

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group

The RSPB works for a healthy environment rich in birds and wildlife. It depends on the support and generosity of others to make a difference. It works closely with other bird and habitat conservation organizations.

Newsletter December 2008



Being Part of the Gravesend RSPB Group (Malcolm Jennings)

Each year the RSPB send me a review sheet that collects information about the activities of the Group over the preceding year. One of the questions is always something like “how many of your group participate in....”.

We have almost 300 group members and trying to work out who comes to what is not easy. I estimate that our indoor meetings are attended by 120 – 130 people (sadly not all at once! - but wouldn't that be great - even though it would give Penny a real catering headache). Outdoor meetings probably reach about 60 – 80 people and some of these never come to indoor meetings. Everyone, I hope, reads this newsletter and is interested to hear about the work on our local RSPB reserves and about local events. Everyone participates in some way - so completing the review sheet can be difficult.

Every year in January the RSPB organises the Big Garden Birdwatch. Just watch and count the birds in your garden or local park for one hour. Instructions and count forms will be in *Birds* magazine and online at www.rspb.org.uk. One of the latest mantras is, “If you do one thing....”. Go on - join in the BGBW!

Presentation to Geoff Wright

At the October indoor meeting, Malcolm presented Geoff Wright with an RSPB award to commemorate his many years of volunteering with the Local Group. “There were only 88,000 members of the RSPB when we joined and look at the society now” Geoff said “The signed limited edition print of *Avocets* by Robert Gilmore was much appreciated”.

For Geoff, volunteering within the local group began 23 years ago, as membership secretary followed by treasurer and finally as honorary auditor. However, Geoff was keen to share the award with Cynthia, who first volunteered to make tea at indoor meetings over 27 years ago. “Jim Martin was the group leader and meetings were at the Battle of Britain” Cynthia recalled. Cynthia is still helping at indoor meetings and Geoff offered the following description of her role: “smiling invitingly and then taking your money!”



Putting up fences, chopping down sycamore at Northward Hill and planting trees at Bromhey farm, road hole filling, ragwort pulling and marginal ditch planting at Elmley and filling sacks with shingle to help create islands at Dungeness were just some of the tasks they were involved in before the Group's regular Friday team were formed.

Geoff has just finished reading *Birds Britannica*, and Cynthia *Flora Britannica*, and they both still enjoy real live birdwatching with the Group.

A History of the Grey Heron in North Kent (Malcolm Jennings)

Grey herons are an important part of the bird landscape in North Kent. Historically there have been two large heronries in Kent. One at Chilham, near Canterbury, and the other in North Kent. In the 18th and 19th centuries, and probably for many years before that, the large heronry in north Kent was at Cobham – not far from the present site of the Darnley Mausoleum. We know this because Robert Pocock (yes – they named the pub in Windmill Street, Gravesend, after him) kept a nature diary at that time. He tells us about his visits to see the herons at Cobham.



Some time around the late 1800s the herons became unsettled (no one knows why) and they stopped nesting at Cobham and moved to their present location in the wood at High Halstow. The herons prospered at this site and the wood eventually became a National Nature Reserve and RSPB Reserve – known today as Northward Hill RSPB Reserve.

Protected from disturbance and with few predators, the numbers of nesting pairs continued to increase. Numbers peaked at about 220 nesting pairs in the mid-1980s. Think about it – each pair could have 3 or 4 young – that's a lot of herons! No wonder that a few goldfish in garden ponds get snapped up. On one occasion recently, when I was escorting a professional wildlife cameraman into the wood, a goldfish fell from the skies and bounced off the roof of his hide!

