



### Reports for 2016

#### Birdwatching bonanza, 10th January 2016

Despite the atrocious weather in December and the first part of January, there was a good turn out as we met at the Barnstaple Leisure Centre car park to amalgamate into fewer cars. I could not believe how dark it was at 8 o'clock in the morning. As we drove down the link road over Exmoor, the clouds began to lift and an unfamiliar object appeared in the sky casting an orange glow over the dark forbidding moor.

We arrived at Darts Farm in good time and inspected every chaffinch flock on the way down to the ponds. Yes we saw goldfinches, linnets, reed bunting, house sparrows and greenfinches all mixed in but no sign of the lonesome brambling. Then two latecomers joined us and they had walked down the same path also inspected all the chaffinch flocks but managed to see the brambling. So much for "the early bird.....". Down at the ponds, where last year in January there were the penduline tits, there were plenty of birds including stonechat and meadow pipit.

Round now through the flood water to Powderham to see the fallow deer. There seemed far too many there for the amount of grazing available. A lot of the grounds were flooded so it was over the railway line to look at the River Exe. We were rewarded with views of redshank, spotted redshank, greenshank, little egret and the first of the day's many avocets. The access to Exminster Marshes was flooded when we passed it, which was a pity as the cattle egret that was there flew over to Powderham after we had left.

In the field near Starcross were large assemblies of Canada geese and oystercatchers plus a few curlew, wood pigeon and some more redshanks. Back round to the Goat Walk where we saw several red breasted mergansers swimming and diving in the river and more avocets on the mud flats. From the viewing platform overlooking the River Clyst some were lucky enough to see a kingfisher preening itself for some considerable time with it's spectacular colours glinting in the sunshine. Also there were bar tailed godwits and a common gull.

Into the posh new hide at the RSPB Bowling Green Marsh Reserve and what a sight beheld us. There were more birds there than you could possibly imagine. In particular some 2000+ wigeon and possibly amongst them an American wigeon. It had been there all week but several people had spent two or three hours looking for it but couldn't find it. It didn't help that every now and again something spooked all the birds and they all took off in a great flurry but didn't necessarily land back in the same place, so the search had to start all over again. As well as all the whistling wigeon other ducks included shoveler, gadwall, pintail, tufted duck, teal, shelduck and mallard.

A quick look into the new RSPB reserve at Goosemoor, where there was absolutely nothing. Quite unbelievable when there were literally thousands of birds just the other side of the railway line at Bowling Green Marsh.

In the fading light a pair of thrushes were seen guarding a clump of mistletoe as nearby an unseen song thrush was singing trying to confuse us but in the end it was decided that they were mistle thrushes on the mistletoe!

It had been a very successful and enjoyable day with some 72 birds recorded (although not all had been seen by everyone) and the weather had been kind to us, as apparently it had not been so good back in North Devon.

#### Annual indoor meeting. Friday 19th February 2016

Once again we had our indoor meeting at Weare Giffard village hall. The guest speaker this year was journalist, author and naturalist Charlie Elder. His first book was entitled "While Flocks Last" but his talk was about the exploits to get the material for his latest book titled "Few and Far Between", which had been voted by the Guardian as one of the best natural history books of 2015. He explained that whilst looking for the beautiful, breathtaking and bizarre it was not all easy going as he travelled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

One of the largest on his list was a sperm whale which he came across almost by accident when up at Oban in Scotland looking for the now critically endangered skate. In the 1920's common skates were lumped together as one species but it seems now following genetic studies that there are two separate species, the larger northern variety and a paler eyed southern version. So no more skate and chips, please.

Another water habitat creature was the great crested newt. This involved driving overnight through the snow despite it being early April. An indoctrination session was followed by being disinfected before he was allowed anywhere near our largest but not necessarily very rare newt. He did eventually manage to see some. The next reptile on his list was the smooth snake, which with help from the warden he managed to spot at the RSPB reserve at Arne (where some of our branch members went last year). He was allowed to handle it and got bitten for his pains. He also tracked down natterjack toads which because of an early start meant sleeping in the car overnight. Another group of mammals he was looking for was listed under the ugliest specimens. The bats won hands down and included long-eared, Bechsteins, noctule and Natterer's bats.

