

SHROPSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chair's Report 2019-21

The last Annual General Meeting of the Society – the 64th - was held nearly 2 years and 5 months ago on 3rd April 2019. Since then, after a few months of normality, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic arrived to have a devastating impact on our activities, as it has on all organisations throughout the UK and worldwide. Though our activities have been curtailed, it must be emphasised that by no means has SOS been inactive during this period in ways that did not involve gatherings of members under enclosed and crowded conditions. Work of a routine but necessary nature has continued, and thanks are due to all those responsible for keeping the ornithological machinery ticking over during this period of disruption.

Sadly, the period since the last AGM was marked by the passing of two members who were very actively involved in contributing to the Society's goals. **Pete Deans**, SOS President since 2017 and our chairman for 37 years prior to that, died unexpectedly in late July of a coronary condition. **Bill Edwards** passed during the previous year. Bill was an enthusiastic birder and bird recorder, mostly in north-west Shropshire and an recipient of the SOS President's Award. Both Pete and Bill were active in survey work, in conservation, in nature more broadly and in enthusing the general public in wildlife matters. They will both be sorely missed.

Society Membership was 847 in early September, very slightly higher than in my last report in 2019. Under the circumstances, this is good news and I want to thank **Annie Andrews** for dealing with membership matters. Regrettably, the Society continues to struggle with memberships among young people, having only three junior memberships. This is a source of continuing concern.

We have already heard from Brian about the favourable state of **SOS Finances**. I would like to express my appreciation to **Jean Rickard** for her work as Treasurer and to **Brian Andrews** for the shepherding of the Society's investments.

Our **Indoor Meetings program**, in both Bayston Hill and Church Stretton was severely curtailed by lockdown precautions. In the former location, five of the planned talks were cancelled in 2020 but four successful events were held online between January and April 2021. My thanks go to everyone who contributes to the success of these meetings, whatever the medium, including **Steve Dawes, Tim Devanney, Jock** and **Mim Eliot-Smith, Sue Brealey**, the speakers and to those who set up and clear the hall for the meetings. Likewise, the Church Stretton branch meeting programme has been inactive since the start of lockdown but will commence again next month.

The **Field Trip** programme, organised by the Development and Publicity Subcommittee, was cancelled after the March 2020 trip to Moore Nature Reserve as it was impossible run them in compliance with lockdown rules. For the excursions we were able to offer prior to that, however, thanks are due to **Sue Brealey** and the individual trip leaders.

Progress on bringing the publication schedule up to date for ***The Shropshire Bird Report*** has continued through the efforts of its editor, **Gerry Thomas**. The 2019 volume has been published and that for 2020 is imminent. Our thanks are due to Gerry, the account authors, and the editorial team, as well as **Helen Griffiths**, who takes on the important work of proof-reading the Report. *SBR* is a publication of which the Society can be very proud.

Covid restrictions caused the cancellation of the Summer 2020 issue of our now colourful quarterly publication ***The Buzzard***, but an extended combined issue with Autumn made up the loss. We thank Editor **Tim Devanney** for his dedication to the task of ensuring the timely appearance of the magazine. Members are reminded of the option to receive *The Buzzard* online by visiting the SOS website and completing a simple form to switch to the digital version. Thanks also to the team which gets together to prepare the magazine packages for posting to members, to **Annie Andrews** for a sustaining lunch and to **Jim Almond** for compilation of the *Bird Notes* feature in each issue.

Venus Pool remains one of the most attractive reserves in the West Midlands, drawing in a wide variety of birds, butterflies, and other taxa throughout the year, as well as nature enthusiasts from across the region and from further afield. Regrettably, compliance with government guidelines necessitated the closure of the reserve in March 2020. The grounds were reopened in the following summer and the hides about a year later, albeit under Covid-related restrictions which remain in force. During lockdown, routine management continued but a backlog of tasks remains that will need to be addressed in the near future.

A recent development has been the appointment of Volunteer Wardens for the reserve who will serve as a link between visitors and the Society, offer advice, ensure compliance with reserve rules and be alert for safety and maintenance issues. Thanks are due to all those involved in the management of Venus Pool, particularly **Graham Walker**, **Helen Griffiths** and **Jim Almond**. I also would like to thank **Chris Whittles** for planning the planting regime for the arable field, and for organising the ploughing and sowing.

While much of the work of the **Conservation Sub-committee** was impeded by lockdown regulations, it continued to function in aspects of conservation-related ornithology in the County. Most notable among its achievements since the last AGM were supervision of the work of the 'Save our Curlews' project and the development of the Red and Amber Lists for breeding species of conservation concern in Shropshire, including the writing of action plans for some of the key species in the latter. Thanks are due to **Graham Walker** and his Sub-committee for their efforts in this very important work, as well as **Ian Grant** and **John Martin**, County recorders during the period of this report.

The SOS-sponsored **Save our Curlews** campaign and appeal were launched in February 2020, but project work was postponed because of Covid-19. However, in 2021, work was carried out in three areas, Upper Clun, Clee Hill and the Strettons. The Community Wildlife Groups in these areas located nesting pairs, and project work found 16 nests. 12 were fenced, 44 chicks were radio-tagged and tracked, and 3 young fledged. I have been asked by **Leo Smith** to thank everyone who contributed to the appeal, which will continue over the next year and beyond. A full report on the project work is available on the SOS website.

Members continued to contribute to other aspects of **bird recording** during the pandemic by combining fieldwork with permitted exercise activities in lockdown. This included national, county-wide, and local surveys, as well as contributing personal records to BirdTrack, the preferred method of submitting sightings. Bird-ringing also continued during the period at many locations. Thank you to all of you who contributed in any way to extending our knowledge of Shropshire's avifauna during the last couple of years.

The end of 2019 saw the long-awaited publication of the Society's *magnum opus*, ***The Birds of Shropshire*** by Liverpool University Press. This 532-page, full-colour treatment of all 301 bird species that have been recorded in the County has been well-received in reviews in the ornithological literature and has sold nearly 700 copies. If you haven't got yours, it is still available from the publisher.

Use of the Society's **website** declined during lockdown to around 80-150 hits per day, down from around 200-450 prior to the pandemic. That number now seems to be climbing again.

I will draw this report to a close by expressing my thanks and appreciation for the work of the members of the Board of Directors, the Sub-committees, and the Church Stretton branch committee during what has been a very demanding period, and to all those people I have not mentioned by name who contributed in any way to the smooth operation of the Society. Thank you all! And, as always, if anyone here would be willing to offer further help the Society as a volunteer, please get in touch.

John Arnfield,

Chair, Shropshire Ornithological Society

15th September 2021