Winter conditions are a major check on heron numbers. A long cold winter, during which the ditches and marshes are covered by ice and snow, causes the death of many. Grey herons do not migrate and a hard winter can kill off half of the population. This last happened in 1987. However, despite the run of recent mild winters, the heron population has been in decline at Northward Hill throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. Why? In spring 2000 a pair of little egrets nested in the wood among the grey herons. Little egrets first nested in the UK on the south coast of England in the 1990s but the Northward Hill nests are thought to be the first for eastern England. Their numbers have increased dramatically over the last 8 years and this year there were about 110 little egret nesting pairs and – wait for it – about 116 grey heron pairs! So, Northward Hill now has more breeding pairs of herons than at any time since the colony was started in 1900. But now there are two species! An amazing change, in such a short period of time, after centuries of history as a single species colony.

It would be natural to assume that the little egrets have “pushed out” the grey herons. But this is almost certainly not the case. Little egrets are much smaller, they do not start nesting until the grey herons are well



established on their nests and, on the continent, it is quite usual for both species to nest alongside each other. Also the grey heron decline had already started before the arrival of the little egrets. Could the large and expanding colony of rooks be involved? My own personal opinion is that the change in fortunes is related to the drier conditions on the marsh in spring and early summer that we now commonly experience. I think that the little egret is a more adaptable and opportunistic feeder when the water table is low. But what do I know! And what next - cattle egrets?

As a predator at the top of the freshwater food chain grey herons are excellent indicators of the environmental health of the countryside. The Heronries census began in 1928 and is the longest running breeding season monitoring scheme in the world. It shows that the population size of grey herons is essentially stable in Britain at the moment (there was an all time peak population recorded in 2002). In addition to little egret and cattle egret (see above) other herons are taking advantage of changes in climate and are more regularly seen in the UK. In 2008 spoonbills bred successfully in Scotland, some single great white egrets summered (including Kent) and night herons from a wildlife park in Norfolk bred in a local heronry (*all information from the BTO*).

Millbrook Garden Centre – Wildlife Month - February 2009

Each February, for several years now, our group has organised a BirdCare weekend in association with Millbrook Garden Centre. Volunteers from our Group and RSPB staff have manned information stands, organised roadshows and given talks. Chris Packham, TV naturalist, has joined us twice. These events have been very successful for us by helping to raise awareness of the work of the RSPB in North Kent. The Millbrook Garden Company must also think that these events are successful for they have now asked us to work with them to organise a month of wildlife and bird activities in February 2009!

As many of you will know the RSPB is running a campaign called “Homes for Wildlife” and this will be the theme for our February events. We will have several illustrated talks, workshops for adults and families, displays of information, RSPB roadshows, treasure hunts and much more. Full details of the events will be posted on our website www.rspbgravesend.org.uk available from Millbrook Garden Centre or by contacting me. I hope you will be able to join us.

At the same time we will also need volunteers to help run the events. If you have helped in the past you can be sure that I will contact you – so you might just as well volunteer first! But obviously, because we have more events, we will need even more helpers. Please contact Malcolm Jennings (01474 322171) if you can help.

Outdoor Meeting to Pulborough Brooks November 2008 *(Sue Healey)*



Photo
Sue Healey

After the torrential rain of the previous day it was a rather apprehensive group who met at Woodville Halls for our trip to Pulborough. We were met with blue skies and sunshine for most of the day however.

The first stop was at the feeders in front of the reception which gleaned marsh tit, nuthatch, blue and great tit and robin. The next stop was for sightings of fallow deer which had escaped from a nearby estate in the 1987 storm and had their spots bred out of them making them appear surprisingly dark.

As we spread out across the reserve the birds began to show themselves with goldcrest, chaffinch, and bullfinch early sightings. A great spotted woodpecker sat in the top of a tree calling enabling all those present to get excellent views. Other sightings were: song thrush, mistle thrush, jay, common gull, redwing, dunlin, little stint, sparrowhawk, kestrel, snipe, ruddy shelduck, pied wagtail, mute swan, shoveler, pheasant, cormorant, grey heron, moorhen, along with large numbers of wigeon, pintail, Canada geese, teal, lapwing. Malcolm conducted a master class on rook, jackdaw and carrion crow identification, and there was some debate over rabbit and hare.

