

# Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group



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## Newsletter May 2012

[www.rspbgravesend.org.uk](http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk)

I have been preparing the Newsletter since I was Group Leader many, many years ago. It has been an enjoyable task but it is now time for new energy and a fresh input of ideas. In response to my pleas Pauline volunteered to take it on from the AGM this year and I wish her success. With the increased cost of postage I would urge members with the facilities, and have not already done so, to change to receiving it via our email newsletter.

Major successes of the Group include our anniversary dinners organized by David Johnson and held at Shorne Village Hall. These get-togethers have been most popular and enjoyable and the food always one of the highs of the evening. This year is the Group's thirty-fifth anniversary and I would urge everyone to reserve the 6 October in their diaries and to book tickets for the evening. You will not be disappointed. *Peter Heathcote*

[www.gravesend.org.uk](http://www.gravesend.org.uk) Our new and improved website, developed by Paul Yetman assisted by Alan Else, contains up-to-date information about the Group and is becoming our main method of communication with members. If required Newsletters will continue to be sent by post. The website also allows you to share your birding experiences and to post your photos on our Gallery page – so don't be shy let us know about your trips – use the Contact Us page on the website and Paul or Alan will do the rest.

**Group Leader's thoughts** At the next indoor meeting on 9 May there will be a short AGM to consider the accounts and to elect members of the committee. For the next year I will remain as Group Leader and the present committee have indicated that they are happy to continue. Neville Lunness-Barnes is treasurer (we were able to donate £700 to the RSPB in 2011), Sue Healey is membership secretary; Penny Leeves organises our speakers and refreshments and Paul Yetman the outdoor walks. Sally Jennings is publicity officer and organises our coach trips (see later for details of trips to Wickham Fen and Abberton Reservoir plus Fingrinhoe Nature Reserve). Julie Peeling provides advice on educational matters and David Johnson gives assistance as required and organises raffles. Josie Brown organises the sale of RSPB items and makes a lot of money for the RSPB. The committee tries to arrange events that members have told us they enjoy. So if there is a talk or walk that you would like please speak to a member of the committee. As an example, a night time walk has already been suggested!

Our speaker on 9 May will now be Paul Outhwaite, Public Affairs Manager at the RSPB south-east regional office, who will tell us about **Futurescapes**. This is a new initiative by the RSPB who are aiming to bring together all their various strands of work across the UK, such as nature reserves, farm conservation advice, planning casework and public events, to step up their effectiveness. A lot of this work will be in partnership with other organisations. The first Futurescapes in south east England will be the Greater Thames, Eastern Solent, South Downs and the Thames Basin and Wealden Heaths. For more details see [www.rspb.org.uk/futurescapes](http://www.rspb.org.uk/futurescapes). Rolf Williams, RSPB Communications Officer for Kent will also give us news of the next Wildlife and Country Fair and current developments on the North Kent marshes. If you have any pressing questions that you would like to ask Paul or Rolf please let me know and I will brief them.

Over the past year we had successful coach trips to RSPB Minsmere and to the Welney WWT. Our weekend walks have remained popular and 160 species of bird were counted during the period. Our Tuesday afternoon talks at Woodville Halls continued to be very popular as did our morning walks led by Sally and Malcolm. Many thanks to the organizers and leaders of the trips (extra volunteers to lead trips would be appreciated). Audiences for our evening meetings at St Botolph's have also increased recently.

The Group depends on the help and support of members for its future success and we are always looking for anyone who would like to be more involved. We currently need a secretary. We would be pleased to welcome anyone to the committee who would like to help and learn more about the workings of the RSPB. Please contact me if you are interested. The Group is entering its thirty fifth year of existence and David Johnson is organising a celebratory dinner for the event in October– see separate insert. We would be very pleased if you could join us for this extra special event.

Finally, this is the last Newsletter that Peter Heathcote is preparing but, thankfully, Pauline Heathcote has volunteered to take on this task. Many thanks to Peter for the hard work you have put in the past in producing excellent newsletters.

