



Nature's voice

## Gravesend RSPB Local Group.



### NEWSLETTER: DECEMBER 2011

For full details of the Group activities and application form to join see website at:  
[www.rspbgravesend.org.uk](http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk)

#### A message from our President, Kate Humble

I want to start by saying a huge thank you for all the work you do. Make no mistake; the society is able to do so much more of its essential conservation work because of all your time and effort and it's no exaggeration to say that you are its lifeblood. I suspect many of you do it for the love of the cause and I hope that you are proud of yourselves. I'm sure there are mornings when some of you are freezing cold, wet, and the birds aren't playing ball, but you support a fantastic charity and make a massive difference.

When I was elected as President two years ago, the knowledge that I was only the second female president since our charity was founded in 1889 was daunting to say the least! I was honoured, excited and surprised to be asked, but once the initial shock had subsided I was incredibly excited.

I have an interest in wildlife that stems from a childhood growing up in the countryside, and my travels as teenager. I'm not an academic or a specialist, but I do love learning new things and asking questions – I'm never afraid to ask. If I can communicate some of the amazing things I learn about wildlife on an almost daily basis and spark the same interest in others, that would be great. I feel very lucky to be able to nurture this interest in my job – my involvement with the BBC's Springwatch and Autumnwatch series, and programmes like Animal Park have all seen me lucky enough to be making discoveries and speaking to some of the world's wildlife experts.

In my role as your President, my overall aim is to help increase support for the RSPB's work. In particular I'd like to get more people enjoying wildlife first hand, whether feeding birds in their back garden, walking in the countryside or visiting nature reserves.

And making sure young people have access to the outdoors is a particular passion of mine – how on earth can a child be inspired to help protect their environment when they only see it in books and never get to feel mud under their fingers nails? I was able to lend my support to the RSPB's recent Every Child Outdoors project – along with some of the UK's other biggest environmental education organisations, the RSPB, the Field Studies Council and the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, joined forces and opened the doors to all their teaching sites and centres in response to a call from teachers calling for more outside facilities to ensure all children and young people have the opportunity to learn outdoors and have contact with nature.

Back in March, I was at the launch of the RSPB's latest and most ambitious campaign yet, called 'Stepping Up for Nature.' The nine year campaign hopes to end the continuing threat to wildlife in the UK and across the world and to get UK Governments to meet their 2020 target of halting biodiversity loss and begin to restore it.

The idea is for everyone to take small steps for nature and make a big difference. Volunteering, building a home for wildlife or participating in a garden wildlife survey counts as a step for nature. There are more fantastic ideas on how you can step up for nature on [www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup](http://www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup). If we all take steps for nature, we might be able to achieve the goal of halting the loss of biodiversity.



**Valuable prize draw - a framed, signed photo of Kate!** (size 6x 4 inches)

On your membership renewal form you will be invited to join the raffle – tickets will be allocated by the membership secretary and the draw will take place at the indoor meeting on 27 March. All money raised will be donated to the RSPB!

**What could look better on your mantelpiece!**

**Distribution of Newsletter, Membership Renewal Form and Programme**

We are sending these documents by email instead of hard copy to members who have asked to receive news items by email. The cost of postage is now a major consideration and we are trying to keep costs down. However if you wish to have a hard copy just let us know - they will be available at our meetings.

**Group leaders report**



Spotted flycatcher – RSPB Images

As we approach the end of the year perhaps we should look back on some of our personal highlights of the birding year. Despite all the trips and with all the expert advice I have received once again my annual list is less than the target 200! However there are special memories particularly of the Dartford warblers and nightjars at Arne and an elusive bird for me, spotted flycatcher at Dungeness.

But really it is the joy of seeing so many things that nature provides not just birds but butterflies, flowers, dragonflies etc. and as a group we have experts to identify all these things and to share their knowledge with us. And through the website we get reports of visits to all sorts of places both locally and elsewhere – so share your holidays and days out with us by posting a report and photos on the website!

But all is not well; wildlife is under threat from climate change, the need for more housing, changes in farming practice - these are all a threat to our wild spaces. We are all witnessing the decline of our birds, bees, butterflies and flowers – even the humble house sparrow has vanished from many places and how many of you were lucky enough to hear a cuckoo this spring let alone see one? Kate mentions the latest RSPB campaign **Stepping Up for Nature** and I would encourage you all to go to [www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup](http://www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup) and “Step up for Nature”.

**Our indoor meetings** at Woodville Halls on Tuesday afternoons continue to be very successful; Wednesday evening meetings continue to attract reasonable audiences. We have had some superb talks and you will see from our programme that we have lined up some excellent speakers again for 2012.

Sue and Ray Horner, pictured with committee members Penny and Sue, are there to greet you at our successful Tuesday afternoon meetings.



You can also buy your RSPB merchandise from Josie, seen here selling Irene her Christmas cards, at both our evening and afternoon meetings.

### Join us at our indoor meetings in January 2012

**Wednesday evening** at St Botolph's Hall on 11 January for "Guerrillas to Guans" an amusing and entertaining talk by Barry Wright about his adventures in South America.

**Tuesday afternoon** at Woodville Halls on 24 January for "Galapagos- the Enchanted Isles" by Ralph Todd. Hear about the amazing birds, reptiles and other animals in this unique and fascinating place.

