



East Surrey Local Group NEWSLETTER



LEADER'S BLOG

Did you participate in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch? The results show further depressing declines in the numbers of our starlings, greenfinches, chaffinches and blue tits. Our most common garden bird continues to be the blackbird but hardly any mention is given to the rise of the wood pigeon which outranks all other birds in occurrence in gardens nationally except for the blackbird, robin and the blue tit, just! It's now regarded as the top bird in Greater London and Surrey, ousting the house sparrow and blue tit respectively! On a brighter note did you see any waxwings or other Scandinavian redwings, fieldfares or bramblings in your garden or local area as there were a lot of these birds about this winter. Don't forget there is much you can do to "Give Nature a Home" in your garden. You can help our native birds by keeping feeders topped up all year round and perhaps find room for a nest box or water feature? You too can have regular visits from colourful goldfinches and bustling families of long-tailed tits if you persevere. You never know what might drop in? Please let us know of any interesting behaviour or unusual sightings.

At the end of this financial year we donated £1300 towards RSPB work on our Coast and Marine Life. Nesting sites on land are given a fair measure of protection but much more needs to be

done to protect foraging areas at sea as parents struggle to feed their chicks. We must seek to reverse the current trends of lower breeding success and numbers of our internationally-important sea birds.

Please check our web site for our monthly meetings and outings. Why not join in our activities and help us raise more money for conservation work? And please continue to support the RSPB as it holds the Government to account for the protection of our environment and special places as the Brexit negotiations pan out over the next two years. One critical area to look out for will be how to support our farmers to grow food sustainably and provide areas where our wildlife can thrive. And don't forget to support our nature reserves as brilliantly show-cased on Spring Watch and Autumn Watch. Whatever your interests I urge you to get out and about this summer and enjoy what's on offer.

John Lawrence (Group Leader)

ALL ABOUT SWIFTS

I don't know about you but every year I really look forward to the arrival of swifts in our area and hearing that characteristic shrill series of screams, with the higher pitched one from the female and the lower from the male. In the past they were called "Devil Birds" perhaps because of their forked

tail and those weird screaming calls. I used to feel the same way about hearing the first and magical call of the cuckoo, but alas they no longer grace my local area at Warlingham. Sadly news for the swift is not good either, with numbers dropping dramatically by half in the last decade in the South East. Surveys confirm that three quarters of our swifts nest in houses, with old buildings preferred especially churches. Interestingly in NE Poland the ancient forest has a resident



population of some 700 breeding pairs, because trees are allowed to die, fall and rot naturally and as a result there are many old holes for the birds to nest in. Many of the birds preferred nesting sites in this country continue to be threatened and declining numbers are very probably due to such buildings being 'improved' or demolished. At first glance swifts look like swallows but they are not closely related at all having shorter bodies, longer and stiff scythe-shaped wings, and are

of course never seen sitting as they cannot perch. Their scientific name *Apus apus* derives from the Greek and means 'without foot'. Despite this they do have strong legs, with 4 toes pointing forwards enabling them to easily cling on to rocks and walls and even foliage. These sensational aerial insectivores spend virtually their whole life on the wing; they can drink, collect food, nesting material and even sleep and mate in the air. They are fast as well, with speeds of 70 mph confirmed and altitude records of 10,000 feet attained. Research has revealed that in just 12 nestling meals over 300 different species had been collected by the parent birds. It has also been estimated that a single bird could catch 25,000 insects every day! Swifts have no crop (food pouch), but accumulate food in the back of the throat. These meal clumps are bound together with saliva into a ball called a "bolus", which is periodically eaten or taken to the nest for the chicks. When bad weather strikes adults can fly huge distances for food, in our case often across to southern France and beyond. With adults absent for some days on occasions, it is no surprise that nestlings have the ability to drop their body temperature and become torpid. This uses much less energy and usually guarantees their survival.

Talking of survival, if you haven't got these birds nesting with you why not try putting up suitable swift nest boxes to help these wonderful creatures that are clearly finding things tough at the moment. If you do have them leave existing nest sites undisturbed and when doing repairs to your house make sure new access holes match exactly the location of the old ones.

Yes, I'll be looking out for them at the end of April; will thoroughly enjoy those nostalgic screaming

groups during long summer evenings when they gather and zoom around in circles, and will be saddened by their early departure in late July to Equatorial and Southern Africa.