Jeffrey Kirk

**Airport on the Isle of Grain** The RSPB is opposed to the construction of an airport in the Estuary, including the latest proposals by Norman Foster for an airport on the Isle of Grain and Boris Johnson's island airport. The Government, in the budget statement in March, promised a consultation document on the *Future of Air Travel in the South East* to be published this summer. The RSPB will be making its views known at this stage together with their wider concerns about the impact of increased aviation on climate change. This world-class coastal wetland has been saved from a series of ill-thought out airport proposals in the past by the RSPB campaigning alongside local communities and many others. We all remember the *No airport at Cliffe* campaign. Depending on the outcome of the consultation the RSPB will campaign actively to reject any plans that threaten these internationally recognised and protected coastal wetlands.

RSPB

### **Volunteers wanted for the Wildlife and Countryside Fair on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2012 at Bromhey Farm**

The fair will be a mix of fun things to do, demonstrations, refreshments and guided walks. However the Government's consultation on the need for more airports will report in summer and the results could shape the day significantly. Should the threat of development locally be part of the report the fair would provide the opportunity to make a strong community statement about what we think of unsustainable development in the Thames Estuary. This year's event has the potential to be the most significant since the *No Airport at Cliffe* campaign.

The event is only possible with the help of volunteers and in the past the Group has provided a number of volunteers. Your continued involvement is essential to make the fair a success. Volunteers will be asked to do a half day only between 10:30 and 16:15hrs so that they can enjoy the fair for the rest of the day. You will be given the opportunity to select what you would like to do. Rolf Williams is already planning the fair and would like to hear from volunteers on 01634 2224801, email [Rolf.Williams@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Rolf.Williams@rspb.org.uk) or at Northward Hill RSPB Reserve, Bromhey Farm, Eastborough, Cooling, Rochester, ME3 8DS.

**A Day in the Life of an RSPB Field Teacher** This starts months ahead with a school contacting the Education Officer (EO) for a programme that suits their needs. They usually have a list of important subjects, mostly science based, but some geography, literacy, maths and personal social health, and economic education needs to be involved. The EO then meets the teacher to agree a programme linked to the National Curriculum and suited to a diverse range of learning styles to meet their learning outcomes. Most teachers want a fun programme without the children really realising that they are being educated! On the day there may be six Field Teachers and a large group of 90 pupils, giving us 15 youngsters each. Co-ordinating school children safely, efficiently and accommodating additional needs, so that their experience is just as sensational, is an art and it takes endless 'tweaks' to get the programme and the timing perfect.



On the day, the coach arrives with expectant faces peering through the windows. The children alight with wellies donned, excitement brimming and backpacks stuffed with extra goodies mum has packed. Once the introductions are over, we troop off in our 15 pupil groups, a teacher plus a few willing adults that have been seconded for the day. We usually run three activities in rotation, giving all pupils the opportunity to have a go at everything. Good timing is essential especially if the group is heavily involved in their activity.

Pond-dipping is always a winner. There is nothing better than seeing 15 pupils, heads-down, gazing in wonderment into the miniature world of the pond-dipping tray. Most times this is the first contact some children have had with such amazing little animals. It is great to hear the cries of *Wow* and *Cool* and *Miss - look at this. What is it?* It is moments like this that I hope that something records in a child's mind and gives them the same 'wildlife bug' that I caught as a child and the passion to want to know more about the natural world, embrace it, guard it and keep it with them into their adult years.

One of the most satisfying parts of my job as a field teacher is opening a new world to a young mind. I think it is so important for children to make this connection with nature. As adults we should always encourage it, no matter how small. Even catching your first stickleback is a monumental event and the trip is nearly always an experience that children ask for again and again. Last summer one young lady informed me that she did not like getting dirty. She was frightened of bugs and preferred to be indoors playing on her computer or watching TV. I suggested that she gave the day a chance and let me know if she had changed her mind. During the day I observed her leading the activities, down on her knees in the mud, shrieking with a mixture of terror and delight when she sweep-netted a spider, and being the last one to tear herself away from pond-dipping and beaming with delight. At the end of the day I asked her whether she'd changed her mind (I think I already guessed)!

We often find that adults enjoy the day just as much as the pupils and some confess they didn't have these wildlife experiences as children. *Julie Peeling* (committee member and field teacher RSPB Rainham)

**Group Member's Trip to the Cairngorms, Scotland** Terry and I had visited the Cairngorms before but not on an organised trip. We decided to give Heatherlea a try in March this year for a week of Winter Birding. We duly arrived at Aviemore to be collected and driven to our hotel in Nethybridge.



