

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



- a million voices for nature

Newsletter May 2009

I inherited the preparation of the Newsletter in 1999 when I became leader. I changed the mallard logo, that David Arnold had used, to two flying grey herons, as the group had had long associations with Northward Hill and its heronry. The committee have made tremendous changes to the Group since the change-over in 2004 and I think it is time for another logo that will be special to them. Above is the picture that helped to illustrate Malcolm's article on the grey heron in the December Newsletter. It keeps the association with Northward Hill and updates the artwork to digital photography. You will also notice that the RSPB strap line has also been updated.

Peter Heathcote (Newsletter editor)

Next Indoor Meeting and AGM – Wednesday 13 May at St Botolph's Hall (7.45pm) *Malcolm Jennings*

There will be a good chance to find out what our Group has been doing over the past 12 months (and how we spend your money!). We will also to get an update on the work of the RSPB at North Kent Reserves. The "official" bit of the AGM will be quite short - although longer than some of my "advisers" would like!

The present committee consists of Malcolm Jennings (Group Leader), Jeff Kirk (Membership Secretary), Neville Luness-Barnes (Treasurer), Penny Leeves (Indoor Meetings Organiser), Paul Yetman (Outdoor Meetings Organiser), David Johnson, Sandy Roman, Julie Peeling, Sue Healey and Judith Pursell.

Joyce Fletcher has decided to leave the committee after five years working behind the scenes. Joyce has done a wonderful job making our programme of events as widely known as possible. She has regularly contacted various local press offices (each with its own publication deadline), created and placed monthly events posters, and much more. The whole package needs good organisation and determination. Well done Joyce and many thanks.

The coming year will also be my last as Group Leader – doesn't time fly when you are having fun! So the search for a new leader is now on. However, if I do walk towards you at a meeting, please do not run away – I could develop a complex.



Homes for Wildlife Month at Millbrook Garden Centre – February 2009

Our month of activities and events at Millbrook started with a series of cancellations and postponements as the cold winter weather created havoc in Kent. How on earth did we manage in the past! Gradually our programme got back on track and our events were well supported by Group members and customers of Millbrook.

It was a joy to take adults and children out to RSPB Cliffe Pools on a minibus "safari". For many this was their first visit to the reserve. Even I enjoyed David Johnson's talk on the "Special Orchids of Kent" and I am now on the verge of becoming an orchid person. Becky, from Gravesend Library, was really pleased with the children's workshop that she organised. The artwork produced can be seen in the main library in Gravesend. Our celebrity speaker,

Mike Dilger, was a great success as he tried, in vain, to make us believe that the life of a wildlife TV presenter

was hard work. Mark Weston, from RSPB Brighton, had an RSPB display throughout the month and was in store at all of the major events to talk to shoppers and members (see photograph).

Putting together a programme of activities is quite hard work. However, I think the really difficult part is to ensure delivery of a quality product on the day. This is where our strong group of committed volunteers is at its best. I have received many kind comments from people who attended or viewed our Homes for Wildlife programme.



So, although I would not normally try to mention everyone that helped, here it is – Sally Jennings, David Johnson, Julie Peeling, Ted and Pam Connell, Mick Neves, Janet Keates, Alan and Sandy Roman, Geoff and Cynthia Wright, Paul, Sam, Emily and Maria Yetman, Sue Healey, Judith Pursell, Chris and Trevor Peek, Penny Leeves, Denise Venison, Joan West, Brenda Ambridge, Peter and Pauline Heathcote, Alan Else, Joyce Fletcher, Neville Lunness-Barnes (someone has to add up the cash takings!) and me. We also had the support of RSPB staff, Marine Conservation Society, Kent BTCV, Gravesend library and of course Millbrook staff. Malcolm