### Butterfly monitoring at Northward Hill RSPB reserve

It is important to build up a complete picture of any reserve before any effective conservation measures are put into place. For this reason all species are monitored, not just birds, to understand what needs to be done to improve biodiversity. In order to assist the RSPB Gravesend group member, butterfly (and insect expert) Roger Kiddie, with valuable assistance from Peter and Karen Hall, carried out a survey of butterflies at Northward Hill. For 26 consecutive weeks ending in September, Roger walked a designated route recording *Lepidoptera* in accordance with the Butterfly Conservation Trust methodology. A total of 26 species were recorded in 2011 (total for Britain circa 60). This type of survey, with a standardised method, allows a year-on-year comparison, identifies trends and act as a barometer of the health of our reserve.



**White letter hairstreak**

The scheme is designed to look at populations of the commoner butterflies but does occasionally turn up the less common species and at Northward Hill the star butterfly for 2011 was the white letter hairstreak. It is a difficult butterfly to find and is rarely seen as it spends the majority of its time high up in trees feeding on the honeydew produced by aphids. They were however seen in June, July and August and seem to have enjoyed a good year.

Silver-washed fritillaries were seen again in small numbers as were grizzled skippers. There was a welcome return of the small tortoiseshell, a species which has suffered a massive decline because of a parasitic fly. In August there was an exceptional hatch of brown argus, seen throughout the whole of the reserve.

The RSPB staff recorded 108 moth species; a first for Northward Hill was a Jersey tiger moth; this is a species that is extending its range across the south from Europe and hopefully will become more common. Our thanks to Roger for this information and all the work he has done for the RSPB- and look out for these butterflies when you visit Northward Hill next summer!

### **Coach Trip to Wicken Fen Sunday 27th May 2012**

Join us on a trip to see one of Europe's most important wetlands. Wicken Fen is a National Trust nature reserve supporting an abundance of wildlife. Raised boardwalks & lush green droves allow easy access to flowering meadows & reed beds where spectacular plants, birds & dragonflies can be seen. These may include marsh harriers, bitterns, cuckoos & water voles. There are 9 viewing hides, trails & a visitor centre serving snacks & drinks.

**National Trust members with membership cards have free admission at Wicken Fen, Therefore tickets are; National Trust members - £14 Non-NT members - £19**

**We leave Gravesend Railway Station at 8am & return at about 7.30pm**

Make cheques payable to: Gravesend RSPB Local Group & send to Sally Jennings: 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, DA12 2NN (01474 322171), enclose SAE for ticket please.

Also note – **Autumn Coach Trip - Saturday November 17th** - venue to be announced.

### **Keep feeding the birds!**

As Christmas approaches and the cold weather kicks in we should think about the birds and maintain feeders for them. Last year was particularly difficult for both the small birds and of course waders where the pools had iced up. So if you have a pond make sure you break the ice occasionally. Also don't forget to help hedgehogs who hibernate in warm places and insects overwintering. Suitable homes for them are commercially available but gardeners can always make a suitable spot for them.

## Big Garden Birdwatch over the weekend 28-29 January 2012



Many of you have taken part in this survey of garden birds in the past. The RSPB have been asking you to count the birds in your garden for over 30 years and with results from so many gardens, they are able to create a 'snapshot' of bird numbers in each region. Every year, even more join in with the count, and 2011 turned out to be one of our best year yet.

Although this survey has shown that some of our birds are disappearing in scary numbers-we have lost more than half our house sparrows and some three-quarters of our starlings- it isn't all doom and gloom. These surveys help to spot problems, but more importantly, they are also the first step in putting things right. So spend an hour recording the birds in your garden – your results can be submitted on line or by post to the RSPB who will collate the results. Personalised monitoring sheets will be available in "Birds" magazine.

### GRAVESEND RSPB GROUP 35<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY 2012!

We have booked Shorne Village Hall for **SATURDAY 6<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2012** to celebrate this historic milestone in the group's history. Full details later but we propose a dinner, presentations from past and present members and a specially baked cake! So keep this date free and join us in the celebrations.

### News from the local reserves from Rolf Williams RSPB Communications Officer - Kent

**Cliffe Pools:** Conditions have remained unseasonably dry across the marshes. 70,000 cubic metres of silt delivered by Westminster Dredgings has created an influx of nutrient and enlarged the beach on Flamingo pool which in turn attracted large numbers of waders.

Incidents of antisocial behaviour are declining; the RSPB remain well supported by the local police.

**Northward Hill:** Future developments for ecology and people engagement have been assessed as a part of the next five-year management plan. More details will follow once the plan is confirmed. The economic climate means some of the more ambitious developments being rolled out over the longer-term.

The RSPB woodlands specialist visited Northward Hill and was pleased with recent work, much aided by the volunteer team, to open-up glades in the public areas, improving biodiversity and the visitor experience. On the marsh, 50% of the habitat is undergoing sub-soiling and manuring to improve soil structure. Years of former arable management have compacted the soil but by breaking it up moisture retention is improved, organic matter is brought back to the surface and invertebrates increase. Next year, the remaining 50% will be similarly managed and this work will continue on rotation until the soil achieves optimum condition.

Birds seen recently have included a female hen harrier, a flock of up to 50 redpoll were around the Ernie Hemsley viewpoint for a week or so – and two waxwing were heard in flight at the same spot.

**Elmley:** A highlight was Gordon (the warden) stepping into the orchard one morning to be startled by a great grey shrike, the first in 30 years on the reserve.

A large amount of work is nearing completion topping and rotavating rills to remove the native sea clubrush (scirpus) which out-competes other important species.

**Great Bells Farm,** is now clear of WWI and II bombs and diggers have started the first of two phases of ditching to create the new wetland reserve.



**Finally thank you all for your support in 2011 and looking forward to a successful New birding Year in 2012 (starting at Foreness Point on 1<sup>st</sup> January!). And -**

**Happy Christmas!**

**Jeffrey Kirk – pictured with Wendy at Reculver**