



# RSPB East Surrey Local Group

NEWSLETTER

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No 43

## LEADER'S LETTER

Once again we have completed another year, that's 24 since the group began; how things have changed from lead shot in swans to climate change and loss of rain forest. We have raised funds for a hide and boat at Dungeness, fencing and forest in Scotland, and teaching in Ghana. We have given talks at schools, Scout and Guide/Brownie groups, care homes and gardening societies within the area. We are still looking for schools or groups to talk to; if we do not get the future generations interested, who will carry the torch forward? Next year is our 25th year and almost my 9<sup>th</sup> as Leader. Anybody fancy the job next year or coming onto the committee this year?

*Best wishes  
Brian*

## ISLE OF MULL

In November 06 we travelled up to Mull for our fourth holiday on the island. The late afternoon ferry from Oban took us to Craignure arriving on the island just after dusk. On the crossing we clocked up common eider, black guillemot and three great northern divers. The journey on the island took just ten minutes to our holiday home at Lochdon where we were going to stay for a fortnight. Next day we spent the morning looking over our favourite spots on Loch Don,

where we were able to view several whooper swans. These birds pass through the island to winter further south. Other birds seen on the loch included red-breasted mergansers, goldeneye, greenshank and, of course, hooded crows. The afternoon took us down to Loch Beg, with more whooper swans, a single black-throated diver, and a great northern diver still in summer plumage. On the journey back we had a superb view of a golden eagle as it drifted across the hills in Glen More. The next day we drove to Loch na Keal, a favourite spot for white-tailed sea eagles, and we were in luck finding an immature eagle on Scarisdale rocks, which we were able to watch for several minutes, albeit through driving rain and high winds. We carried on westwards along the loch to Gribun, a wild and rocky area on the west of the island, where we saw merlin, raven and of course common buzzard which are absolutely everywhere. On the journey back we passed Loch Beg and another sea eagle was watched as it flew round the valley and up through the hills towards Ben More. A hen harrier was clocked up on arriving back at Lochdon.

We did two trips to the SW corner of the island, taking in Fionnphort, Fidden and Uisken Bay. Here we saw large numbers of greylag geese. Although there

is a small resident population of these birds on the island, most are on migration from Iceland, and only stop off here for a few days before moving south. Sixteen Greenland white-fronted geese and a single barnacle goose were also seen at Fidden, again these birds are passing through. Other birds seen in this area included sea eagle, peregrine, golden plover, and two great northern divers, one that we watched for a long while as we had our lunch overlooking Uisken Bay.

A trip to the north of the island took us past Tobermory to Dervaig and Calgary Bay. The low dunes and the large white sandy beach at Calgary Bay with not another soul in sight is almost heaven. Here we saw common eider, rock pipit, raven, ringed plover, shag, and a black-throated diver. In this general area we found greenshank, common snipe, wigeon, teal, and goldeneye. We visited many other places too numerous to mention in such a short article, but there was always something to see and admire.

As the winter approaches the red deer come down from the high hills to feed in the valleys and we had many views at quite close quarters. On the coast we saw seals in many places, although on this visit we did not see any otters. In all, this visit produced some seventy odd species of

birds, and yet another sea eagle was seen from the bedroom window of the holiday cottage. To round off our stay on the island a last night dinner at the Isle of Mull Hotel is a must – the Scottish steaks are something else!!

This was our fourth visit to the island; the scenery is as spectacular as ever, the autumn colours were beautiful, the wildlife wonderful, the people are friendly and we will no doubt go again in the future. We wouldn't recommend it as a holiday for any one else as we want to keep it to ourselves!!

*Keith and Marion Brandwood*

## OUR VISIT TO VIRGINIA

We went to visit our daughter Rachel in Virginia Beach where her husband Steve is stationed with NATO at Norfolk naval base. Our first outing was to the local shopping mall to purchase the Peterson guide to the birds of Eastern and Central America. Rachel took us to the Norfolk botanical gardens on three occasions as it is a very good birding area and a lovely place to visit. There is a bald eagles' nest in a pine tree in the gardens and two young fledged in 2007. We saw about 40 different species of bird there including great blue heron, great egret, downy woodpecker, wood thrush, American robin, northern parula, cardinal and flocks of American goldfinches. The gardens have a large area designed to attract butterflies and we saw 6 species of swallowtail and many other butterflies both large and small.

