

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



- nature's voice

Newsletter May 2011

Wednesday evening 11 May 2011, 7-45 to 10pm at St Botolph's Hall, Northfleet.

AGM (short) followed by *Developments on North Kent Marshes*

followed by *Experiences in the Iraqi Marshes* by Rolf Williams

At the meeting 11 May there will be a short AGM to consider the accounts and elect members of the committee. Our original speaker has moved away so we are pleased that Rolf Williams, the RSPB Communications Officer for Kent, has agreed to step in. Rolf will bring us up to date with developments on the North Kent marshes. Rolf will also talk about his experiences in the Iraqi marshes where, in 2008, as Lieutenant Rolf Williams (Royal Naval Reserve) he was deployed aboard HMS Chatham as part of the coalition protecting Iraq's oil platforms from terrorist attack. The decks were festooned with migrating birds, and the Task Force Commodore ordered Rolf to investigate the bird spectacular taking place on Iraq's oil terminal. Sounds like an interesting talk – a bit different to others!

Looking back over the past year we had coach trips to Minsmere and Pulborough Brooks, many thanks to Sally Jennings for organising them so successfully, as well as our usual Tuesday and weekend walks. As a group we saw a respectable 161 species in 2010 – all without twitching! Thanks to Penny Leeves and Sue Healey we successfully transferred our Tuesday afternoon talks to The Kent Room at Woodville Halls. Thanks also to Irene Robson and Sue and Ray Horner for taking on the role as “meeters and greeters” at these meetings. Evening meetings continued at St Botolph's but attendance seems to be dropping, hopefully, due to the poor weather.

In planning our programme the committee tries to arrange events that members have told us they enjoy. So if there is anything, talk or walk, that you would like included, please speak to any member of the committee, similarly if you would like to be more involved in the group let us know.

For the future I will remain as Group Leader and the following have indicated that they are prepared to continue on the committee. Neville Lunness-Barnes is our Treasurer ensuring that we remain in the black (in 2010 we were able to donate nearly £900 to the RSPB). Sue Healey is our membership Secretary (have you paid your subs yet)? Penny Leeves organises our speakers and refreshments and Paul Yetman our outdoor walks. Sally Jennings has taken on the role of Publicity Officer and continues to organise our coach trips. Julie Peeling provides advice on educational matters for children and David Johnson, with his long connection with the group provides advice and assistance as required, and organises the raffles. Peter Heathcote produces our Newsletters. Our funds are bolstered each year thanks to Josie Brown who organises the sale of RSPB items – save money by buying your Christmas cards from Josie! Sandy Roman has provided secretarial services to the committee but she has now decided to stand down. We are grateful to Sandy for all her hard work and she will be sorely missed.

Jeffrey Kirk

Our Website www.rspbgravesend.org.uk

Our IT expert Paul Yetman has developed a new and improved website. Alan Else will be involved with maintaining the site. The new site is updated frequently and aims to be interactive. You can check out the latest trip reports and if there is something you wish to add you can then post a comment. If you want to display that great photo you took on the last outing please send it in for inclusion in the gallery. You can also check the

News section to find out what's happening in and around your local area and keep up-to-date with reminders of upcoming meetings and events.

Kent's contribution to the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch helps to reveal trends

Nationally 609,177 people counted over 10 million birds in 300,780 gardens across the UK over the weekend of 29/30 January this year when over 70 species were recorded (see below).

Kent Big Garden Birdwatch results (top ten birds in 2010 and 2011):

Rank	2010	Average per garden	2011	Average per garden
1	House Sparrow	4.13	Starling	5.0
2	Starling	3.81	House Sparrow	4.6
3	Blackbird	3.05	Blue Tit	3.2
4	Blue Tit	2.56	Blackbird	2.8
5	Collared Dove	2.21	Collared Dove	2.3
6	Woodpigeon	2.01	Woodpigeon	2.0
7	Chaffinch	1.59	Chaffinch	1.8
8	Robin	1.37	Great Tit	1.4
9	Great Tit	1.22	Robin	1.3
10	Dunnock	1.11	Goldfinch	1.1
No. of people participating	17,149		20,481	

A record-breaking 20,481 people in Kent took part this year and their counts helped reveal a recovery for small birds. Small-bodied birds such as Long-tailed Tit, Coal Tit and Goldcrest were the worst affected by the harsh winter of 2009/2010, but their numbers were up this year in Kent and across the UK. Across the UK many people were also lucky enough to see Waxwings and this year they ranked number 48, out of a total of 69 species.

Jeffrey Kirk

Wildlife and Country Fair at Northward Hill on Sunday 7 August 2011

This is the last day of the *Explore Kent Walking Festival*, and the fair will benefit from the festival's marketing campaign. This year it is planned that there will be a much stronger emphasis on healthy living, country life and the work of the RSPB. There will be a special family adventure nature trail through the reserve on the day. Once again, the event will only be possible with the help of local members' groups. A list of activities will be sent out well in advance for individuals to select where they would like to assist. Volunteers will be asked to work half the day, allowing the rest of the time to enjoy the event.

