

Dorset Bird Club

Awareness and Engagement Meetings – progress report

Background

- The Club embarked on a series of conversations with bird- and nature-related organisations in Dorset earlier this year.
- This arose from a recognition that the Club needs to develop a strategy for improving engagement and inclusion, in order to remain relevant and important in the years ahead.
- Following a discussion paper first drafted in January 2023, it was agreed we should establish a short-life working group (max 2 meetings) to draw up a draft engagement and inclusion strategy for consideration by the Committee and Club members.
- The paper on Diversity in Bird Watching published August 2020 was well received and sparked a very positive debate. There was clearly a desire to change the stereotypes and become a more inclusive birding community, which needs to be built on.
- Before establishing the working group, it was agreed we need to seek and listen to honest opinions about the Club, especially from those we see as partner organisations.
- Originally a paper survey was proposed but it was agreed instead to conduct a series of discussions with partners, using a semi-structured set of talking points. This approach was also felt more likely to strengthen collaborative working with partners.
- The discussion points were based on the stated aims of the Bird Club and on the Club's charitable objectives (see end of report).
- This paper summarises progress so far and identifies further work to be done.

Conversations with partners

- The following organisations were identified as important for us to meet:
 - Abbotsbury Swannery/Fleet and Chesil Reserve
 - Birds of Poole Harbour (BoPH)
 - Bournemouth Natural Science Society (BNSS)
 - Bridport Bird Club
 - British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)
 - Christchurch Harbour Ornithological Group (CHOG)
 - Countryside Restoration Trust
 - Dorset Council Natural Environment Team
 - Dorset Environmental Records Committee (DERC)
 - Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT)
 - National Trust
 - Portland Bird Observatory (PBO)
 - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
 - Stour Ringing Group
- Six meetings took place between March and May 2023, with Abbotsbury Swannery, BoPH, Bridport Bird Club, BTO, CHOG and PBO. We are still progressing conversations with those with whom we have not yet met.
- Conversations held so far have been extremely illuminating and helpful. Key learning from them is summarised below.

Key messages from conversations with partners

General comments

- Partner organisations generally agree that the Club's key role is to provide the annual bird report and collect bird data.
- PBO does not see us as the guardian of bird data for the Isle of Portland.
- The Club should complement partners rather than compare or compete with them.
- Dorset has many strong local bird organisations within the county (e.g. BoPH, CHOG, PBO). Some leading lights in birding gravitate to those rather than the Club.
- All say they value their partnership with the Club. Suggestions for further collaborative work include joint conference with BTO; joint indoor/outdoor meetings with CHOG; and helping local organisations with conservation issues.

What are we good at?

- Annual bird report
- Newsletter
- Daily sightings blog
- Twitter

What could we do better?

- Daily sightings blog sometimes has inaccuracies (these are now quickly rectified) and standard of photos is not always good (minority view – most disagree).
- The recent sightings write-up in the Newsletter is usually several months out of date.

How are we regarded?

- Hard to gauge from comments received, but no suggestion that the Club is the 'beating heart of the birding community in Dorset'!
- PBO felt that most birders who live in or visit Portland are "indifferent" to the Club.
- Many birders (although none interviewed) don't feel bird data and reports are important.
- Attracting new and young birders is a challenge. Joining a bird club is 'not cool' for young people. Women and new birders may be put off by the 'middle-aged white male' image.

Suggestions

- Make more use of annual reports and bird data to support practical conservation issues.
- Share data between BTO, DBC and DERC.
- Increase focus of under-populated northern and western areas of Dorset, which are potentially rich ornithologically and where landowners might value surveys and support.
- Connect landowners with birders and bird organisations who can help them.
- Change the image of the Club, rebrand it as 'Dorset Birds'.
- Use branding better on our emails etc. to improve recognition.
- Have an Instagram account to connect with young birders; arrange for Bird Club tweets and Facebook posts to automatically go to Instagram.
- Liaise with local Young Farmers groups.
- Have resources on the website suitable for people new to birding.
- Reconsider buddying – there shouldn't be any issues with people over 18.
- Consider reduced membership fee for people who only want the annual report and newsletter online.

- Make it possible or easier to join the Club without having to print and scan a pdf form.
- To fill Committee roles, life and business skills are more important than birding expertise.
- Ask all those who currently take on voluntary work for the Club if they'd like to be more involved.
- Seek financial support from businesses.

Discussion

- Very encouraging, positive feedback, although it emphasises there is more to be done to make the Club matter and to ensure its relevance for the future.
- The feedback so far supports the direction we have been taking in recent years (focus on bird report and data collection, more involvement of people in that process, more inclusiveness, initiatives for young people and women, new focus on nature recovery/rewilding).
- Although a lot of time and effort has gone into improving the Club website, people have so far had little to say about it and it does not appear to be having the reach we would like.
- There are clear opportunities for joint working.
- The Club should consider whether it wants to strengthen its role in conservation, perhaps alongside other county-wide bodies such as DERC and DWT.
- There are plenty of suggestions – some good, some probably impracticable. These should be taken into account in developing the Club's Engagement and Inclusion strategy, and the good ones should be adopted.

The Club's Aims and Charitable Objectives

Our Aims

- *To promote the interest of birds and birdwatching in Dorset*
- *To collate Dorset bird records, producing the annual Dorset bird report*
 - *To provide comment and support on local conservation issues*
- *To promote small-scale local projects through the DBC Conservation Fund*
 - *To initiate and encourage participation in local and national surveys*

Charitable Objectives

- *To advance the education of the people of Dorset and the surrounding area in the study of birds and the science of ornithology.*
- *To benefit the community of Dorset and the surrounding area by contributing to the conservation of birds through research and the publication of results, by practical projects and by encouraging and working in partnership with others with similar interests.*