



giving
nature
a home

RSPB East Surrey
Local Group

NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN 2015

No 58

LEADERS BLOG

It's nearly official! The nation's favourite bird is still the humble robin. We haven't got an official national bird but a ballot held by the "Urban Birder", David Lindo confirms our continued love affair with our garden robin. We will have to wait and see whether it will now be officially recognised.

As the evenings draw in and the temperatures drop the desire to get out and about bird watching understandably wanes. Yet this country benefits from a massive influx of winter visitors – geese, swans and waders – which are the envy of many countries. Of course you can follow the sun abroad (and you can learn more about foreign climes in some of our monthly talks) but why not wrap up and venture out onto our estuaries and marshes to enjoy the gathering spectacle and if you're lucky, hunting owls and raptors. We have another varied programme of monthly outings, including some popular mid-week local walks coming up, so why not make a date and join us.

Our "Giving Nature a Home" campaign progresses and I hope you are doing your bit to support your local birds and wildlife, even if it's just topping up the feeders in your garden in the coming months. The RSPB magazine "Nature's Home" has many interesting

articles and ideas on how to help and enjoy wildlife so don't just recycle it as soon as it arrives. And please continue to support the work of the RSPB, particularly as climate change is likely to be high on the political agenda in Paris in December and Government needs consistent reminding of the impact of their policies on Nature.

John Lawrence (Group Leader).

OARE STRUCK

I don't often report on Group field trips in these columns unless there is something of particular interest to record. The group was scheduled to visit Thursley Common in west Surrey on Sunday 16th August. In view of a relative dearth of interesting birds from that quarter and reports of several 'goodies' in Kent, the 10 attendees decided on arrival at Godstone, to reroute to Oare Marshes. What an inspired decision this proved to be. As I have previously reported, this Kent Wildlife Trust Reserve is in a spectacular location adjacent to the mouth of Faversham Creek, with a magnificent vista across the waters of the ever interesting Swale to Harty Ferry on the Isle of Sheppey with the former RSPB Elmley reserve to the west and further extensive wild marshes beyond to the east stretching on the horizon to Shellness Point. It's

a wonderful place to walk around with all its unique sights and sounds, even if you have no particular interest in wildlife. If you do decide to follow this recommendation, why not take a picnic as we do and sit comfortably in one of the fine hides provided, either looking over the floods inland, or the Swale at the very entrance to the Creek. If you prefer there are several close pubs that do food and the interesting town of Faversham is no distance. If you are interested in local history and disasters, check out the former explosives industries associated with Faversham and this very site-it's truly mind boggling!

Waxing lyrical I digress, so back to our visit. The site was awash with birds in their thousands from the moment we arrived; even the locals commented on the amazing numbers and variety. Quite apart from the more common waders like redshank, knot, greenshank, dunlin, golden and grey plover, curlew, godwits and green and common sandpipers we were treated to good numbers of little stint, curlew sandpiper and whimbrel. Add to this the extraordinary views of the normally secretive and spectacular looking bearded tits which were observed feeding out in the open on the exposed mud, the kingfisher flashing by and the obliging

juvenile reed warbler watching us from touching distance, it was a very special day. Five raptor species were in attendance but star billing has to go to the large female peregrine falcon that gave us an amazingly close view as it swooped before us over the east flood, flushing thousands of birds before it. The waders defensive close grouping 'balls' high in the sky was something to behold and as it turned out proved very effective since the falcon failed to make a kill, despite repeated stoops at breakneck speed. There were of course the normal duck species, and both Cetti's warbler and water rail were heard but not seen. This was not true of a splendid little owl however that perched for us on a fence post, giving us prolonged views. As if all that wasn't enough on a fantastic day, we even managed to see the two rare American vagrants present; a first winter Bonaparte's gull and a white-rumped sandpiper. These were 'firsts' for many of the group, and with a day count of 76 species you can guess where our field trip will be in August next year!

