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RSPB East Surrey Local Group

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2009

No 46

LEADER'S LETTER

It has been another good year with excellent speakers, some very good birds, and a lot of welcome new faces. Unfortunately we also lost a staunch member of the group and a very good friend in John Jeal. Jean and the rest of John's family and friends donated £415 in his memory. As a group, we are going to place a plaque along with the last bird box John made for us on the hide at Dungeness Reserve, for which he and Jean helped raise £5,000. It would be great if you could all bring a friend to either or both our indoor and outdoor meetings. If you have any contact with clubs or local community groups, we are still able to give talks or presentations.

I would like to thank all our volunteers for their sterling efforts during the year. In this connection congratulations to our sales supremo Ann Fort for winning the best dressed award at Hurst Green Fete for her conversion to an owl for the afternoon (*see photo*).

I'm looking forward to some good birding through the winter months, and don't forget the big bird watch in January.

Best wishes for the New Year.

Brian Hobley



Ann's Winning Owl

LIVING THE DREAM

Of all the places in the world I have ever wanted to visit, the Andes and the Galapagos Islands had always been my No1 destination. My wife, Lesley, and I and two similarly minded friends, Derek and Jane Baber, set out on our 'trip of a lifetime' on Feb 28th 2009; rather fittingly in the 200th anniversary year of Darwin's momentous voyage. We flew with KLM and after an overnight stay in Amsterdam our 13 hour flight landed in Lima, the Peruvian capital, with its 9 million population and an annual rainfall of 0.8inches. Our hotel was opposite an exclusive golf course virtually in the middle of town. The armed guards at the course entrance wouldn't let us in, but a walk around its perimeter yielded some notable birds including: eared and white-tipped dove, white-eyed and red-masked parakeets, Inca wren, three-

striped warbler, American kestrel, and a majestic black vulture flew overhead. Before going to the high Andes we thought it wise to acclimatize, so our next stop involved an internal flight to Arequipa, the 'White City', a beautiful old colonial city at 7,800 feet above sea level. Seeing extreme poverty, alongside countless riches, was to fly over this city's poverty stricken breezeblock shanty town and then visit any one of its ornate churches dripping with unimaginable gold and silver. Even our accommodation - Casa Andina - was a 214 year old silver mint! There were plenty of fascinating buildings, many of which were of pearly white volcanic stone. On display at one of the museums was the astonishingly well-preserved mummy of Juanita, a young Inca maiden, sacrificed to the Gods over 500 years ago. (NB. there is no truth in the suggestion that Juanita only has one front tooth!!!). I was in my element, with the ubiquitous rufous-collared sparrows at my feet, watching turkey vultures sitting on the Jesuit Cathedral and numerous species of humming birds buzzing around our heads as we visited the Santa Catalina monastery, built in 1579.



Rufous-collared sparrow

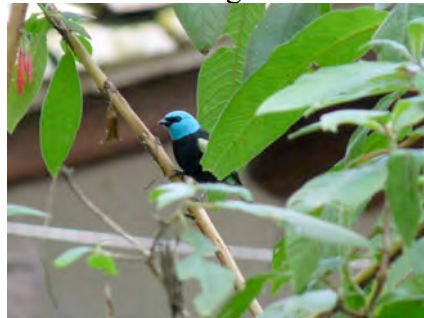
We followed advice and drank plenty of water and coca tea on arrival, and had Ostrich and fish for dinner (red meats being best eaten for lunch, white for dinner), but notwithstanding Jane fell ill with a touch of altitude sickness, and the rest of us felt a bit light-headed. Fortunately we soon acclimatized and were ready for our next ascent up the Andes. The Latin American fiasco of having our luggage weighed for all internal flights and paying for excess over 20 kilos, plus airport taxes each time, was galling, particularly when the readings were different every time our luggage went on their 'dodgy' scales!! These minor inconveniences were soon forgotten however as we flew out over the stunning snow-capped El Misti volcano on route to Cuzco at 11,000 feet, the hub of the once powerful Inca empire. Our very attractive and extremely knowledgeable guide, Silvia Aguirre, met us at our sumptuous Monasterio accommodation. She showed us the red granite Cathedral that took over 100 years to construct, and the principal Inca sites, including the fabulous stonework of the Sun Temple.

It is no surprise when you see the unbelievable precision and design of Inca buildings that these lasted whilst much of the later Spanish construction succumbed to earthquakes.

