



Red-legged Partridge



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nature

**RSPB East Surrey  
Local Group**

**LEADER'S BLOG**

Will this winter never end? The survival of many of our smaller native birds will be affected by these continuing cold weather snaps and in turn these will affect our birds' ability to embark on a new breeding season. Once committed, they must invest all their time and energy into incubating and raising their young. If their food supply is interrupted or their habitat is disturbed, all may be lost. For many there will be the opportunity to try again. So, if you can, give them a helping hand by putting up nest boxes and continue to put out food for them, preferably in suitable feeders, although even kitchen scraps will do.

Looking ahead, you will hear about the RSPB's new corporate strategy – "Saving Nature" – which covers its main aims for the next 5 years. Much of what the RSPB does for birds – nature reserve management, scientific research, political campaigning and education work – benefits all wildlife. This is important not just for birders, as our knowledge of and contact with the outside world enriches and gives added meaning to our busy lives. Regrettably many do not appreciate what we've got until it's gone.

We must all do more to reach out to those who have not yet understood this and work with others who are committed to building up our capacity to appreciate and nurture nature more. In May, the RSPB will be helping to launch a report into the State of Nature in the UK and its Overseas Territories. Its message will be that our wildlife and special places need help more than ever and

that Government cannot shirk its responsibilities. This year the Group's spare funds have been dedicated to helping intertidal habitats, the salt marshes and mudflats of our estuaries, which are so vital for wading birds and waterfowl here in the South East.

So please continue to support the work of the RSPB, spread the word and get out and enjoy nature when summer finally comes.

*John Lawrence - Group Leader*

**LOCAL BIRD NEWS**

Unfortunately there was to be no repeat this winter of the 5 magnificent long staying short-eared owls at Chelsham, but a single bird of that species was seen on the 5th November 2012 at Farleigh Court Golf Club. Your Editor was more than adequately compensated however on the afternoon of 20<sup>th</sup> February this year whilst driving in Washpond Lane, Chelsham.



*Long-eared owl- Brian Thomas*

I noticed a large bird perched in a roadside bush, and couldn't believe my eyes as it was the first long-eared owl I had ever encountered locally in 66 years of birdwatching. Needless to say I didn't have my camera with me!

So as not to disturb the bird I reversed the car, turned it around and broke all speed limits to get back the 4 miles home to pick up the necessary piece of equipment. Frankly I wasn't very hopeful of finding the bird still present on my return, but there it was still, sitting very obligingly out in the open in bright sunlight, enabling me to creep up on all fours, using an oak tree in front of me as cover, to get the photo shown in column two.

We see this largely nocturnal species from time to time on our group field trips. Almost without exception the views are less than perfect since whilst they are at known roosts, they are extremely well hidden from view in the middle of dense undergrowth, often hawthorn. When they do decide to move, it's only as ghostlike silhouettes silently into the gathering darkness.

Still on the subject of owls, recent televised horseracing from Lingfield Park had the commentators surprisingly baffled by the identity of very close-up shots of graceful white birds quartering the long rough grass in the centre of the track. At least two barn owls have been feeding there, sometimes well before dark, and it's an odds on bet that they're more interested in mice and voles than the thoroughbreds on display!

Other notable sightings during the first winter period included just a single ring ouzel for one day at Nore Hill Chelsham on 21<sup>st</sup> October, where several migrant blackbirds and song thrushes were also in evidence. The first woodcock was at Lumberdine Wood on the last day of the same month. Into November there

were 2 stonechats at Farleigh Court golf course, a pair of ravens at Beddlestead, and 3 reed buntings returned to Riddlesdown - the first for a considerable time. During December, finishing off the wettest year on record, waxwings turned up at Shirley and East Grinstead and soon spread themselves thinly throughout the county, including a small party at Downs Way, Oxted.

Into 2013, and the second winter period, 5 inches of snow fell on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, the same day 2 jack snipe were at Spynes Mere Merstham. There was a wonderful spectacle at Cheverells Farm, Chelsham on the 20<sup>th</sup> with a covey of no less than 50 grey partridge. The keeper 'put down' some 250 birds with the intention of trying to re-establish them in the area, and the shooting parties have only targeted the red-legged partridges, 5,000 of which are released most years there along with three times as many pheasants.



*Raven - Brian Thomas*

There was a report of grey partridge further east at Chevening, and as they are not released here or anywhere else locally to the writer's knowledge they could well have originated from the Chelsham site.