RSPB North Kent Marshes Events Contact for information 01634 222480 or visit www.rspb.org.uk

Unless stated otherwise, prices are:

Members: Adult £3.00 Child £1.50
 Non-members Adult £5.00 Child £2.50 (refunded if you join RSPB)
 Wildlife Explorers Child £1.00

Sun 8 May, 9am – 12pm, RSPB Cliffe Pools – *Spring birdwatch with the warden.* An opportunity to join the warden looking out for, and listening for, spring migrants, birds and insects. Suitable for all levels of wildlife expertise, but especially recommended for beginners or those who want to learn of Cliffe Pool's wildlife hotspots. Meet at the main car park, Salt lane, near the village of Cliffe (on the B2000).

Sat 14 May, 4pm – 5pm, RSPB Northward Hill Nature Reserve - *Bluebell Walk.*

These brilliant flowers are at their best around this time of year; join the RSPB and marvel at this carpet of blue amidst the splendour of the wood. Meet at the main car park, RSPB Northward Hill, ME3 8DS.

Sun 29 May, 5am –7am, RSPB Northward Hill Nature Reserve - *Dawn Chorus* Enjoy the dawn chorus and learn the various birdsongs with the reserve warden, and pick out the superb nightingales, which defend their territories at this time of year. Meet at the main car park.

RSPB Northward Hill, Eastborough, Cooling, ME3 8DS. Meet at the main car park.

Sun 10 July, 10am – 1pm RSPB Northward Hill Nature Reserve – Butterflies & Dragonflies. More than just bird food, enjoy the insect life of the woodland and fields with two local experts. We will look for early white-letter hairstreak and the scarce emerald damselfly. Meet at the main car park, RSPB Northward Hill

Sat 16 July, 6.30pm – 9.30pm RSPB Northward Hill Nature Reserve – Music at the Cherry Orchard. Tickets £10 (Advanced booking essential 01634 222480). By popular request, a return visit from the “Darent Diversion”. The ensemble includes cello, viola and clarinet and the performance takes place in the shade of the cherry trees, first glass of wine included (otherwise £2.00 a glass).

Sun 24 July, 10am – 12am RSPB Northward Hill Nature Reserve – A stroll through the delightful reserve with one of the wardens looking at the wildlife but giving a thought to the heavens, clouds, our weather and its influence upon the landscape and its wildlife. If the sun is out, Mid Kent Astronomical Society will be on hand with helioscopes, to safely observe the sun. Meet at the main car park. RSPB Northward Hill, Bromhey Farm.

RSPB Campaigns

On 9 March, two of the RSPB’s youngest members delivered to 10 Downing Street a special book of stunning images of the natural world – but these were no ordinary images – they were made up of the names of 355,773 people who signed the RSPB’s Letter to the Future! This gesture marked a celebration of the RSPB’s most supported campaign ever and showed the Government how important the natural environment is to the public and how it should be considered deeply when reviewing public spending.

Stepping up for Nature

The RSPB is encouraging their supporters, the public and businesses to take steps for nature, big and small. This will demonstrate to the UK Government how precious the natural environment is to the public, who are taking millions of steps for nature every year to protect and care for it – and now it’s their turn to do the same. Politicians will be challenged to step up for nature by urging them to make the right decisions on key issues and policy areas such as agriculture, marine, tropical forests, land use planning and climate change. At the launch, the opportunities and steps that must be met over the next nine years to achieve the 2020 target were laid out to the movers and shakers of the conservation world in the form of a roadmap. To find out more about what the RSPB is asking decision makers to do, please visit www.rspb.org.uk/stepup2020

News from North Kent Marshes

Rolf Williams, the RSPB communications officer for Kent, is working on *The People Engagement Strategy for the North Kent Marshes*. This process involves an assessment of national and regional studies of open space usage, in particular the RSPB’s North Kent Visitor Survey (funded by Greening the Gateway Kent and Medway), and working closely with Medway Council and the Tourism Association. The information will be used in developing a comprehensive plan for new trails, signage and visitor infrastructure on the reserves.

Elmley Rain fell in good quantity from early November. This, plus the snow melt, helped to raise levels at which we are able to abstract water and pump it onto the reserve. The marsh is now really wet and it looks fantastic.

A new fence has been installed around the Southfleet hide to protect it from cattle. The work has been carried out to exclude foxes from core areas of the reserve. The sea and counter walls will be maintained for the benefit of small mammals and raptors, and there will still be areas of reed for passerines. We have also been carrying out work on the electric predator fences on the reserve. More water gauge boards are also being installed to enable more effective hydrological management of the reserve.

