

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



The RSPB is a Registered Charity, number 207076

Newsletter September 2011

www.rspbgravesend.org.uk

Join us at our next Indoor meetings

Wednesday evening at St Botolph's Hall on 14 September for an evening of RSPB films presented by Malcolm Jennings.

Tuesday afternoon at the Woodville Halls on 27 September for *Springtime in Scotland* presented by Peter and Pauline Heathcote.

AGM of Gravesend RSPB Local Group held on 11 May 2011

Group Leader's report The success of the group could only be judged by the numbers of people participating in the various events planned. He was pleased, therefore, to report that the programme of walks and talks, including two coach trips to Minsmere and Pulborough, had been as popular as ever. Members of the group had also continued to support the RSPB on the North Kent marshes with Thursday and Friday working groups, providing help at the wildlife fair and undertaking various surveys and other duties for the RSPB. A particular success was the transfer of Tuesday afternoon talks to Woodville Halls attracting large audiences. Wednesday evening meetings had seen a decline in numbers but the committee was determined to keep these meetings going and would continue to arrange the usual high quality speakers. Jeff thanked the committee and all those volunteers working behind the scenes for their contribution to the group's continuing success.

Treasurer's report There was a net surplus of £140 plus £1,970 in the bank at the end of the financial year 31 March 2011. £860 had been donated to the RSPB.

Election of Committee The committee had agreed to continue with some changes. Sally Jennings had agreed to take over the role as publicity officer replacing Malcolm Jennings who had stood down. Sandy Roman had stood down as secretary. Both Sandy and Malcolm were thanked for their hard work on behalf of the group. Jeff said new committee members would be very welcome.



Group meeting Ashdown Forest 03 July 2011

AOB The committee arranged events that people had said they enjoyed; if there was any additional event that members would like included in the programme they were asked to let members of the committee know.

Committee members required

We do need a secretary to take minutes at meetings; but we would also welcome anyone else who would like to become more involved in the group and the RSPB's work locally. Please contact me or any other committee member if you are interested.

Friday Working Group at North Kent Marshes

Jeffrey Kirk

You may know that the group set up in conjunction with the local warden at Northward Hill a Friday working group over 20 years ago. This group of volunteers carried out sterling work on the North Kent Marshes maintaining the estate as required and the results of their work can be seen in all areas of the reserves. Such was the level of interest that a Thursday group was also established. Sadly because of a fall in volunteers for the Friday group, and the arrival of 3 residential volunteers at Northward Hill, it has been decided to suspend the Friday working group for the time being – but the Thursday group will continue and volunteers are welcome.

Tell everyone about your birding adventures on our Website!

Jeffrey Kirk

The group organises weekend and Tuesday morning bird watching visits mainly to well known places in Kent, but I know that many of you are out and about both locally and further afield at other times. It is always interesting to know where other people have been and to learn about what they have seen and their experiences at other sites. I have been prompted to visit sites I did not know about until someone told me about them. Our website has information from members about their activities – we have learnt about Sue's adventures at home and abroad and also from Neil, Irene and Sally nearer home. So share your trips and holiday experiences with other members of the group. It could not be easier! Go to our website and click the "About us" title and then select "Contact us". In the boxes shown enter your news, press the "Submit" button and your message will go to one of our web administrators, Paul or Alan, who will then arrange for it to be posted onto the website. Simple! (It is also possible to post your pictures in the Gallery section). For those who do not have access to a PC but would like others to know about their adventures drop me a line and I will arrange for your news to be posted.

Volunteering for the RSPB

Jeffrey Kirk

Since the AGM in May I have had a busy time, firstly off to the Arne RSPB reserve for two weeks residential volunteering, for the third year running. This is a wonderful reserve near Wareham in Dorset, bordering Poole Harbour. The habitat is mixed but famed mostly for its heathland. As with many heaths the land around Arne was planted up with conifers and the RSPB is gradually removing them to recreate the now rare heathland habitats. One of the problems is that the trees have little commercial value so it is expensive to dispose of them.

Within the reserve there are also meadows, mixed woodland and marsh and tidal muddy areas. So the birdlife and wildlife is rich and varied. Uniquely all six species of British reptile can be found including sand lizard (I saw smooth and grass snake). The wardens are happy to show off specimens they catch (and release).



