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**RSPB East Surrey
Local Group**

LEADER’S BLOG

The British weather never ceases to amaze me – the warmest November, then the coldest February for many years. This year sees the publication of the Bird Atlas after 4 years of intensive survey work by many volunteers; unfortunately too late to include the affects of our latest cold weather snap. Nevertheless much more information will highlight the “winners” and “losers”, and the need for further research and monitoring of underlying trends in our bird numbers and coverage. The tagging of some of our summer visitors, such as ospreys, cuckoos and nightingales, with lightweight tracking equipment is also throwing up new information about the hazards faced on their journeys to and from our shores and on their wintering grounds. Rest assured that the RSPB will continue to lobby our Government and other agencies abroad to protect all birds, including maintaining pressure against illegal shooting and trapping, and to conserve their habitats and migration routes.

As summer approaches why not visit one of the RSPB reserves? Rainham Marshes, Pulborough Brooks and Farnham Heath are all within easy reach where you can catch up on your local birds, buy bird food or just enjoy the open air and some light refreshments.

We shall also be attending various local fetes and fairs so why not come up and speak to us – all constructive comments are welcome. Meanwhile thank you all for your continuing support and make sure you “Step up for Nature”.

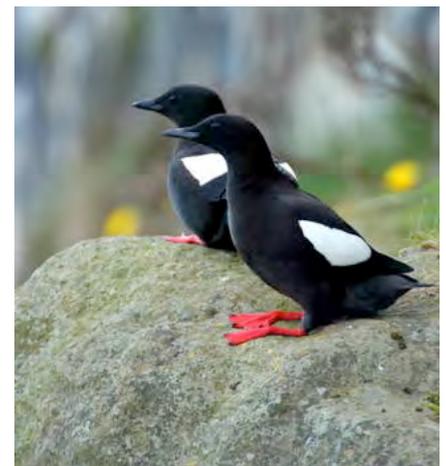
John Lawrence

NORTHERN IRELAND

Unfortunately, expectations about the Flora and Fauna of Northern Ireland can often be akin to the mistaken attitudes envisaged of its people. I can, however, attest to the diversity and appeal of both. Growing up with a Northern Irish Grandmother, I had always envisaged spending some time in my life tracing my roots in Ulster; however, it was not until I met my partner Roxanne, coincidentally from Belfast, that I found the impetus to cross the water myself. Now having accumulated several months experiencing Northern Ireland, I find that it provides a plethora of varied wildlife and cultural experiences in settings that rival any of the UK’s best renowned locations.

Adjacent to the capital is the aptly named Belfast bay. This prominent geographical feature acts as a haven for a variety of species within the vicinity of the city limits. The Avifauna of Northern Ireland can be characterised by the species which frequent the

bay throughout the year. From its banks, Belfast bay offers a platter of species for the avid birder. Rafts of Sea ducks, such as the Eider, drift along the rugged shore within a stone’s throw of the waders which patrol the sands at low tide. The occasional White-Tailed Sea Eagle will scramble Redshank, Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone alike to disturb the sound of the gentle waves lapping the shore.



Black guillemot (Sam Thomas)

A particular highlight of the bay lies on its northern banks at Carrickfergus Castle. Here, breeding Black Guillemots are drawn in by the dilapidated walls of the Norman Fort which once defended the passage to Belfast City and now serves as a crèche for the next generation of these enigmatic sea birds.

Belfast Lough RSPB Reserve is also a fantastic place to observe

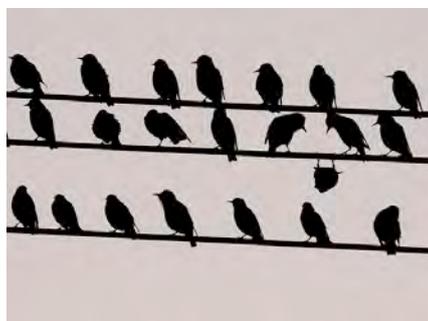
the migrating fauna from a saline biome such as Black-Tailed Godwits; integrating with some remaining Iceland Gulls before travelling north for breeding. For this reason, Northern Ireland constitutes one of the best places to see many wintering species in full breeding plumage before their departures to northern breeding grounds.

In the further reaches of the country, many of the UK's rarest animals still retain a foothold. A handful of Corncrakes can be heard reeling on the northern coast during spring whilst a friend of mine in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh informs me that he still has to protect his chickens from raiding Pine Martins. While these remote pockets of wilderness remain untouched, their bountiful potential stays free for all to enjoy.

Sam Thomas

CAPTION COMPETITION

Disappointingly we were not exactly overwhelmed with suggested captions for the 'starlings on a wire' competition. However, after some deliberation it was whittled down to two entrees, ironically from the same household - Carol and Stan Griffiths of Selsdon!



Carol's winning caption: *'The first few bars of the dawn chorus published at last'* obviously struck a chord with the Committee!

Carol received a very nice bottle of wine from where else - yes, you've guessed - down under!

