Minutes of the 124\textsuperscript{th} Annual General Meeting held on 10\textsuperscript{th} October 2015

The 124\textsuperscript{th} Annual General Meeting of the RSPB was held at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London at 11.00am on Saturday 10\textsuperscript{th} October 2015.

In attendance:
Mr Ian Darling (RSPB Vice President), Professor Steve Ormerod (Chairman of Council), Mr Graeme Wallace (Hon Treasurer), Dr Mike Clarke (Chief Executive) and 398 members.

The Chairman of Council, Professor Steve Ormerod, welcomed members and guests to the meeting and introduced RSPB Vice President, Mr Ian Darling who had kindly agreed to chair the meeting.

It was noted that a quorum was present and the meeting would accordingly proceed to business.

Notice of the meeting had been published in the autumn issue of the members’ magazine, along with a summary of the annual accounts. This notice was taken as read. Members were advised that a copy of the agenda, plus the latest annual review containing the summarised accounts, could be found in their delegate pack.

1. MINUTES OF THE 123\textsuperscript{rd} ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The minutes of the 123\textsuperscript{rd} Annual General Meeting held on 25\textsuperscript{th} October 2014 were signed by Mr Ian Darling. RSPB Council had confirmed that they accurately reflected the proceedings of the previous year’s AGM, and although there was no legal requirement to do so, they were traditionally signed at the next AGM.

2. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Mr Clive Cohen asked whether any progress had been made with regard to attempts to ban spring hunting in Malta.

Dr Tim Stowe, Director of International Operations, reported that the referendum on banning Spring hunting in Malta failed by only c.2000 votes in spite of 75\% of eligible citizens taking part, but that subsequent dialogue between political parties had not yet been successful in reducing the problem. There was one case of infringement proceedings outstanding with the European Commission and 2 further challenges were in the pipeline to try to reduce illegal killing and reduce the scale of legal, derogated, taking of birds.

Ms Linda Wintle said that she was planning a trip to Malta next spring, and asked whether she could help by passing the suggestions from Mr Cohen to the director of BirdLife Malta. Dr Mike Clarke confirmed that the RSPB works very closely with the BirdLife partner and thanked Ms Wintle for her interest and offer of help. He suggested she may like to explore this further with Dr Stowe during the break.

3.1 **Annual Report**
The Chairman of Council, Professor Steve Ormerod gave his annual report, the full transcript of which is attached and available on the RSPB website.

3.2 **Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015**
The Honorary Treasurer, Mr Graeme Wallace gave his annual report, the full transcript of which is attached and available on the RSPB website.

3.3 **Questions**
The Chairman invited questions, first on the Annual Report and Accounts and then on the work of the RSPB more generally.

3.3.1 **Members’ Weekend**
The first question was about the future of Members’ Weekend and had been asked by several members. Dr Mike Clarke was invited to respond.

Dr Clarke started by saying that Members’ weekend was one of the highlights of the RSPB calendar and acknowledged the popularity of the University of York campus. He explained that the University had, however, made permanent changes to their student accommodation which meant that this was no longer a viable venue. 2016 would therefore be the last Members' weekend to be held at York and alternative venues were now being sought for future years.

3.3.2 **Diversity of the panel**
Ms Veronica Morris asked why there were no women on the panel.

Professor Ormerod replied that the Council and Executive were very conscious of the issue of all forms of diversity including gender and were taking that into account in the recruitment of new Council members.

3.3.3 **Expenditure**
Ms Iona Macphie asked Mr Wallace to comment on the fact that 20% of RSPB income was spent on generating income.

Mr Wallace replied that for every £1 spent, £4 was generated in return, that the cost base was always considered very carefully and great efforts made to make it as efficient as possible. He added that it takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to reach out to over 1.6 million members and to keep RSPB in the public eye. He said that investing in TV advertising and similar was expensive but that RSPB did well in terms of the percentage cost referred to and the revenue raised from it. Mr Sharpe added that, in his time as Director of Finance, there had been ups and downs in economic circumstances and that the diversity of income streams, such as grants, legacies and memberships, had been important. He said that it was vital for the future of the organisation to continue to spend time and a percentage of income on investing in this diversity of income and the future. He thanked members for supporting these activities.

3.3.4 **Malta**
Mr John Davies, with reference to the European Birds Directive, said that in 2018 Valetta, the capital of Malta, would be the European City of Culture. He wondered whether this could be an opportunity to encourage Malta to extend their idea of culture to their wildlife.