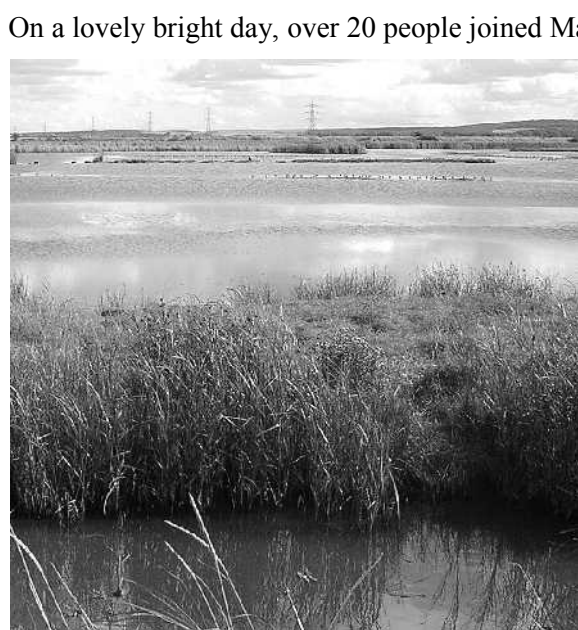
Volunteers Needed – Green Day - Holy Trinity Primary School – Friday 3rd July *Malcolm Jennings*

As most of you will know the Group has, for the last two years, sponsored and supported a special “Green Day” of activities at Holy Trinity School in Gravesend. This year we do not have enough funds available to sponsor the day but the staff and pupils are very keen and have decided to raise the money themselves and the event is planned for the 3 July. Julie Peeling will again be coordinating the activities (Julie will be seen wearing all of her hats – Group member hat, School Environmental Co-ordinator hat, and RSPB Field Teacher hat. Clever but tricky! RSPB staff, other experts from outside the school and school staff will be leading the activities for the children.

However we do need as many other volunteers as possible to help support each activity. It really is an excellent day and the response from the children is wonderful. It may be hard work but very definitely worth it!

Please contact me for further information on 01474 322171, or malcolm.chalkland@btinternet.com

5 April 2009 Outdoor Meeting to Oare *Sue Healey*



On a lovely bright day, over 20 people joined Malcolm for a walk around this popular venue. A brisk wind blew in from the river but we had soon noted great crested grebe, numerous redshank and black-headed gulls. As we stood scanning the area the first swallow of the day flew past and was seen by many of the group. We then turned our attention to the scrape and reeds. Reed buntings were sporting their bright breeding plumage. Wigeon, shoveler, pochard, teal, shelduck, mallard and gadwall were all present, along with little egret, cormorant, and greylag geese. Two common gulls were found on one of the islands, and a Mediterranean gull flew past.

Several lucky members of the group saw a bearded tit as it moved from bramble to reed, keeping low out of the wind and, despite our best efforts, it was not spotted again. Other species noted were snipe and linnet. Two marsh frogs were found in one of the sluices and seemed unperturbed to have such an audience.

After a quick lunch stop, we moved back along the seawall, eastwards. The tide had receded and curlew had joined the redshanks in the mud. A large flock of Brent geese were spotted out in the estuary but only really visible with a telescope.



Oare Marshes - View across Swale to Harty Ferry Inn

Two avocets flew past us, in the direction we had just come from, to land in a pool, upending in the deep water. Stock doves were using the concrete buildings and Konik ponies grazed the fields.

Three marsh harriers displayed for a while giving everyone the chance to see them well, before we returned to the car park and the end of our walk

North Kent Marshes News

Alan Johnson

A new residential volunteer wardening scheme is set to start at Northward Hill. The old farmhouse at Bromhey Farm has been renovated and we will take recruits. We intend to expand this into an apprenticeship scheme next year to develop the RSPB staff of the future.

Our brick barn at Bromhey Farm is set to become an indoor base for education, walks and events. Heat and light are now in place, and we will soon install visual and interactive displays to encourage schools to visit us. Indoor events for the summer will include music concerts to complement our cherry orchard music evening.

Dungeness Reserve News

Phil Beraet

As with most reserves, much of our focus during spring has been carrying out essential new work and maintenance work to prepare the reserve's various habitats in readiness for our breeding birds.

Seabird islands on many pits have been cleared of last season's vegetation and decoy black-headed gulls will be put out soon to encourage birds (including terns) to return to breed on the reserve. More tree sparrow nest boxes were made, and put up at two sites away from Boulderwall Farm, to encourage our burgeoning colony to spread to other parts of the reserve.

