



Grey Phalarope – Bough Beech



**RSPB East Surrey  
Local Group**

**NEWSLETTER 64  
Autumn 2018**

## **LEADER'S BLOG**

Did you enjoy the long, hot days of summer this year? Did you get out and about and go somewhere new to watch birds? You don't need to head off to foreign parts to enjoy the wonders of nature, particularly as there are many protected areas and reserves within easy reach from home. Surely it makes sense to make practical use of your RSPB membership to enjoy new experiences or re-visit cherished haunts, catch up with seasonal changes in bird life and enjoy a cup of tea and a slice of cake!

Have you considered keeping an annual bird list, for example, for your garden, for a local open space or even while on holiday? It's fun and makes you appreciate at first hand subtle changes going on. And don't just keep records for yourself – share them on Bird Track, an on-line facility run by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) which monitors trends from year to year and points to birds that are doing well and those not so for further research.

With 70% of the land being farmed it is encouraging to note that post-Brexit, payments to

farmers under the common agricultural policy (CAP) will be replaced by subsidies based on a range of environmental protections after 2021. No birds are declining faster than those species dependent on agricultural land, 56% since 1970. These new payments should benefit many of our farmland birds and support many more smaller farmers. It remains a national disgrace that vast shooting estates belonging to extremely wealthy landowners continue to be prone to illegal shooting, poisoning or trapping of protected raptors and would it not be better to encourage more responsible, beneficial management of uplands directly through the public purse?

It is also encouraging that more and more people world-wide have woken up to the scourge of plastics in the environment and many new initiatives are coming forward to reduce their single purpose use and/or recycling. Climate change and warming seas are already threatening the feeding grounds of our sea birds off-shore and the pollution of our oceans with non-bio-degradable plastics has serious implications for all

of us in the long-term unless we address the excesses now.

2019 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the first RSPB Local Groups. We have some years to go, having been founded in 1983. I hope our new programme of talks and outings for next year has something for everyone and will encourage you to mix with like-minded people who care about the environment and the future of nature, and birds in particular. Hopefully there will be more positive outcomes to report as we reach our 50<sup>th</sup>!

*John Lawrence (Group Leader)*

## **BADGER GOVERNMENT**

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a serious disease of cattle that has re-emerged as a major problem for British farmers. Whilst badgers are implicated in spreading bTB to cattle, they have unduly become a scapegoat for bTB amongst agricultural communities. I use the term 'unduly' because the scientific evidence overwhelmingly, and somewhat inconveniently for the NFU, George Eustice (Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), veterinary leaders and the cattle industry, shows that disease transmission

from animal husbandry practices and livestock trading are the principal causes of transmission from herd to herd. Despite this overwhelming evidence, it appears the main approach to bTB must involve some form of badger population control.

Accordingly, the Government's plan to cull badgers is being expanded into a further 10 locations in England, with up to an additional 42,000 badgers due to be shot. At a cost of £1000 per badger (based on recently published statistics), now perhaps serves as a good opportunity to review the utility of badger culling in the UK.

I would like to say that never before has a native member of the UK fauna been persecuted so ruthlessly, but unfortunately history serves not only to crystallise the folly of the industry for believing that culling badgers will resolve the bTB issue, but also to highlight the ignorance of our policy makers and the weakness of our institutions to address this appalling blight on our countryside.

In arguably the single most comprehensive study evaluating the epidemiology of bTB and the measures used to reverse the spread of the infection, the June 2007 'Final Report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB', presented to the (then) Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, David Miliband, showed in no uncertain terms that there is no scientific evidence supporting the culling of badgers in the UK as a viable means of stopping the spread of bTB. The report concluded that "badger culling

cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain" and instead outlined alternative cattle control measures, which, "in the absence of badger culling, [are] likely to reverse the increasing trend in cattle disease incidence".

In addition to failing to find a causal link between badgers and bTB spread, the question has to be asked, why has Natural England (the statutory institution tasked with protecting our environmental heritage) failed to discharge its duty to investigate the wider-reaching environmental implications of badger culling, particularly when the policy risks sites such as Special Protection Areas, where culling could compromise areas within or close to its boundaries. Failure to do this is tantamount to a breach of the precautionary principle observed in our habitats regulations and the repercussions could be catastrophic.

