



## OPINION Gordon Kirk

“I believe these intergenerational encounters provide rich opportunities for both sides”

It's late September as I write and I've just taken part in 'Big Bird Race 2023', an event organised by BTO Youth. The team I was in consisted of me (aged 71) and two 16-year-olds, one of whom has recently started as the new BTO Youth Rep here in Gloucestershire. We chose a country park on the Cotswolds as our site and enjoyed a great morning in the autumn sunshine. I'm sure our species list wasn't a prizewinner, but that's not really the point – this was a getting-to-know-you session, because we had never met in person before. But both younger team members saw a 'lifer' and I learned a lot about the site itself, which I had only visited once before – so, when I was invited to write about 'intergenerational knowledge exchange' for this magazine, I realised not only that I knew what it was but that I had just participated in it!

Gloucestershire has three universities, and I am occasionally asked to support a student with a project, dissertation etc. As BTO's Regional Representative for the county and previously the local organiser for *Bird Atlas 2007–11* I have access to plenty of data, and very often this is what the students are looking for. I am also closely involved with the Gloucestershire Raptor Monitoring Group, and raptors are often an area of interest for research. I really enjoy supporting these students; often it is a case of a lot of data and a small amount of support, but sometimes the balance is different. For example, I have supported one master's student studying the habitats and diet of Little Owls, another looking at declines in farmland birds, and undergraduates doing projects on woodland bird species and (currently) on Goshawk nest-site selection. Each time it is different but always stimulating and rewarding.

If that all sounds rather one-way – me supporting the students – nothing could be further from the truth. It's always an education for me too – not only about the actual subject matter but also about ways of working and learning. I believe these intergenerational encounters provide rich opportunities for both sides. I may have some specific local knowledge, useful contacts, and a headful of possibly handy stuff as a result of having been around for a long time, but the students possess sharp minds and can look at issues in new ways. They also have access to modern research techniques and methods of analysis. Isn't it remarkable, for example, that one of the world's longest-running ornithological research projects, the Wytham Woods tit study in Oxfordshire (where one of those master's students now works) can monitor individual birds visiting feeders by tagging the birds and tracking their movements using RFID tag readers attached to the feeders (*BTO News* 342)? No human presence required, no binoculars, no notebooks. I've been introduced to fancy software packages I would never have encountered otherwise and learned a lot about data presentation and mapping techniques.

### A SENSE OF OPTIMISM

Of course, people of different ages work together in most settings but I think this exchange of knowledge between generations is particularly important in the conservation/ecology arena, for two main reasons. The first is 'shifting baseline syndrome' – a change in perception of what is considered 'normal'. Most of the time I try not to say things like "years ago there were loads of Lapwings breeding up here," but sometimes it is useful – indeed essential – to know that. Conversely, I recognise that young people are not as

ILLUSTRATION: WILL ROSE, PHOTOGRAPH: JENNY KIRK



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excited by seeing a Little Egret as I am! Much of the volunteer effort harnessed by BTO goes into surveys specifically designed to monitor long-term changes in bird populations, and the sharing of personal birding experiences and knowledge across the generations can only enrich the hard data and make it come alive, especially at a local level.

The second reason that intergenerational working is so important is that it is now possible to pursue a career in the ecology/conservation sector in a way that was not possible just a couple of decades ago. Those two master’s students are now both working full-time in ecology/conservation and I am sure they are making a real difference in their respective fields. It gives me a sense of optimism to think that some of the smartest young people around are working on solving the climate and biodiversity crisis we are facing; we certainly need them. For most people of my generation, birds and nature in general and even conservation have been

a leisure interest (or obsession), so it’s a real advance that the sector is being professionalised and therefore attracting more attention. But the experiences and knowledge of the older generations of volunteers can still play an important role. In my county at least, it’s good to see that there are organisational structures to enable that exchange to take place.

A recent BTO survey of bird clubs found that their main concern is an ageing membership, and I know that many of them spend a lot of time and energy worrying about how to attract younger members. It seems to me that much of this anxiety is aimed at preserving the existence of the club in its current state but with younger members, which I think is slightly missing the point. I think young birders are doing quite nicely; they organise themselves using social media, seem to be a very supportive and friendly community (all the better for being more diverse), and are busy doing what they want to do. That might be twitching, patch-birding, ringing, surveying, wardening, taking community action or simply enjoying our hobby/vocation/obsession, as we all do, lost in the sense of wonder for the natural world that we all share. This is why I so admire the BTO’s approach; the concept behind the BTO Youth movement is not simply to try to recruit young people into the organisation, but to reach out to young people who already have an interest in birds, support them in their interest, and ask them to help shape BTO strategy in a way that is meaningful to them and their needs. Long may it continue! ■

**Gordon Kirk** is BTO’s Regional Representative for Gloucestershire, having been an active BTO member for 40 years. He was county bird atlas coordinator and is co-author, with John Phillips, of *The Birds of Gloucestershire*.