On day seven of our adventure, with overnight bags at the ready, Silvia and our driver picked us up early for further Andean

exploration. Our destination was the astonishingly picturesque valley between Pisac and Ollantaytambo (part of the 'Sacred Valley of the Incas') the spiritual and commercial centre of that Empire. On route we rose to 13,000 feet near a major fault line and epicenter of earthquakes, and in the villages we met the locals in colourful traditional dress, some of which is little changed from pre-conquest times. Markets selling local produce (llama, alpaca, vicuna wear etc), elegant haciendas and breathtaking Inca citadels, temples and fortresses were the order of the day - we were speechless!! Our overnight stay was in a lovely complex of circular huts built in traditional style and surrounded by the most wonderful flower garden. Every plant appeared to have its own hummingbird - at least three different species - and we also saw black-backed grosbeak and the blue and yellow tanager here.

Early the next morning we boarded the glass-covered



Blue-necked tanager

Vistadome train for the spectacular journey alongside the rushing Urubamba River and through lush vegetation of tropical cloud forest to the settlement of Aguas Calientes, which is only accessible by rail. Our accommodation here, the Inkaterra, was really in tune with nature. There were several ecological trails and an orchid garden within its grounds, and the bird life with its parrots, hummingbirds, blue-necked

tanagers and national bird the 'cock of the rock', was nothing short of stunning.

We were now less than an hour away from the pinnacle of Andean treasures, the magnificent citadel of Machu Picchu—surely South America's most famous sight.



Machu Picchu

We negotiated the many hairpin bends by special bus, leaving the torrent of the river below as but a distant worm. The Spanish conquistadors never found this place; it was the American explorer Hiram Bingham who discovered it in 1911. To stand here on top of the world, trying to comprehend the wonders and scale of everything around you; where some 1,000 Incas once lived and worshipped, was to pinch oneself and still think you were living a dream! One minute you were in the clouds, the next you had panoramic vision as these cleared and you viewed mountain caracaras soaring over the dense cloud forest below, along with bee-eaters and numerous blue swallows. Would the Galapagos Islands ever compete with this? I now had my doubts! *(To be continued).*

Brian Thomas

HOT SPARROWS

The catastrophic decline of the once common house sparrow

could, at least in Lincolnshire, be put down to their habit of smoking in bed! £250,000 worth of damage to a shop was caused by a recent fire in that county. Investigators were at a loss to discover the cause since no gas or electrical faults were found. Eventually 35 cigarette ends were found in the roof. It was concluded that sparrows must have picked up a smouldering butt for a nest in the roof's eaves and so caused the fire. *Your Editor wonders if the birds in question escaped in the nicotine!!*

NOT ANY OLD NEST

Oxford University scientists have been carbon dating the guano deposits in active Greenland gyrfalcons' nests and found one to be 2,500 years old! The cold climate slows decay and in some nests used year after year the droppings have accumulated to a depth of 2m. Further proof of global warming, if any is still needed, is the fact that nests further north had been occupied for much shorter periods - sometimes only 50 years - suggesting that the birds are responding to climate change with the retreating ice fields. Adelie penguin colonies have been dated in the same way, one being 44,000 years old. The mind boggles as to how deep the droppings would be if the falcons ever catch up with the penguins!

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS.

At Bough Beech Reservoir on 24th May, three stunning bee-eaters were briefly present, but were only seen by a handful of lucky birders.

At the same location August proved a bumper month for good birds, which included: osprey, honey buzzard, marsh harrier, avocet, marsh sandpiper, wood sandpiper and Sandwich tern.



Honey Buzzard (M. Cade)

In addition a record 14 common buzzards were seen in the sky here at the same time. So if any of you want to guarantee a buzzard sighting look north off the Causeway at this location, preferably mid morning. Even more local, crossbills were seen in several places during July, including a party of 25 on the 14th at North Downs Golf Club Woldingham.

September brought an amazing passage of house martins moving through our area. In excess of 2,500 birds were estimated moving west over Marden Park, Woldingham on the 22nd and 30,000 birds were recorded on the Kent coast at St Margaret's the same morning.

Any day now the winter thrushes (redwings and field-fares) will be back in, or moving through our area. Migrant song thrushes from the near Continent have already been seen in good numbers including 70 plus at Nore Hill Chelsham on 5th October. There were 3 little owls and 6 passage stonechats there the same day. Finally remember to check out any blackbirds on the downs this month since they could well turn out to be ring ouzels; a beautiful but declining species that moves south through our area every year.