The couple have something else to crow about. Their garden backs onto a nice piece of deciduous woodland at Selsdon Plantation, and they have until

quite recently been fortunate enough to attract a lesser spotted woodpecker to their feeders. It hasn't returned this spring, but I would be very interested to hear from other members if they know of any recent sightings/locations in our area, of this rapidly declining species.

Brian Thomas

DAWN CHORUS WALK

Have you ever got up at the crack of dawn on a beautiful Spring morning to witness the cacophony of magical sound that is the dawn chorus? I shall be leading such a trip locally in about a month's time on Sunday 6th May. So if you have never heard a nightingale, or would like to again, and learn the songs and calls of our native and migrant songsters do join us. The venue is Blindley Heath, and we are meeting at 4.45 a.m. in the lay-by car park outside the Red Lion pub in Tandridge Lane. Yes it's an early start, but well worth the effort.

Brian Thomas

VIVA ESPAÑA

Very southern Spain - Punta Umbria - a point sticking out into the Atlantic between the Portuguese border and Gibraltar.

The first view when we landed at Faro airport was not very inspiring, in fact it was chaos with half the roof having been ripped off the Terminal buildings the previous week. Our transfer coach took us across the border into Spain, and our welcoming party on reaching our hotel comprised a flock of 15 azure winged magpies drinking from a large puddle.

A walk along the beach in the afternoon, through the nature reserve, produced more 'goodies' with Sardinian warbler, hoopoe, Thekla and crested larks.

After returning to the hotel we discovered that the rain does not just fall on the plain! We travelled to the largest local town, Huelva, on our second day via a road across the salt marshes, and flamingo's, spoonbills, common cranes, black-winged stilts and

white storks were everywhere. The world famous Coto Donana National Park didn't disappoint the next day with black storks, great white egrets, short toed and Spanish imperial eagles, and red kites. Even from the coach we picked up impressive species like black and black shouldered kite.

Our hotel balcony faced straight out to sea across the dunes and their scrubland. It was no surprise that such excellent habit enabled me to enjoy further good birds with Iberian grey shrike, serins, black redstarts, Callandra lark, yellow-legged and Audouin's gull, and crested tit.

For a non specialist birding holiday it was great.

Brian Hobley

SPEAKERS PAST AND FUTURE

I think it has been remiss of me thus far not to have highlighted in these pages the great job our Leader John has done in arranging to bring such a diverse range of extremely interesting speakers and topics to our indoor meetings. Indicative of the quality just recall the 3 talks so far this year: Ralph Todd on North America, Brian Gallop on India, and of course the highly talented Stephen Moss who entertained us once again, as only he can, with his highly memorable 'Evening without Bill Oddie'.

John can't be expected to go on for ever pulling these gems out of the bag. If we are to maintain such a high standard it would be very helpful if members could suggest topics they would like to have talks on, and perhaps, since many are members of a diverse range of other societies, could suggest specific speakers they have been particularly impressed with.

FISH & CHIP QUIZ NIGHT

This is now a very successful and popular annual event. It's a real fun night with a wide ranging set of questions and topics put together by Elitta and Cathy. Do buy your £9 tickets early; they

include prizes for the winning team and a quality fish and chips supper. It's 7.00 for a 7.30 pm start on Friday 19th October, and don't forget to bring your own drink.

BTO NIGHTINGALE SURVEY

Penny Williams, regional BTO organiser for our area, made a plea for volunteers for this valuable and interesting scientific survey at our last indoor meeting. A number of people put themselves forward but there are still some areas where cover is still needed. If you are interested please contact the Editor who will pass on your details to Penny.

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

The last wheatear departed Nore Hill Chelsham for warmer climes on 31st October, and there was a 'one day' ring ouzel there on 21st. The same month was good for crossbills with 25 seen on North Downs Golf course on 29th. It was a particularly poor winter for brambling, and redwing numbers were also down. Just before the 6 inches of snow fell on 5th February there was a 250 strong flock of linnets near Lumberdine Wood Chelsham. Extremely cold frosty nights were the order of the day with a possible record low temperature for Surrey of minus 18 degrees. This could well have explained the record number of 40 fieldfares in the Editors garden stripping the cotoneaster shrubs. The gamekeeper at Cheveralls Farm reported a bumper year for woodcock with an estimate of 40 plus birds in the Chelsham area alone. The undoubted highlight of the year however was the wintering at Beddlestead of up to 5 short-eared owls. The first bird was seen in late November, and numbers gradually built up to 5 in February. There were still at least two present as late as the 7th of April. On checking some of the rough grassland over which the birds patrolled, it quickly became apparent that there were a large number of voles in the area. This reminded me of a vole 'plague'

that occurred in the fields at Beddington Sewage Farm way back in 1970. No less than 10 birds stayed there feeding on short-tailed field voles for the whole winter. I only wish I had taken photographs at the time since the number of voles was breathtaking. The grass under your feet, wherever you walked, seemed to be writhing with voles, and the gridiron of deep concrete channels taking the treated effluent away to the River Wandle was full of thousands of drowned voles that had fallen into the water.