2007 was the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing of the first English colonists in America on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1607. In the museum there is a list of the 104 men and boys who sailed in the 3 ships and one man came from East Grinstead. We visited Cape Henry, where the ships first landed and watched royal terns and double-crested

cormorants fishing and saw brown pelicans flying past. We then went to Jamestown, the site of the original settlement and were listening to a talk on how the site of the fort was only discovered in 1996 when a bald eagle flew directly overhead! Rachel – who did all the driving as we would have been completely confused with all of the junction layouts and traffic lights – took us across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel which is 17.5 miles long. It separates the bay with the Atlantic and consists of three bridges and two tunnels. There was either a laughing or ringed-billed gull on nearly every lamp standard on the bridges. On the eastern shore is a marshland nature reserve which is a great spot for migratory raptors. We saw bald eagles, ospreys, peregrines, harriers and quite a few other hawks but we needed a local birder to identify them for us. We also spent five days at a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains overlooking the Shenandoah river and drove along skyline drive with frequent stops to admire the views. During our stay there we saw green heron, hairy woodpecker, yellow shafted flicker, American kestrel, and, of course the most common birds-turkey vultures and black vultures. Wherever we went in Virginia you only had to look up and see at least one and sometimes as many as thirty

*John & Jean Jeal*

## BISCAY TO SPANISH STEPPES

It all started several years back when I was on board the *Pride of Bilbao* crossing the Bay of Biscay with my son Sam. We were watching dolphins and pilot whales very early in the morning from the upper deck and the only other people about were a couple of teachers from Sussex. Like us they were keen birders and told us we must visit the Spanish Steppes, as it was magical bird-

ing, but that the habitat was fast disappearing. I thought I had exhausted all the wonderful Spanish sites-Pyrenees, Picos, Cota Donana Sierra Nevada and Tarifa.. The thought of missing out on a further gem, and one that clearly would not be there, untouched, for ever, left its mark. So last spring in the first week of May I flew to Madrid with my birding friend Ray Baker to find this magical place. (*Ray's pictures grace this article*)



The region is known as Extremadura and is in western central Spain close to the Portuguese border. We flew to Madrid and just about being able to extricate ourselves from its motorway horrors we drove SW to our first planned stop at Calera y Chozas. This area was truly magical and set the tone for our whole trip. On first exiting the car our ears were assailed by the sound of several nightingales, golden orioles, various tits and warblers (including melodious and Sardinian) as red-rumped swallows flew past.



On exploring the steppe area to the north we chanced upon 16 great bustards only 200 metres away, and saw our only rollers and black shouldered kites of the trip here. With 3 little bustards showing up beautifully against a now thunderous sky we continued

our 180 miles drive SW to Trujillo, a wonderful old town in the centre of the region. The conquistador, Pizarro, came from here and as you sit in the central square looking up at his statue (glass of rioja in one hand, and bowl of chorizo in the other) the sky is full of swifts, including pallid; almost every other building has its stork nest and lesser kestrels patrol the rooftops. This is real Spain at its best, unspoilt by tourism and as atmospheric as the spectacular hillside town of Ronda in Granada.



The above photograph shows the attractive arch opening up the magical town square. We stayed for 3 nights just outside the town at the Finca Santa Marta. This is a very handsome converted olive-oil mill and winery. Before breakfast each morning we explored the grounds and were not disappointed. Hoopoes called from the roof, azure winged magpies fed on the lawns, and splendid bee-eaters were



everywhere. Golden orioles and cuckoos were also present in the grounds, and there was even a resident scops owl at night. After breakfast on our first morning we headed for the famous Monfrague National Park. On the way we noticed lots of birds in the sky so decided to make a quick stop on the quiet roadside. We stayed an

hour and a half seeing golden, booted, short-toed and Spanish imperial eagles, black and griffon vultures, black and red kites, marsh harrier and common buzzard.



When we eventually reached Monfrague we climbed to the top of its castle and were rewarded with a truly magnificent panorama. The birds matched the scenery; there were rock buntings, black stork, chough, alpine swift, crag martin, blue rock thrush, and black redstart. Adding Bonelli's eagle and Egyptian vulture also amazingly completed the full set of all expected eagles and vultures on our very first morning! On the spectacular rock face overlooking the river valley we also had views of roosting eagle owl.



Back at our accommodation that evening we decided to use the few hours left of daylight to drive to the nearby Belen plains. We succeeded in seeing stone curlew, little bustard, little owl and our only trip sighting of great spotted cuckoo, before heading back for a very tasty dinner. On other day trips from our base here we saw single great bustards, little bustard and black-bellied sandgrouse, and the large numbers of Montague's harriers (7 in a single field near Monroy) were noteworthy.