February saw another 3 inches of snow on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and there was a pre-roost gathering of 400 common gulls below Oxted Down on the 27<sup>th</sup>; the birds seemed oblivious to the constant drone from the adjacent M25! March is a very good time for red kites and Nore Hill didn't disappoint with different birds present on the 6<sup>th</sup> and then the 14<sup>th</sup>. Also on the latter date it was wonderful to observe displaying lapwings on the newly sown fields by Beech Farm, Chelsham, where the Limpsfield Road still had 3 foot snowdrifts in the adjacent hedgerows. Today 28<sup>th</sup> March there was a truly amazing gathering of no less than 2,000 stock

doves in stubble fields at Marden Park, Woldingham, together with yet another sighting of a raven; this one feeding on a dead fox. It's extraordinary that the high ground is still covered in our 4<sup>th</sup> fall of snow, and I'm wondering if Spring, and our eagerly anticipated migrants, will ever arrive! I think there's no question that we'll all need more than our Easter bonnets this weekend.

### **BOX HILL ATTRACTIONS**

A lifelong birder, I've done my bit of twitching in my time, but nothing too extreme. Yes, I made annual trips to the Scilly Isles 30 odd years ago, chased sea eagles in Norfolk, great bustards and gyr falcons on Romney Marsh, but I've never chartered my own light aircraft to chase an exotic warbler somewhere off the Western Isles.

In fact I get the greatest pleasure just finding 'my own' birds, particularly if they happen to appear on my local patch.

I do however look at internet birding sites and if something special is reported close to home, I may well pay a visit. One of our most beautiful and distinctive native passerines is the hawfinch.

Guy Mountfort, who lived in Woldingham, wrote a very interesting monograph on this species in 1957.

At that time they were still breeding in our district, and were regularly encountered at places like Farthing Down and Caterham until the early 1980s. These days you will be extremely lucky to come across any in Surrey. You can therefore imagine my disbelief when on 10<sup>th</sup> March an unprecedented flock of no less than 130 birds were reported at Juniper Bottom, Box Hill.



*Juniper Top Box Hill*

The first time I visited the site it was mid morning and I only managed to see a handful of birds. On my return on 19<sup>th</sup> March, I purposely went

earlier in the day, and hit the jackpot. Initially I only saw the bulky outline of single birds perched atop the distant beech trees, but out of nowhere some 80 of these distinctly short tailed birds exploded into the heavens and to my great joy flew directly overhead, and in so doing showed off their huge white wing bars which appeared completely translucent against the sky.

Our relatively small national resident population is augmented in the winter by continental immigrants, and this year has been a particularly good one with several counties reporting double figure flocks. It could well be that the atrocious weather on the near continent, or food shortages there forced the birds in much greater numbers to our shores, and happily to the yew covered banks of Box Hill. Considering their truly stunning appearance it is amazing how unobtrusive they can be. They possess a huge conical bill and muscular head specifically adapted for cracking open the seeds/stones of their favourite foods, like cherry, sloes, yew and hornbeam. Indeed their aptly chosen scientific name *Coccothraustes* derives from the Greek for 'kernel-breaker' and it has been calculated that the bird can exert a load of 60-90lbs to open such solid fruit. In this connection, whilst on a birding trip to N.E. Greece in 1981, Roy Coles, the then warden of Bough Beech Nature Reserve, and one of our party most unwisely, picked up an injured hawfinch.



*Hawfinch - Mark Sisson*

The bird immediately took hold of his finger, and as Roy yelled and danced about in circles trying to shake it off as it dangled from his hand, the rest of the party spontaneously burst into fits of uncontrolled laughter (very appropriately haw haw haw of course!) at such a comical sight. Roy eventually extricated his blooded finger, and believing for

several hours that the bone was broken didn't see the funny side of the 'orchard episode' till we returned to the UK a week later. Considering how close Box Hill is to home, it is surprising that I had never really explored the area. Having succeeded in seeing my quarry I decided to spend the rest of the day making up for lost time.