Short-eared owl (Sam Thomas)

Prior to this year's occurrence at Chelsham, the writer had only ever had two records of the species on his 'local patch' and on both occasions they were only 'flyovers'. It is wonderful to report how plentiful buzzards are in our area these days, indicative of this were 12 in the sky together over Nore Hill on 19th March. Another amazing number was 400 plus stock doves feeding on a freshly harrowed field at Worms Heath Chelsham during the second half of March. Grey partridges are being seen again after many years absence in the Chelsham area. Whilst it is almost certain they originate from released birds, they do now appear to be breeding in the wild.

Like last year, early Spring weather has been uncharacteristically warm and bluebells are fully out already. What with hawthorn being well forward as well, calling it by its alternative name of May is becoming more and more of an anachronism. The sun soon got the songbirds started as well. I heard my first blackcap in song on Riddlesdown on 13th March. The song was by no means typi-

cal and it had me wondering if this was a wintering bird that had not yet returned to Germany or elsewhere in central Europe, or whether it was truly the first returning bird from Africa. One lucky observer saw an osprey moving through north over Forestdale Selsdon on 31st March, and the first returning swallows and hobby have also been noted. I visited Nore Hill for migrants this morning, the 4th of April, and although I failed to find either wheatears or ring ouzels I did get a great view of a red kite moving through, harassed by a small flock of corvids. Considering their rapid advance down the M40 corridor, it surely won't be long before these magnificent raptors are breeding in or midst, and it won't be necessary to travel to Stokenchurch to see them in all their glory. (NB Why not come and join us on our field trip planned for this very purpose on 12th September?)

Brian Thomas

MORE BIRD DISEASE

Readers will recall me writing in the Autumn Newsletter of a virulent disease, trichomonosis, which has particularly hit greenfinch and chaffinch populations. Unfortunately, information has now been received of more bird disease in our area in the form of avian pox. At least two incidents of the disease have already been recorded, one in Upper Norwood and the other, much closer to home, around Selsdon Woods. Anyone seeing birds, particularly great tits, with warty like growths up to 1cm in size should phone the RSPB on 01767 693690 or e-mail wildlife@rspb.org.uk with details. This will enable the extent of the outbreak to be monitored. It may be spread by insects, bird to bird contact or contact with contaminated surfaces or water. There is no cure; extreme cleanliness could reduce it spreading. It is only found in birds, so is not a threat to humans or animals. Google 'RSPB Avian Pox' to obtain more information.

EVENING MEETINGS 2012			FIELD TRIPS 2012	
JAN	Wed 11th	Ralph Todd: "Where Yeehaa meets Ole." A trip through Texas and California, including whale watching.	Sun 15th	Dungeness
FEB	Wed 8th	Brian Gallop: "One man's view of India" Covers birds, animals and various sites.	Sun 12th	Rainham
MAR	Wed 14th	Stephen Moss: "An evening without Bill Oddie". Includes video clips from this popular BBC wildlife series Stephen produced.	Sun 18th	Northwood Hill & Cliff
APR	Wed 11th	AGM - followed by "Futurescapes". A talk by Guest speaker Sam Dawes, Conservation Manager, South East Region, RSPB	Sun 15th	Selsey Bill & Church Norton
MAY	Wed 9th	Brian Nobbs: "Flights of Fancy". How birds fly explained in an extremely innovative way.	Sun 6th	Dawn Chorus Blindley Heath (meet 4.45 a.m. car park opposite Red Barn P. H. Tandridge Lane, off Ray Lane)
JUN	Wed 13th	John Buckingham: "The Wonders of Bird Migration". Increase your understanding with interesting bird facts and behaviour.	Sun 13th	New Forest (meet Godstone 7.00 a.m.)
JUL	Wed 11th	Barry Wright: "Birds of the West Indies" Enjoy a visit to these exotic islands..	Sun 27th	Minsmere Coach Trip (meet Godstone at 7.30 a.m.)
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Fri 8 th & Fri 22 nd	Ashdown Forest for nightjars (meet 7.30 p.m. Godstone, 8 p.m. Long Car park)
SEP	Wed 12th	David Johnson: "Memoirs of an Orchid twitcher". An autobiography of one man's search for all British orchids.	Sun 17th	Stodmarsh & Grove Ferry
OCT	Wed 10 th	Chris Ward: "South African Safari". Birds and animals of the Kruger and Drakensberg Mountains and much more.	Sun 15th	Mystery trip
NOV	Fri 19th	Fish and Chips Quiz night (7 for 7.30pm).	Sun 19th	Elmley
DEC	Wed 14th	Bill Coster: "Norway and Finland". Another inimitable digital presentation featuring 5 species of forest owls.	Sun 16th	Stokenchurch (red kites) & Staines Reservoir
	Wed 12th	Christmas Meeting- member's tales/ photographs.	Sun 14th	Rye Harbour
			Sun 25th	Chichester Harbour Boat Trip. (Meet at Godstone at 8a.m, or go direct and be on slipway by 12.45 for 1pm departure).
			Sun 16th	Harty Ferry & Shellness



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 Holey (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 2012 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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RSPB is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

If you would like to receive this publication by e-mail contact the Editor, Brian Thomas (e-mail: 13bjthomas@talktalk.net). Publications sent by e-mail will be in glorious colour.



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