Dr Clarke thanked Mr Davies for his well-made point and useful suggestion. He said that a change of attitude on Malta was key to the future and that the people needed to see wildlife as a positive part of
their culture, economy and way of life. He said that both encouraging tourism and celebrating the value of wildlife would take us in the direction we wanted.

3.3.5 Rats
Mr John Rae asked about progress on removal of rats from seabird nesting sites such as South Georgia. Dr Stowe agreed that rat and mouse eradication continued to be a major issue for a number of islands in the UK and Overseas Territories. He said that the RSPB was in the process of trying to raise funds for the eradication of mice on Gough Island (Tristan da Cunha) in 2018/19. Closer to home, the RSPB was also working to eradicate rats on the Shiant Islands (N W Scotland) where seabird chicks are being predated by rats. Introduced rodents were still a very serious problem on many islands but the RSPB was working hard to eradicate them.

3.3.6 Curlews
Mr Philip Astor asked for an update on the plight of curlews. He commended Dan Brown and David Douglas for their work on curlew research and said that he was concerned about the application of research findings on the ground. He cited the difference in curlew numbers on neighbouring sites in Wales, suggesting that this was related to the difference in management and the presence of a gamekeeper at Ruabon.

Mr Stuart Housden, Director of Scotland, thanked Mr Astor for his question and agreed that the serious decline in curlew numbers was cause for great concern. He said that the RSPB was investing money and effort on a range of sites to ascertain what can be done to improve numbers, for example, as heard earlier by re-wetting at Dovestone, where numbers had been increased substantially. In other areas, the drivers of decline still needed to be understood and the causes, such as predation and landscape change were being investigated. Mr Housden said that predator control was acknowledged as part of the solution as well as habitat improvement, and that increasing curlew numbers was very high on the RSPB agenda.

Mr Martin Harper, Director of Conservation accepted Mr Astor’s point that Lake Vyrnwy could be offering more for curlew and said that the tenure was not secure last year, and that the management approach was now being reviewed. Mr Harper said that he would be very happy to give Mr Astor an update on the plan at a later date.

3.3.7 Predation by cats
Mr Clive Cohen referred to figures from the Mammal Society indicating that cats prey on 55 million birds per annum. He asked that advice be permanently included in the RSPB Catalogue on the fitting of cat collars with bells. He also asked that the RSPB take a more proactive approach by subsidising these items and engaging with pet shops, veterinary surgeries and cat organisations.

Mr Harper thanked Mr Cohen for his question and said that the RSPB had always taken this very seriously but, as a conservation organisation, the issue was whether the level of predation affected the population of the species of concern. A 5-year study of the decline of house sparrow, for example, found no link between the number of cats and the house sparrow population level. He said that the RSPB was however interested in finding ways of reducing the impact, and that recent research into the effectiveness of collars found that they could reduce birds killed by 41%. He added that the RSPB supported these devices and shops gave advice to cat owners but had judged that these were better sold in pet shops or veterinary practices where advice on which type to use would be available.

3.3.8 Reporting of Questions
Mr Clive Cohen asked whether other questions that aren’t asked publicly can be reported in the minutes. Dr Clarke said that AGM and Members’ days give members a chance to ask questions but there were many other ways to interact and share views and ideas including letters, phone calls and
social media. As an organisation he said that the RSPB was keen to offer more opportunities for question and answer sessions and debate in other parts of the country, for instance by holding the AGM in Birmingham as last year. Dr Clarke said that the AGM minutes were however restricted to recording the business conducted on the day.

3.3.9 Farmland Birds
Mr Robert Corsey asked why the RSPB had not been successful in persuading other farmers to follow the example of work at Hope Farm where farmland bird numbers have been increased.

Dr Clarke thanked Mr Corsey for his very pertinent question. He told the meeting that Hope Farm remains in the top quarter of profitable farms as well as being successful in substantially increasing biodiversity. Dr Clarke said that the key was to persuade farmers to adopt wildlife friendly management techniques, such as skylark plots, built into their ways of operating. These are affected by the economic regime and Common Agricultural Policy and the RSPB is pressing for measures that give support and encouragement to wildlife friendly farmers.

3.3.10 Local Groups
Ms Linda Wintle asked whether the RSPB could do more to encourage people to join local groups.

Dr Clarke agreed and said that the RSPB was looking at developing the role of local groups. He said that the work of local groups should be celebrated more as ambassadors for the organisation.