There are the unusual birds to be seen in the woods and marshes including woodlark, spoonbill, osprey, buzzard and peregrine - so plenty to look out for including Dartford warblers. The latter have been hit hard by successive bad winters and numbers are estimated to be 70% down this year, but I did manage to see them. Nightjars are another bird that can be seen easily at Arne. The estimate is 30 to 40 churring birds. Sitting up on the heath at night when everyone had gone home listening, and occasionally seeing them, was wonderful.

The Purbeck Hills generally are overrun with deer and Arne has large numbers of Sitka deer wandering around. They were originally introduced to Brownsea Island in Victorian times but someone forgot they could swim-so they made it to the shore and have bred like mad ever since. There is no doubt that they do a lot of damage and throughout the area they are regularly culled – but fortunately not whilst I was there.

The RSPB is responsible not only for wildlife and conservation but also for the archaeological artefacts on their land. At Arne this includes various tumuli from the Iron Age. Most interestingly (well at least to me) is a WWII gun emplacement site which is one of very few left. Anti-aircraft guns were set up there to protect local munitions factories and nearby Poole harbour. Interesting though they are they do occupy quite a lot of the warden's time looking after them.

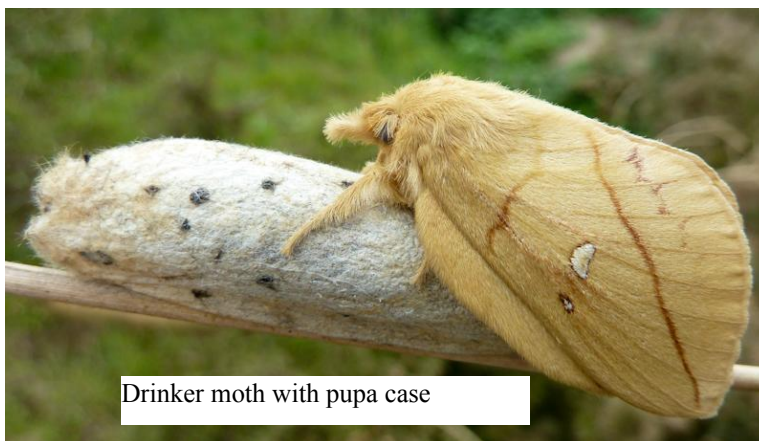
I have been asked what volunteers do and for me it was mainly estate work erecting and repairing deer fences, laying paths, maintaining hides and pulling ragwort! But I also helped out at the visitor centre welcoming people to the reserve. I also had the opportunity to see parts of the reserve not generally open to the public - and the RSPB has a lot of land in the area. The accommodation is a wooden chalet on the reserve which I shared with two young people who were there getting experience for their CVs and hopefully a job in conservation. Residential volunteering is not for everyone but I treat it as my chance to put something back into conserving the countryside for wildlife and seeing at first hand the RSPB in action. I enjoyed myself!

Outdoor meeting at Northward Hill - 26th July 2011

Sue Healey

Today 20 people joined Malcolm for another of his Tuesday morning walks. This time the venue was the marshes at Northward Hill RSPB Reserve. As we met in the car park Malcolm and Sally were showing us a Drinker moth which had emerged from its cocoon overnight. Howard had a moth field guide and we were able to identify this as a female – larger and paler than the male.

We stopped at the screen near the feeding station and there were blue tit, great tit, chaffinch and goldfinch feeding on the seeds and peanuts. A family of greater spotted woodpeckers were squabbling and we heard a green woodpecker calling. On the pools in front of the viewpoint there were two pairs of mute swan, one with three cygnets, tufted duck with 6 young, many coots, mallards, a great crested grebe, and little grebe. As we moved towards the marshes a wren was scolding. Chaffinch, grey heron and wood pigeons flew past, feathers missing and looking rather worn. Later a smarter male flew past low over the reeds. Along the ditches there were two little egret feeding, and a little grebe with juvenile sheltered in the waters edge of reeds nearby. A female marsh harrier flew over from the wood towards the marshes. As we watched the little grebe and chick, a bearded tit whizzed by allowing only a few lucky folk a view, but we could hear their distinctive “pinging” further out. A marsh frog sat on an old nest and distracted us for a short while, but the call of a sedge warbler moved us on yet again. Eventually more of the group got fleeting views of the bearded tit as three of them hopped from one part of reed bed to another.



