



RSPB East Surrey
Local Group

NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2015

No 57

LEADERS BLOG

Our 30th Anniversary year is now over and we are in the run up to the May General Election. The result will affect how Government treats Nature in the coming years. It's therefore worth challenging candidates to explain how they see public spending and regulatory regimes responding to the ever present threats to our wildlife and special places if they get into power.

Our advertising and recruitment campaign seems to be paying dividends as national membership is up to more than 1.15 million. The greater the number of members the greater the influence we can bring to bear on politicians and public bodies to safeguard and nurture Nature in their day to day dealings and forward planning; also to finance our own conservation initiatives based on sound scientific research and management. Regrettably the plight and downward trend of our farmland birds shows no sign of abatement. A current concern is the widespread use of nicotinoids in the countryside and the RSPB is calling on Government to ban their use until more is known about the long term effects on insects and bees in particular.

At the end of the financial year our surplus funds (£700) have been donated towards engaging with young people and school children in the South East. Also with the help of a generous private donation we have provided nest boxes at the Nutfield Woodland Burial site. We shall be monitoring their success and reporting back through the Parish Council magazine. Does

anyone know of any other sites that might benefit from similar involvement or support?

Now the weather is warming up it's time to get out and about again, particularly to enjoy a walk around one of our Reserves. We have another varied programme of talks and outings, including some popular mid-week local walks. Full details can be found on our web site <http://www.eastsurreyrspb.co.uk> so why not join in?

John Lawrence (Group Leader).

NO LONGER A PASSENGER

September the 1st 2014 marked the centenary of the death of Martha the last surviving passenger pigeon, a species native to North America, with flocks once so unbelievably numerous as to block out the sun with their passing and so turning day into night. She was so named in honour of the First Lady Martha Washington. The bird sadly died aged 29 in Cincinnati Zoo. Author Errol Fuller's recent and stunningly illustrated book tells the astonishing story of a species that has become one of the great icons of extinction. He describes how the fast, agile and handsomely plumaged creature was immortalised by ornithologist and painter John James Audubon, and captured the imagination of writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, and Mark Twain. Fuller shows how widespread deforestation, the demand for cheap and plentiful pigeon meat and the indiscriminate killing of birds for sport led to the species' catastrophic decline. Featuring rare archival images as well as haunting photos of live birds, this book provides an evocative memorial to a species

that was once the most abundant in North America, and reminds us just how fragile the natural world can be. It surely resonates with us today in a world where man has still not learnt the lesson of living in harmony with the wonderfully diverse creatures that share our planet and so ensuring their survival. All our countless politicians who only give lip service to the so called green lobby should in my opinion be forced to read Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and this chronicle of an avoidable avian catastrophe. *Brian Thomas*

FOLLOW USA EXAMPLE

I for one have never understood the continuing American love affair with firearms, notwithstanding the never ending incidents of college and other massacres there, invariably involving automatic firearms. What I do admire however is how seriously their Legislature takes wildlife crime, and how the judges fully reflect this in subsequent sentencing. After a very long and involved forensic enquiry two men were found guilty of shooting a bald eagle in Florida. One was sent to Federal prison for 9 months. The accomplice was sentenced to 18 months probation, and 50 hours Community service at a National Wildlife Refuge. The maximum penalty is a year in prison and 100,000 dollar fine.

The species was brought back from the brink of extinction through efforts to ban the use of DDT, which was damaging the eagle's eggs, and through the protection afforded by the Endangered Species Act. Clearly all involved were tireless in bringing to justice and adequately

punishing those who wantonly killed a living symbol of America's freedom.



Common Buzzard Now compare the recent case of a former gamekeeper found guilty in Norfolk of killing no less than 10 buzzards and a sparrowhawk as well as possession of pesticides and other items to prepare poisoned baits. Who knows how many birds in total might have been involved in this crime? In sentencing, the Judge rightly criticised the running of some shooting estates. He said: "Those who employ gamekeepers have a strict duty to know what is being done in their name and on their property. They also have a duty to ensure that their gamekeepers are properly trained and capable of keeping abreast of the complex laws relating to the use of poisons. In other industries, employers as well as the employee could be facing prosecution in such cases and I hope therefore that this case can serve as a wakeup call to all who run estates as to their duties. It is clear that the Buzzard population in Norfolk is increasing and this is something to be applauded and not seen an inconvenience by those who choose to run shoots."