The Chairman encouraged members with further questions to talk to staff or Trustees during the break. Alternatively, he said, question cards were widely available which staff would answer as soon as possible.

4. ADOPTION OF THE ACCOUNTS

The Chairman proposed the adoption of the Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015. This was seconded by Mr Colin Hawkins and duly carried on a show of hands. The Annual Accounts were declared duly adopted.

5. ELECTION OF NEW COUNCIL MEMBER

Following the resignation of former Chair, Mrs Judith Annett, due to personal reasons, Council had appointed Mr Clive Mellon as Acting Chair of Country Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland in March 2015.

Council nominated Mr Mellon to be confirmed in this position as Chairman of the Country Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland and a member of Council.

This was seconded by Ms Judith Woodman and duly carried on a show of hands. The Chairman declared that Mr Mellon was duly elected.

6. ELECTION OF NEW COUNCIL MEMBER

The retirement of Mr Paul Cooke gave rise to another vacancy. The Chairman thanked Mr Cooke for the generous giving of his time and expertise as a valued member of Council.

Council nominated Sir John Randall as a General Council member.
This was seconded by Mr Philip Astor and duly carried on a show of hands. The Chairman declared that Sir John Randall was duly elected.

7. ELECTION OF NEW COUNCIL MEMBER

7.1 The third vacancy for an Ordinary Council member was to be decided by ballot since the number of nominations exceeded the number of vacancies. The Chairman informed the meeting that Electoral Reform Services had been appointed as scrutineers and ballot papers had been distributed to members with the Autumn issue of Nature's Home. The ballot was conducted under the terms of the RSPB Statutes with a closing date of 2nd October 2015. Electoral Reform Services had returned the count and the Chairman declared that Mr Stephen Moss had been duly elected.

The Chairman offered congratulations to Mr Moss. He expressed thanks to the other candidate, Mr Peter Newton, for being a worthy candidate and also for his work at Rye Meads and his continued support of the organisation.

7.2 Retirement of Dr Andy Brown: The Chairman informed the meeting that the Chair of Conservation Committee had decided to step down due to personal circumstances effective on conclusion of the AGM. He thanked Dr Brown for his 9 years of committed service to Council and for his invaluable contribution to the Society’s work.

Council had appointed trustee Mr David Baldock to Chair the Committee and were seeking nominations for the vacancy for Ordinary member in line with statute 4.4.2

8. ELECTION OF AUDITORS

The Chairman informed the meeting that Council wished to re-appoint the current auditors, Crowe Clark Whitehill, who continued to serve the Society well. This proposition was seconded by Ms Anna Husband and carried.

9. PRESENTATION OF THE PRESIDENT'S AWARDS

The Chief Executive introduced the President’s Awards recognising the tremendous contribution made to the RSPB by its volunteers. The citations were read by the Chief Executive and the President, Miranda Krestovnikoff, presented awards to: Mr John Oliver, Mr Brian Nobbs, Ms Pip Goodwin, Mr Brian Foster, Mr Allan Dawson and Mr David Baynes.

10. PRESENTATION OF RSPB MEDAL

The Society’s most prestigious award, the RSPB Medal, was presented to Mr Stanley Johnson in honour of his services to conservation. The Chief Executive read the citation and the medal was presented by the Chairman of Council.

11. DATE OF THE NEXT ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Before closing the meeting, the Chairman announced that the next Annual General Meeting of the RSPB would be held on Saturday 8th October 2016 at the ICC, Birmingham.

Signed: _______________________________________        Date: ______________________
Chairman’s report RSPB AGM 2015

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning.

It’s hard to believe that I’m now over half way through my 5-year term as your Chairman of Council. It seems that our challenges are ever greater, and the threats to wildlife ever growing. But our achievements tell a story that inspire real hope for future success. I want to weave my way through a small part of that story about our reserves, our Futurescapes, our science, our partnerships, and our advocacy for conservation.

Across the whole spectrum of our work this year, you have helped to make amazing successes possible. For it is you who give us the support, the power and the courage to save nature.

On our nature reserves, you’re enabling great work, reaping big rewards for some of our most important wildlife.