I was so impressed with the various and spectacular views, and the places/sites of interest that I would thoroughly recommend a visit. If you do go, pick up the various free information leaflets at the National Trust Centre, close to the viewpoint commemorating the benefactor Leopold Solomons who donated the original 230 acres for the nation in 1914. Don't miss the grave of the local eccentric Major Peter Labilliere who was buried 'head downwards' on the top of the Hill in 1800, since he believed the world was changing so quickly, and becoming topsy-turvy, that one day he would be the right way up. Had this gentleman known what was to follow in the next 200 years I dread to think what his wishes would have been! Do have a look around the Old Fort; one of 13 mobilization centres built in the 1880s to guard against the French, and which started in our area, to the east, at Woldingham. Finish the day looking down to the river Mole and the former home of John Logie Baird, or on the Burford Spur that inspired Jane Austen's picnic site in 'Emma'. At either I trust you will be as lucky as I was to see nuptial 'air dances' by sparrow hawk and buzzard.

*Brian Thomas*

## **WOODCOCK SURVEY**

It's been a very good winter for woodcock sightings in our area. In fact I have found no less than 10 individual birds in different locations which is more than ever before. It is however a great shame that none now breed locally; even at Limpsfield Chart, a former breeding stronghold, no birds were reported 'roding' for the very first time in 2006. They do of course breed on Ashdown Forest, where we see them every year on our nightjar watch.

The BTO are organising a National survey of woodcock this summer and quite a few sites in Surrey have been

selected. If you would like to help you can see more information about the survey methods and a list of the sites on the website of the Surrey Regional Rep for the BTO at:

[www.surreybtorep.co.uk/html/woodcock\\_2013.html](http://www.surreybtorep.co.uk/html/woodcock_2013.html)

If you do not have internet access please contact Penny Williams direct on 01276 857736. There are other surveys detailed on this website which you may be interested in volunteering for.

## **SPRING BIRD WALK.**

Not all of our members have the time to spend a whole day on one of the Group's weekend excursions.

With this in mind I am leading a local walk around Bay Pond and the Godstone countryside on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> April. We meet at Godstone Green car park at 9 a.m.

Hopefully we should find some interesting species including early migrants, but even if the birds don't fully oblige it's a very attractive walk in its own right.

We're sure to see greater-spotted woodpecker, but the very much rarer lesser-spotted can still be encountered in this area. I intend finishing by mid-day, but if attendees have to leave sooner that's absolutely fine. Please come along; I'll look forward to seeing a few new faces.



*Greater-spotted Woodpecker*

## **GROUP SALES SUCCESS**

Congratulations to Ann Fort and all those who have assisted her on the sale stall both at our monthly indoor meetings and numerous local fetes and shows. Notwithstanding what has been, and continues to be, a harsh economic climate, the magnificent sum of £2,072 was taken in 2012. If you are able to help for just a few hours on the stall, or just attend

to assist with setting up (erecting the tent and stall), please speak to Ann at our evening meetings.

## **BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH**

Almost 590,000 people across the UK, including more than 15,000 from Surrey, took part in the Birdwatch in January. Unfortunately, the survey, in its 34<sup>th</sup> year, revealed that some of the UK's most threatened and best-loved bird species, like starling, bullfinch, and house sparrow are continuing to decline at an alarming rate. With the cold weather seemingly set to continue, our wildlife may be relying on the alternative food sources we provide for them in our gardens for a while longer. Calorie-rich foods like mixed seed, nyger, fatballs, suet sprinkles, sunflower seed and peanuts as well as kitchen scraps, like mild grated cheese, rice and porridge oats are all excellent fare. Don't forget also that a supply of water is also essential for bathing and preening. In freezing conditions birds become more dependent on water provided in gardens, since many natural sources of water are frozen over.

## **GOVERNMENT LET DOWN**

Our political masters have most regrettably let us down once again, by refusing long term security for The National Wildlife Crime Unit, despite receiving evidence of how crucial it is in protecting our most threatened species. They have also refused to turn up the heat on wildlife criminals, despite previous ministerial assurances that tackling wildlife crime was a 'core priority'! The introduction of vicarious liability legislation, would have allowed landowners to be prosecuted for crimes committed by their employees. Until this happens the magnificent hen harrier will continue to be exterminated by shooting interests, and will certainly become extinct in England as a breeder. Make sure you let MPs know what you think!