Brian Thomas

SAND MARTIN REPRIEVE

Readers will be pleased to learn that Surrey County Council, after a long and hard fought struggle by wildlife campaigners, have at least recognised the importance of preserving the sand martin colony at Oxted sandpits. The quarry operators have been given permission to fill the remaining pit void with inert waste, but a mitigation strategy and conditions require them to leave in tact the southern cliff face for these summer migrants. It is hoped that this, and other measures, will be enough to ensure the safe and undisturbed continuance of the long established breeding colony.

Sadly, this is only a Pyrrhic victory since I feel a wonderful and unique opportunity has nevertheless been



missed here to preserve the whole unfilled western portion of the Quarry as an area of exceptional biodiversity.

Over the years, nature had taken over in the disused pit to a remarkable degree, and an amazing array of wildlife has made it their home. These included rare local and nationally declining

breeders like the magnificent lapwing. Water bodies formed periodically in the pit bottom attracting species like little grebe, mallard, mandarin and numerous other waterfowl and waders like common snipe, jack snipe, green sandpipers and even the very rare little-ringed-plover have been regularly observed in the vegetated margins. Yes, this real gem of a wildlife oasis, that could so easily have been left as a nature reserve, will soon be no more; we can just hope that the planning conditions are robust enough to ensure the martins survival.

In this connection I would implore anyone who is passing the site in the coming months and years, to spend a few minutes checking on how the colony appears is be doing, and to report any activities by the operators, whether authorised or not, that could be construed as disturbance. The colony is easily viewable from the east side of Tandridge Hill Lane, 150yards north of its junction with the A25.

Brian Thomas

VULTURE PROBLEMS IN EUROPE

Readers are probably aware that the catastrophic decline and virtual extinction in a decade (1990's), of 3 species of Gyps vulture in the Indian subcontinent was as a direct result of the widespread veterinary use of the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac. Over 99% of their populations have now gone, perhaps for ever, as a direct result of birds feeding on carcasses of animals treated with the drug.

One of my most memorable encounters with this species was when I spent a holiday with my family in the foothills of the western Pyrenees near Biarritz. The kids loved a train ride so what

better than to take them on a 1924 vintage rack railway train on a half hour trip up the 3000 foot high mountain of La Rhune the mythical mountain summit of the Basque country. What awaited us exceeded all expectation with a breathtaking panoramic view of the French and Spanish Atlantic coast and the peaks of the Pyrenees. But even this was but nothing to our experience with the vultures - the emblematic bird of this mountain range. Over 30 griffon vultures effortlessly and majestically glided around us at head height. It seemed such a special personal experience, and felt like the birds were putting on the 'show' purely for our benefit. They came so close at times that you could almost reach out and touch them. It's no wonder this place holds an iconic place in Basque culture.

Regrettably, this avian wonder could soon be no more. Yes, the drug that has obliterated its Indian cousins has unbelievably been licensed for veterinary use in 5 European countries recently, including Spain which holds 95% of the Continent's Eurasian griffon vultures. The Spanish governments suggestion that only limited numbers will be killed as a result of the introduction beggars belief; it's irresponsible and negligent, and most importantly entirely avoidable. Man has, with long line fishing, obliterated the albatross from our great oceans, he is now about to bring about the extinction of the vulture and potentially other avian scavengers from the face of our planet.

Brian Thomas

RELENTLESS SLAUGHTER

In 2014 the RSPB received 179 reports of shooting and destruction of birds of prey, including the confirmed shooting of 23 buzzards, 9 peregrines 3 red kites and a

hen harrier. There were also 72 incidents of wildlife poisoning and pesticide related offences; victims included 23 red kites, 9 buzzards and 4 peregrine falcons.

2015 was yet another grim year for raptor persecution with no fewer than 5 nesting male hen harriers from English moorlands 'disappearing'. Unbelievably rare visitors to our shores like the magnificent little bustard, and the stunning red-footed falcon were shot in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. The former had spent 3 months touring the UK and delighting thousands of



people. 8 satellite-tagged Golden Eagles have disappeared in the Monadhliath Mountains in the past 5 years, with 3 birds vanishing in just 2 months in the summer of 2016. Head of our Society's Scottish Investigations said, "It's surely no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of satellite-tagged birds of prey that have disappeared in Scotland have been in areas intensively managed for game bird shooting and in areas that have an appalling previous record raptor persecution." These 8 birds have all disappeared in an area where driven grouse moor management dominates the landscape, and where there have been many previous cases of illegal killing of protected raptors, including the poisoning of a golden eagle and a white-tailed eagle. Official statistics of course only represent a minute fraction of bird crime, particularly since most happens in remote areas of the countryside

and is totally unreported.