Bob Elliot, Head of RSPB Investigations, said: "This is the worst case of bird of prey poisoning we are aware of in England, and one of the worst in the UK. Finding the carcasses of nine poisoned Buzzards in a bag at Lambert's home was truly dreadful. Unfortunately this is a part of a wider national problem". You must now be guessing the severity of the sentence. Well a 10 week suspended sentence with costs was handed down - how on earth does this fit the crime for the 'worst case ever' in England? How else can this be viewed other than a single buzzard's agonising death equates

to no more than one weeks suspended sentence; surely truly derisory and ineffectual as a worthwhile deterrent

The Judge's comments however give substantial backing for the need to introduce vicarious liability into England. It has of course already been introduced in Scotland. As I have quoted before in these columns we have 5 million supporters of wildlife organisations in this country; if every one of them asked their local MP when they come canvassing for the forthcoming election why they voted against or abstained in the vote on this subject we might be getting somewhere.

Brian Thomas

LOCAL SAND MARTINS

Sand martins are one of the earliest of our summer migrants, sometimes arriving in the first week in March. Therefore by the time you read this article they should be a common sight in our area. These birds, which breed in colonies, have been recorded nesting in dry drainpipes and natural sandy banks of rivers, but in our area they invariably nest in exposed banks of working or recently finished sand quarries.

Sand martins breed across Europe, Asia and North America, with European birds wintering in Africa south of the Sahara. A sand martin ringed in Godstone on 5th August 1966 was recovered in Missouri, Morocco on 13th April 1967.

Local records from the first half of the 20th century show breeding colonies at Caterham, Moorhouse, Nutfield area, Oxted, Reigate, Tilburstow Hill and Limpsfield Common. Since 1970 breeding colonies have been recorded in the Godstone area, Holmethorpe Sandpits, Limpsfield, Moorhouse, and Oxted. Although these attractive birds are still relatively common each summer, breeding colony sizes appear to be down compared to older records.

This summer we are hoping to carry out a breeding survey of our local sand martins. The area we will want to cover will be from the North Downs south to the Sussex border and from the west of Reigate to the Kent border. We

would welcome any records of possible breeding sites and numbers of birds involved. Should you have any such records please do not hesitate to pass them on to me. (Tel. 01883 742740).

Keith Brandwood

In connection with the above your Committee has recently sent a strong letter of objection to Surrey County Council concerning a planning application, illegal disturbance and interference with the colony of martins nesting at Oxted Quarry. A decision has been deferred until June.

Lapwings and other species also breed in the unfilled western portion and it is the writer's belief that conditions should have been attached to previous applications so as to permanently preserve a unique piece of local biodiversity.

Brian Thomas

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

It's been a truly unique 2014/15 Winter for local birds. For whatever reason be it mild conditions on the near Continent not forcing migrants to move to relatively warmer climes or whether they haven't needed to move because of an abundance of food; birds like redpoll, siskin and brambling have been conspicuous by their absence. For the first time ever I haven't seen either redpoll or brambling in the Warlingham/Woldingham area (my local patch for over 60 years), and only one siskin. Also unusual has been the local ratio of winter thrushes with fieldfares considerably outnumbering the smaller redwing.

A barn owl has been regular at Cheverells Chelsham, and tawny owls are more than holding their own in the area. One or two Short-eared owls have graced the fields near Beech Farm for several months, feeding on the numerous field voles, but little owls have sadly and inexplicably become very scarce. It's now early April and if you are travelling on the B269 near Botley Hill you are virtually guaranteed seeing common buzzard, and now stand a good chance of encountering numbers of red kite and raven. Remember to check for the forked tail of kites to

easily distinguish them from buzzards and to look for the diamond shaped tail of the raven.

