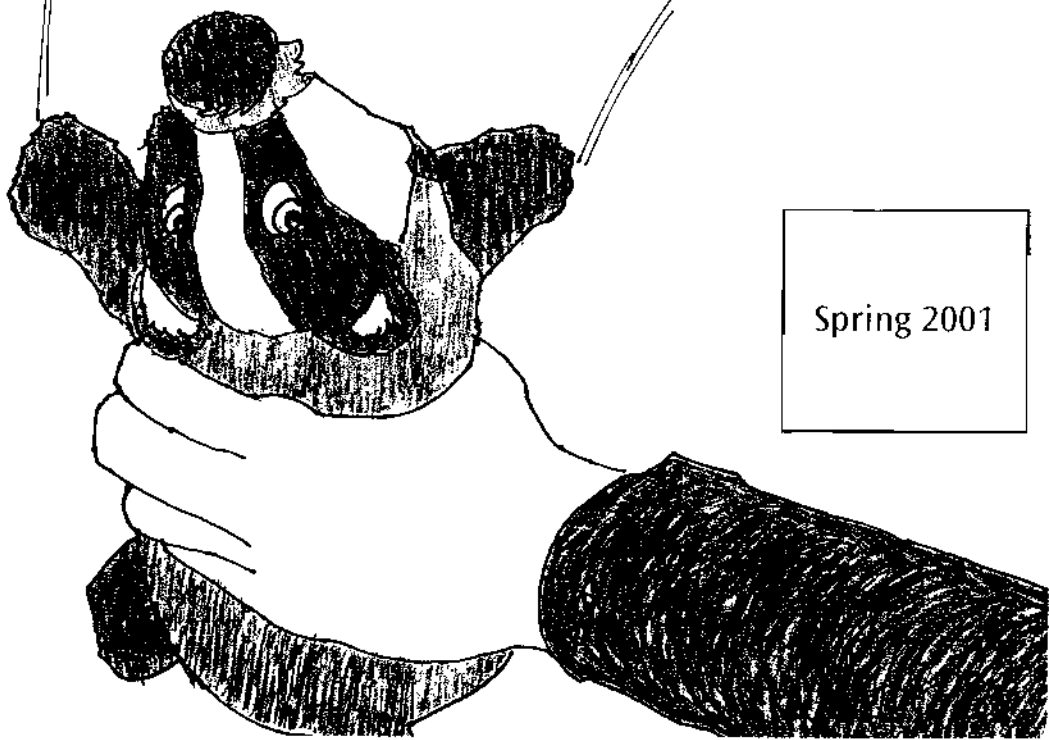


# The Weasel



Spring 2001

## Letter from the Chair

This is only going to be brief – wahey I hear you cry! Unfortunately we have been hit by the Foot and Mouth crisis and will have no further tasks until it has been resolved. Regular Tuesday socials are still available and we hope to have some on an ad hoc basis on Sundays. Many thanks to those of you who came along last Sunday to clean out the minibus and the Sunday before for a tool store clear out.

We are in regular contact with our clients and will let you know as soon as we are back in business. Keep an eye out on our web-site and we'll also send a mail shot out to everyone.

This is my last letter as chair of the OCV (famous last words!) as I will be resigning as from the AGM in May. Kay will also be standing down as social secretary. So if you think you could fill either of those posts, or know someone who can – let us know.

Remember, we could start tasks again at fairly short notice – so please don't forget about us.

*Mairi Clare Dunlin*

## The resi that never was.

Unfortunately, the resi that was scheduled for the weekend of the 2nd to 4th of March, when we would have been clearing hawthorn and blackthorn at Wootton, was cancelled due to foot & mouth restrictions. Thanks to efforts made by one OCV member, who works at Oxford University's Department of Applied Possibility, it has been possible to produce a mathematical model of what would have happened on the resi. Using extensive data from previous copies of the Weasel and weather reports from the Met Office he has produced forecasting algorithms guaranteed to describe within a 97.53 % probability ratio what would have happened. Here is his account of the resi as it almost certainly would have happened, and in fact probably **did** happen somewhere in a parallel universe near you....

