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a home

RSPB East Surrey Local Group



NEWSLETTER

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No 59

LEADER'S BLOG

Shall we stay or shall we go? Whatever the great British public decides we need to vigorously challenge Government and other policy makers on public spending and regulatory regimes to make proper protection and conservation for our wildlife and special places.

Did you participate in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch? For an hour over the last weekend in January there was an opportunity to observe birds in your garden or at a public open space and get a feel for what is happening to your birds locally. Unfortunately two recently-published reports make for worrying reading.

The fourth Birds of Conservation Concern report shows a net gain of 17 additions to the Red List including such favourites as puffin, curlew, dotterel and woodcock making 67 species in all or 27.5% of those species assessed. Red Listed status means that there is a significant threat of regional extinction based on various criteria such as historical decline, trends in population and range, rarity, localised distribution and international importance. There is continuing concern about the population decline of a growing number of our long-distance migrants, particularly those that winter in the humid tropics of sub-Saharan Africa such as nightingale,

whinchat and pied flycatcher. It is also recorded that three species - wryneck, serin and Temminck's stint - have ceased breeding in the UK.

The 2015 State of the UK's Birds report also highlights a continuing decline of our wintering water and farmland birds although there is some hope for well-targeted conservation action for such species as bittern, nightjar, cirl bunting, stone curlew, grey partridge, yellowhammer and lapwing. Unfortunately the golden oriole may be on the brink of UK breeding extinction. The plight of the hen harrier in England continues to be of concern.

At the end of this financial year we have managed to donate £500 each from locally-raised funds towards RSPB work on our Woodlands and Heathlands. We are lucky in this part of Surrey to be able to access so many wonderful sites. But perhaps our local plant and wildlife are as confused as we are about the recent weather and coming of spring. Have you noted anything unusual in your garden or local area? We'd love to hear from you via the web site, at our meetings or on our outings (sorry but we're not yet up to social media channels yet!) Please check on our programme of talks and outings, including more popular half-day mid-week local walks, and why not

join in and help us raise more money for conservation action?

John Lawrence, Group Leader

AGE OF DISCOVERY (Part One)

For sixth form history I studied the great age of discovery, and was enthralled by the amazing courage and feats of the early explorers and Conquistadors. Quite apart from the amazingly diverse wildlife, it was not surprising therefore that I was thus drawn to South America. My first trip to the magical Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes, to Ecuador and the Galapagos archipelago in 2009, only wetted my appetite. This year during February, my own exploration continued with a cruise around the tip of South America, visiting Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Foremost amongst my heroes had always been Ferdinand Magellan, who masterminded, but sadly never lived to complete, the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1522. It was therefore fitting that I was to visit Tierra Del Fuego and travel through the Magellan Strait (some 600 kilometres long), linking the Atlantic and the Pacific and discovered by the great man. I should perhaps point out the 'slight' differences in the vessels travelled in. Magellan's Trinidad weighed 110 tons and had 55 crew, the seventeen decked, 200 foot

high fully stabilised, Star Princess was 109,000 tons and with crew carried upwards of 3700! Furthermore I don't believe any of my fellow passengers were petrified about going too far south and so falling off the end of the earth, or worried about dying of starvation, scurvy or other diseases. (NB only one of the 5 ships in Magellan's original fleet returned, and there were only 18 survivors on board after the momentous 3 year voyage).

Anyway, enough of the history and onto our holiday, which began with an Iberia flight from Heathrow to Santiago Chile, via Madrid. We stayed here for 3 nights, visiting its Bohemian - Bella Vista district with its interesting architecture and funicular railway affording stunning views across this large densely developed city hemmed in by two mountain ranges. The smart open spaces afforded views of interesting birds such as southern lapwing, eared dove, and austral thrush. Whilst there we arranged a trip out of the city up into the Andes to Valle Nevado, developed in 1981 by a Frenchman as a ski resort. This proved a really worthwhile excursion. Quite apart from the stunning scenery, including two glaciers and a wonderful and very reasonably priced mountain restaurant, it proved to be a Mecca for condors. There were upwards of 20 of these huge and iconic birds present; not only did they perform aerial manoeuvres for us directly overhead they also perched for photo opportunities on the roofs of the resort chalets. This was quite unbelievable for this mythical and usually elusive species since it had proved difficult to even snatch a brief glimpse of wild birds elsewhere in the Andes unless you went on an expensive and specific early morning excursion to somewhere like the Colca Canyon in southern Peru.

It was soon time to be picked up from our hotel to travel to the

picturesque deep water port of Valparaiso to board our ship for the 14 day 4,500 mile cruise. Before leaving our berth however there was plenty of time to birdwatch from the cabin balcony, where Turkey and black vultures were spotted along with a flock of Peruvian pelicans, a Peruvian booby, an American kestrel, kelp gulls and both olivaceous and rock cormorants. We eventually set sail at 8pm on Monday 15th February moving south-westerly down the South Pacific. We were at sea till Wednesday morning and it didn't take long for the seabirds to impress. Things just got better and better the closer we got to Antarctic waters. I managed to spot single blue and grey petrels, but what was extraordinary was the vast numbers of southern giant petrel black-browed albatross, and sooty shearwaters. We anchored at 7.a.m off Puerto Mont, a city originally largely settled by Germans. We boarded tenders ashore for an excursion to the famed emerald waters of lake Esmeralda, and the Osorno volcano. Often called the "Fujiyama of South America" this iconic snow-capped landmark rises over 8700 feet and is an active but dormant volcano. We were unlucky with the weather so I didn't add many new birds on the trip, nor did I get very clear views of the volcano on driving right up to a small ski resort below it. However, we were partially compensated with a wonderful lunch of fresh salmon in a local restaurant.