Of the more attractive creatures he photographed was the Duke of Burgundy fritillary – one of our rarest butterflies. Next on his list was the cutest and this turned out to be the dormouse. The audience dutifully “oohed and aahed” at the pictures.

Now on to the most colourful and this involved a trip to Suffolk for a golden oriole. Of the 16 million birds that come to Britain each year there is now only includes a handful of these beautiful birds. It took him fourteen hours of patient bird watching before he found one. Another rare bird on his wish list was the corncrake. This involved a trip to an RSPB reserve on the Western Isles off Scotland. Hearing them was easy (they sound like a thumbnail scraped along the teeth of a comb) but seeing them was a different matter but did see one eventually. Whilst in Scotland he continued his quest for the rarest animal on his list, the Scottish wildcat. He managed only glimpses but did manage to spy another elusive predator, the pine marten.

Another extremely rare creature was the streaked bombardier beetle, just one species of the four hundred thousand species of beetle found globally. This, he was privileged to be shown on a derelict site in East London, a little different to some of his other trips to the Cairngorm mountains, Dorset heaths, windswept Hebrides or the open fen lands.

From the smallest to the largest, next on his agenda was a basking shark, the size and weight of a double decker bus, it is the second largest fish globally and meant a trip to the Isle of Man. He was lucky enough not only to see them but go on a boat that was involved in obtaining samples for DNA analysis.

On another trip to East Anglia he was fortunate enough to see a pair of Montagu's harriers, the scarce Norfolk hawk and the fen raft spider which is large enough to catch sticklebacks. The next hunt needed a snorkel and face mask as he was on the trail of the spiny seahorse in Studland Bay off the Dorset coast. It took several abortive journeys to the area before he eventually found one. On a cold night in mid Wales he tried to track down a rare Silurian moth but with no luck so rather than go home empty handed he drove to Kent where he was rewarded with a sighting of the wart-biter cricket.

A final trip to Scotland, this time to the Shiant Isles to see the black rat, now one of Britain's rarest animals with the Shiant being the most likely place to see it. It was at this point during his talk that a black furry four legged animal mysteriously appeared in the hall but it turned out to be a black rabbit!

We had to admire his determination to see all these unusual creatures and grateful that he came to talk to us rather than us having to endure the frustrations and hardships that he had.

So another enjoyable and profitable evening came to a close.

## **Looking for lichens, Sunday 3rd April 2016**

As we made our way to Arlington Court, the banks of the Devon lanes were sprinkled with primroses, the hedgerows had snippets of white from the blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and in the villages were swathes of cultivated daffodils.

There are over 17,000 specimens of lichens worldwide, about 1800 in the British Isles and some 300 at Arlington. They are indicators of clean air hence their preponderance on the west coast and being slow growers are also indicators of ancient woodland.

Local expert Maxine Putnam explained that they are composite organisms that arise from algae living among filaments of a fungus in a symbiotic relationship. However their properties are very different from their component organisms. As an example, they are epiphytic not parasitic – like fungi – so do not harm trees.

Maxine explained that there are four basic forms of lichens. Crustose which grows completely attached to the substrate. The main body of the lichen is called the thallus and there is usually a distinct layer of prothallus between the thallus and the substrate. Squamulose lichens are scale like growths with the lower layer not having a cortex. Foliose lichens are where the upper and lower surfaces are distinctly different and are usually attached to the substrate by growths from the lower surface. Fruicose lichens are shrubby, branched, beard like or strap shaped with branches that are rounded or flattened and both sides being similar. Just when we thought we had cracked it we were informed that each of the four basic forms has lots of sub categories.