AVOIDING TORNADOES

Some readers will well remember the mass twitch to see the diminutive but magnificent North American golden-winged-warbler that graced the Tesco's car park in Maidstone for over three months in early 1989. Well these little gems that only weigh in at around 9 grams are in the news again. In May 2013 scientists in Tennessee tagged 20 of them on their breeding grounds, with tiny geolocators, and after wintering in Colombia, over 3000 miles south, 10 birds returned in April 2014. However no sooner had they arrived than they all 'evacuated' the area and flew back south some 400 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, just one day before tornadoes struck. There were in fact at least 84 tornadoes recorded across the USA at the time, with 35 human fatalities and over one billion dollars of property damage. After the storms had blown over the team managed to recapture 5 birds. The geolocators indicated that the birds had taken unprecedented evasive action, beginning 1-2 days before the storm's arrival. They escaped just to the south of the tornadoes path- and then went straight home again. By 2nd May, all 5 were back in their nesting area. It is believed that the warblers - and other species- may sense such extreme events with their keen low frequency hearing. We have all heard related stories of birds flying inland and wild animals moving to higher ground well before Tsunamis strike coastal areas, and I remember reading a fascinating account of unprecedented movements and numbers of birds flying over San Francisco several hours before the catastrophic earthquake of 1906 struck. So whilst the Tesco's bird's navigational skills might have been suspect it would appear that science could learn a great deal from these fascinating creatures.

Brian Thomas

YET MORE BIRD CRIME

We are sadly only too accustomed to reading horror stories of bird slaughter from the Mediterranean

especially Malta and Cyprus, but it's tragic and incomprehensible to still have to report major problems from these shores. No less than 4 of the very beautiful and rare little bustards were found in England this winter and were seen by thousands of grateful and captivated admirers: so much pleasure given to so many by so few. This was true for Yorkshire, Sussex and Dorset, but what of the Norfolk bird? Unfortunately very few locals and less who travelled long distances saw this magnificent specimen before it was found dead, having been shot by some unknown 'lowlife' near the village of Blofield. The species is protected at all times of the year and are the focus of intensive conservation efforts in Spain and other countries where they breed. I personally travelled to Extremadura close to the Portuguese border at considerable cost specifically to see this endangered and magnificent species.

Not for the first time in these columns, another enigmatic species the hen harrier makes the headlines for the wrong reason. I have written many times about the ongoing conflict concerning this bird and the upland grouse moor shooting interests. The latest outrage however concerns Ireland.

Heather a female hen harrier was so named by local schoolchildren, and was fledged from a nest in Co. Kerry in 2013. She was fitted with a satellite tag in a collaborative project of wildlife and community groups to raise awareness of special raptors. Her movements were subsequently tracked online by thousands of people. She ranged far and wide throughout Ireland until being shot down in Kerry in January. This was very much a high profile slaughter, which even the Irish Minister of Agriculture publically denounced. I say 'even' since I can't recall any of our British front-benchers speaking out against raptor persecution! However sadly this is not the whole story since Heather's death has to be seen in the context of other Irish politicians recently vilifying hen harriers in Ireland. In the Emerald Isle it's not about depleting grouse

on upland moors, it's to do with forestry. The birds are seen as a threat to farming livelihoods and have become a target for those struggling with changes to the EU Common Agricultural Policy. There has been a moratorium on commercial conifer planting in six areas designated as Special Protection Areas since 2007, to safeguard the habitat of harriers and other moorland birds. The birds are largely dependent on the traditional farming in upland areas that has existed for generations. Conservationists believe the current ban on additional forestry within the SPA's is entirely necessary given commercial forestry already dominates the landscape. There is no doubt that farmers and whole communities are struggling in marginal upland areas, but an approach to commercial forestry that is clearly unsustainable is not the solution. These conflicts have been resolved elsewhere in the past; alternatives need to be urgently put in place to allow the landowners to continue farming their holdings in a viable manner, which is ultimately for the benefit of the local environment and rural communities.