RSPB Big Garden BirdWatch

RSPB information

This year's Big Garden BirdWatch involved a record 552,000 participants across the UK who logged garden visits by 8.5 million birds of 73 different species. It was the largest mass-participation wildlife survey anywhere in the world!

As in previous years, in terms of numbers, house sparrows and starlings were the two most populous species in gardens. Their high position conceals the fact however that both species have suffered major declines since the survey first began in 1979. House sparrow and starling numbers have fallen by 63% and 79% respectively since the first survey. This year did bring one small sign of hope however with house sparrow numbers rising 3% on 2008.

Species	% Gardens found
Blackbird	95
Blue Tit	81
Woodpigeon	69
House Sparrow	61
Collared Dove	57
Dunnock	54
Chaffinch	53
Starling	50
Greenfinch	33
Long-tailed Tit	28

The big surprise this year was the long-tailed tit with numbers up 89% on 2008. At 14cm long, and weighing little more than a 50p coin, the long-tailed tit suffers badly from freezing weather. From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s a series of bitter winters caused the population to plummet but a long run of mild winters has brought the species into the top ten garden birds for the first time.

“A few years ago this bird wouldn’t often have been seen on feeders, preferring instead to forage in the countryside,” said Dr Mark Avery, the RSPB’s director of conservation.

Long-tailed tits were not the only surprise from this year’s survey, with many respondents in the east of England enjoying sightings of waxwings, a scarce and irregular winter visitor from Scandinavia. The waxwing leapt 13 places up the bird-spotting chart, which the RSPB’s Big Garden BirdWatch coordinator Sarah Kelly attributed partly to gardens with berry-bearing shrubs. A change in what we feed birds is also thought to be causing a greater diversity of species.



The survey follows a recent report by Durham University, which concluded that climate change was threatening some native British birds with extinction. Experts warn that changes in the British climate, such as milder winters and drier summers, could leave some species struggling to adapt.

Ecologists note that a warmer climate will, however, be good news for some bird species. “We would expect changes in the relative abundance of some of our common birds as climates warm across the UK and Europe, with some species increasing in abundance,” said Dr Stephen Willis, lecturer in ecology at Durham University.

Bob Scott

Malcolm Jennings and Peter Heathcote

You may have heard the sad news that Bob Scott died on 26 March after a short illness. Bob worked for the RSPB for 37 years and for part of this time he was warden at Dungeness and then Northward Hill. While at Northward Hill Bob and his wife Ann were involved in the formation of the Gravesend RSPB Group. Bob later worked at The Lodge, Sandy and he had a great influence on the conservation of birds in Britain and abroad. Bob Scott started the relationship between the Group and Northward Hill in the early 1980’s when many work parties took place in the woods (lesser spotted woodpecker could be guaranteed there then!). Ride clearing, path making and sycamore cutting followed by bonfires were regular features. We also had a regular outdoor badger watching meeting from a platform that Bob had made in a tree. Many members kept in touch with Bob and Ann after they moved to Sandy. His constant happy enthusiasm, his mine of knowledge, and his bottomless supply of jokes, never waned over the years. He will be sadly missed.

Coach Trip to the Fens on Saturday 6 June 2009

Sally Jennings

Join us on a trip to two different reserves to see the birds and wildlife of the East Anglian fens. Hopefully, marsh harriers, hobbies and bearded tits in the reed beds, golden orioles in the poplars, and, maybe cuckoos everywhere watching sedge and reed warblers.

In the morning we will visit the National Trust reserve, Wicken Fen, which has hides, trails and a visitor centre serving snacks and drinks. After lunch we will travel to RSPB Lakenheath nearby with its new visitor centre and paths.

Tickets are: NT members - £11 Non-NT members - £15
National Trust members with membership cards have free admission at Wicken Fen.



We leave Woodville Halls at **8am and return at about 7.30pm**

Please make cheques payable to: Gravesend RSPB Local Group and send to Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474 322171), enclosing SAE for ticket(s) please.

Photographs: Grey Heron and Long-tailed Tit - RSPB, all others - Peter and Pauline Heathcote.