Drinker moth with pupa case

In a field at least 84 greylag geese were feeding among the stubble left after harvest. A family of magpie sat in a tree watchful as we progressed across the field and keen to keep their distance. Two reed bunting were spotted by those at the front of the group but they chose not to hang around for the rest of us to catch sight of them. We did see sedge warbler however, the first glimpse was of a couple of juveniles moving about in the reeds and practicing their flying from one side of a ditch to another. Their colours were bright but the eye stripe still diagnostic – just a little too far for my camera, but several of the group got good shots. Moorhen, linnets and turtle dove finished off our days bird list.

We do, however need to add a few non-avian notable sightings including, scarce emerald damselfly, cinnabar moth caterpillars feeding on ragwort, gatekeeper, large white butterfly, wall brown, marbled white, meadow brown, common blue, small skipper, small white, green veined white.

In addition Malcolm took us out to the Duck Decoy – an area which was landscaped in the 1700's specifically to catch ducks by funnelling them down nets set into the deep rills the ducks were then encouraged down the tunnels by man and dog towards the traps set at the end of each of the ditches. Thanks to Malcolm (ably assisted by Sally as always) for another enjoyable, entertaining and informative walk.

At **Northward Hill** lapwing numbers almost equalled last year's but redshank and avocet did less well. Herons took a big hit during the winter freeze of February 2010, but this year they have bounced back despite the bad winter. There were 94 nests (a small increase) and nearly 100 juveniles were seen feeding on the adjacent marsh. There were more than 100 little egret nests.

The reed beds were battered by the December snows but water vole and bearded tit are doing very well and once again marsh harriers appear to have nested. The national population of nightingale is well down but Northward Hill has been rich with the song of 20 males but turtle doves are down to two.

New dredgings deposited at **Cliffe Pools Reserve** earlier in the year have settled, creating a muddy edge along the northern perimeter of the pools and some 5-600 shelduck, avocet and gulls immediately moved in. Tern rafts were floated and looked successful with common terns going straight to them, but gales broke them loose at a critical time. Approval has been given to the creation of a tern island using shingle stored elsewhere onsite. The new sluice gates installed last autumn will allow the levels in the pools to be adjusted, shallowing some and deepening others. The benefits will include the creation of new islands from existing causeways suitable for terns, ducks and waders and an increase in edge habitat for visiting winter waders.

Conditions at **Shorne Marshes Reserve** were very good early on, but have subsequently dried back. Lapwing numbers are similar to last year which is good considering the dry season. Nest cameras were used and confirmed that nine fledged successfully. Redshank numbers appear to have fallen.

At **Elmley Marshes**, despite the dry spring and small clutches, lapwings successfully fledged 30 youngsters - twice as many as last year! Redshank and avocet are doing well thanks to efficient water management on the marsh which has attracted green sandpiper, spotted redshank and yellow wagtails. The latter is suffering a national decline but continues to breed successfully at Elmley.



Group meeting at Elmley 26 July

Coach Trip to Welney Bird Reserve on Saturday 3rd December 2011

Sally Jennings

Treat yourself to a day out exploring the unique landscape of Welney Marshes - a vast unspoilt area which is home to thousands of wild birds. Experience the thrilling spectacle of wild ducks, geese, and swans as they visit the reserve. Berwick's and whooper swans feed alongside our own mute swans, while carpets of wigeon graze on the wetland, and pintail, gadwall, teal and shoveler dabble in the pools. See them at feeding time, from the comfort of a heated observatory, as they clamour to get close to the warden and his wheelbarrow full of corn. The reserve has hides, trails and a new visitor centre serving hot and cold food. A great way to spend a December day.

Tickets:

Wildfowl & Wetland members **£15.00** (WWT members please take membership cards) or

Non-WWT members **£20.50** (includes entry charge)

The coach will leave at 8.30am but please meet at Woodville Halls before then, as we may have to board it nearby. **We will return about 6pm**

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 tickets please.

Photographs by Sue Healey (Group meetings at Ashdown Forest and Elmey, drinker moth) and Pauline Heathcote (osprey).