HIT FOR SIX

I am not a cricket fan, far less so now following Sir Ian Botham's attempt to deflect recent attention away from rogue gamekeepers before the courts for appalling raptor persecution. His campaign and complaint against the RSPB, sadly backed by the Countryside Alliance, has been completely dismissed as unfounded by the Charity Commission. Given the current parlous state of our National team would he not be better employed shooting a few salvoes in their direction? All joking aside confrontation never gets anywhere, responsible shooting interests, landowners, farmers and conservationists are quite capable of resolving issues that are far from insurmountable. Talk, compromise, negotiation and endeavouring to listen to and so hopefully better understand the other sides stance is needed so that common ground can be found.

Brian Thomas

EVENING MEETINGS 2015			FIELD TRIPS 2015	
JAN	Wed 14th	Chris Gooddie: "The Jewel Hunter" A daring quest to see all the pitas of the world (32) in one calendar year. Did he succeed?	Sun 18th	Farlington Marshes and Hayling Island. Leader Richard Lowe ((01342 835354).
FEB	Wed 11th	. Conor Mark Jameson: "Silent Spring Re-visited and Looking for the Goshawk" Double bill. A reprise of his two recently published books, one exploring the debt we owe to Rachel Carson and the other describing his search for the 'lost raptor' – the enigmatic 'phantom of the forest'.	Sun 15th	Shellness and Capel Fleet. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
MAR	Wed 11th	Brian Pettit: "The Wildlife of Hants and Dorset" Wonder at the wildlife of the New Forest, Brownsea Island and the Jurassic coast.	Sun 15th	Pagham and the Burgh Leader Brian Hobley (01883 625404).
APR	Wed 8th	AGM. – followed by special guest speaker Steve Gilbert, Conservation Programme Manager, RSPB SE England Region who will be telling us about:- The Greater Thames "Futurescape" vision	Sun 12th Wed 15th	Pullborough Brooks. Leader Brian Thomas. Half day trip meet 9a.m. Old Lodge car park Ashdown Forest (TV470305) Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
MAY	Wed 13th	Chris Collins: "Birds of the Russian Far East". Kamchatka Peninsula and beyond, including the plight of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.	Sun 10th Wed 13th Sun 24th	Minsmere. Coach , Godstone 7.30 a.m. Half day trip Bough Beech Res (meet Causeway, North Lake 9a.m). Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149). New Forest -7 a.m. Godstone (Brian Thomas)..
JUN	Wed 10th	. Paul Roper: "Introducing the Lee Valley" Learn about the history of the area and its attractions as a Regional Park	Fri 5 & 19 Sun 14th	Ashdown Forest (nightjars), meet Long Car park 8pm (south of Wych Cross A22. Cuckmere Haven and Friston Forest. Leader for all Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
JUL	Wed 8th	Dennis Newland: "A Passion for Butterflies" An inimitable personal view of a life-long interest in these delicate creatures	Sun 12th	Mystery Trip Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Sun 16th	Thursley Common. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
SEP	Wed 9th	. Glenda Law: "Wildlife of Botswana" Birds and animals encountered on a recent camping safari to this country	Sun 13th	Pett level and Royal Military Canal. Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).
OCT	Wed 14th	John Buckingham: "How Birds Work" A simple and entertaining way of looking at the anatomy of birds	Sun 18th	Thorny Island. Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
NOV	Wed 11th	. Bill Coster: "Canada and North USA" Enjoy the changing seasons in the Rockies, around Lake Superior and the Yellowstone/Grand Teton National Parks.	Sun 15th	Gillingham Country Park, Motney Hill Leader Brian Hobley. (01883 625404).
DEC	Wed 9th	. Christmas Meeting – festivities including members tales/photographs	Sun 13th	Dungeness. Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).

Visit our website for all the latest news:

www.eastsurreysrbp.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 Richard Lowe (01342 835354).

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 2015 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.eastsurreysrbp.co.uk>. There is no group subscription, new visitors are always welcome.

Group Leader: John Lawrence (01737 553316).

Newsletter Editor: Brian Thomas (01883 623149)

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.

