

## Notes from Local Interest Group 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022

**Present in Hall:** Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy Ozols, Stewart Roberts, John Price, Helen Barnett, Cherry Williams, Roy Lloyd, Lucy Trench, David Price, Eric Biggane, Gethin Davies, Elizabeth Passey

**On Zoom:** Dainis Ozols, Sue & Keith Hodgetts, Eva Morgan, Jenny Francis, Ann & Howard Dean, Allison Joyce, Ros Coles, Richard Thomas, Sylvia Illingsworth, Elsa Harflett, Jane Nicholls, Bronwen Jenkins

**Apologies:** Joan Lloyd

ML welcomed everyone in the Hall and on Zoom and introduced our speaker, Stewart Roberts.



**Male Stonechat. Photo by Stewart Roberts**

### **Birdlife of the Painscastle/Rhosgoch Area**

Stewart began by telling us a little about himself. He lives in Clyro and, during the first lockdown in 2020, he started to post wildlife photos on the Hay-on-Wye Community Facebook page. He takes these photos whilst he is out on daily walks with his dog; he doesn't use a tripod or sit in a hide. He is neither an expert on photography or wildlife, but he is a keen naturalist and so is interested in the wildlife he sees when he is out. Although it is not essential for their appreciation, like many people, he finds that is helpful to be able to put names to the things he sees. For his talk, he showed us a great

many wonderful photographs of the birds that he has seen in our local area, up on Ireland Moor, Llanbedr Hill and The Begwns. He also told us something about each of the birds.

Stewart started with birds of prey. The Buzzard is a very common sight around here, in fact it is the most common bird of prey in the country. It can often be seen both in the air and perching on telegraph poles along the roads. Surprisingly, perhaps, the main part of a Buzzard's diet consists of worms and they can often be found in ploughed fields for this reason. This fact had not been realized for a long time as it was more usual for naturalists to examine the nests to see what the birds had been eating, and obviously there will be no "remains" of worms left once they have been eaten. However, field observations of Buzzards revealed a penchant for worms. They will also eat carrion.

His next photo was of a Red Kite, the iconic bird of Wales. Fifty years ago, this bird was a very rare sight in the UK, with fewer than fifty breeding pairs left, mainly in Mid-Wales. After many years of protection and monitoring, especially by the Welsh Kite Trust, this species is now thriving in Wales. There have been re-introductions of Kites in parts of England and for a few years Welsh birds were being taken to Ireland (North and South) for a re-introduction programme there. There are now feeding stations, for example at Gigrin Farm near Rhayader and Llandeusan on the Black Mountain, and these have helped the species to increase in number. At Gigrin, for example, it is not unusual for there to be up to 300 birds feeding at a time. Most of the time, a Red Kite's diet is very similar to that of a Buzzard (including worms and carrion), and they can often be seen over the fields when farmers are cutting hay and silage, looking for some poor unfortunate small mammal that has failed to escape the cutter! Stewart has discovered three collective nouns for a group of Kites: wake, soar or kettle.

Kestrels can also be seen around Ireland on the hill above Painscastle. They used to be much more common, especially along motorways where they would hunt prey in the grass verges, but their numbers have been declining. Could this be because of increased mowing of such verges and the consequent reduction in prey numbers? Peregrine Falcons have also nested on the craggy rock faces up on Llanbedr Hill. The Welsh Peregrines are said to be the fastest in the world! Another bird seen locally, especially in gardens with bird feeders, is the Sparrowhawk. Stewart showed us a photo that he had taken in the car park of the doctor's surgery in Hay; it was of a Sparrowhawk eating a pigeon although, as their name suggests, they regularly take much smaller birds. Another important predator on the hill is the Raven, which has been increasing in numbers. It has a very distinctive cry (crronk crronk) and a hefty beak. It is common for Ravens to use the same nest, a large structure made from twigs and straw, for many years, and they tend to mate for life.

Barn Owls and Tawny Owls are also important predators. Barn Owls can nest in hollows in trees, as well as in barns, and it is common to find pellets beneath the nests, especially in barns where they can easily collect. By examining the pellets, it is possible to tell what the Barn Owl has been eating. Both of these Owls prey on small mammals and field voles have been found to make up about half of what they eat. They will also eat worms. Barn Owls make a screeching sound and this is what gives them their alternative name, Screech Owl. Short Eared Owls have also been seen in Clyro and this is the Owl that you are most likely to see flying during the daytime. Tawny Owl chicks are unusual in that they spend quite a long time near their nest after they have fledged. At this time, they are known as "branchers" and they will often go back to the nest to roost at night.

Lapwing can also be found locally. Sadly, they are becoming rare – they were once very common on farmland. They are sometimes also called Peewit or Green Plover. Most go to the coast in the winter but they breed in the uplands. Lapwings are quite long-lived birds, but numbers have been declining because of a lack of breeding success. This might be caused by predation, changes in farming practices or human disturbance – the reasons for the decline appear to be complex. Their plumage is beautiful

with a wonderful sheen. Both male and female birds have a distinct crest, but this is larger in males, and also bigger in the summer months. Stewart has seen them on Cold Blow and the Begwns, and there were three on farmland adjacent to Ireland Moor last summer (2021).

Golden Plover also visit the hill above Painscastle, especially in winter when they can be seen in flocks of one hundred or more, often on the slope up to Cnwc Bank. In winter, when on the ground, they are very well camouflaged and can easily be missed until they can be heard or when they fly off. Their golden colour is particularly noticeable in flight as the sun catches their undersides as they wheel around in the air. Another recognizable feature is their sharp pointed wings.