LORD OF THE RINGS

This year marks the centenary of bird ringing in the United Kingdom. It was on 8th May 1909 that a lapwing was caught and fitted with a numbered ring by ornithologists at the Univer-

sity of Aberdeen. The idea was the brainchild of Arthur Landsborough Thompson and the BTO have administered a national ringing scheme since 1937. An amazing 36 million birds have been 'processed' in that time, and as a result we have unravelled many but by no means all the mysteries of bird movements and migration. If you wish to see ringing first hand, why not join the group next time we visit Icklesham in Sussex where our former Leader Phil Jones is in charge of an amazing ringing station. Over three-quarters of a million birds are ringed in this country every year now and it has been calculated that the weight of all the rings placed on birds since that first Scottish lapwing would be in excess of 11 tons! Ironically the first ever ringed bird to be found abroad was in France; it was a Scottish lapwing - but not that first bird! Since then 'our' birds have been recovered throughout the world. Some have been found in the strangest of places, like an osprey eaten by a crocodile, a reed warbler caught by African spiders, several ducks and gulls hit by golf balls, and even a poor barn owl that died trying to extricate its bill from the hem of a blanket!

FORTHCOMING FIELD TRIPS

For those who would like a chance to see bitterns, common cranes, golden orioles and stone curlews, why not join us on our outing to Lakenheath on 20th June 2010, with cars leaving Godstone at 6.30a.m.

East Head and Snowhill Marsh which we plan to visit in February is a new venue, as is Lullington Heath scheduled for August. If you can't 'do' a full day, why not join our nightjar trip at 7.30 p.m. on 25th June.

Brian Thomas

EVENING MEETINGS 2010			FIELD TRIPS 2010	
JAN	Wed 13 th	Barry Wright: "Travels in South America" Birds, scenery and other strange antics from Venezuela to Argentina	Sun 17th	Dungeness Beach, RSPB, and raptor roost.
FEB	Wed 10 th	Bill Coster: "Birds of the Shetland Isles." An innovative digital presentation of this popular birders destination.	Sun 14th	East Head & Snowhill Marsh.
MAR	Wed 10 th	David Boag: "Safari – a book in the making." Enjoy the excitement, spectacle and amusing moments of an African wildlife trip.	Sun 14th	Rye Harbour – Long lagoon and Castle Water.
APR	Wed 14 th	AGM – Guest speaker – Sue Armstrong Brown, Head of Agricultural Policy, RSPB. Farming, birds and the countryside.	Sun 18 th	Stodmarsh & Grove Ferry
MAY	Wed 12 th	Sue Buckingham: "Flowers of South East England". Enjoy the species and habitats of the region, including the Downs.	Sun 25th	Seaford Head & Splash Point (6.30 a.m. start at Splash Point for sea watch).
JUN	Wed 9 th	Chris Ward: "Birds of Aphrodite's Island". The birds and wildlife of Cyprus.	Sun 9th	Minsmere RSPB Reserve. Coach trip (Pick up at Godstone at 7.30 a.m.).
JUL	Wed 14 th	Nigel Choat: "Wild Surrey". Look at the natural history photographed within a 25 mile radius of Guildford.	Sun 20 th	Lakenheath Reserve Suffolk. (NB Early start from Godstone at 6.30 a.m.)
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Fri 25th	Ashdown Forest (Long car park), 7.30pm meet for nightjars.
SEP	Wed 8 th	John Wyatt: "Pharaohs." An interesting insight into how Ancient Egypt relates to modern birding.	Sun 18 th	Mystery trip.
OCT	Wed 13 th	Ian Rumley-Dawson: "Wildlife of the Rocky Mountains". Enjoy a scenic cross-section of Canadian animals, plants and some birds.	Sun 15th	Lullington Heath.
NOV	Wed 10 th	Gordon Langsbury: "Bird Islands of Britain". Depicting birds at home from the Shetlands to the Scilly Isles.	Sun 19th	Beachy Head, Belle Tout and Birling Gap For passage migrants.
DEC	Wed 8 th	Christmas Meeting – members' tales/photographs.	Sun 17th	Reculver & Oare Marshes.
			Sun 21st	Pagham Harbour & Church Norton - winter swans.
			Sun 12th	Shellness & Harty Ferry.



Visit our website for all the latest news:
www.eastsurreyspb.co.uk

Field trips start from Godstone Green Car Park at 8.00 am, unless otherwise stated. Part 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.

Alterations 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 2010 starting at 8.00 pm.

Admission currently £3.00 for adults, £1.00 for fledglings.

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

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

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