### Friday evening

*Leave Oxford for Wootton. Get lost in fog and drive around for two hours, passing Long Wootton, Stony Wootton, Church Wootton, Ginger Wootton and Sporty Wootton. Have unfortunately left directions in Oxford. Eventually have to choose between Church Wootton and Wootton Dynamo. Reaching Wootton Dynamo late there is no-one to greet us at the village hall, but we make our way in, drop stuff, and head to nearest pub.*

### Friday night

*Inadvertently we crowd out regular drinks from their customary seats. Learning I am from Oxford, am asked if I think I am really clever, then, or what? Tense atmosphere ensues, and violent altercation only narrowly avoided by fleeing the pub.*

### Saturday am

*Find to our horror that someone has broken into the van and deliberately blunted all the tools. Spend morning sharpening tools.*

### Saturday pm

*Fell tree onto nearby fence. Angry farmer who happens to be out shooting crows demands recompense. Spend rest of day doing fencing work. We eventually persuade farmer to drop legal action; he accepts out of court settlement of some old plastic mugs and a piece of string.*

### Saturday evening

*Discover one of the new volunteers is a compulsive eater. He has raided food box the previous night and eaten entire supply of spaghetti. We try to make spaghetti bolognese without the spaghetti, only to find that he has eaten the bolognese as well! Go to pub in pouring rain.*

*Pub is crowded due to meeting of South and West England branch of the Elvis Presley Society. All conversation drowned out by Elvis impersonators attempting to sing. Drink excessively and leave early.*

### Saturday night

*Going to toilet in night I get lost, take wrong turning and find myself in strange room in total darkness. I panic, search for light switch, hit fire alarm by mistake, which automatically summons fire brigade.*

*Not wishing to waste their time, and to save myself embarrassment, I set fire to my sleeping bag. When they arrive they quench the blaze and depart in good humour, but now I have nowhere to sleep.*

### Sunday breakfast

*Hear on radio of new food scare: due to sabotage in suppliers' warehouses, Tesco is warning people not to eat any egg, bacon, mushrooms, beans, bread, tea or coffee that have been purchased in past two days. To eat them means certain death. Breakfast is cancelled. We decide to find our luncheon in the woods by foraging for berries and eating roots.*

### Sunday am

*Large tree is felled in spectacular three man operation, unfortunately landing on fire and crushing kettle. Tea is cancelled.*

### Sunday lunch

*Lunch also cancelled. Plan of foraging for berries proves to be fatally flawed by it being early spring. Roots and grubs are found in abundance but are frankly disgusting.*

### Sunday pm

*Harrowing work. A party of small children and large youths come to mock us, spoiling our woodland solitude with their mockery and stone throwing. Leave site early.*

### Sunday evening

*Journey home delayed by heavy traffic and major roadworks. Discover compulsive eater has eaten entire stock of suspect food and is seriously ill. Make detour to John Radcliffe, but are delayed by blow out and minor road rage incident.*

### Monday

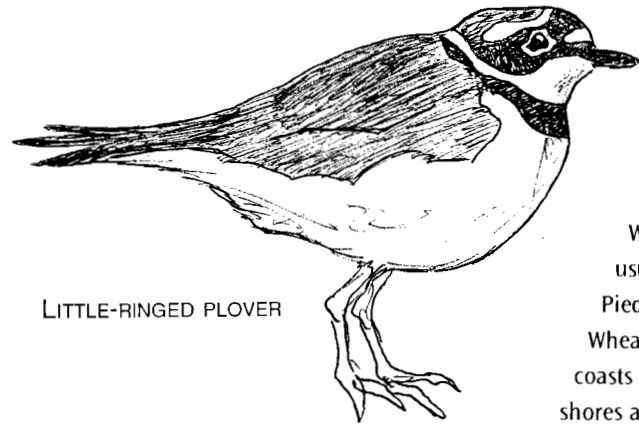
*MC phones. Warden of Wootton village hall wants to know why we never turned up. Switch on local news to hear disturbing report on escalating rural crime - a mysterious band of people descended on a quiet village in Cotswolds, broke into village hall, set fire to it, damaged a farmers fence, and wilfully destroyed a small area of woodland. Shocking.*

It can be statistically proven that all these things might have happened.

Just as well it was cancelled really.