So armed with all this knowledge and watched by a grey squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*, we set off and immediately came across *Cresponea premnea* and an *Opegrapha* sp. on an oak tree. We then found an example of a foliose lichen, *Flavoparmelia caperata*, or common green shield lichen. A green/grey *Graphis scripta* was found, which gets its name from the black lines on it looking like black lines or scribbles. Past a sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa* tree with its swirling patterned bark we came across a tree with what looked like a white stripe around it. This was a crustose lichen – a type of *Pertusaria* – which as the tree grew and increased its girth, the lichen appeared to stretch around it. We then had another crustose lichen – *Lecanactis abietina* – which chooses the dry side of the host tree with moss on the other wetter side. The piping call of a nuthatch *Sitta europaea* seemed to be mocking us as we struggled with all the latin names. One of the most abundant lichens at Arlington is the sausage lichen *Usnea articulata* (nationally quite rare) and the recent winds of storm ‘Katie’ had blown a lot of it off the trees but even so many of the trees were still dripping with it.

A flash of colour was provided by the lambs in an adjoining field wearing their orange macs! An oak tree on the main lawn had so many different lichens on it, that it was popular with artists and photographers. Further on were some beard lichens, *Usnea cornuta*, *Usnea ceratina* and *Usnea subfloridana*. One of these *Usnea ceratina* if stretched revealed a thin pink centre, so was called pink knicker elastic lichen. An oak tree planted in 1970 to celebrate 75 years of the National Trust had the pepperpot lichen – *Pertusaria pertusa* – on it and lots and lots of sausage lichens. Nearby on the ground were examples of shrubby lichens, *Usnea florida* and a type of *Ramalina*.

Into the more formal garden where there were *Usnea articulata*, *A. phaeographis*, *Ramalina fastigiata*, *Parmotrema perlatum* and *Usnea subfloridana*. On an ornamental tree was a blue/grey lichen – *Parmelia saxatilis* – and on a twisted wisteria were *Lecidella elaeochroma* showing a mosaic pattern. A goldcrest *Regulus regulus* in a rose arch caught our attention as on the stone bird bath were yellow *Caloplaca* and dark brown *Verrucarias*. The azaleas were hosting *Sticta fuliginosa* – stinky sticta – which when wet produces a fishy smell. It was interesting that most of the ladies could smell it but not many of the men could detect it. On another tree we were offered the chance of tasting a lichen. Those that did wished they hadn’t as it had a very bitter taste. We couldn’t understand who would go around the countryside licking lichens to see if they had a taste.

Now around to the Church where there were *ochrolechia parella* – the fish eye lichen – *Caloplaca flavescens*, *Chrysothrix candelaris*, *Collema tenax* and *Tephromela atra* on the stone walls and a *Bellonia* which looked like a slice of orange on the stone window frame.

Our thanks to Maxine whose infectious enthusiasm kept us out for much longer than anticipated and my thanks to Julie and Len for keeping the flower and bird lists.

## Dawn chorus, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2016

By the time we had reached our rendezvous place at 6.00 am, it had stopped raining. We amalgamated into fewer cars and made our way to Chapel Wood at Spreacombe. It is a broadleaved woodland on a steep south facing slope crowned by an Iron Age fort. It takes its name from the remains of Spreacombe Chapel together with the priest's two roomed dwelling and a well, (it is a scheduled ancient monument dating back to 1250). When the site was donated to the RSPB in 1951, it was the first reserve owned by them in the South West. Originally mainly oak woodland, it now comprises of mature oaks plus substantial beech trees, ash, holly, sycamore, hazel, yew and some Scots pine.

As we approached the limited parking area, a deer leapt across the lane but too quick and too far away to be identified. By now the clouds were drifting away and the birds were beginning to sing at full throttle. Such was the cacophony it was sometimes difficult to select any individual birds but mistle thrush and chiffchaff were easily picked out. There seems to be an exceptional amount of wrens this year and Chapel Wood was no exception, as they squeaked away as we made our way along the path. The scent of ransoms drifted on the early morning air whilst bluebells and primroses could be seen in every direction. A grey squirrel busied itself in the tree tops silhouetted against the now blue sky. As the sun rose over the neighbouring hillside, green and greater spotted woodpeckers were heard along with the raucous cry of a jay and the cronking of a passing raven. The adjoining field had a crop of solar panels and the rabbits were enjoying the lush green grass beneath them. There were a large number of jackdaws and blue tits plus great tits, a coal tit and a goldcrest. A wood warbler was heard but despite several pairs of eyes looking for it, no one could locate it.

