeting with OSME held at the Natural History Museum on 21 November 2015 (see below). Guy Kirwan's report on the Bulletin as set out in the Report and Accounts was also noted.

The *Hon. Treasurer* introduced the Financial Review and Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2015 and the accompanying independent examiner's statement. He reported that the Club had a surplus at the year-end of £1,035, almost identical to 2014. Recovery of the 2015 Gift Aid would be made in the current year. Overall the Club's funds stood at £428,073 at year-end and a satisfactory level of liquidity was maintained to enable commitments to be met with particular regard to future Checklist volumes and new developments for the Bulletin.

4. The Way Forward The Chairman outlined the sequence of events leading up to his letter to members in December 2015 and his letter of 20 April 2015, which accompanied the formal paper and proposal prepared by Matthew Boyer, solicitor, on behalf of the Committee. He said that he had received many replies, of which 27 were, subject in some cases to caveats, in favour and seven against. Concerns raised included lack of hard copies, poor internet coverage in certain parts of the world, the absence of a voting membership to monitor the trustees, and the dangers inherent in digital-only publications.

In summary the proposal addressed the following issues:

- Declining income, rising costs and falling readership.
- Requirement of trustees to further the Club's charitable objects, using the trust funds to that end.
- Academic publishing moving rapidly towards online open-access models.
- Reduction of costs by changing to a non-subscription basis (with members who so wish to become Friends of the BOC) and the use of investment income to finance an online *BBOC*.

He introduced Matthew Boyer to the meeting to speak to the paper and the formal resolution. Matthew Boyer said that the document entitled 'The Way Forward: the trustees' proposal for the future of the BOC', which had already been provided to members, set out the financial and commercial background to the trustees' conclusion that the charity needed to reform itself to become less reliant on members and more

reliant on the internet in order to continue and improve its charitable work. It was important to bear in mind that a charity must, as a matter of law, act for the benefit of the public.

To effect a transition from the current loose 'club' charitable structure to a more streamlined organisation it was necessary to create a new charity, with a new structure and constitution. Having created a new charity, it would then be necessary to transfer all of the assets of the existing charity to the new charity, and then dissolve the existing charity.

An important asset of the existing charity was the fund administered by a separate body, the Herbert Stevens Trust (HST). It was critical to ensure that this fund would be administered for the benefit of the new charity. Confirmation had been given by the Trustees of the HST that this would be the case, and nothing would proceed without this assurance being firm.

The most suitable legal structure for the new charity would be the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), on the Charity Commissioners' Foundation Model and described on p. 3 of *The Way Forward*. Matthew Boyer added that a CIO is a recently available type of charitable structure that is in every sense reputable and proper. The constitution of a CIO must be based on a pro forma provided by the Charity Commission, with any changes and, of course, the charity's objects, to be formally approved by the Charity Commission. Importantly, the trustees propose that the objects of the new charity will be as closely identical to those of the existing charity as possible, using essentially the same words, with the addition of confirmation that the work of the charity will be for the public benefit. Equally importantly, the new CIO will be regulated by the Charity Commission, whose statutory role is to foster the integrity of charities generally and to enforce proper governance.

Turning to p. 5 of *The Way Forward*—the formal resolution set out in italics would be put by the trustees to the members at the AGM. The essence of the proposal, which required members' approval, was that once four specifics had occurred, the existing charity would be dissolved. The charity would not and could not be dissolved unless and until all the following had occurred.

- (1) The successful creation and registration of a new CIO, with the existing trustees being the first trustees of that new charity.
- (2) The discharge of all of the existing charity's debts and other liabilities.
- (3) The agreement of the trustees of the HST to manage that fund for the benefit of the new charity.
- (4) The transfer of all other assets of the existing charity to the new charity.

Finally, Matthew Boyer and the trustees commended the resolution, with its four preconditions, to the members. Prior to putting the resolution to a vote, the Chairman took questions from the floor. In particular, Steven Gregory expressed his strong concerns as to the proposals, the speed of implementation and, in particular, the loss of the hard-copy *BBOC*, bearing in mind uncertainties as to the durability of digital formats.

The Chairman then asked the members to vote by a show of hands on the resolution. Those in favour: 18; those against: one; and abstentions: one. The resolution was duly passed.

5. Any Other Business The Chairman paid tribute to Keith Betton, whose term as trustee was ending and who had decided not to continue as a trustee of the proposed CIO. He said the BOC had benefited greatly from Keith's broad knowledge and contacts in the birding world. Keith had stressed that his wish to escape committee work in no way reflected on his support of the BOC and its plans for the future.

Joint meeting on *Bird Monitoring in the Middle East with the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Natural History Museum, London, 21 November 2015*

Approximately 80 people attended this joint meeting between OSME, NHM and BOC, which was held at the Flett Theatre, NHM, London, as part of the continuing and successful annual series of one-day conferences involving BOC, NHM and a regional bird club. The meeting opened with an overview of *The value of BirdTrack as a bird recording tool in the OSME region* by Nick Moran, BirdTrack organiser. BirdTrack is a free global system via which birders can log, store and interact with their records. Nick introduced the tools that it offers to individual birdwatchers and how BirdTrack data can provide a valuable resource for conservation, monitoring and research.

The following talk by Richard Porter on *Bird recording and conservation in Iraq: a ten-year perspective* was based on his close involvement with biologists and conservationists in Iraq over the past decade, and was intended as a tribute to their labours under exceptionally difficult circumstances. The work of Nature Iraq featured prominently, especially its Key Biodiversity Areas Inventory—a monumental treatise that OSME helped sponsor. Other recent ornithological discoveries and conservation achievements were also highlighted, notably in the mountains of Kurdistan and relating to the striking and continuing ecological recovery of the formerly almost drained southern marshes.

