

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



- nature's voice

Newsletter September 2010

At our AGM in May this year, Jeff Kirk took over from Malcolm Jennings as leader of the Group for the next three years. Previously Malcolm had shared the leadership with other committee members for two years before completing a four year stint at the helm. Malcolm thanked everyone who had helped him and the Group and stated that he was staying on as a committee member responsible for the Group's publicity.

Peter Heathcote (previous leader), Malcolm, Chris Corrigan (the RSPB South East Region Director) and Jeff Kirk posed for a commemorative photograph, and, as his last action, Malcolm presented Jan Neve with an RSPB long service volunteer badge. The talk by Chris *The present and future work of the RSPB in our area* was followed by a sometimes heated discussion about the RSPB's thinking and plans for the future at the RSPB Cliffe Pools reserve.

Peter Heathcote



Some thoughts from Jeff Kirk

This is my first Newsletter as Group Leader and I have been thinking about the reasons I joined the group and where I see us going in the next couple of years.

My main reason was to learn how to identify the birds that I had been watching for some years, and to learn more about them. I found that we have many experienced birders in the group and I have learnt a lot from them, not just about birds, but also about the countryside and wildlife generally. I am grateful to them for sharing their knowledge with me and other members on our walks. And, of course, we have the RSPB reserves where we can see different habitats, the associated birds and wildlife. It was brought home to me how lucky we are to have such an organisation as the RSPB.

A recent holiday took Wendy and me to some nature reserves in Portugal and, whilst they have designated nature areas, there was little available in the way of information. At one site the hides had fallen down and the boardwalks were rotted away. This was a pity as there were some wonderful birds to see (star bird - common waxbill!). Hopefully the RSPB's work internationally will encourage a greater appreciation of wildlife in other countries. For this reason I believe it important for us to continue our support of the RSPB here both financially and in persuading people to take up membership of the RSPB.

The committee will continue to arrange an interesting variety of speakers for our talks and, as ever, we will programme visits to the best birding sites in Kent and elsewhere. Hopefully we will include some new sites.

To maintain pressure on the Government the RSPB is encouraging us all to sign their **Letter to the future** – see www.rspb.org.uk/applications/lettertothefuture. The letter details a number of objectives which highlight the need for politicians not to neglect the needs of the countryside and wildlife in these difficult times.

These are challenging times for groups such as ours but I look forward to your continued support for 2011 and beyond.

Jeffrey Kirk

Persistence Pays

Neil Tew tells me that he has been asking the Longfield Waitrose supermarket to include the RSPB in their “Community Matters” initiative for a long time. It finally paid off, on 20 August, when he was presented with a cheque for £260 by Judith Taylor-Shilling the Community Matters co-ordinator. The cheque will be sent to the RSPB via the Gravesend Local Group with a request that it will be spent on local RSPB projects.

Peter Heathcote



RSPB Cliffe Pools Reserve rerieved (again!)

The land on the north-west corner of Cliffe marshes, next to the RSPB’s Cliffe Pools Reserve, was bought and developed by Britannia Assets in 2003. The resulting industrial depot is known as the Thameside Terminal. It was developed without planning permission and was in an area that was both important for nature conservation and of high landscape value. Medway Council issued the company with enforcement notices to clear the site but the owner appealed and a public inquiry was called.

At the inquiry on 14 June 2010, Medway Council, supported by the RSPB, took action to have the depot removed. The inquiry found in their favour and ruled that an industrial depot next to an internationally important area used by hundreds of thousands of migrating birds was unlawful and must be removed. The company were given two years to clear the site.

The RSPB’s role was to act as an expert witness for the council. They presented evidence on the potential impacts of the development on the neighbouring reserve which is protected for its wintering water birds that arrive internationally important numbers. Their vulnerability to disturbance was an important aspect of the case. The outcome confirms that the site was totally unsuitable for such a development, not just because of the impacts on the surrounding environment, but also the impact on local residents through increased traffic and unacceptable noise levels.

The inspector ruled that the site should be cleared because:

- An adverse effect on the internationally designated site cannot be ruled out.
- The development is insensitive to the surrounding environment which the council is seeking to restore.
- The development is likely to increase the risk to highway safety and is particularly hazardous to pedestrians.
- The development is detrimental to the living conditions of local residents.

So for a second time in a decade, the natural environment of Cliffe has won through – there’s a welcome pattern developing. Let’s hope this is the end of the struggles to protect this special place, the signs are clear – the natural environment must be at the heart of this area’s future.

RSPB information

Photographs in this Newsletter by Peter and Pauline Heathcote and Sue Healey

Bell's Farm (adjacent to Elmley reserve) Sheppey

The Environment Agency (EA) has recently acquired Great Bell's Farm which lies between Eastchurch Prison and Windmill Creek adjacent to the Elmley reserve. It is currently poor quality grazing marsh of about 193 hectares. Freshwater and intertidal wildlife habitats are being lost elsewhere due to rising sea levels and the Environment Agency plan to use the farmland to help mitigate loss as required by EU law.

They plan to create a wetland habitat for a variety of freshwater species of birds, animals and insects and to use a section at the southern end, which borders the tidal entrance to Windmill creek, to achieve a small area of intertidal habitat.