This year, the Council and I visited our new Medmerry reserve, near Chichester. Here, we’ve created a dynamic new wetland through a very innovative coastal realignment project in the wake of sea level rise. Not only does it already have breeding black-winged stilts, but this July it became a social media sensation when around 50 Starry Smoothhound sharks were filmed feeding there on the rising tide. This astonishing spectacle exemplifies how we’re doing the right things not just for birds, but for all nature.

There was an even more historic breeding success in the South West where the cranes that we helped reintroduce fledged the region’s first chicks in over 400 years.

And there has been fantastic news for wading birds. Our work to restore the blanket bog on our Dove Stone nature reserve in the Peak District has doubled numbers of dunlins, curlews and golden plovers in the last 10 years. Our reserves in the south east also had a record year for lapwings and redshanks.

And in Wales, where lapwings are now down to just a perilous 400 pairs, our targeted work has resulted in chick numbers exceeding all expectations. For example at Maltreath Marsh, breeding pairs rose by 50% and 88 chicks were fledged. In Northern Ireland, too, we’ve worked with 190 farmers as part of our HELP project to boost wader numbers. Thanks to specially created habitat, numbers of lapwings, snipe and redshanks have increased by two thirds over the last three years.

Up in Scotland, our Mersehead nature reserve has been identified as one of the most important sites in the country for natterjack toads. Here, we pioneered a new method for surveying natterjacks using the unique pattern of warts on their backs.

Conservation really is a matter of warts and all…

But the achievement I’m most proud of is the amazing return of bitterns. Back in 1997, they were on the brink of extinction in the UK. So much of their wetland habitat had been lost that just 11 booming males were left. But after our huge wetland recreation projects around the UK, bitterns are now in their greatest numbers for 200 years. In 2014, we had 140 booming males, more than half of them on RSPB reserves. What clearer demonstration can there be of the importance of “Giving Nature a Home?”
But nature reserves are just one part of our conservation toolkit. If they were our sole focus, we might create fantastic islands for nature that were isolated in otherwise barren surroundings. Wildlife needs interconnected spaces where plants and animals can move around freely – particularly as the climate is forcing the ranges of so many species to change.

Our Futurescapes programme of landscape-scale conservation is at the heart of our efforts to create this interconnected, wild network. This year the programme has grown further and we now have 38 such areas across the UK, including a new project to create wetlands across the Trent and Tame floodplains.

Here, we’ve opened a brand new reserve in partnership with LaFarge tarmac – Langford Lowfields in Nottinghamshire, where we’re restoring the sand and gravel quarry into wildlife habitat. We’ve planted more than 40 hectares of reedbed, where you can see bitterns, short-eared owls and starling murmurations. Elsewhere, the reserve has hobbies, cuckoos, 10 warbler species and sand martins, as well as 18 butterfly species.

And for a fantastic piece of Stop Press, please visit the RSPB Midlands stand to hear some exciting news about a new partnership at Sherwood.

Across the whole Futurescapes programme, we’re now giving nature a home on more than 100,000 hectares, working in 138 different partnerships. And this approach is still building momentum such that more grand-scale work is on the horizon.

No matter what the scale, all of our species and habitat work is based on excellent science. RSPB scientists continue to provide invaluable insights into the threats that face nature, while devising new and innovative ways to save it.

As an example, they recently contributed to the new State of the UK’s Birds report, which highlighted the worrying losses of our summer migrants. Species that spend the winter in west and central Africa – including whinchats, nightingales and spotted flycatchers – have declined overall by 70% since the late 1980s. With your help, we’re working hard to find solutions.

But saving migrant birds is tricky. We have to understand all the problems facing them in their summer and wintering grounds, as well as along their whole flyways. But through projects like Operation Turtle Dove, we’re confident that we can help turn things around.

Turtle doves are our fastest-declining bird. Their population is halving every 6 years - and we’ve lost over 95% since 1970. In the UK, the main cause is lack of food in farmland when the birds return to breed. So we’ve been working with farmers to help create seed-rich areas to provide an energy boost when the birds need it most.

National and international projects of this size can’t be done by any one organisation alone. It’s by working together with like-minded partners that change becomes possible at the scale that nature needs. Partnerships magnify the impact that the RSPB can have.

In the first year of our new little tern recovery project, we’ve worked with 10 partners to great success. Little terns are one of our rarest breeding birds, migrating here from West Africa every year to nest on our open beaches. We’re working on more than 20 such beaches to protect the terns
when they’re at their most vulnerable. And it’s paid off already, with 2014 being one of the best years for fledging chicks in many years.