Another bird which is in sharp decline is the Curlew; it has been described as “the most pressing bird of conservation priority” in the UK. This bird has a most distinctive call, often described as a bubbling trill. Their preference is for upland wetland areas. Nesting sites are now being identified in some areas using infra-red drone photography and farmers are being encouraged to avoid cutting hay/silage fields until nesting is over. Like the Lapwing, these are long-lived birds and so a decline in numbers may not be immediately obvious. Some reintroductions have been happening in predator-free areas. Since the average clutch size is four eggs, with perhaps only one chick surviving under natural conditions, egg removal from a nest and subsequent captive rearing can actually help with the process of increasing numbers.

Red Grouse can be found on Ireland Moor, especially near the Mawn Pools. Stewart wondered whether the area called Dancing Ground got its name from the Grouse’s display or lek during the mating season. Although they are not seen very often, their droppings are found on the hill and these contain the medicated grit that the birds are given to help them to reduce strongyle threadworm infestations and break up their food (such as heather shoots) in their gizzards. Red-legged Partridge are released onto the hill by the gamekeepers just before the shooting season. Some of these birds are now more or less native to the hill. These birds are often spotted in Painscastle and beyond as their tendency is to head downhill. Stewart told us that there are now quite a few of these birds on the Begwns as well.

An iconic bird of the uplands is the Skylark. The poet, Shelley, in his poem “Ode to a Skylark”, called the bird his “blithe spirit” and Wordsworth referred to the bird soaring and singing. The male and female look very similar and both have a small crest. It is the male’s ability to sing which makes it attractive to the female, and it is certainly a wonderful sound up on the hill.



**Wheatear. Photo by Stewart Roberts**

Of the smaller birds found on the hill, the Meadow Pipit is common in summer. This bird moves to the lowlands in autumn and winter. It has a distinctive parachute flight in the spring, and this is their form of display. The Wheatear is another upland bird found on our hill. It is a particularly attractive bird, with a black patch through its eye. The name, Wheatear, derives from its Old English name, White Arse, and this is exactly what you see as the bird flies off. It is not a great songster, but it is a fine mimic and its favourite bird to copy is the Buzzard. The Stonechat is so named because its call sounds like two stones being knocked together. It is another common upland bird and it likes perching on posts or the tops of bushes; it particularly likes gorse. The male is a striking looking bird, with a rust red breast and white patch on its neck. The Stonechat stays in Wales on the upland all year round and so is susceptible to the weather. These birds eat insects as well as seeds. There are also Linnets on the hill. This is a small Finch and it feeds on seeds. In winter, they can form large flocks with other seed eaters, especially on stubble fields. Stewart recently saw a large flock of around one hundred Yellowhammer on a field where conservation grade cereal had been grown. In terms of nesting success for this bird, it has been found that later broods often do better than the early ones and so where farmers leave the cutting of their hedges until later in the year, the Yellowhammer can do well. Numbers have been increasing in recent years. They are typically a bird of the hedgerow and have been seen near Lower Lundy.

Stewart then went on to talk about winter visitors. Large flocks of Redwing, Fieldfare and Starling are often seen on the hills and surrounding farmland. The Fieldfare looks a little like a Thrush, but it has a grey head. The Redwing again is like a Thrush, but it has a red underwing; it will call at night during flight. Both of these birds are common visitors in autumn and winter. Starlings form very large flocks. If you look at them carefully, you can see that they are beautiful birds with remarkably iridescent plumage in shades of green and purple.



**Starling. Photo by Stewart Roberts**

Our local area does not have a great number of wetlands, but the Monks Pool on the Begwns and Llanbwchllyn Lake are good places to see water birds, such as Canada Geese, Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe and Moorhen. Water Rail can be found at Llanbwchllyn. This is a secretive bird which can sometimes be seen scuttling across the lily pads. Reed Bunting can also be found around the lake, as well as on the Begwns. They are expert insect hunters and look very similar to Sparrows, except that they have a white “moustache”.

Stewart went on to say that he would expect there to be Heron, Dipper and Wagtails along the Bachawy, feeding on the insects in the water, but he has not yet had the opportunity to explore it. Dippers bob up and down when standing and are experts at swimming under water. These birds are all indicators of good water quality.

Other birds that Stewart would expect to find locally include Treecreeper. These birds have a very limited territory, perhaps only five or six trees, and they move very quickly up the tree trunk looking for insects in the bark. Nuthatches feed facing downwards. When the natural nut harvest is bad, Nuthatches can regularly be seen on bird feeders.

People may sometimes see a Green Woodpecker on their lawn where they are looking for ants, especially in the summer. Another name for this bird is the Yaffle and this is because they make a call that sounds like laughing.

Common sights at bird tables and feeders are Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Siskin, Chaffinch and Bullfinch, amongst others. Bullfinch particularly like seed-bearing plants and will eat blossom buds in the spring. Brambling are common winter visitors and may be seen amongst flocks of Chaffinch, although they are more likely in fields.



**Reed Bunting. Photo by Stewart Roberts**

Amongst more rare birds, Stewart has seen Ring Ouzel up on Ireland Moor (in the summer), as well as Merlin, Hen Harrier on Rhosgoch Bog and Great Grey Shrike on Rhulen. The latter is sometimes called the “Butcher Bird” because of its habit of skewering its prey items on tree thorns.

After a few questions from both audiences, and comments about what people see in their gardens and when out walking, ML thanked Stewart for his most interesting talk. The photos were absolutely amazing – and someone commented that it was very impressive to have been able to get close-ups of so many birds, especially the shy ones. We had all learned a great deal from Stewart’s talk and will now go on walks with our eyes open looking out for many of the different birds that it is possible to see in our local area. The best part is that we will also now know a little more about each one. Thank you from everyone to Stewart for giving so generously of his time to come to talk to us.