Brian Thomas

SEND THEM PACKING

That brilliant and ever popular wildlife expert and TV presenter Chris Packham has recently, and quite rightly in my opinion, spoken out again against the illegal persecution of hen harriers, the badger cull and other matters, much to the annoyance of the hunting and shooting fraternity. In September's BBC Wildlife magazine he said: 'We want more action from Britain's conservation leaders, not the fence-sitting and ineffectual risk-avoidance that

have contributed to the mess we're in now.' The BBC will soon be in sensitive political waters when its Charter comes up for renewal next year, so the timing of a call for Mr Packham's sacking from certain quarters of the Countryside Alliance comes as no surprise; they have been gunning for Chris for a long long time and obviously sense an opportunity. If the BBC was stupid enough to listen to such ridiculous calls all hell would break out, least of all from the myriad of supporters who tune in to the ever popular Spring and Autumn Watch. Can you imagine what message the effective silencing of a truly passionate defender of wildlife would convey to our children and grandchildren! Would this be the price of telling the truth and sticking up for the protective laws that Parliament has put on the Statute Book? Is this no longer the home of free speech? There was an eloquent defence of Mr Packham in the Guardian of 9th September, and legions of supporters are saying BACK HIM RATHER THAN SACK HIM. There is also a petition at change.org which now exceeds 75,000 signatures, so if you are prepared to stand up and be counted you know what to do.

SAND MARTIN UPDATE

Keith Brandwood's article on this species in the Spring Newsletter mentioned that we would be surveying breeding numbers/colonies in our local area from the Kent border in the east to Holmethorpe near Redhill in the west. As expected breeding numbers proved very disappointing. Whilst the odd bird was seen at the Moorhouse quarry on the Kent border, no breeding was established there. Moving

west the next site was the small remnant of Oxted Quarry, at Tandridge Hill Lane, shortly to be covered for ever with landfill (see 'To Fill Or Not To Fill' below). Here there were upwards of 35 active nest holes in the north facing quarry bank. The next site at North Park Godstone/Bletchingly, was found to hold the most breeding birds with three occupied sand faces containing in excess of 100 nests. Finally, although present in fair numbers at the Holmthorpe complex, sand martins didn't breed there this year. At least we still have this beautiful migrant breeding in our midst, but sadly at nothing like the densities of yesteryear.

TO FILL OR NOT TO FILL!

Unfortunately it now seems highly likely that the campaign to save the western remnant of Oxted Quarry has not been won and even the scheme meant to preserve and protect the sand martin nests on the north facing sand cliff is far from guaranteed to ensure the colonies future survival. Surrey County Council are likely to determine the application for the landfilling of the residual pit before the end of the year. It remains to be seen whether or not the owner and/or his advisers, following campaigners objections, put forward an improved proposal to better protect this important colony. Jovita Kaunang was the first to recognise the sites importance for wildlife, and she is to be congratulated on her well argued and tireless efforts to preserve it for posterity.

This is yet again another sad story of a valuable opportunity missed. Yes, as a society we need sand and gravel, but planning authorities

when giving valuable consents for extraction, and even more priceless permissions for subsequent landfill should ensure that the local community gets a proportionate quid pro quo. As far as I am aware there was absolutely no such historic planning gain attaching to this site. The small area of the quarry remaining provides an amazing area of natural biodiversity, and could be left with minimal management as a wildlife refuge. I am saddened that local conservation organisations didn't recognise the importance of this little wildlife gem, and so take appropriate action to preserve it. Quite apart from its valuable sand martin colony and nesting lapwings, the quarry base pools have provided ideal feeding habitat for green and common sandpipers, jack snipe, little ringed plovers, little grebe, teal, and mandarin ducks. All we can look forward to after landfill is a grassed bund devoid of any worthwhile wildlife: an opportunity lost forever!

Brian Thomas

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

It has of course been 6 months since the last newsletter and timing for publication was such that it was not possible to highlight the significant late spring migrants encountered in our area. Foremost of these has to be the record of a stone curlew found by Ken Noble on his Newchapel local patch, in a sheep field close to the British Wildlife Centre. Ken very kindly phoned me; luckily I was in and able to get to see this enigmatic species with my son Sam who even managed to get some half decent photos. This species was known to last breed in the County in the late 1890's on the Downs at Caterham,

today however its status is only that of an extremely rare passage migrant. It was a case of déjà vu for your Editor since amazingly, a year earlier and not far to the west near Outwood, Ray Baker, another birding friend had - like Ken - also found his very first Surrey stone curlew. Again I luckily got the all important phone call and managed to see that bird as well. It has to be said that the odds of ever encountering the species in the county are extremely low; to catch up with one two years running is equivalent to winning first prize in the National Lottery!

The other 'standout' bird of the Spring had to be ring ouzel. Seen most years in ones or two's on the Downs in the Chelsham/Woldingham area 2015 was a record year with amazingly good numbers across the country and no less than a magnificent total of 11 birds locally on April 19th.