Partnership can also mean campaigning together, and with others we’ve helped persuade the UK government to begin plans to create the world’s largest Marine Protected Area around Pitcairn – a UK Overseas Territory in the South Pacific Ocean. This will become the world’s largest marine reserve – 834,000 square kilometres – a safe haven for humpback whales, turtles, sharks, and Henderson petrels – one of the world’s most threatened seabirds.

We all recognize that conservation has many challenges, and some of our overseas work has recently seen some acute difficulties. I just want to pay tribute to the outstandingly courageous work of our teams in Sierra Leone and in Liberia during the recent Ebola Crisis. For a time, work on the ground at the Gola Rainforest was seriously disrupted, but our staff worked shoulder-to-shoulder with our BirdLife Partners, the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone and the Society for the Conservation of Nature in Liberia, to maintain safety and well-being while ensuring the operations could recommence once the Ebola outbreak had abated. –It has, at least for the present, but the potential long-term risks and impacts make our work in Gola more relevant than ever.

Here, at home, in another innovative partnership, we’ve joined forces with Barratt Developments – the UK’s largest house builder, to create some very special space for nature. The new ‘Hope Community’ in Aylesbury Vale will include 2,450 homes, a school and community facilities, alongside wildflower meadows, hedgehog highways, bird nesting bricks and a 100-hectare nature reserve. Half of the whole site will be wildlife-friendly areas like this.

In addition, the RSPB and Barratt have signed an agreement to work nature-friendly principles into all of their developments. This is great news in the current economic climate, when nature is increasingly seen as “nice to have” but a barrier to development. This isn’t true: we simply can’t live without it.

We’re working hard to defend the laws that protect our wildlife while using our expert knowledge to help shape new legislation.

Campaigning in Scotland by the RSPB and our supporters has helped persuade the Scottish government to designate 30 new Marine Protected Areas. These reserves at sea will protect places that are vital for our most vulnerable marine life from damaging activities such as dredging and intensive fishing.

Of course, wildlife laws can only be effective when commensurate punishments are handed out for those that break them.

At the end of 2014, a landowner was fined £675 because a gamekeeper on his land poisoned a buzzard. Although modest, this landmark fine was issued under a recently adopted Scottish offence called ‘vicarious liability’ in which landowners can be prosecuted for illegal activities under their jurisdiction. We hope to see similar laws adopted in the other UK countries, where species such as hen harriers are facing ongoing difficulties.

And in January of this year, a former gamekeeper was sentenced to four months in prison for wildlife crimes including illegally killing a goshawk. Evidence gathered by the RSPB was used as part of the
police prosecution. This was the first case in the UK where a custodial sentence was issued for the persecution of a bird of prey.

We hope these landmark cases will deter other would-be wildlife criminals.

We must continue to ensure that those who govern the UK make the right decisions for people *and* nature. So it’s more important than ever that we can demonstrate that nature has strong public support. And with RSPB membership at an all-time high, you’ve helped do that.

A membership of this size gives us the power to raise nature higher up the political agenda. We have a strong tradition of campaigning, and this year we ran two major campaigns.

On Valentine’s Day, as part of the **Climate Change Coalition**, we asked people to show their love for the temperate things at risk from climate change. The campaign centerpiece was a short film based on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 – ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’. It was produced by Sir Ridley Scott’s RSA Films and featured celebrities including Emilia Fox, Alison Steadman and Stephen Fry. The film had over 180,000 hits on the first day alone. The campaign rounded off with three party leaders signing a pledge to work together to tackle climate change.

**Bob, our campaigning red squirrel**, encouraged people who love nature to ‘Vote for Bob’. And they did. By June of this year, he had attracted more than 120,000 votes, including 1,100 parliamentary candidates. Bob travelled all over the UK: across Wales and Northern Ireland, to the Nature of Scotland Awards, and to Westminster, where his supporters spoke to MPs. He made a big impression and Bob will be back this autumn, striving to get nature on the agenda at the devolved elections.

Work like this will become more and more vital over the coming year as we work alongside nature conservationists from around the UK and the whole of Europe to defend our most precious wildlife laws. Right now, European leaders are considering weakening the **Nature Directives**, which protect our most important wildlife and wild places. The Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive have been cornerstones in our wildlife conservation for over two decades, and we have very real evidence that they work.