## Spring birdwatching in Oxfordshire

Nick had asked me to write something vaguely birdy, and I was going to suggest a few good places for seeing spring migrants. However, many birding sites in Oxfordshire are now closed due to foot-and-mouth regulations. Nevertheless, some of these access restrictions may be lifted soon where, as in Farmoor reservoir, one wouldn't really have expected there to be any significant risk (fish don't carry the disease as far as I know!). Hopefully Farmoor will be reopened soon (check with Thames water); it's certainly one of the best sites in the springtime. It has the attraction of being easily accessible by bus and attractive to a variety of birds. As disadvantages, you need to get a permit (£5 / year) at the entrance gate, and it's rather unattractive, being a concrete-lined basin. The best part for birds is often the causeway which divides the two reservoirs. This is popular with wagtails; bright yellow Yellow Wagtails will



LITTLE-RINGED PLOVER

be present through much of the spring as they drop in on their journeys northwards and much more conspicuous than birds in breeding habitat. White Wagtails, the pale-backed continental race of our Pied Wagtail, are also frequent, though usually outnumbered by the local Pied, and it seems a good place to find Wheatears en route to the moors and coasts of the north and west. The concrete shores are surprisingly attractive to a variety of waders – the nice thing about

Farmoor is that it is very unpredictable what exactly will be there, but there's usually always something to look at. Little-ringed Plover is one of the more reliable wader species, since they commute between the reservoir shores and their breeding sites on the adjacent pools which have been created between the reservoir and the Thames (your £5 also gets you a key to the hides overlooking these pools, although access to these is more likely to be controlled for F & M reasons than to the reservoir). Over the water you might see Sand Martins (from March), followed by Swallows and House Martins, and by late April / early May, Swifts. Common Terns, (which breed on or nearby the reservoir), Arctic Terns and Black Terns are all possible on passage.

The new RSPB reserve at **Otmoor** is another great spring site, but more likely to remain closed due to F & M. Port Meadow (which can be attractive to spring migrant ducks such as Garganey) and Shotover / Brasenose Wood (good for migrant and resident woodland species) also seem to be out-of-bounds.

On the more positive side, in Oxford the **towpath** is open between Osney and Iffley. The wilder

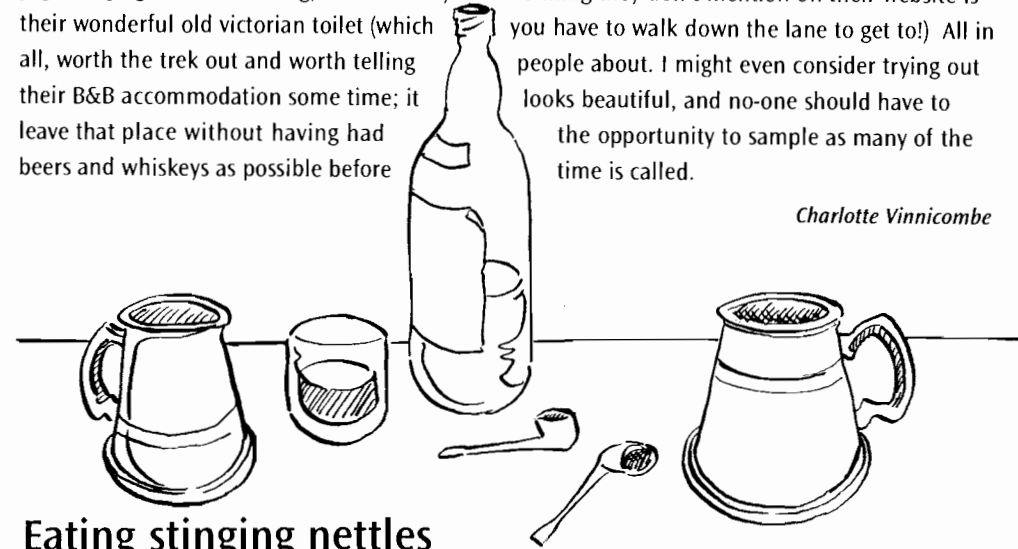
## Pub trip to Falkland Arms

A few weeks ago the OCV took a Tuesday night trip out to the Falkland Arms in Great Tew near Chipping Norton, which was attended by those amongst us who can't resist the offer of a good pint or an unusual whisky even on a week-day evening.

