

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



nature's voice

Newsletter December 2009

As I mentioned in a newsletter earlier this year I will be formally standing down as group leader at the next AGM in May. However the Group committee will share much of the work that I do from the start of the New Year. We have still not resolved who will take over officially in May. However I am already looking forward to being involved with many of the Group events in 2010. Here are some highlights for 2010.

We have a new dawn chorus walk venue in May at Cobham at 6.00am (I know – but it is early enough!). The group used to visit “Cobham Woods” many years ago but sadly the site has been in decline and it became a “no go” area. The woods are now managed by the National Trust and Plantlife and are perfect for a dawn chorus visit. I am really pleased to be able to lead a walk there – conservation progress at last. It is so good at Cobham that I will lead another walk in June to the famous “Kitchen Field” on the Plantlife Reserve. This year the wildflower display was brilliant – I went twice in one week and could have spent the whole day just sitting amongst the flowers. No doubt it will pour with rain the day we go in 2010 – but you never know.

Another new venture is our “Migrant Watch”. A cunning plan this. Usually when we go to see migrants at (say) Dungeness, the wind is in the wrong direction and we should have been on the other side of Kent at Reculver. When we go to Reculver For our Migrant Watch in 2010 we will decide where to go only a few days in advance. What can go wrong?

With this newsletter you should have received our annual programme. Full details of the Group, the programme and the latest news can always be found on our website at www.rspbgravesend.org.uk.

I hope you will join us at one of our events.
Jennings

Malcolm

PS. I did receive the RSPB President's Award at the AGM. Sadly Kate (Humble) was filming for Autumn Watch in Scotland and could not join us at the ceremony. A beautiful relationship nipped in the bud.

New RSPB Reserve on North Kent Marshes

The RSPB has just announced that they have acquired land on the North Kent Marshes adjacent to the RSPB reserve at Elmley on Sheppey. Great Bells Farm, about the same size as the Elmley reserve, will be a great addition to the existing reserves in North Kent and should, in time, provide a great boost for populations of breeding waders such as lapwing, redshank and avocet. There is a lot of work to be done on the site to restore it to wet grassland. Ditches will need to be cleared and conservation grazing by cattle and sheep will be introduced.

The North Kent team of wardens have had lots of practice of this kind of work. The marshland at Northward Hill was reverted from arable farming only 15 years ago, Shorne Marshes only seven years ago and at Seasalter restoration work is still at a very early stage. Add to this all of the “remedial” work that has been carried out at Cliffe Pools Reserve and I think the new acquisition shows the continuing commitment of the RSPB to preserve the landscape and wildlife of the North Kent Marshes.

At the moment there is no public or member access to Great Bells Farm. I have been advised that the only access is through the prison!

Malcolm Jennings

Hedgehogs – In decline?

For many years now I have kept a record of every hedgehog that I have seen in Kent. Some sightings have been in my garden but most, sadly, have been dead corpses in the road. Like many other people, I believe there are less hedgehogs about in our area than a few years ago.

I was really pleased, therefore, to get a very early morning call about hedgehogs (actually a bit later would have been better still) from an excited Julie Peeling. She had arrived at Holy Trinity School to find that builders had just removed an old wooden “temporary” classroom (hut) and they had found a mum hedgehog with a young litter of hedgehog kittens under the floor. And this was the start of the autumn term this year! What to do? To cut a long story short – Julie went to B&Q to purchase some wood and the caretakers were persuaded to build a suitable hedgehog home in the school wildlife area, adjacent to the building site. Mum was kept supplied with food and, as far as we can tell, everything was happy ever after.

Amazingly, early the next morning, Julie called again! (what is she doing in school at this time of day?). The builders had just removed a second hut and under the floor? - another mum hedgehog with another litter. And this time the kittens were very small – as Julie said, “they are the size of walnuts”. What to do again? This time we decided that the young



hedgehogs were too small to survive and we called Judith Purssell, one of our group members, who volunteers for Follies Wildlife Rescue. Mum and babies were collected and transferred to intensive care. At the last report all were doing well and they will be released in the spring.

What to make of all of this as far as hedgehogs are concerned I am not sure. But I am thinking of changing my telephone number! On a more sombre note, I recently read of some research carried out on dead hedgehogs (road accidents). 80 out of 120 showed traces of the anticoagulant chemicals used in rat poisons. Levels were high although few of the hedgehogs showed clear signs of anticoagulant poisoning such as internal bleeding. It is not known how the hedgehogs access the rat poison. They may be feeding on poorly sited bait or scavenging on dead rats or feeding on slugs and snails that have come into contact with dead rats and their faeces.

The Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre at Brogdale will always be pleased to receive the details of your hedgehog sightings. Look at www.kmbrc.org.uk.

Second Hand Books

Although we are no longer able to hold our Charity Stall in Gravesend Market, group members occasionally still give me books to help raise funds for the RSPB. George Clements recently passed on

to me several bird books – four of these I knew were very collectible. By selling direct to a specialist bookseller, Neville our treasurer, raised £110. A cheque has been sent to the RSPB. Many thanks George!