I began by talking about our **Medmerry reserve**. This is a place that simply wouldn’t exist without the Nature Directives. It cost £25 million to create as compensation - required through the Directives - for the loss of nearby coastal habitat. Just look at this place – we can’t afford to let homes for nature like this slip through our fingers. It would be a catastrophe, and we will be fighting any weakening of the EU Nature Directives with everything we’ve got.

I can’t impress on you enough that these are your successes: for it’s you who make such an incredible array of actions possible.

I can’t even begin to find the words to express to you my thanks for the enormity of what you achieve in the name of the RSPB.

Ladies and Gentlemen, individually, you are amazing.

Collectively, you are unstoppable.

Together, we are the hope that the world *can* Save Nature.
Treasurer’s Report - RSPB AGM 2015

Introduction

Good morning everyone. Last year I told you of my sense of wonder at the wildlife I had encountered on the RSPB reserves that I visited during my first year as your Treasurer. The dragonflies, bees, nightjars, warblers, glow worms and the smooth snake of Arne are still fresh in my memory.

However, this year, I have had rather less opportunity to get out and about, but I did make it along to the Members’ Weekend, as I am sure many of you did too. There we were treated to brilliant presentations showcasing the RSPB’s work throughout the UK and overseas.

We were reminded of the 19th century demise of the once widespread osprey, persecuted to extinction across the UK, with the last breeding attempt at Lochaber in 1916. That was it – they were gone - no longer breeding in the UK. Thanks to the efforts of the RSPB and other conservationists, this stunning bird returned, and now there are over 200 breeding pairs. Over the years since the ospreys returned to Loch Garten, hundreds of thousands of people have come to see and be inspired by them. A terrific achievement. That is what we do...

We also heard about the pioneering work now underway to try and arrest the decline of our migrant species: the swifts, wood warblers, turtle doves and cuckoos that grace our summers. Using tiny tracking devices, alongside more traditional coloured rings, we are devising innovative solutions to the problems facing these threatened birds. Our thorough scientific research provides the concrete evidence that allows us to speak with authority on such matters. That is what we do....

We do all of these things in pursuit of saving nature, but none of it would be possible without you, the members, in terms of both the moral support that you provide, and the generous financial support that you give.

Overview

That financial support meant that we can be satisfied with the outcome of the 2014/15 financial year, in almost all respects. I’ll come back to that qualification later.

Together with fellow Trustees, not least those on the Finance and Audit Committee, it is my responsibility as your Treasurer to ensure that the Society makes the best possible use of the funds that you have entrusted to us. We take this role very seriously.
But we operate in challenging times and have been buffeted by headwinds. For example, rising land prices, availability of grant funding, competition for the attention of the public and decision-makers, and the need to keep up with an increasing pace of new regulation, not only to ensure compliance, but to reflect best practice in the management of our work. It all adds up to a difficult operating environment. Therefore, it is more important than ever to plan for the future with prudence, and to retain our flexibility so that we can react quickly to the ever-changing conditions in the wider financial world. And of course, holding modest financial reserves helps provide short-term resilience to such buffeting.

Within that context I am pleased to be able to report that a small surplus for the year meant we were able to add slightly to our free financial reserves, taking them to £14.7m, representing 9 weeks of expenditure.

Income

I’ll turn now to RSPB’s income for the year.

As you’ve already heard, we now have 1.16 million members, which helped our income from membership and donations to rise by £3.2 million to £45.6 million. And with 88% of our members renewing each year, your loyalty enables us to plan our work over the coming years with confidence. Many of our major accomplishments were years in the making, decades even, so it’s essential that we can continue to work with the long-term in mind.

This increase in membership comes largely thanks to the investment we’ve made over the last couple of years in our public face and in particular in our advertising.

A great example of this is our corporate partnership with the supermarket Aldi, made possible in part by our TV presence. The RSPB will now receive all funds generated from the sale of Aldi plastic carrier bags over three years from July 2015. The partnership aims to raise £3 million pounds, enabling us to achieve our long-held ambition of a comprehensive programme to connect children with nature across mainland UK.

With Aldi’s generous support, we will deliver education sessions to primary schools in 15 cities, and family activities in parks and green spaces. In addition, we’ll develop ways to connect pre-school children to nature and reach out even further through a bank of free online resources to schools everywhere. This ground-breaking project will help get our message out to an even wider audience.
And it’s not just our membership that has increased.