*Brian Thomas*

| EVENING MEETINGS 2013 |                      |  | FIELD TRIPS 2013 |   |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--|------------------|---|
| JAN                   | Wed 9th              | <b>Danny Green: "The Long Journey North"</b><br>A lavish Audio Visual show from some of the remotest parts of northern Europe, including Scotland, Finland, Iceland and Svalbard associated with a book launch.          | Sun 13th         | Westdene Woods & Burton Mill Ponds. (Leader: Brian Thomas 01883 623149).  |
|                       |                      |  | Mon 21st         | Half day trip to Sevenoaks Reserve and Bough Beech Reservoir. Meet Godstone Green Car Park at 9a.m. (Leader: Brian Thomas). |
| FEB                   | Wed 13th             | <b>John Lawrence: "South to Antarctica"</b><br>To the other extreme join your Leader for a "twice" in a lifetime trip to the Antarctic peninsula via the Falkland Islands and South Georgia.                             | Sun 17th         | Church Norton and The Burgh. (Leader: Brian Hobley 01883 625404).   |
| MAR                   | Wed 13th             | <b>Dennis Newland: "From Temples to Tuskers in South India"</b><br>In his own inimitable style we view a Hindu temple and a Christian wedding in Chennai Cathedral and enjoy the wildlife of some lesser known reserves. | Sun 17th         | Rye Harbour-Long Lagoon & Castle Water. (Leader: John Lawrence).  |
| APR                   | Wed 10th             | <b>AGM</b><br>Followed by our Guest speaker Mark Thomas, Senior Investigations Officer with the RSPB on "Wildlife Crime".  | Sun 21st         | St Margaret's Bay and Bockhill Farm (Leader: Brian Thomas).   |
| MAY                   | Wed 8th              | <b>Glenn Duggan: "Rare and Extinct Birds of the World"</b><br>Guaranteed to get you arguing about the top ten contenders.  | Wed 24th         | Half day trip around Bay Pond and the Godstone countryside.<br>Meet Godstone Green Car Park 9a.m. (Leader: Brian Thomas).   |
|                       |                      |  | Sun 12th         | Minsmere RSPB Reserve. Coach trip (Pick up at Godstone at 7.30a.m.).  |
| JUN                   | Wed 12th             | <b>John Buckingham: "The Wonders of Bird Migration"</b><br>Further fascinating insights into why and how birds migrate.  | Sun 26th         | Acre Down New Forest (Leader: Brian Thomas 01883 623149). Meet 7am Godstone Grn   |
| JUL                   | Wed 10th             | <b>Ken Bare: "The Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty"</b><br>Learn about our wonderful local countryside and the work of the Surrey Hills Society.  | Fri 7th & 21st   | Ashdown Forest for nightjars. Meet 8pm, South of Wych Cross on A22, first car park on right (Long Car Park).                |
|                       |                      |  | Sun 16th         | Pett Level & Icklesham. (Leader: Richard Lowe).   |
| AUG                   | <b>SUMMER BREAK</b>  |  |                  |   |
| SEP                   | Wed 11th             | <b>David Boag: "The World of a Wildlife Photographer"</b><br>David's compendium of "favourites" and "tips" from over 30 years of work in the field.  | Sun 14th         | Mystery trip. (Leader: Richard Lowe).   |
| OCT                   | Wed 9 <sup>th</sup>  | <b>Mike Reed: "Bats in Surrey"</b><br>A local enthusiast's view of these ever popular night time fliers.   | Sun 18th         | Oare Marsh & Reculver (Leader: Brian Hobley).   |
|                       | Fri 18 <sup>th</sup> | Quiz night - White Hart Barn (7 for 7.30 pm).  | Sun 15th         | Beachy Head, Belle Tout & Birling Gap (Leader: Brian Thomas 01883 623149).  |
| NOV                   | Wed 13th             | <b>Brian Pettit: "Life's Tough at the Top"</b><br>Enjoy a wide screen presentation of the wildlife of the Mountains of France and Spain and the birds of the Camargue.   | Sun 13th         | Shellness Point & Harty Ferry. (Leader: John Lawrence).   |
| DEC                   | Wed 11th             | <b>Christmas Meeting</b> – members' tales/photographs.   | Sun 17th         | Grove Ferry and Stodmarsh (Leader: Brian Hobley 01883623149).   |
|                       |                      |  | Sun 15th         | Dungeness Point, RSPB & Raptor roost. (Leader: Richard Lowe).   |



Visit our website for all the latest news:

[www.eastsurreyspb.co.uk](http://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 2013 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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If you would like to receive this publication by e-mail contact the Editor, Brian Thomas (e-mail: [13bjthomas@talktalk.net](mailto:13bjthomas@talktalk.net)).

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