Nests in Trouble

We all know that the number of birds we see in the countryside has been declining for a number of years. How can we help? Poor resources during the winter may impact on the condition of birds in the breeding season and reduced food availability in the spring/summer may impact on their nest success. Familiar garden birds, such as dunnock, house sparrow and chaffinch, are producing fewer fledglings per breeding attempt.

Providing food and shelter in the garden is an important way of helping birds to have a more successful nesting season. Come along to the events at Millbrook as shown below and see how you can help.

Millbrook Garden Centre – Homes for Wildlife – February 2010

You may remember that last year our group had a “Homes for Wildlife” month of activities at Millbrook Garden Centre. I really enjoyed being involved with this and I hope that, if you were involved, you enjoyed it too! To be honest it was a bit tough keeping it all going for a month. The snow and bad weather did not help.

So this year? – We have organized a wildlife week (actually 9 days).

Our programme is:

Saturday 6 February 2010. Millbrook Events Room. 3.30pm - 4.30pm.

How to Attract Birds to your Garden - A Talk by Malcolm Jennings. Tickets £2.50.

Sunday 7 February 2010. 10.00am - 3.30pm FREE.

Drop In Workshop – Habitats for Wildlife - Birds and insect boxes

Wednesday 10 February 2010. Pop in any time between 10.00am – 4.00pm FREE.

Drop In Workshop – Family event – Homes for Wildlife. Design a Bag!
Make and take, great fun!

Friday 12 February 2010. Pop in any time between 10.00am – 4.00pm FREE.

Drop In Workshop - Family event Bird Feeders. Make and take, great fun!

Saturday 13 February 2010. Millbrook Events Room. 3.30pm – 4.30pm.

How to Attract Birds to your Garden - A Talk by Malcolm Jennings. Tickets £2.50.

Sunday 14 February 2010. 10.00am - 3.30pm FREE.

Drop In Workshop – Habitats for Wildlife - Birds and insect boxes.

Everyone is welcome and tickets for the talks can be purchased at Millbrook or any of our meetings.

As usual I would welcome support for these events. Crowd control (very important this one), meeters and greeters, stall minders and workshop helpers wanted. Yes – you will be asked!

Outdoor Meeting - Ditch Dipping at Northward Hill 25 July 2009

This lovely photograph of Joan was taken at our outdoor meeting whilst ditch dipping at Northward Hill.

We assumed that Joan was very interested in water diving beetles. Apparently not. Joan had found a Tesco's trolley and she was trying to see if the £1 coin was still in it.

Photographs

Hedgehog photos by Julie Peeling, greenfinches on birdfeeder by Pauline Heathcote, Joan at ditch by Malcolm Jennings.



Coach Trip to the London Wetland Centre on Sunday 22nd November 2009

The London Wetland Centre, once Barnes reservoir, is now an excellent place to see many water birds. The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust have worked hard to make it attractive to many species. Despite a gloomy forecast of rain and winds 51 Group members enjoyed a visit to this urban reserve in the heart of London. We did have



a heavy shower but we also had sunshine.

The highlights for us were a bittern, spotted peeping out of the reeds by Paul; a jack snipe feeding with about 17 ordinary snipe, a water rail and a line of nine herons loafing by a rill.

Our Group bird list was 51 (52 including the vulture on the coach who ate most of the chocolates that Sue and Ian had donated).

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch on the weekend of the 30/31 January 2010

In 1979 the RSPB asked its junior members to spend an hour counting the birds that visited their back gardens over one weekend. The idea was so successful that it has been an annual event since and become the world's biggest bird survey. It regularly attracts nearly half a million participants and more than six million birds have been counted so far.

The 30th anniversary of the Big Garden Birdwatch took place on 24-25 January 2009. The most common birds counted were house sparrow, starling, blackbird, blue tit, chaffinch, woodpigeon, collared Dove, great tit, robin, long-tailed tit.

Although the house sparrow and starling have consistently been the most seen birds in the survey, the average numbers have fallen drastically. Twenty years ago it was common to see large groups of sparrows or starlings whilst now, as we all can witness, they are present in much smaller numbers. Bird numbers in the garden have fallen by 20% in the last four years alone and song thrush is no longer on the top ten list.

Taking part in the Big Garden Birdwatch couldn't be simpler. All you need to do is spend an hour watching the birds in your garden or local park over the weekend in January and record the results which you can submit online to the RSPB. The results will then be collated in March and the data used to help the RSPB decide which birds they need to focus their conservation work towards.

Coach trip to RSPB Minsmere Reserve on Saturday 12 June 2010

Minsmere is always worth visiting in Spring. On this trip we hope to see marsh harriers displaying over the reed beds, avocets and terns feeding young on the scrape, sand martins by the tea room and, maybe, swallowtail butterflies.....! The reserve has hides, trails, a good visitor centre (with toilets) and a restaurant.

The coach will leave the Woodville Halls, Gravesend, at 8.00am and return from Minsmere at about 5.00pm. The nearest car park is close by at Lord Street.

Tickets are **£16** each and are available at Group meetings **or** by post to:

Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474-322171). Please make cheques payable to Gravesend RSPB Local Group.