It was now back to Braunton for a visit to the next reserve, at Velator, where the former Braunton sewage treatment plant is now just a pumping station but the building and settlement ponds remain now surrounded by a selection of trees. We were met by Jon Turner who looks after the reserve and carries out a lot of ringing. He had finished for the day but had left one mist net up to see if it had caught anything for us to see. We were delighted to find sedge warbler, willow warbler, reed warbler and both male and female blackcaps entangled in the net. These were skilfully disentangled and taken back to the ringing station, where he demonstrated how to ring, measure, weigh and

record each bird before it was gently released none the worse for it's adventure. It was found that one of the sedge warblers had been ringed previously in France. A Canada goose was sitting on a nest on the island in the middle of the lake whilst swallows, house martins and mainly sand martins swooped over the water catching insects. We could have stayed there much longer but it was now time for coffee.

A quick trip along the Tarka Trail to the pond where mute swan and coot were sitting on their nests, moorhens were scuttling about and little grebe and pochard were diving for food.

Back now over the stone bridge and along the Eastern side of the River Caen. Immediately we had a singing whitethroat and on the river a common sandpiper and a flash of blue from a whizzing kingfisher. A little egret flew in and a buzzard passed overhead harried by a couple of crows. That was a good start for that part of the walk, when we came across both pied and white wagtails. It then got even better as we discovered several yellow wagtails, which with the midday sun shining on them, made them look like mobile dandelions. Then it got even better as amongst them was a blue headed wagtail (*Motacilla flava flava*), a sub species which has been recorded in Devon about ten times in the last ten years but normally in South Devon.

We subsequently learnt that wood warblers had been seen later that morning at Chapel Wood together with a pair of redstarts. Still it had been a fantastic outing with people recording "lifers" as well as their first sightings of the year.

### **Woodland migrants, Yarner Wood. Sunday 8th May 2016**

We knew it was going to be a good day because as we pulled into the car park at Yarner Wood, there right in front of us was a pair of pied flycatchers. A few steps into the hide and besides the great, blue and coal tits were siskin, wren and robin plus some lovely mandarin ducks. So two of our target species already and we hadn't left the car park.

The Spring sunshine encouraged the butterflies to come out including quite a few brimstones during the day. A greater spotted woodpecker played hide and seek with us but a male redstart showed very well. After some patient waiting and watching we then got the spotted flycatchers which had only just arrived at Yarner. The mature oak and beech trees were just coming into leaf giving a dappled shade on the woodland floor where there were young holly trees, mosses and whortleberries with their delicate pink flowers.

A wood warbler was heard and eventually a couple were found feeding high up in the tree canopy. After a picnic lunch the search for the lesser spotted woodpecker continued where we were told there had been one seen earlier in the day. Unfortunately we didn't see one and it turned out to be the only one we didn't see on our wish list. However we did come across a singing whitethroat and an immaculate male stonechat. In the distance was a little brow bird right on the top of a tree, which we were told was a tree pipit. The doubters were soon quietened when it took off, flew up even higher before parachuting down and singing at the same time before landing in another tree. A quick trip now up the road to Trendlebeare Down in the hope of seeing some raptors. One flew in and was lost track of as it flew across the brown and black hillside where the bracken had been burnt. We thought we had found it sitting in a small tree but was it a pale coloured buzzard, a honey buzzard or even a marsh harrier. So out came the telescopes and it turned out to be a burnt log lying on the hillside directly in line with a branch of the tree. We were very tempted to add "log buzzard" to our list! We did see linnet and willow warbler on the silver birch trees amongst the gorse bushes with their striking yellow flowers. A cuckoo was heard several times but it was some way off. An orange tip butterfly put in an appearance and a large red damselfly posed for all the photographers. An injured adder was discovered taking refuge under a vehicle but no one was brave enough to render it any sort of assistance.

