

## **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 in early 2023.
- 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 by Dorset Bird Club in 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
- Nine meetings took place during 2023, with Abbotsbury Swannery, BoPH, Bridport Bird Club, BTO, CHOG, DERC, National Trust, PBO, RSPB, Stour Ringing Group and Wessex Ringing Group. 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 collect bird data and provide the annual bird report.
  - PBO does not, however, see our role in collecting bird data for the Isle of Portland as important.
  - 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 with partners include joint conference with BTO; joint indoor/outdoor meetings with CHOG; helping local organisations with conservation issues; using one another's media to publicise news and events.
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- **What are we good at?**
  - Annual bird report
  - Newsletter
  - Daily sightings blog
  - 'X' (formerly 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.
- 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.
- Link with Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) South West and with emerging Farmer Clusters
- 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 'X' posts and Facebook posts to automatically go to Instagram.
- In our social media, give identification tips on the commoner species.
- 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.
- Link with Bournemouth University, where many ecology students are interested.
- More field trips and outdoor activities to draw in newcomers and novices.
- Consider reduced membership fee for people who only want the annual report and newsletter online.
- Have a flyer about the Club that can be handed out at events and by other organisations.
- 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.
- See widening participation as a long-term project: 10 years, not just 2 or 3 years.

### **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: a focus on bird report and data collection, more involvement of people in that process, more inclusiveness, initiatives for young people and women, and a new focus on nature recovery/rewilding.
- However many comments have been made suggesting we could use field trips and indoor meetings as a way of engaging new people.
- 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.

### **National perspective**

- We are not alone in our concerns – they are shared by most bird clubs, and are being addressed quite vigorously by both national and local bird organisations.
- A national survey of bird clubs by the BTO in early 2023 found that:
  - The majority of clubs are worried about the future of their club.
  - Asked what they needed to change, most said have a younger membership and more committee volunteers.
  - Asked what is the best thing about belonging to a bird club, most said social interaction/being with like-minded people.
  - Asked what is the most important factor in persuading people to join, most said social contact.
- A survey of bird clubs by Keith Betton for Birdwatch magazine (published July 2023) found:
  - More clubs are growing than shrinking.
  - Most clubs issue a welcome pack to new members, some including leaflets on where to go birdwatching and other helpful hints.

- Some clubs make a point of seeking out new members at meetings; Hampshire invite new members every 3 months for coffee and biscuits with committee members followed by a coastal walk.
- 78% of Clubs have tried Zoom meetings and most still use Zoom for some meetings, enabling them to attract speakers from far away (even USA and Australia).
- The Hampshire WhatsApp group for female members has improved female attendance at outings and enabled small groups to set up private birding trips.
- 57% of clubs said finding volunteers is becoming harder.

### ***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.*