The Environment Agency has appointed the RSPB as their tenant managers and, between them, they intend to turn the site into another important nature reserve along the southern coast of Sheppey. This will have the effect of extending the huge Elmley reserves complex into Eastchurch marshes separated purely by Windmill Creek. The RSPB have some exciting plans including new ditches and reel ways, higher water tables and part flooding in winter (with hay meadows in summer). They intend that the area will be accessible once paths can be established.

Environment Agency

Outdoor Meeting to Thursley Common

Ten of us joined Paul for our trip to Thursley Common. For those not familiar with the site, it is a National Nature Reserve: primarily a lowland heath with areas of bog, pine forest and small stands of birch. With Dartford warbler, woodlark, nightjar and hobby being some of the breeding specialities of the site, we had high hopes for day.

Birds were not our only quest, however, as Thursley is also home to nationally rare invertebrates such as marsh grasshopper, and butterflies such as grayling and silver-studded blue thrive. Heath and bog plants are also to be seen with two species of sundew and bog asphodel also present.

With this in mind we set off. Around the lake we looked for dragonflies, and quickly spotted red-eyed and emerald damselfly. Whilst reed bunting sang, and hobbies flew overhead, emperor dragonfly, small red damselfly, keeled skimmer and black-tailed skimmer darted around the edge of the pools. As we watched the hobbies we realised they were catching and eating the dragonflies we were trying to spot - watching them eat on the wing was an amazing sight.

Moving away from the pools and onto the heathland, green and great spotted woodpecker were seen and after debating the calls of chaffinch and common redstart, we realised we were listening to both species. We soon tracked down the redstart, and two birds appeared to be carrying food, so to ensure minimum disturbance we moved off towards our lunch stop; pausing on the way to watch grayling and soon after silver-studded blue butterfly.

After lunch we moved off again and after spotting ringlet and large skipper, found woodlark on the ground, we watched a family of six moving in the open and got excellent views of this great bird. We eventually



dragged ourselves away, and soon identified a bog bush-cricket. A seventh woodlark was found on a telegraph wire, again with food in its beak and appeared very wary of us. We took this as our lead to return towards the car park. An excellent day out, with some superb views of a wide range of species.

Sue Healey

Outdoor meeting to Cobham Park

A dozen people got up early for this 6 am start. Some arriving a little later than others! Our aim was to enjoy the early morning birdsong and improve our identification skills.

As we left the car park we found several female glow-worms on the path. We followed the main track to the Darnley Mausoleum which has been restored after being featured in the Restoration television programme. Chaffinch, whitethroat, lesser whitethroat, blackcap and wren were singing, then we spotted a yellowhammer sitting ahead of us, giving everyone good views. Dunnock, blackbird, and chiffchaff were among other songsters. Two ring-necked parakeets called from the top of a tree. We were lucky to watch several blue tits and great tits gathering food for their broods. Treecreeper and garden warbler were also identified. The area was the original site for the North Kent heronry, the birds relocating to Northward Hill around 1900.

We took the opportunity to view the Kitchen Field, the most important arable field in the country due to the plant life there but we were just a little too early to see the plants and flowers for which the field is famous.

Other sightings: Peacock and orange tip butterfly, cinnabar moth, brown rimmed snail, six-spot burnet moth caterpillar.

Sue Healey

Coach trip to RSPB Pulborough Brooks - Sunday 7th November 2010

Set in the Arun Valley with views across wet meadows to the South Downs, Pulborough Brooks can be a haven for wildlife. We hope to see flocks of wintering ducks, fieldfares and redwings feasting on berries, and nuthatches and tits on the feeders by the visitors centre. The reserve has hides, trails and a good visitor centre with tea room.

The coach will leave the Woodville Halls, Gravesend, at 8.30am and leave Pulborough at about 4pm.



Tickets are £13 each and are available at Group meetings or send a cheque made payable to "Gravesend RSPB Local Group" to Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474 322171)
RSPB members please take your card.

RSPB Country Fair at Bromhey Farm near Cliffe (ME3 8SR) on Sunday 5 September 2010

This popular event will take place once again this year on **Sunday 5 September**. There will be plenty to do and see. Look at the stalls, buy some apples, go on a guided walk or just sit at a table with a nice view and have a cup of tea and a home-made cake. Easy free car parking (and toilets), If you would like to help or need further information about the event please contact Jeff Kirk on 01474 365757.

Gravesend RSPB website

Have you visited our website recently? All the information you need is just a click away - with even more trip reports and articles by members of the group. Much more than we can hope to put in our newsletters. You can sign up for our automatic updates facility to keep up to date with all that is going on locally. We look forward to your visit at www.rspb.gravesend.org.uk or type Gravesend RSPB into your Internet Explorer.

Indoor Meetings – Autumn programme meetings

Please join us at our popular indoor

Wednesday evening 8 September 2010 at St Botolph's Hall (7-45 to 10-00pm)
Spring in the Greek Isles by David Johnson

Tuesday afternoon 28 September 2010 at Millbrook Garden Centre (2-4pm)
Small Things with Wings by Pauline and Peter Heathcote