We drove through terrible fog to get there (thanks to Jerome for volunteering to drive), but I'm sure it was well worth it. It's a great pub; as you can read on their website (<http://www.banbury-cross.co.uk/falklandarms/>) they offer six guest beers which are changed regularly, as well as having 60 types of Malt Whisky behind the bar. I tried a few of the whiskies, and fully intend to keep going back until I've tried them all...

The Falkland Arms is also known for its clay pipes and snuff, and a huge collection of mugs and jugs hanging from the ceiling, but curiously the one thing they don't mention on their website is their wonderful old victorian toilet (which you have to walk down the lane to get to!) All in all, worth the trek out and worth telling people about. I might even consider trying out their B&B accommodation some time; it looks beautiful, and no-one should have to leave that place without having had the opportunity to sample as many of the beers and whiskeys as possible before the time is called.

Charlotte Vinnicombe



## Eating stinging nettles

Many people are surprised, not to say slightly horrified at the idea of eating stinging nettles. But it's around this time of year, when those warm spring days (sometimes) happen that nettles start to shoot out their tender green shoots. This is the time, if you're into this kind of thing, for eating nettles, as later in the year they become more tough and bitter.

**Top tip!** Always remember to wear gloves when you pick the nettles, and to cook them before eating.

Here is a recipe from a fascinating book called *A taste of history* for nettle puree :

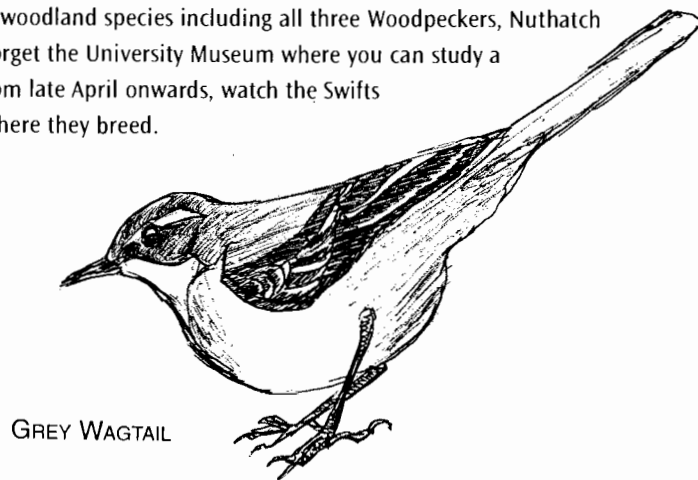
*Put young nettle tops into boiling water and boil until tender. Drain well and chop finely. Reheat, adding butter and salt to taste. Sorrel, dandelion, spinach, sow thistle, watercress and lady's smock may all be mixed for this puree. Cooking in a liberal amount of fast boiling water will conserve the vitamins better than slow, gentle cooking.*

Alternatively you can simply cook them rather like spinach and have them as a side vegetable.

bits along that route, especially Grandpont Nature Park (open, by the old gas works bridge) and Iffley Meadows (which may be open and are at least viewable from the towpath), provide opportunities to look and listen for small summer-visiting songbirds like Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler. There will also be a good chance of Cuckoo in the same areas. Swallows and Martins are possible along the river, although the best numbers will often be over large water bodies. There is always a chance of the Hobby, a Swift-like Falcon which catches insects, Swallows or Martins on the wing, anywhere in the city. Common Terns will arrive in April and are often seen fishing all along the river; they can also be viewed breeding at **Hinksey Park** on a specially provided raft (two pairs bred there last year). Interesting resident birds which can be seen along the Thames include Kingfisher (considering their colours, surprisingly hard to see, but often their shrill calls give them away) and Grey Wagtail (the very long-tailed grey-backed "yellow" Wagtail, typically around fast-flowing water, as at weirs).