Our fourth day was spent travelling north. We experienced some lovely mountain scenery and picked up good birds like ortolan buntings, tawny pipits and subalpine warblers. Our next base was Sepulveda. This place is breathtaking. It was like standing above the Grand Canyon, but with much of it being filled by the huge Rio de Duraton. Numerous birds of prey flew past on top of the cliffs only yards away, including the huge 'fingered winged' Griffon vultures, their Egyptian cousins and both light and dark phased booted eagles. Words cannot describe how special the experience was, and we had the whole place to ourselves! The surrounding rocky scrub had rock sparrow and we saw 7 species of lark only missing Dupont's! You could spend a week here alone, but we only had time for the one night before moving south again towards Madrid through the Sierra Guadarrama. We managed to find a target species here, citril finch, a first for both of us, but dipped out on rock thrush! Our final list was 143 species. We loved it so much Ray and I are returning this spring. Teeming with spectacular and rare birds, it certainly makes a telling comparison to our own sanitised UK countryside. Unfortunately we witnessed things starting to change with extensive prairie ploughing of the grassland steppe-just as I had been told by those teachers on my trip across Biscay. I was lucky enough to visit the Camargue in southern France and the Cota Donana in southern Spain 30 years ago before habitat destruction and industrial pollution respectively took their toll. So get to Extremadura while its bustards still grace the plains.

*Brian Thomas*

EVENING MEETINGS 2008			FIELD TRIPS 2008	
JAN	Wed 9th	<b>Chris Ward: "Adventures in Argentina"</b> The birds and mammals of this spectacular country.	Sun 20th	Harty Ferry & Shellness
FEB	Wed 13th	<b>Dave Hassell: "A Miscellany of Birds"</b> Winter wader roosts, woodland birds and some not so common birds.	Sun 17th	Dungeness
MAR	Wed 12th	<b>David Boag: "The American Project"</b> The wildlife and natural beauty of some of the more remote areas, including Alaska, the Grand Canyon and The Everglades, captured in David's inimitable style.	Sun 16th	Barn Elms
APR	Wed 9th	<b>AGM</b> – Guest speaker, Chris Corrigan. South East England RSPB Regional Director talks about the work of the region and what the members have done to help.	Sun 27th	Pagham Harbour
MAY	Wed 14th	<b>Carl Barimore: "In the dark about owls"</b> Field surveys and how much (or little) we know about our breeding owls.	Sun 11 <sup>th</sup>	Minsmere RSPB Reserve. Coach trip (Pick up 7.30 a.m. Godstone).
JUN	Wed 11th	<b>David Darrell-Lambert: "Flight identification of Raptors"</b> Brush up your identification skills with lots of audience participation.	Sun 18th	Seaford Head (early sea watch). Meet from 6.30 a.m. onwards at Splash Point.
JUL	Wed 9th	<b>David Cromack: "Wild West birding"</b> Memorable images of California's coastal wildlife, Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks and Arizona's apache country.	Fri 6th	Ashdown Forest (nightjar watch). * Meet 7.30 pm Godstone, or 8pm Forest Centre. Amberley Wildbrooks & Pulborough
AUG	<b>SUMMER BREAK</b>		Sun 22nd	
SEP	Wed 10th	<b>Brenda Holcombe: "New Zealand and its sub-Antarctic islands"</b> From the mainland onto Macquarie Island and the world of the albatross.	Sun 13th	Mystery Trip
OCT	Wed 8th	<b>John Buckingham: "Land of Ice and Fire – Iceland's natural history"</b> Popular lecturer returns to this ever interesting country.	Sun 17th	Stodmarsh & Grove Ferry
NOV	Wed 12th	<b>Robert Canis: "A Nature Photographer's Year"</b> . An insight into the work of a professional wildlife photographer.	Sun 14th	Pett Level & Rye Harbour.
DEC	Wed 10th	<b>Christmas Meeting</b> – members tales/ photographs.	Sun 12th	Reculver & Oare Marshes
			Sun 16th	Rainham Marshes
			Sun 14th	Dungeness

\* Half day trips



Visit our website for all the latest news:  
**[www.eastsurreysrspb.co.uk](http://www.eastsurreysrspb.co.uk)**

Field trips start from Godstone Green Car Park at 8.00 am, unless otherwise stated. Half day trips – see above for time and place.

For details of coach trips contact Brian Hobley (01883 625404).

Warm waterproof clothing and stout footwear should be worn. Bring a packed lunch for day trips. No dogs.

Alternations to some of the proposed venues may be necessary at the last minute.

NOTE: If going direct to venue please notify leader at least 24 hours in advance in case of changes.

Indoor Meetings will be held at the White Hart Barn, Godstone in 2008 starting at 8.00 pm.

Admission currently £2.00 for adults, £1.00 for fledglings.

Other events arranged during the year are advertised at the indoor meetings and on the website:

<http://www.eastsurreysrspb.co.uk>. There is no group subscription, new members and visitors are always welcome.

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