



East Surrey Local Group NEWSLETTER



LEADER'S BLOG

Did you get out and enjoy Nature this summer? Did you see a turtle dove, a nightingale or a swift? Probably not, as numbers of these long-distance travellers from Africa are falling precipitately. Some good news for now for nightingales is that the plans to build houses on one of their largest breeding sites at Lodge Hill, Medway have been withdrawn. We must remain vigilant but are you happy that 800,000 songbirds are being illegally killed on a British military base on Cyprus every autumn? Could it be that hunting and mist-netting in the Mediterranean area is having a long-term effect on the number of birds migrating to these islands generally? These and many other concerns require organisations like the RSPB to speak out and seek to influence governments and attitudes around the globe to take Nature seriously, not just for conservation reasons but because a sustainable regard for a healthy environment is surely essential alongside the need to feed and house the world's growing population.

Birds do not acknowledge national boundaries. So why should we ignore the effect of climate change (think again America about the Paris undertakings) as weather

events seem to be becoming more extreme and recurrent by the year. Those recent hurricanes caused devastation unseen before in the Caribbean and the southern United States but some of the islands badly affected fall under British jurisdiction. Global warming affects us all and we should continue to press for more not less international cooperation and action now and post-Brexit. Birdlife International is one of those organisations to which the RSPB is affiliated and which



seeks to encourage responsible conservation work around the globe. The amount of plastics floating around the oceans represents an immediate and long-term threat to many of our seabirds and can only be tackled by nations getting together if there is a will. The RSPB can be proud of its work showing how it can be done through collaborations like the Albatross Task force in reducing the unwanted by-catch of such iconic birds from long-line

fishing.

Giving Nature a Home is just as important in your garden or local area. If you are concerned about birds in particular and the environment generally have you encouraged friends and family to take up the cause? We are constantly looking for new members and people willing to speak up for Nature. Politicians and governments will have to listen to us and modify their actions accordingly if we speak wisely, loud and often enough. But they need to be constantly reminded of the long-term implications of environmental degradation and species loss and not just make short-term gestures to curry electoral advantage so it's even more important to engage and enthuse the young for the long haul.

We've just set out our new programme of talks and outings for next year. I hope there is something which attracts you to participate. And as our skies fill with returning geese and ducks why not get ready to get out and about and enjoy those crisp winter days watching these birds.

John Lawrence (Group Leader)

TWITCHING OR LOCAL BIRDING

As I have commented in past Newsletters, like many other

birdwatchers. I get the biggest kick or rush of adrenaline on finding 'my own' rare or unusual bird on my local patch. I have of course, on occasions in the past, gone on the so called twitches for rare birds, but the enthusiasm for such trips has long since waned for me. The one exception however is when I still rush off down to Shellness Point in the Autumn, when wind conditions are promising, in the hope of a really lively day sea-watching. Good days can be spectacular with hundreds of skuas passing by often very close in, not to mention the odd shearwaters, petrels and rare gulls such as Sabine's. It's not always like that however, since sea-watching can turn out just to be that on occasions, like the 14th September this year when Brian Hobley and I both thought conditions were promising but ended up spending several hours just looking at waves and the remnants of Herne Bay Pier and Reculver Towers on the horizon. Despite such blank days we are never put off, and will be down there 'back on duty' so to speak as soon as wind direction looks promising (i.e. anything in the northerly quarter). Correctly identifying distant birds at sea is by no means easy, but there's a great amount of satisfaction when they eventually move in closer to shore and you know whether or not your initial 'shout' was right or not. In this connection it's great to have experts and fellow enthusiasts with you, not only for the extra pairs of eyes to pick up passing birds, but to be able to discuss identification features on particularly difficult sightings, and to join in the special sea watchers camaraderie and banter when things go quiet, which they inevitably will for periods, even on spectacularly good days.

Anyway, enough of my remaining birding vice, I shall return to the local patch and briefly illustrate how interesting that can prove in say a 6 months period, if you put the necessary time and dedication in. I am fortunate to be in contact with a few birding friends who also watch 'my patch' on occasions, and this is very useful in immediately sharing information (invariably by text or e-mail) on what's been about.