Despite challenging circumstances, grant income in 2014/15 rose by £1.3 million to £26.7 million. Legacies rose slightly to £30.6 million, as did income from our reserve shops and our online sales, to £21.8 million.

Overall, net income rose by £5.8 million to £99 million. This enabled us to maintain a healthy conservation programme, invest for the future, and still end the year with a small surplus.

However, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that some things went in our favour that might not always do so – income from grants and stock market gains – to name just two. We must also be mindful of the possible consequences of government spending cuts and the potential volatility of legacy income. So it is more important than ever that we continue to look for ways to broaden and strengthen our various income streams.

**Spending**

To build the kind of support required to save nature, we need to continue to invest in growing our membership, but not at the expense of our current conservation programmes. So now let me take you through our spending for the past year. The chart behind me represents that spend. It is broken down neatly into categories because that is what us accountants like to do - and to be fair to us, that is what regulators like us to do. I will try to breathe life into it by illustrating each major segment with an example of our work.

I’ll start with our land investment in the UK. At home, we made good progress against our plans for acquiring new nature reserves and extending existing ones, bringing a total of 657 new hectares under RSPB management – either through direct purchase or by management agreement. Overall, through careful management, we were able to secure all of these places and more for the £2.8 million spent on land acquisition. The £4.4m shown in the accounts also includes some major improvements to facilities on reserves, including those at Bempton Cliffs, Sandwell Valley and Belfast Harbour.

One of the recent additions to our reserves is Boyton Marshes on the Suffolk Coast. Here, we bought 33 hectares of arable farmland, which we’re going to turn into a vibrant wetland for wildlife. The new scrape will become one of the largest in the UK, connecting Boyton Marshes to Havergate Island, giving a home to avocets, lapwings, Sandwich terns and common terns. We also plan to construct a new scrub-covered spoonbill nesting island, which we hope will encourage this magnificent bird to breed in Suffolk.
As well as making new land purchases, we invested £33.5 million in looking after the land we already manage – an increase of over £1 million on the previous year. In addition to the work that Steve has already mentioned at Medmerry, Dove Stone and Langford Lowfields, I’ll just mention an important piece of work in Scotland to save corncrakes.

Corncrake is an important UK species found mainly in north-west Scotland, where it is at the edge of its range. Their breeding success can be somewhat volatile but we were convinced we could help them do better.

Consequently, we have invested more in managing some of our reserves in the Hebrides and Orkney especially for corncrakes, making sure that there is plenty of tall vegetation for them to hide in when they arrive back from Africa in the spring. I’m delighted to report that our efforts seem to have paid off, as numbers of calling males bounced back from a recent low of 200 in 2013 to more than 250 in 2014.

On our International work, too, particularly in the UK Overseas Territories, we continued to make good progress.

You’ve already heard about the new marine nature reserve around Pitcairn. One of our other successes has been on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, where we’ve been working with our BirdLife Partner. Here, seven new nature reserves and wildlife sanctuaries have been designated. One fifth of the island now has protected status, which is a terrific boost for Ascension’s 25,000 nesting green turtles, as well as more than 800,000 seabirds, including the Ascension frigatebird, found nowhere else in the world.

Our spend on research policy and advisory work rose from £36.4 million to £36.8 million, enabling staff within our new Centre for Conservation Science to author more than 80 peer-reviewed scientific papers during the financial year.

I’ll give you just a couple of examples of what we have discovered from that research.

Working with collaborators, we have shown that there are sadly now 420 million fewer birds in Europe than 30 years ago, mainly because common species have declined. Fortunately, however, in a recent analysis we have been able to demonstrate that the European Birds Directive has been an enormous success; as a consequence, these species are markedly more secure than they would have been without the directive.

Unfortunately, this legislation has been unable to protect our long-distance migrants, as they spend their winters in Africa, well outside the Directive’s jurisdiction. Turtle doves are one of our many
migrants in decline, and though we do not understand all the reasons why, we have recently shown that nearly all turtle doves are infected with trichomonas parasites, which occasionally kills their chicks. Whether this is causing their decline, we don’t yet know. But at least we now know where our birds spend their winters. For the first time ever, we managed to track a turtle dove nearly 11,000km from its Suffolk breeding grounds last year, to its winter home in Mali and back again to Suffolk this year. Turtle doves, and other migrants, face threats throughout the year, and we can only help them if we know where they are; such research is crucial to their conservation.