**Blenheim Park** should (if my info. is correct) have reopened by the time you're reading this. If you find the inconspicuous entrance opposite the Black Prince pub you can get into the park free. Look out for Grey Wagtail (near the Black Prince, or the other side of the wall where the river enters the lake, or near the Grand Bridge). The lake has breeding Great-crested Grebes and Gadwall, and is popular with Swallows and House Martins. Look for Sedge Warbler in at the weedy end where the river comes in. If you get as far as the wooded areas or pay to enter the Palace gardens (the wilder bits) you might find Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler and Blackcap.

The **University Parks** are another possibility, looking or listening across the Cherwell to the meadows will reveal some of the same songbirds as mentioned above. In addition, the trees are good for a variety of resident woodland species including all three Woodpeckers, Nuthatch and Treecreeper. Also don't forget the University Museum where you can study a variety of stuffed birds, or, from late April onwards, watch the Swifts screaming round the tower where they breed.



GREY WAGTAIL

Steve Barlow

## Latest news: urban reserves set to re-open

For those of you who haven't been e-mailed by Laurence about it, the good news is that some of the urban reserves in Oxford are now 'open for business' - these are Holywell Cemetery, Boundary Brook, Grand Pont, Lye Valley and Magdalen Wood. BBONT and English Nature are not yet able to do the same, but we are keeping in touch with them.

## Foot and mouth: the outlook

After the initial government response warning people to stay away from the countryside altogether, and the blanket closure of public footpaths by local authorities, people now seem to be adopting more selective and sensible measures. Looking at the MAFF website there are more signs of this change in attitude: under an optimistic heading "the countryside is not closed" they write that "a formal risk assessment has been carried out which shows that there is no veterinary justification for closing all footpaths and preventing all public access to land." Their advice to local authorities is to consider which rights of way should be re-opened in the area, and their suggested criteria seem reasonably sensible and optimistic. For example they suggest that woodland paths, moorland paths (even where there is a low density of livestock), cycle routes, and non-agricultural land such as golf courses could be re-opened. There are more complicated guidelines about agricultural land, which at least seem to be making sensible distinctions between arable land and grazing land.

One of the reasons for this change is that the closure of the countryside is devastating rural tourism, and that the outbreak is likely to continue for longer than people thought it would at first. Given that (apparently) agriculture brings in £9 billion a year, while tourism earns revenues of £63 billion, it makes sense to minimise the impact of the foot and mouth restrictions. It was estimated in March that the crisis was costing the tourist industry £100 million a week in lost revenue.

However the chances of things returning to some thing like normal depend on being able to halt the spread of the disease. Partly because of the trend to transport animals ever greater distances, the disease has spread more quickly than expected. At the time of writing, the number of confirmed cases in Oxfordshire was 2, with 31 in Gloucestershire, 6 in Wiltshire, 2 in Berkshire, and 4 in Wiltshire. Three reports by different groups of scientists predicted in March that the disease would continue for several months, and even the Ministry of agriculture states that "the government's view [is] that the outbreak will last to June or July". So a return to tasks in the countryside proper might still be a little way off.

# The social programme

## April

- 10 Cinema trip : meet Grapes, George Street, 7 pm
- 17 OCV meeting: location to be confirmed, please check for details
- 24 Meal out on Cowley Road, meet Firkin Pub, 7-7.30 pm
- 29 After task supper at Kay and Simon's, 15 Lincoln Road tel: 790868

## May

- 1 OCV meeting at Steve Barlow's room, Lady Margaret Hall, Norham Gardens
- 8 Pub quiz, Folly Bridge Inn, Abingdon Road, meet 8pm, food available
- 15 OCV meeting at Steve Barlow's room, Lady Margaret Hall, Norham Gardens
- 22 Cycle ride and meal out at The Star, Stanton St John : meet at The Plain, 6.45pm
- 27 After task supper at Nick's, 67 Crescent Road tel: 770884
- 29 Evening trip to Wittenham Clumps and pub visit : meet at The Plain, 6.30pm

## June

- 5 OCV meeting
- 12 Punting : meet Cherwell boat house 6.30pm with food to share!
- 19 OCV meeting
- 24 After task supper at Anne & Roger's
- 26 Rounders at Angel & Greyhound playing field, The Plain : meet 7.00pm

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Please note some of the above may be changed to evening walks / site visits if the foot and mouth restrictions are lifted - ring Kay for details (01367) 240309

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