

ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY
The History and Role of the British Trust for Ornithology
by Anthony Harbott

When it comes to the subject of Birds, the RSPB (The Royal Society for the Protection for Birds) always springs to mind for most people as the only organisation around which matters, but although this group does a fantastic job and is known world-wide, there is also another organisation which are in a way the unsung heroes for birds, as their work involves so much more information in terms of data, surveys and general monitoring, which ironically is used by the RSPB and others, in their publicity material.

This organisation is the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the speaker Anthony Harbott, gave a fascinating and lively talk about the Trust and gave us an insight into the work which is carried out at its Headquarters at the Nunnery, Thetford, in Norfolk.

The Trust was formed in 1933 and is the leading bird monitoring organisation; some of its funding comes from the Government and industry; it has nationwide, 20,000 members, 80 full time Staff and reps. From its Headquarters and its impressive library base, surveys can be collated, analysed and the data circulated to the relevant parties either weekly, monthly or annually. All this work of course, can only be done in the main, to modern technology and Mr Harbott underlined the fact that a computer was able to store so much information and work out respective surveys which would not have been achieved quickly, by any other method.

The surveys explained at the meeting, included a common birds census which was started in the 1960's, breeding birds and garden birds surveys, and a wetland bird survey (an area of which was started by Peter Scott in 1993). All of these surveys, a lot of which were started in the 1990's, can be regular or random checks and can be monitored at any time. Checks can also be made along coasts, and in selected parts of the country. The amount of different birds that are monitored, can also vary.

Mr Harbott also mentioned nest records which were started in 1939 and trace the comings and goings of who lays what eggs and what happens to them.

The ringing scheme for birds aims to monitor survival rates and check on their various fantastic journeys throughout the world. This was started in

1909 and it is estimated that 800,000 birds are ringed every year. So the work of the BTO brings together all aspects of work with birds, a census and population levels, breeding details and keeping a record of nesting and survival levels. The BTO are always updating their website and encourage us to conduct bird surveys in our own gardens.

Bob Jenkins

The next meetings of the OWLS group are on 19 April and 17 May (Mondays) at the Great Stony Arts Centre, 8pm.