This Spring things got off to a promising start when Andrew and Sue Broomfield had a male ring ouzel (*photo above*) in their Warlingham garden on 30th march. The same day 3 adders were sunning themselves off long Hill Woldingham in the company of several beautiful green hairstreak butterflies. Wendy Bainbridge discovered a female redstart below Nore Hill on 2nd of April and it was still there the following day. On the 5th a migrant yellow wagtail was picked up on call flying over Nore Hill. The 10th April proved a very good day, with 6 wheatears on the downs in the Warren Barn Woldingham area. One of these birds at Bushy Bank was in company with the second ring ouzel of the Spring, but most exciting of all was the discovery nearby of a single corn bunting which dropped in briefly for a drink at Rodney Fuller's

equestrian water jump. This was the first time I had encountered this species in the area since 3 birds were found on Riddlesdown in 2000. This was a significant find as I believe it's been several years now since any have been seen in the County, although it is still just about 'hanging on' in neighbouring Kent. Willow warblers, once such a common breeder in my local area, is now only encountered as a passage migrant. It has of

course declined markedly in the south and is amber listed as a result. It was therefore encouraging to find a singing male at Blanchman's Farm Warlingham holding territory for much of May and early June. Unfortunately breeding wasn't confirmed.

A walk along Butterfly Walk is always worthwhile for the view south over the Marden Park valley Woldingham, as

immortalised so famously in the words of the 17th Century diarist John Evelyn where he describes in flowing terms the estate of Sir Robert Clayton: 'Is in such solitude among hills, as, being not above 16 miles from London seems almost incredible'. Unfortunately there were very few butterflies at all neither common or otherwise when I walked there on 5th June, and even less birdlife, but I found 30 bee orchids, and its classification within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has fortunately preserved for posterity that same incredible view.

On 15th July I found myself on Nore Hill Chelsham amongst clouds of the magnificent chalk hill blue butterflies. What was even more amazing was the density of cinnabar caterpillars munching through ragwort in an adjacent field at High Breach. In no time

at all the flower heads had been completely consumed, and I anticipate that the vast majority of these insects accordingly starved and thus didn't make it to the moth stage. Cuckoos no longer stay to breed here and are now extremely rare even passing through, but John Gill found a juvenile at this location in late August and with their food preference for large caterpillars (they can eat up to 100 at one sitting), it's not difficult to fathom out what had attracted the bird here. Earlier in the year John Gill had reported regularly seeing stonechats in the Washponds area Chesham and asked if I thought they might be breeding. I told him that they last bred some 50 years ago at nearby Worms Heath and that I had only ever seen them in the Winter months or on Spring or Autumn passage through the area. John's suspicions however were eventually confirmed when 2 adults and 2 juveniles were spotted in August, and they are still in the area as I write.

Ray Baker who lives 'on site' at Watercolours Merstham, and who has the Holmthorpe complex Redhill on his doorstep as his local patch, saw a female brown hairstreak butterfly there on 1st August. It was third time lucky for me when I eventually found one at Spynes Mere on 11th August, and I even managed a photograph as it sunned itself on a young oak. Whilst I have found the diminutive white eggs of this butterfly on blackthorn much closer to home at Riddlesdown I have yet to see any adult butterflies there. The very next day Ray counted no less than 39 Willow Emerald dragonflies at the same location; an amazing tally of an uncommon species.

The first returning wheatear was spotted on Nore Hill on 16th August, but it was on 31st of the month that we had a significant migrant 'fall' after a very wet night. In the thorn bushes around the Civil Aviation twin towers at High Breach, Chelsham there were: 6 wheatears, including one individual of the larger more upright Greenland race, 3 very smart whinchats, 4 stonechats (not the local breeders), lesser and common whitethroats, a single turtle dove,



a spotted flycatcher and circa 25 chiffchaff/willow warblers, with the vast majority being the former species judging by wing length, call or constant tail depressing. I bumped into Jack Barnes later that morning at Nore Hill where we observed a very high hobby flying north. On learning of the birds I had seen earlier Jack said he would pay a visit himself that afternoon. This proved really fortuitous since Jack contacted me later to describe a small skulking bird he had flushed from the rank grass at Washponds. He wasn't certain of its identity, so I visited early the next morning and fortunately found and got just good enough brief views to confirm its identity as a grasshopper warbler (*photo above*). When these birds are clearly in view holding territory and giving their unique 'reeling' song they are easy to identify. When seen only briefly and silently skulking amongst thick grass things are far more tricky.