Back to Bovey Tracey for tea before the journey home through the Devon lanes awash with primroses, bluebells, scurvy grass and the occasional red campion. A woodcock had been seen on the way down in the morning but no such luck on the return journey. Still it had been another cracking day with weather playing it's part and the quality of birds we had actually managed to see.

### **Hunter's Inn, Heddons Mouth, Sunday 19th June 2016**

June 20th -26th this year is National Insect Week. So our butterfly walk on 19th June could be considered as a preliminary event, held in conjunction with the Devon Branch of Butterfly Conservation.

The weather forecast predicted a dry sunny period between 11.00 am and 4.00 pm which was ideal for our walk. So when we left home it was misty as forecast so we were not too concerned. Young rabbits were out grazing on the roadside on Trentishoe Common and a redstart was seen gathering food for it's young. The Bristol Channel was visible where it bordered the land as the steep tree covered cliffs plunged down into Elwill Bay. Descending down through the lanes lined with foxgloves, buttercups and cow parsley past Trentishoe Church, we arrived at Hunter's Inn and met up with the butterfly people.

The mist was still swirling around the hilltops as we set off along Jose's lane and immediately had good views of dippers and grey wagtails in the River Heddon accompanied by the cronking of some passing ravens and the raucous

sounds of a tame peacock. A couple of micro moths were pointed out to us - a brown silver line moth and an *Olindia schumacherana*. We then came across a cottage which is reputed to be the only property in the Country which has high brown fritillaries in its garden. All we saw was a spotted flycatcher sitting on a TV aerial although Norman did produce a dead young adder.

Up Trentishoe Hill towards the church and by the time we had reached the bracken covered hillside where we would have expected to see the high brown and dark green fritillaries, the mist had changed to drizzle. A coal tit and grey squirrel put in brief appearances. We now left the road and made our way along part of the South West Coast path as the drizzle changed to rain. A dor beetle and several black slugs revelled in the conditions but we decided enough was enough and returned to our cars for our packed lunches, in the hope that the rain might cease and we could have a quick look along Ladies Mile. Alas, it got worse. The weather had borne no relation to the forecast given out earlier in the morning. It was one of the very few times that we have had to abort an outing due to the weather. Come to think about it one of the previous times was when we had another joint outing with the Devon butterfly

### **Meeth Quarry and Ashmoor Reserves, Sunday 14th August 2016**

Again it was a well attended meeting as we assembled at Meeth Quarry Reserve on a lovely Summer's morning to hear from Ian Chadwick of Devon Wildlife Trust all about the history of the site and what they are proposing to do to make it into a flagship reserve.

It had been a busy location for the mining of ball clay used in the making of toilets, tiles and sinks, producing some 70,000 tons a year in the 1970's. This eventually ceased and in 2012 the 370 acre site was acquired by the Devon Wildlife Trust. It is now a fast maturing reserve containing large ponds, hills (formerly spoil tips), wooded areas, streams and areas grazed by Exmoor ponies. It is already supporting 18 species of national importance.

So off we went and a lovely silver washed fritillary was one of the first butterflies to be seen, soon followed by large, small and green veined whites and several mating common blue butterflies. On a gorse bush a very obliging female keeled skimmer posed for ages so photographs could be taken. A white legged damselfly was also found but as it was dead we couldn't really count that one.

Willowherbs of various varieties decorated the marshy areas together with ragged robin and water mint. Ragwort was also fairly abundant. We now crossed over the Tarka Trail and ascended a former spoil heap to get panoramic views of the surrounding Devon countryside. The Exmoor ponies were busy eating as much gorse as they could as a skein of some 50 Canada geese flew honking overhead en route to the largest pond.