There is now more astonishing news to report as I pen this in mid September with the truly amazing presence of double figure numbers of red kites in the Botley Hill/Titsey area for the past month or so. As far as I am aware there has not been local breeding of the species as yet, so these birds are most probably dispersed individuals - both adults and juveniles - from the Chilterns stronghold and the M40 corridor. It's now ironic to think that it was not that long ago that our group arranged field trips

to the Stokenchurch area specifically to see these magnificent and enigmatic raptors. Whilst earlier local naturalists such as Arthur Beadle and Hubert Pounds, if alive today, would bemoan the extinction of so many species once so common here only decades ago, and the enormous reductions of other once common species, they would surely be equally incredulous to learn that on a good day it's possible to see upwards of 30 common buzzards together with increasing numbers of red kites. Add to this the fact that ravens and peregrines have bred successfully this year for the first time in living memory, and you have to pinch yourself to realise it's not all a dream.

Whilst the 'chats' no longer breed with us as they did in Arthur Beadle's day it's good to be able to report they still drop in annually as passage migrants, with up to 3 whinchats at Court Farm Riddlesdown, and a minimum of 6 stonechats at Warren Barn Woldingham on 20th September.

Finally a rare grey phalarope dropped into Bough Beech Reservoir during heavy rain on the 15th September, and there has been both a Spring and Autumn sighting of black redstart at Bushy Bank Woldingham, a species encountered far less regularly than the common redstart in our area.

Brian Thomas

Windchat – Sam Thomas.



EVENING MEETINGS 2016			FIELD TRIPS 2016	
JAN	Wed 13th	Martin Davies: “Cuba – a Caribbean wilderness” An introduction to the birds, wildlife, landscapes and people of this island.	Sun 17th	Capel Fleet Sheppey. Leader Brian Hobley (01883 625404).
FEB	Wed 10th	Swapnil Kumbhojkar: “Out of the Amazon” Appreciate some of the amazing birds that live in the Peruvian rain forests.	Sun 14th	Lee Valley CP. Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
MAR	Wed 9th	Brian Pettit: “Birds of Coast, Stream and Wetland” Marvel at the variety of our water birds captured in stunning photography.	Sun 13th	Cliffe Pools. Leader Brian Hobley.
APR	Wed 13th	AGM - followed by special guest speaker Dr Mark Avery, previously the RSPB’s Conservation Director now a freelance writer and campaigner, who will be talking about: “Fighting for Birds – from Passenger Pigeons to Hen Harriers”	Wed 13th	Half day trip meet 9a.m. Old Lodge car park Ashdown Forest (TV470305) Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
MAY	Wed 11th	Chris Collins: “The birds and wildlife of Guyana” Enjoy the special birds and animals from tropical forests to savannah found in this country	Sun 17th	Stodmarsh. Leader Richard Lowe.
JUN	Wed 8th	Keith Brandwood: “Mull” Learn about the attractions of this favourite destination for birders.	Wed 4th	Half day trip Mercers Park Merstham (meet Sailing Club car park 9.30 a.m.). Leader Brian Thomas
JUL	Wed 13th	Dennis Newland: “A Passion for Dragonflies” An inimitable personal view of his life-long interest in these marvellous flying creatures.	Sun 8th	Minsmere. Coach pick up Godstone 7.30 a.m. sharp.
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Sun 22nd	New Forest. Meet 7.a.m. Godstone. Leader Brian Thomas.
SEP	Wed 14th	Brian Gallop: “Wildlife of Zambia” Learn about the wildlife and attractions of this less-visited African country.	Fri 10th & 24th	Ashdown Forest (nightjars), meet Long Car park 8pm (south of Wych Cross A22).
OCT	Wed 12th	Jono Forgham: “The North Norfolk Coastal Footpath” Discover the birding delights of this popular area.	Sun 12th	Sandwich Bay. Leader for all Richard Lowe.
NOV	Wed 9th	Chris Ward: “Romania; Bear Mountains and the Pelican Delta” Overview of the birds and wildlife of an area including the Danube Delta.	Sun 17th	Mystery Trip Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).
DEC	Wed 14th	Christmas Meeting – festivities including members tales/photographs	Sun 14th	Oare Marshes. Leader Brian Hobley.

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 2016 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.eastsurreysrspb.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: brianjthomas47@gmail.com). Publications sent by e-mail will be in glorious colour.