What ecological cascade might we expect from removing badgers? A potential insight might be gained from a close relative of the badger; the pine marten. Once abundant throughout the UK, these elusive predators were forced to the brink of extinction by persecution from gamekeepers and landowners seeking to safeguard their pheasant shooting interests. Once absent from large swathes of the British countryside, the ecological implications soon followed. The most pervasive of these impacts is one we have only recently realised through observing the ecology of the pine marten in Ireland where gamekeepers and landowners were not quite so accomplished in their

persecution, and sizeable populations survived.

Until recently it was not understood why Irish red squirrel populations were not devastated by the introduction of the grey squirrel to the extent that they have been in GB. As the ecological relationships between our native red squirrels, invasive grey squirrels, and the predatory pine marten become better understood, it is now apparent that the grey squirrel cannot persist in habitat where pine martens are present. By contrast, the red squirrel, which has evolved alongside the pine marten for millennia, thrives in their presence. The causal relationship of these population dynamics are not perfectly understood but it is widely accepted that the pine marten, a natural predator of the red squirrel, has a penchant for their fatter, slower, American cousins who have not evolved the necessary characteristics for escape.

It is therefore not an overstatement to say that gamekeepers' and landowners' systematic persecution of the pine marten, can retrospectively be seen as one of, if not the, single largest contributing factors to the near extinction of red squirrels in GB.

The eradication of pine martens occurred at a time when the impacts of trophic imbalances were poorly understood; today we have no such defence and whilst Natural England's position on badger culling should reflect the corpus of scientific literature, instead we see an institution which has

undermined its own practitioners' ability to evaluate the cull zones.

In much the same way they did for the licensed culling of buzzards in 2016, Natural England have kept the locations of the cull zones a closely guarded secret. Obscuring information from their local staff has become the mantra of Natural England in a number of high-profile cases and clearly undermines their ability to accurately conduct their Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRAs) (a legal requirement of Natural England's role as competent authority in such cases of environmental consideration when they are undertaking or permitting plans or projects).

This mantra has brought Natural England in front of the High Court on a number of occasions, resulting in punitive sanctions in the Wealden case relating to an illegal HRA on the environmental impacts to Ashdown Forest Special Area of Conservation involving an increase in traffic from proposed developments, and in several more cases they have admitted producing unlawful regulatory assessments, presumably to avoid more costly and embarrassing litigations.

With the scientific evidence so heavily stacked against badger culling and an Authority such as Natural England failing in its statutory obligations to assess the potential implications of this policy, it is improbable these expansions will be the last.

Nobody is saying that the issue of bTB, which is damaging to



Great White Egret – Bough Beech

livestock and farmers livelihoods alike, doesn't need to be addressed. What needs to be done is to get our ministers to realise that appeasing agricultural lobbyists is not the answer to this Gordian knot. We need a scientifically robust response to bTB which focuses on husbandry methods and livestock management and not on the needless waste of innocent lives at a huge cost to the taxpayer.

If readers agree with my views they may wish to raise this with their local MP, as I have done.

*Sam Thomas*

Editor's note. Sam Thomas holds an M. Phil. in Environmental Policy from the University of Cambridge; the opinions expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society.

### **LOCAL BIRDS**

As I write this in early October, Autumn passage is well underway with swifts long since gone and very few swallows and martins still with us. There have been a few local sightings of wheatears, whinchats and stonechats, but it has been a poor year thus far.

The now rare spotted flycatcher

has been seen on passage (none to my knowledge still breed in our area); one sighting was in the cemetery close to Mayday Hospital, the other at the British Wildlife Centre Blindley Heath. Not that far away at Bough Beech Reservoir however, there have been some really attractive birds. It has been possible to see great white egrets there along with black tailed godwit, but the star bird has to be the beautiful and graceful immature grey phalarope that has been gracing the North lake pools for the last 10 days.

For the first time I have found Jersey Tiger moths locally, a really beautiful creature that seems to be spreading at an amazing rate, and Dark Green Fritillaries have returned to the slopes of Nore Hill after an 18 year absence. Finally I wonder how many of you have been along to the Thames waterfront at Gravesend to see 'Benny' the Beluga whale which has been feeding in the area for the last week. Hopelessly off course this far south (it should be off Greenland or in the Barents Sea thousands of miles north); we can only hope it makes its way safely home.