The fluffy white clouds had now given way to a clear blue sky so it was time for a picnic lunch, which we enjoyed overlooking another large pond where the swallows, house and sand martins looked as if they were dive bombing the mallard and tufted duck. A spectacular flock of goldfinches twittered by (no wonder they call it a charm) as a couple of buzzards soared into view.

Back down towards the Tarka Trail was another smaller pond which was patrolled by several emperor dragonflies. A further pond produced more dragonflies, a peacock butterfly and some lesser water plantain. There was an excellent specimen of a fly agaric in the welcome shade of the trees along the Tarka Trail as we made our way to the Ashmoor reserve. In 2001 this area had been bulldozed out ready to accept 40,000 cattle carcasses from the foot and mouth outbreak. In fact it was never used and in 2003 the bulldozers returned to restore it to its original state including hedgerows, streams, ponds and replanting of trees.

As we entered the reserve we were met by the heady scent of what looked like a crop of meadowsweet, so vast was the extent of the creamy panorama in front of us, interspersed with the rusty colour of the sorrel and splashes of purple from the devil's-bit scabious. There were lots of grasshoppers in this area and a couple of young common lizards as a green woodpecker flew over. Back now along the path to the car park were meadow browns, gatekeepers and a lovely brimstone.

No time to waste now as we headed for the River Torridge. We searched for an otter but could only come up with some beautiful demoiselles flitting about at the water's edge in the dappled shade.

Another cracking day. In the years to come this will be a super reserve and on our doorstep as well.

### **Rock pool walk, Lee Bay. 18th September 2016**

Another outing by popular request, this time to Lee Bay which is between Ilfracombe and Bull Point and in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had a reputation for smuggling. Lee has its own micro climate as it is situated in a sheltered valley with steep sided wooded hillsides. This was apparent as we made our way down the narrow winding lane as it was lined with fuchsia hedges. Not only was there a car park opposite the beach but there was no charge. This must be the only seaside car park in Devon that's free!

So on a lovely sunny morning we set off down the beach accompanied by a family of rock pipits. It was explained to us that some things will be found higher up the beach as they can tolerate longer times out of the water and as you go down the beach so the variety of wildlife changes. Having selected a day with a higher than average high tide this meant that at the water's edge there would be rock pools that would often not be exposed at low tide. So higher up the beach we had beadlet anemones and toothed wrack seaweed, then sea lettuce and Irish moss, edible crab, hermit crab and velvet swimming crab.

But it was down at the water's edge that we had the greatest selection with two types of cowrie, both three and five bearded rockling, a sand eel and a snake pipefish. Delicate things like stalked jellyfish, brittle-star and sea spider were also discovered. Whilst having a quick snack, someone came across what looked like a pile of black spaghetti but it turned out to be a bootlace worm which when stretched out came to over a metre in length.

A red admiral butterfly came to see what all the excitement was about as a gannet flapped slowly by. Something that looked like a woodlouse clinging to a rock turned out to be a coat-of-mail chiton and then a sea hare with eggs came to light. We were shown why a common clingfish gets its name as it hung on to someone's finger.

Then came the most amazing catch of the day which was a bright green coloured fish. It turned out to be a juvenile ballan wrasse. Quite remarkable, nobody had seen a fish that colour before. The tide had now turned, so leaving the kelp forest waving in the incoming tide we made our way back up the beach past strawberry anemones.

## **Exmoor – Friday 14th October 2016**

There was a beautiful starlight sky as we left home for our early morning trip to see the red deer rut on Exmoor. The journey up to the moor was fairly uneventful apart from the usual pheasants with fairly low life expectancies. As we approached our rendezvous point with our guide Charles Harding, the National Trust red deer warden for the area, the low lying cloud turned to mist.

Undeterred we set off to where Charles had heard red deer roaring earlier that morning, over Wilmersham Common, down over Pool Bridge and along lanes that even I hadn't been on before. It was still misty when we arrived at Ley Hill so it was decided to go down into the woods which turned out to be close to Horner Water where we have been many times on our dawn chorus walks. The only animals seen were some red ruby cattle with some meadow pipits and robins flitting about in the gorse. The woods were eerily quiet and the nearest we got to a bird was a great spotted woodpecker feather. The occasional wren did make the odd squeak and in the distance we could hear the deer roaring. The tormentil glistened like flakes of gold amongst the heather and whortleberry plants.