The morning session closed with Andy Symes speaking on *Monitoring the threat status of birds and the implications for conservation management*. The BirdLife Secretariat is the Red List Authority for birds on the IUCN Red List, coordinating the process of evaluating all of the world's 10,000 or so bird species against Red List categories and criteria in order to assess their extinction risk. Monitoring changes in species threat status is a major tool in prioritising conservation management.

In 2014, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) was approached to establish a waterbird monitoring programme for the East Jahra Reserve area of Kuwait under the UN-funded Kuwait Environmental Remediation Programme (KERP). In their talk on *Waterbird monitoring at Kadma Bay, Sulaibikhat Bay and Jahra Pools, Kuwait*, Gareth Bradbury and James Drake described this innovative project. Following three successful coordinated counts in November 2014, January 2015 (timed to coincide with the International Waterbird Census) and April 2015, ten species of waterbird have been identified whose numbers exceed 1% of that species' flyway population.

Yoav Perlman used his talk on *35 years of bird monitoring in Israel* to describe the importance of Israel as a migration hotspot and a country with varied habitats, to outline the history of bird monitoring in Israel and the current structure of the national bird monitoring scheme. Flagship projects in Israel include the annual raptor counts in autumn and spring that have taken place since 1981, breeding atlas surveys, a long-term ringing network, and numerous focused monitoring projects of threatened species.

Finally, the conference closed with a presentation by Bob Elliot on *Monitoring illegal bird killing*. Many iconic and protected species continue to be under threat from illegal trapping, shooting and poisoning, and his talk drew on case studies to demonstrate why long-term monitoring of species and habitats is vital in fighting against wildlife crime.

Overall, the programme of talks successfully integrated information ranging from specific case studies at particular localities, via national overviews of avian monitoring, to regional assessments of conservation threat and approaches to help counteract it, resulting in a thoroughly worthwhile event much enjoyed by the audience.

Rob Sheldon & Robert Prŷs-Jones

The 983rd meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 24 May 2016 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE. Eighteen members and four non-members were present. Members attending were: Mr D. Allen, Miss H. Baker, Cdr. M. B. Casement, RN, Mr S. Chapman, Mr S. M. S. Gregory, Mr R. Langley, Mr R. W. Malin, Dr C. F. Mann, Dr P. Morris (*Speaker*), Mr D. J. Montier, Mr R. Pritchett, Dr R. Prŷs-Jones, Mr N. J. Redman, Mr P. Sellar, Dr A. Simmons, Mr S. A. H. Statham, Mr C. W. R. Storey (*Chairman*) and Mr P. Wilkinson.

Non-members attending were: Mr J. Boorman, Mrs M. Gauntlett, Mrs J. McDonald and Mrs M. Montier.

Dr Pat Morris gave a talk entitled *Taxidermy: a peep into the parlour*, intended as a brief survey of a topic that has been long neglected. So called 'stuffed birds' form a significant part of the history of Britain's wildlife, but fell out of favour after World War II. But it is important to remember that in the 19th and early 20th centuries taxidermists performed a prominent role, embedded in the social history of their times. Preserved birds (and mammals to a lesser extent) were probably more important in Britain than in other countries because of their acceptance as part of the domestic scene. No respectable household was without a few specimens. This led to the establishment of hundreds of small taxidermy businesses throughout the country, with up to 18 operating simultaneously in Glasgow alone (with more in Birmingham and London). Much of their output was dire and gives taxidermy a bad name today. The great mansions often had taxidermy in the main hall or on otherwise prominent display, making a clear statement about the owners and their estate. Exotic species might be conspicuous, indicating foreign travels, or a selection of gamebirds indicative of the sporting opportunities in the environs. But even a modest middle-class home would have taxidermy as part of its decoration. This led to a demand for colourful displays in glass cases, often with the species of two or more continents mixed. There was no scientific intent, just the eye-catching colour of unfamiliar species.

A contrary approach was that of dedicated collectors who built up substantial displays of British and foreign birds, often motivated by a genuine interest in the study of plumage variations and patterns of distribution (with voucher specimens for the occurrence of rare species). This type of taxidermy frequently outgrew domestic space and required a whole room (or entire outbuilding!) to accommodate the birds. It is easy to forget how important such collections were in the compilation of the early county avifaunas and the illustrations needed for field guides that make such collections obsolete today. Supplying collectors led to George Bristow, taxidermist of St. Leonards in Sussex, being blamed for fraudulently distorting ornithological history by passing off imported birds as British, the so-called 'Hastings Rarities'. The evidence is strong but not incontestable, and it is hard to see how such a fraud could have been a practicable possibility. Nevertheless, the role and reputation of taxidermists were dealt a serious blow and to this day many assume that Bristow was one of the 20th century's greatest fraudsters. He is the only British taxidermist to have been awarded the accolade of a blue plaque on his former residence—for entirely the wrong reasons.

In modern times, with fresh perceptions and declining wildlife abundance, there has been a tendency to express regret that birds are seen stuffed in glass cases rather than alive in the wild. Taxidermists are blamed for present-day scarcity, the stuffed birds being evidence of their guilt. This is false logic. Taxidermists were simply doing a job. Blaming them for present-day scarcity is akin to blaming undertakers because people die. Modern taxidermists are tightly constrained by national and international legislation, although this creates expensive bureaucracy and probably achieves comparatively little in real terms.