Encounters with the beautiful

yellow wagtail on my patch are invariably flyovers only when they are picked up by their distinctive call. It was therefore a very pleasant surprise when I discovered 4 of these elegant birds feeding on the ground amongst a herd of Longhorn cattle at Warren Barn farm on 13th September. They no longer breed here and this is only the third occasion I have ever found them on the ground in the area.

On 28th September there was a hobby hawking insects over High Breach Chelsham, and a few days later John Gill had a brief view of a merlin here. Then on 1st October I sat on a bench for half an hour on the high point of Riddlesdown

whilst my labrador George made acquaintance with several other canines in the immediate vicinity. Just in this short period I estimated a minimum of 150 house martins passed through high above me in a westerly direction and I sadly reflected how Winter would soon be upon us.

In this snapshot of local patch watching I have only highlighted the more interesting observations and trust it gives readers a feel for how exciting regular watching can prove. The downland area I describe is also of course the best place locally by far to see birds of prey which I have often commented on in these pages. Indicative of this is the fact that I visited two preferred slopes this morning (Bushey Bank and Nore Hill), and observed no less than 6 red kites, 11 buzzards, a peregrine falcon and a raven - surely not half bad for a local patch!

Brian Thomas

FIELD TRIPS 2018 (with Leader)

| | | | |
|--------|--|----------|--|
| Jan 14 | Sheppey (Brian Hobley 01883 625404) | May 31 | 1/2 day Warnham, meet Blindley Heath pond 9 a.m (Richard Lowe 01342 835354). |
| Feb 18 | Pagham and The Burgh (Brian Thomas 01883 623149) | Jun 17 | Grove Ferry (Brian Hobley) |
| Mar 18 | Dungeness (John Lawrence 01737 553316) | Jun 8+22 | Nightjars (Richard Lowe) Meet Long car park 8pm (south of Wych Cross) |
| Apr 15 | Broadwater Warren and Hartfield (Brian Hobley) | Jul 15 | Mystery trip (John Lawrence) |
| Apr 18 | Half day Old Lodge Ashdown Forest (meet OL car park TV 470305 at 9am) (Brian Thomas) | Aug 12 | Medmerry (Richard Lowe) |
| May 13 | Minsmere: Coach pick up Godstone 7.30am sharp. | Sep 16 | Reculver and Oare (Brian Thomas) |
| | | Oct 14 | St Margaret's at Cliffe (Brian Thomas) |
| | | Nov 18 | Pulborough and the Burgh (Richard Lowe) |
| | | Dec 16 | Shellness and Elmley (John Lawrence) |

EVENING MEETINGS 2018

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| 10 Jan | Rick and Elis Simpson: "Wader Quest" A personal insight into the problems facing wader conservation world-wide. | 13 Jun | Jonathan Forgham: "The birds of Southern Sri Lanka" Enjoy the unique wildlife and outstanding scenery of this attractive holiday destination. |
| 14 Feb | Des Sussex: "Reptiles and Amphibians" Get to know all about our native species, their lives and habitats. | 11 Jul | Penny Williams: "My year as a BTO Regional Rep for Surrey" How to combine an interest in bird, butterfly and reptile surveys, conservation work and holidays. |
| 14 Mar | Chris Collins: "The birds of the Ross Sea, sub-Antarctic Islands and Southern Ocean" Introducing the birds encountered from the less well-visited New Zealand side. | Aug | Summer break |
| 11 Apr | AGM - followed by our special guest speaker Euan Dunn, Head of Marine Policy at RSPB HQ, who will be telling us about: "Puffins in simmering seas" - how warming of the seas is disrupting the food chain of this our favourite seabird and others. | 12 Sep | Brian Gallop: "2 weeks in Ireland" Learn about the wildlife and attractions of this neglected area on our doorstep. |
| 9 May | Glenn Duggan: "Birding in Gambia and the Sine-Saloum Delta, Senegal". What this winter destination with over 540 species offers, sponsored by Gambia Experience. | 10 Oct | Brian Pettit: "A Falklands Island Odyssey" Marvel at the birds and scenery of these windswept distant islands. |
| | | 14 Nov | Adrian Thomas: "Homes for Wildlife" How to make your backyard wildlife-friendly based on personal experience. |
| | | 12 Dec | Christmas Meeting – festive fare and members tales/photographs. |

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 & 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 2018 starting at 8.00 pm.

Admission £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.eastsurreyrspb.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.