It is my personal opinion that the majority of civil servants, politicians and the police should hang their heads in shame when it comes to taking bird crime seriously. Despite there being over 5 million members of conservation organisations in the UK, their voices are effectively totally ignored. Take the recent case of North Yorkshire police not prosecuting a gamekeeper who admitted setting 3 barbaric pole traps on a grouse moor after a hen harrier had been seen in the area. He was only given a caution, and whilst the Chief Constable admitted her officers were wrong she tried to justify actions by explaining a caution was not a 'let off'. Who is she kidding- this is pathetic! The Crown prosecution Service as usual did nothing. Even in England's worst-ever raptor poisoning case in Norfolk the miscreant avoided jail, and whilst members of our group have provided the police unequivocal video evidence of peregrines being shot at on the nest locally, the perpetrators have never been prosecuted.

Now in the latest outrage of Establishment bias we have Natural England issuing the first ever licence to cull buzzards. What is really needed is for the gamekeeping industry to identify ways in which they can coexist with buzzards and invest in protecting their poults without resorting to extermination. If some responsible keepers and shoot owners can do it why can't the industry encourage the rest to follow their good example? In an industry in which brazen criminality is endemic this catastrophic decision sets a precedent that will be interpreted by the rotten apples to now give carte blanche to yet more not less raptor slaughter.

Brian Thomas

EVENING MEETINGS

- 11 Jan Andy Skillen: *"Walking with Bears"* Amazing guided adventures "on foot" in arctic Canada to view brown and polar bears
- 8 Feb John Bevis *"The Keartons: Inventing Nature Photography"* Amazing lives of the founding fathers of natural history photography.
- 8 Mar Brian Gallop: *"A Trip to Zambia"* Learn about the wildlife and attractions of this less-visited African country.
- 12 April AGM – followed by our special guest speaker, Alan Loweth, who will be telling us about: *Broadwater Warren* - How to make a Nature Reserve.
- 10 May Chris Collins: *"Amazing Birds"* Learn some amazing facts about avian travels, feathers, endemism and new species.
- 14 June David Boag: *"The Nature of New Zealand"* Enjoy the unique wildlife and outstanding scenery of these remote islands.
- 12 July Keith Brandwood: *"I paint bird pictures"* Learn how a local artist prepares and executes a picture of a bird study.
- August Summer break**
- 13 Sep Martin Davies: *"Wild Ethiopia."* Explore the conservation and development issues facing such a diverse country.
- 11 Oct Ashley Grove: *"Trinidad and Tobago, home of the Hummingbird"*. Marvel at the colourful birdlife of these islands, including some on film with sound.
- 8 Nov Bill Costa: *"Hungary and Spain"* View many iconic European birds and raptors of mountains, forests and the countryside.
- 13 Dec Christmas Meeting – festivities, including members tales/photographs.

FIELD TRIPS

- 15 Jan Dungeness. Leader Brian Hobley (01883 625404).
- 12 Feb Sheppey. Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).
- 12 Mar Gillingham Country Park. Leader Brian Hobley (01883 625404).
- 16 April Medmerry. Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
- 19 April Half day trip Old Lodge Ashdown Forest (meet OL car park TV470305 at 9.a.m. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
- 26 April Half day seawatch Seaford Head. Meet 6.30 a.m. east end of beach by start of cliffs. Leader R Lowe (01342 835354)).
- 3 May Half day Bough Beech Reservoir - meet BB Causeway 9.00a.m. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
- 7 May Minsmere. Coach pick up Godstone 7.30 a.m. sharp.
- 21 May New Forest. Meet 7am Godstone. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
- 7 June Half day Warnham Horsham, meet Blindley Heath pond 8.30 am. R. Lowe.
- 18 June Stodmarsh & Grove Ferry. Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
- 9 & 23 June Ashdown Forest (nightjars), meet Long Car park 8pm (south of Wych Cross). Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
- 16 July Mystery trip. Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).
- 13 Aug Oare Marshes. Leader Brian Hobley (01883 625404).
- 17 Sep Birling Gap & 7 Sisters Country Park. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
- 15 Oct Pagham Harbour. Leader Brian Thomas (01883 623149).
- 19 Nov Easthead West Wittering & The Burgh. Leader Richard Lowe (01342 835354).
- 17 Dec Pett Level & Rye Harbour. Leader John Lawrence (01737 553316).

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 2017 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: www.eastsurreysrpb.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

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