*Brian Thomas*

EVENING MEETINGS 2019		
JAN	Wed 9	Andy Skillen "Never-ending story: my Life in the Wild" Covers projects in 2018 from Nepal to Uganda, Zimbabwe to Chile and on-going work with cats and dogs (wild ones...) and how to build relationships with these animals.
FEB	Wed 13	Brian Gallop "The Natural History of Costa Rica" An introduction to the fauna and flora of this magical country.
MAR	Wed 13	Bill Coster: "Queensland Australia" A visit which includes colourful Bowerbirds, Birds of Paradise and the Great Barrier Reef
APR	Wed 10	AGM - followed by our special guest speaker Peter Holden MBE who will be talking about "Birds: their hidden world" or the sort of information most bird books leave out on reproduction, social behaviour, the purpose of bird song and how long these birds can survive in the wild.
MAY	Wed 8	Rick and Elis Simpson: "Confessions of a bird guide" Promises to be an interesting and entertaining insight into birding on the road!
JUN	Wed 12	Ian Rumley-Dawson: "The Wildlife of Rye Harbour Reserve" The development and change of this popular site over the last 30 years.
JUL	Wed 10	Jonathan Forgham: "The natural history of an East Hertfordshire parish" Local observations and records in and around Hadham Ford narrated in his inimitable style
AUG	<b>SUMMER BREAK</b>	
SEP	Wed 11	Ashley Grove: "Shetland to Scilly" Learn about the wildlife and attractions of various places visited in the British Isles.
OCT	Wed 9	Richard Black: "Wildlife in Winter – feathers, fur and frost" Insights into our wildlife during the cold winter months.
NOV	Wed 13	Martin Davies: "Gondwanaland re-visited" How the remarkable geological history of the southern continents has influenced the wildlife we find there today (includes penguins, albatrosses, whales and seals).
DEC	Wed 11	Christmas Meeting – festive fare and members tales/photographs.

FIELD TRIPS 2019	
Sun 13	<b>Pagham</b> Harbour/The Burgh (Leader Brian Thomas - 07596 171941)
Sun 17	<b>Elmley</b> Marshes (Brian Thomas - 07596 171941)
Sun 17	<b>Rainham</b> Marshes (Wendy Bainbridge - 07751 784479)
Sun 14	<b>Rye</b> Harbour & Pett Levels (John Lawrence - 01737 553316)
Wed 17	<b>Half day</b> Old Lodge Ashdown Forest (meet OL car park TV 470305 at 9am) (Brian Thomas)
Wed 1	<b>Half day</b> Bough Beech Reservoir for migrants, meet 9a.m. on Causeway (Brian Thomas).
Sun 12	<b>Minsmere</b> ; Coach pick up Godstone 7.30 am sharp
Fri 7	<b>Nightjars</b> : Broadwater Warren (TQ554372) 8.15pm RSPB Car park Broadwater Forest Lane, off A26. (Brian Thomas).
Sun 16	<b>Thursley</b> Common (Leader TBA)
Fri 21	<b>Goathurst</b> Common: (Woodcock/Nightjars), meet Bough Beech Res Causeway 8pm (B Thomas)
Sun 14	<b>Mystery</b> trip (John Lawrence)
Sun 18	<b>Oare</b> Marshes (Dave Bryant - 07837 250090)
Sun 15	<b>Birling</b> Gap/Beachy Head (Leader Brian - 07596 171941)
Sun 13	<b>Reculver</b> (Wendy Bainbridge - 07751 784479)
Sun 17	<b>Dungeness</b> (Dave Bryant - 07837 250090).
Sun 15	<b>Shellness</b> and Elmley (John Lawrence)

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 Brian Hobley 01883 625404. Alterations to some of the proposed venues may be necessary at the last minute. *Warm waterproof clothing & stout footwear should be worn. Bring a packed lunch for day trips. No dogs. 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 2019 starting at 8.00 pm. Admission £3.00 for adults, £1.00 for fledglings. There is no group subscription and new visitors are always welcome.

Other events during the year are notified at the indoor meetings & on the website: [www.eastsurreyspsb.co.uk](http://www.eastsurreyspsb.co.uk)

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If you would like to receive this publication by e-mail contact the Editor, Brian Thomas (e-mail: [brianthomas47@gmail.com](mailto:brianthomas47@gmail.com)). Publications sent by e-mail will be in glorious colour.