So back now through more narrow Devon lanes, past Stoke Pero Church, the smallest one on Exmoor, towards Cloutsham where you can normally guarantee to see deer. The mist was now beginning to clear as chaffinches whizzed in and out of the mature beech trees but still no sign of any deer. Not to be defeated, it was back a short way towards Hillhead Cross when we walked down to Bagley Coombe where we had redwing, fieldfare, great spotted woodpecker plus great and blue tits. Over the ford at Sweetworthy Coombe but still no joy. On the way back to the cars we then again heard some deer and in the distance there were four hinds in one field and a large stag with seven hinds in another field. Not the best views we have ever had but at least we had seen some. We then spotted four more hinds which were within a few hundred yards of where we had been walking.

It was now time to eat so off we went past some Highland cattle with very large horns and down to Challacombe where the sun was out and we had a very enjoyable lunch in the local hostelry.

## **November Annual General Meal 2016**



Our event in November was our Annual General Meal, held again at the Torrington Golf Club. There was a good attendance and just before the coffee and mints were served, the lights were dimmed and a chocolate hedgehog appeared with candles ablaze depicting 21. This was to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the formation of The Taw and Exmoor Branch back in 1995 by Trevor Beer. Letters of congratulation had been received from Trevor and from the national chairman, Roger Tabor, which were read out.

There then followed a short slide show of the branch's five day trip to West Wales earlier in the year before ideas were put forward for the monthly outings for next year's programme. It was then agreed to go to Cornwall for our long visit in June next year with the possibility of a trip to Hungary in 2018

## **Annual birdwatching bonanza, Friday December 9th 2016**

For once we picked the right day, as the weather the previous day was very grey and murky and on the following day it poured with rain.

So having amalgamated into fewer cars, we set off on a still, balmy December morning. The usual suspects (pheasant, buzzard, magpie, rook, crow, starling and black headed gull) were all seen on the journey down to the first stop at Dart's Farm, Topsham for coffee.

Immediately a pair of stock doves were seen in the maize stubble field and greenfinches and blue tits were on the feeders. Down at the hide where previously we had seen penduline tits, there was a blue flash of a kingfisher, some brent geese flew overhead and a female stonechat flitted continuously from one bulrush to another without any apparent rhyme or reason.

Round now to the recently created RSPB reserve at Goosemoor which is slowly becoming more popular with the birds as amongst the usual curlews, redshanks and lapwings were greenshanks and spotted redshanks. Behind us a pair of mistle thrushes were feasting on a clump of mistletoe.

Out on the River Exe as viewed from the Goat Walk was nice pair of red breasted mergansers, a cormorant, shelduck and some avocets.

On the way to the viewing platform overlooking the River Clyst, we had goldfinches, a lovely male bullfinch and a great spotted woodpecker and from the platform there were little egret, heron and grey plover.

At the entrance to the much improved hide at the RSPB Bowling Green Marsh Reserve there is now a garden with a small pond and several feeders. The latter were attracting several different tits and finches as well as house sparrows. Once in the hide it was lunch time but what a feast there was for our eyes out on the reserve. There were nearly 500 avocets, double that number of black tailed godwits with a few bar tailed ones mixed in and more wigeon than you could possibly count. That became even more difficult as every time a buzzard or peregrine or sparrowhawk put in an appearance the whole assembly took to the air in a huge mass of flapping wings and whirring flight paths. Diligent searching amongst this heaving mass of birds once they had reassembled produced pintail, snipe, shoveler, teal, mallard, greylag and Canada geese. A pair of pied wagtails seemed overwhelmed by it all, whilst from the edge of the reserve several rabbits looked on with complete indifference.

Whilst 62 species of birds was a good total for the day (the record being 96), it was the sheer numbers of some present that made it another outstanding day.