And last but not least, our spending on education and communication work takes many forms ranging from the use of the latest social media technology at one end of the spectrum to good old fashioned hands on projects of the “inspiration, perspiration” kind. One example that leans towards the latter end of that spectrum is our Giving Nature a Home in Glasgow project, which saw schools and over 50 community groups creating wildlife havens across the city. Projects like this ensure that nature will continue to have its champions long into the future.

Pension

As I mentioned at the start, we can be satisfied with the results for the 2014/15 financial year – with one exception. The exception is the increased pension deficit. Regulars to our AGM will know that this topic crops up most years as we respond to the various challenges that emerge. Part of what follows is a little technical, for which I apologise. It is however important that I report it to you.

Let me put this in context. A recent study by the respected pension consultancy Hymans Robertson reported that the projected cost of paying the pensions promised to people in UK private sector final salary schemes has rocketed in the space of a year from £1.7 trillion to £2.1 trillion. This liability is more than the GDP of the UK.

The main culprit for this movement is low bond yields, and whilst the logic behind it is quite technical, the result is simple: when yields go down, deficits go up, and when yields go up, deficits come down. Unfortunately, yields haven’t been moving in our favour for some time, and whilst it would not be unreasonable to expect the tide to turn at some point, we have to deal with the situation as it is.

In 2014/15 the RSPB pension fund deficit rose from £62.4 to £86.5 million. In common with the other schemes I have just referred to, our assets grew satisfactorily but could not keep pace with the impact of falling bond yields and our deficit rose as a result.
The inclusion of this long-term deficit in the Society balance sheet means that the accounts show the RSPB having negative unrestricted funds, but this understates the RSPB’s true financial strength. Required accounting treatment brings together real, fixed and current assets, which we certainly have, with the present value of a future pension promise, which may be overstated, and in any event will only unfold over the next 30 years. There is no doubt that the deficit is a significant feature of our accounts but I am pleased to say that, thanks in part to far-sighted arrangements with the Pension Trustees, it is being managed in a way that has relatively low impact on our current work programmes.

Let me highlight the key points;

First - Over the years, we have taken many steps to address the pension problems including closing the final salary arrangement to new entrants, increasing the employee contribution rate and increasing the retirement age. Had it not been for further falls in bond yields, then we would have been on course to balance the books in accordance with the timetable already agreed with the Pension Trustees and reported to the Pension Regulator.

Second- Whilst it would be reasonable to anticipate rising bond yields helping to reduce the deficit, our financial plans do not assume this to be the case. As I mentioned a few moments ago, we will agree with Pension Trustees a plan to address the situation as it is - not as we might wish it to be.

Third- If the triennial review currently in progress shows a need to add to the list of scheme changes made in recent years, then we will implement what is required.

We are almost there.................one final important point to make is that the fixed assets in the balance sheet are shown at historic cost. If they were to be restated at their current valuation, it would comfortably eliminate the negative balance I mentioned a few moments ago and return unrestricted funds to a positive. Changes in accounting rules will allow us to consider adopting such an approach next year. Our underlying reserves remain strong.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to acknowledge the creativity and ingenuity of our staff working in all aspects of the business. They do a great job – sometimes in difficult circumstances. One excellent example of this creativity is how the potentially huge costs of projects such as Medmerry, were significantly reduced thanks to some innovative partnerships.
Earlier I talked about the Aldi partnership. Another great example of our partnership work is Wallasea, which I did manage to visit this year.

The Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project, now called *Jubilee Marsh* in honour of our patron, is an extraordinary space – a huge landscape-scale conservation project that will provide a home for nature, including tens of thousands of birds, for generations to come. When I was there, the sea wall had not yet been breached and I was able to see the giant construction machines carefully moulding and scalloping the landscape, creating curves and slopes in the land with millimetric precision, guided by computer. These machines were following a design put together by RSPB ecologists to create all the various land features and habitat niches that will give a home to a huge diversity of species, including spoonbills, black-tailed godwits and Brent geese.

*Jubilee Marsh* is an outstanding achievement. It involved a multi-year partnership between the RSPB and Crossrail – Europe’s largest nature charity working in conjunction with Europe’s largest infrastructure project. This is conservation and business working hand in hand to provide not just significant conservation gains but also significant economic growth, by contributing to the City of London becoming more streamlined and efficient.*Jubilee Marsh* is an exemplar that demonstrates how your support translates directly into major gains for nature. Thanks to you, this is what we can do.

Thank you once again.