Most of the group took advantage of the tea and cakes available in the tea room before our return journey. All agreed it had been an excellent day.

NW Kent News *(Paul Hyde)*

Changes on the staffing front at North Kent Marshes have been fast & furious over the last few months. Barry O' Dowd has left RSPB Elmley for distant pastures of Orkney, leaving a gap on the wardening front. We have plugged this by restructuring the area and splitting it in two “East” and “West”. Gordon Allison has taken over responsibility for Elmley whilst retaining his role in the woodland at Northward Hill. In the near future, he will also be responsible for the new reserve at Seasalter.

I have taken over the responsibility for Shorne marshes, Higham Bight & Rye Street as well as Cliffe Pools and the marshland at Northward Hill. We are presently advertising for a Sites Manager to oversee all of the above.

The planning application for the car park at Cliffe has been submitted to Medway Council and we await their decision, all things being equal, work should start next February. Other than that, the restoration plan continues to grind its way forward, we are meeting with Natural England & the Environment agency next month and we hope to agree the plan with Westminster Dredgings by the end of November. Presently you may see various contractors around the site conducting 'site investigations' informing the car park construction and the Environmental Impact Assessment required for the Restoration Plan.

We were given approximately 10,000m³ of clay, which was the product of the new Gas Pipeline being constructed from Gravesend to Grain, which we have stockpiled on the ex-arable field at the Salt Lane entrance. We plan to use this in the future for the construction of causeways & trails.

In August volunteers were recruited to help with the weekend patrols to ensure there is an RSPB presence on the reserve at weekends, to talk to visitors and deter motorbikes, fly tipping, fishing and even jet skis! So don't be surprised if you bump into wardening staff on the reserve these days.

In September Carol Donaldson, community officer and Malcolm Jennings led a coach safari across the reserve for members of the Sole Street Monday Club. The elderly guests, including one participant of 99 years young, enjoyed views of the reserve and the Thames from the comfort of the mini bus.

Introducing Sarah Cartlidge - Assistant Warden at North Kent Marshes

I have been working for the RSPB since April as assistant warden for the North Kent Marshes, working on Northward Hill, Cliffe Pools and Shorne Marshes. Before working for the RSPB, I was studying Zoology at Aberystwyth University. While I was at university, I did residential volunteering with the RSPB at Blacktoft Sands and Vane Farm. I really enjoyed volunteering on these reserves, learning and taking part in reserve management, and it made me more determined to work in conservation and in particular for the RSPB.



When I graduated from university, I applied for the double placement scheme that the RSPB runs in the northern region, which is an apprentice scheme to give applicants training and experience to work in conservation. I volunteered for a year on the scheme, spending six months at Coombes and Churnet Valley and six months at Fairburn Ings.

While volunteering on these two very different reserves I got to take part in all aspects of reserve work, from repairing fences, installing kissing gates, scrub clearing, WeBS counts, nest box surveys, stock handling, to membership recruitment and promoting and assisting at events. During the end of my placement, I was encouraged to apply for jobs and I applied for the position of assistant warden at the North Kent Marshes reserves and was really happy to hear that I had been offered the job.

Since I have started work here, I have carried out breeding bird surveys, water vole, damselfly and bumblebee surveys, leading team challenges and helping at events. I also lead the Thursday and Friday team of volunteers (see photograph), doing a great variety of tasks: making and launching tern rafts, woodland work, clearing reservoir islands, keeping the footpaths clear from overgrowing vegetation and installing new signs plus the odd bit of fire fighting when fires have got out of hand! Malcolm has asked for a photo to go in this newsletter too, so here is a photo of me with some of the Thursday volunteers, if you see me out and about on the reserves feel free to come and say hello!

Finally:

The last RSPB indoor meeting of 2008 will be on **Wednesday 10 December 2008 at St Botolph's Hall, Northfleet** when one of our regular (and excellent) speakers, **Ian Rumley-Dawson**, will talk about *The Birds of Seychelles*. Come and join us for a good evening – and perhaps mince pies.