Seasalter Levels Much has been happening recently at the Seasalter Levels reserve near Whitstable. A *stakeholder walk*, to show what the RSPB has achieved since 2007, was held for local landowners, councillors, advisors, and officers from Natural England, Canterbury City Council, Swale Borough Council and the RSPB. In mid-February, contractors started work on site to cutting bankside vegetation and scraping banks to remove rooted fragments of floating water pennywort an invasive species. Sadly a dead bittern was found on site, that had possibly collided with the overhead pylons.
Natalie Holt – Assistant Warden Elmley

Shorne Marshes are in excellent condition. They were well flooded earlier in the year and will hopefully encourage more breeding birds than in previous years. The RSPB is monitoring closely the Kent County Council proposal for a third Thames Crossing that would impact on the Shorne area. The feasibility study presented by KCC in February contained no real detail, but Paul Carter said a tunnel was more likely, and that it would not impact on Shorne Marshes. We will see!

Cliffe Pools Westminster Dredgings have deposited 120,000m³ of silt into Flamingo and Ski Pools, to create further shallow edges for wading birds. The silt will take 1-3 years to bed-in, and then can be 'landscaped' if required. New fencing has been installed along the entrance to the reserve, which has also been improved.

Northward Hill The fields have been well flooded and the grazing is as required, providing the right mix of sward for the breeding season. Herons have nested and are showing in better numbers than last year, when the February freeze hit them hard. It is believed that about 100 pairs and a similar number of little egrets will have nested this year. Several pairs of oystercatcher paired-up and lapwings showed an interest; hopefully they have bred successfully. From the view point you can see how good the marsh is looking compared with the neighbouring land.

Non-Avian Taxa Team (NATT @ NKM)

Since the RSPB is primarily a bird conservation group they call all other life forms non-avian but to you and me that means plants, insects, mammals, frogs and everything else that lives around us. North Kent Marshes reserves easily have several thousands of these non-avian taxa (species) and help needed to find them! Please contact Malcolm if you feel you could help at malcolm.chalkland@btinternet.com

In an earlier newsletter I wrote about the formation of a group of naturalists who would carry out surveys of non-avian taxa on our North Kent Reserves – a Non-Avian Taxa Team – hence NATT @ NKM. We have made a start and have had some real successes. The following are highlights: *Malcolm Jennings*

Roger Kiddie has re-established the weekly butterfly transect walks at Northward Hill. This survey started many years ago and clearly shows the changes in our butterfly populations. This year Roger found silver-washed fritillary in the wood. This magnificent species used to be widespread in Kent in Victorian times but declined greatly in the last century. More recently, conservation efforts have helped it make a come back, so perhaps we will be able to enjoy its presence in North Kent in summers to come. Roger has been assisted by Peter and Karen Hall and another great find was a grizzled skipper butterfly. This butterfly is in steep decline throughout Britain and, although we knew that they had been seen in Northward Hill, this was the first record for some time. We know where the butterfly was seen, we know the plant that the caterpillar feeds on, what we need to do now is find the plants that the butterflies are using to lay eggs. Does anyone fancy spending a day in June searching for caterpillars on wild strawberry plants? If we could find them, and it shouldn't be that difficult, we could improve the habitat for the plants and hence do a lot for the butterflies.

Sue Healey, Paul Keene, Sally and I have carried out some preliminary surveys of water voles at Great Bells Farm, the new RSPB reserve on Sheppey. Water vole poo was found on many of the ditches although I was surprised that the vole population seemed to be fairly low compared to the RSPB reserve next door at Elmley. Some of the ditches were in poor condition but perhaps the very cold spell last winter had caused high mortality. Water vole surveys elsewhere in North Kent have been done by Howard Stacey and Julie Peeling.

The non - avian taxa highlight of the year for me personally was finding a huge colony of scarce emerald damselflies *Lestes dryas* on the marsh at Northward Hill. I have mentioned this species before but it is special to our marshes in North Kent. Back in June last year Sally and I were searching for the damselfly and not doing particularly well when we chanced upon an overgrown rill packed full of sea club rush plants. There must have been several hundred *Lestes dryas* -copulating and laying eggs- more than I have ever seen anywhere before!

Coach trip to RSPB Minsmere Reserve on Sunday 22 May 2011

Tickets still available!

Join us at this excellent bird reserve on the coast to see all kinds of birds. The reserve has hides, trails, a good visitor centre and cafeteria. The coach will leave the Woodville Halls, Gravesend, at 8.00am and leave Minsmere at about 5.00pm. Please take RSPB membership card if you have one.

Tickets **£16** each - available at Group meetings **OR** send your cheque, payable to Gravesend RSPB Local Group, to Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474 322171)

Please note that there is a change in date to WWT Welney Bird Reserve in Cambridgeshire later in the year: The Coach Trip is now on Saturday 3 December 2011. Details to follow.