The following day we were at sea and I was both thrilled and stunned to see my first wandering albatross. The ever present black-browed with their 6 foot wing span had impressed, but to see this new and majestic species gliding effortlessly by on fixed wings up to 13 foot across was nothing short of spectacular. Sadly the long-line fishing industry has taken a terrible toll on albatross numbers, so it was

no surprise that I only managed to see a handful of this the largest species.

The early morning of 19th saw us cruising for some 2 hours very close to the huge but elegant blue Amalia Glacier. The onboard scientist advised passengers that upwards of 75% of the world's fresh water supply is held in glaciers and that if they all were to melt sea levels would rise by some 220 feet - quite a sobering thought! We continued our scenic cruise through the Chilean fjords and into the Magellan Strait with the sea getting very rough (wind force 7), and Wilson's storm petrels and brown skuas very much in evidence.

Early on the morning of Saturday 20th we anchored off Punta Arenas, but the swell and strong winds predicted later in the day prevented us landing. The Captain explained that it would be too dangerous risking over 1000 passengers being stranded onshore overnight in a settlement unable to accommodate such numbers. Accordingly we set sail for our next destination Ushuaia Argentina. Not long afterwards, again in the Magellan Strait, we were hit broadside by a mighty wind (100mph); this effected our stabilisers and the huge ship listed considerably, so much so that ballast was immediately shifted to starboard. Decks were closed off and onboard swimming pools soon lost their contents. Strange as it may seem I didn't see many people suffering from sea-sickness as a result and both my wife and I were fine in that regard for the whole cruise. Also strange to think that Magellan named this the peaceful sea and the name stuck (i.e. the Pacific)!

Because of these events we reached and successfully docked half a day early at Ushuaia, Tierra Del Fuego. From the rugged peaks, pristine lakes and ancient forests of the Andes to the glacier-draped

shores of the famed Beagle Channel, we were in the world's southernmost national park. It was hard to believe that this gem of a settlement was until 1947 a penal colony and owed its very existence to that historic event, because the inmates constructed, not only the towns railway, but also its hospital and port. After experiencing a ride on the stunning railway and its 'End of the World Train', I spent the whole afternoon walking around the picturesque bay in balmy conditions for this far south - 60 degrees F. I was rewarded with plenty of new birds including: Buff-necked Ibis, kelp goose, flightless steamer duck, and the stunningly beautiful dolphin gulls.

Our next stop moving south towards the Atlantic was the notorious Cape Horn - the worst seas in the world, and they didn't disappoint. More than 1500 ships have been lost in these waters. We managed to get to within a mile of Hornos Island but couldn't circumnavigate it because of the adverse weather (force 8 winds, very heavy seas and a temperature of 46F). I must admit I would have been very disappointed if it had been any different. Sailors used to say 'there was no law below 40 degrees, no God below 50' and we were nearly 56 degrees south! I was also reminded that Captain Bligh tried for months to round the Horn and failed, eventually getting to Tahiti by passing Africa and India instead. Star birds here at the turbulent confluence of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans were the countless prions, petrels (more than half a dozen different species at least), and a magnificent royal and wandering albatross.

At the bottom of South America, I have now only described half of this unforgettable adventure. Read part two in the Autumn Newsletter, detailing the Falkland Islands, Patagonia's Puerto Madrin, Montevideo Uruguay, and Buenos Aires Argentina.

Brian Thomas

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

On 10th October 2015 Nicola Hunt discovered a yellow-browed warbler in Coombes Wood Riddlesdown. This coincided with a considerable national influx of the species. I wasn't lucky enough to find the bird but gained handsome compensation discovering at least 4 firecrest there, which had most probably arrived with Nicola's bird. On 15th November John Mayer flushed a short-eared owl from the rough pasture behind Knight's Garden Centre Chelsham. This proved to be the only sighting of the Winter in our area. In an adjacent field on 15th December I flushed 2 snipe whilst walking my dog. These birds are rare on the usually dry chalk downs but the persistent rain had obviously created ideal habitat. A smart great grey shrike wintered around the Long Carpark Ashdown Forest and it's still there as I write in late March 2016. On 3rd February 2 ravens were 'play diving' over the Rose and Crown Chalk pit Whyteleafe. It's my experience that marsh tits have been difficult to find so far this year, with only a couple being seen in the Featherbed Lane area Farleigh. I do hope these birds don't disappear completely from our area as the Willow tits did so quickly. A male stonechat was seen passing through Nore Hill Chelsham on 11th march, very possibly on its way to Ashdown Forest. Single male merlins were seen on 16th November and again on 22nd of March in the Cheverells Farm area Chelsham. Finally after a temporary absence red kites were back in the Botley Hill area today, 23rd March, with 3 seen soaring with a similar number of common buzzards over Beech Farm Chelsham. *Brian Thomas*

OXTED QUARRY OBJECTIONS

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to those of you who kindly registered objections with Surrey County Council to the landfill application at the above site. At the time of writing there has still been no decision, but we are hopeful that the sand martin colony should stand a better chance of surviving with the improved, though hard fought, mitigation proposals. It is to be regretted however that the remainder of the site and its important wildlife will undoubtedly be lost forever. Is it too much to hope in future, that when new applications are considered for quarrying in our district, that necessary and flexible safeguards are put in place in anticipation of the possible creation of valuable habitats, and that conservation organisations take appropriate action at this early planning stage rather than wait until landfill when intervention is clearly totally ineffectual.

Brian Thomas



Short-eared Owl. Samuel 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	John Lawrence: “Footloose in Namibia” The wildlife of the Namib desert, Skeleton Coast and Etosha National Park.	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.eastsurreysrbp.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.