Our aim was to see at least some of the Scottish speciality birds that we don't see here in the south-east, and we were not disappointed. Our first trip out to the Abernethy forest seemed unnaturally quiet but it was not long before we were taken to a spot where a rogue male capercaillie was found. We had great close views as we were forced back by him along the track out of his territory. How could this be topped? Well perhaps a trip up the Cairngorms to see views of ptarmigan, red grouse and mountain hare came close, and that was only the first day!

The next two days were spent travelling around the Thurso area on the north coast, where we had good views of whooper swans, pink-footed and white-fronted geese. Once we arrived at the coast there was a multitude of birds to see including scaup and lesser scaup, long-tailed duck, common and velvet scoter, eider, red-breasted merganser, Slavonian grebe and many more. A visit to Scrabster harbour also gave great views

of more than one Iceland gull, a first for us. Another day, another trip, this time to the Findhorn valley where, in a snow blizzard, we watched golden eagle tumbling in the sky with a raven and in a stream nearby a dipper was busy dipping.

We had not yet had any good sightings of black grouse so the following morning we were up early to visit a lek and successfully saw several individuals strutting their stuff. Also we had not seen a crested tit so, on our last day, we visited RSPB Loch Garten and there on the feeders was our target bird. With a bird count of over 100 we finished the week on a high.

*Irene and Terry Robson* (Group members)

**RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch 2012** Almost 600,000 people took part in this year's RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch counting over nine million birds. The RSPB reported. "It's great that so many people use Big Garden Birdwatch as an annual activity to monitor what is happening in their own gardens".

The RSPB South East's Samantha Stokes said: "We've generally noticed fewer starlings this winter, both in gardens and at some of the traditionally large roosts around the region. The average was 3 per garden compared with 15 in 1979. It is thought that this may in part be the effect of the mild weather. Usually the UK's resident starlings are joined in winter by hundreds of thousands from northern Europe but this year they simply may not have needed to travel as far as the UK if conditions were to their liking elsewhere in Europe. The declines are mirrored across much of northern Europe and the starling is red listed as a bird of high conservation concern. We

also need to bear in mind breeding numbers of starlings in the UK are falling with changes in their feeding habitats, and changes beneath the soil reducing their insect food, possible reasons”.

Across the UK blackbird numbers were down 22% on last year possibly due to the milder weather that enabled them to find food out in the wider countryside rather than relying on our gardens for survival.

In contrast to the falling numbers of starlings, the survey revealed some birds prospering. Goldfinches were up to number seven in the UK list this year. This colourful bird has been steadily increasing in gardens and first reached the top ten in 2008.

Species	Average number in Kent	Rank	% of gardens in Kent	Average number in UK	Rank	% of gardens in UK
House Sparrow	5	1	67	4	1	64
Starling	5	2	55	3	2	43
Blue Tit	3	3	83	3	3	84
Collared Dove	2	4	75	1	10	51
Blackbird	2	5	85	3	4	90
Woodpigeon	2	6	65	2	6	66
Chaffinch	2	7	50	2	5	52
Great Tit	1	8	54	2	8	60
Robin	1	9	80	1	9	84
Goldfinch	1	10	28	2	7	33

In Kent over 20,000 people sent in details of their garden birds which revealed the house sparrow has knocked the starling off the county’s top spot with an average of 5 seen per garden. The blue tit has clung on to third place, and the blackbird is only just in the top five, having been overtaken by the collared dove.

Without a prolonged cold spell this winter, more of our birds would have survived compared to the last two winters so many species may have a better start to the breeding season.

*RSPB*

**Reminder - Coach trip to Wicken Fen Nature Reserve on Sunday May 27th 2012**

**Tickets still available !**

Join us at this lovely wetland nature reserve to see all kinds of birds, plants and insects. The reserve has hides, trails, visitor centre and cafeteria.



The coach will leave Gravesend Rail Station, Clive Road, at **8.00am** and leave Wicken Fen at about **5.00pm**.

Tickets **£19** each or **£14** for **National Trust members** (please take NT membership card) Are available at Group meetings **or from Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN** Telephone 01474 322171. Please make cheques payable to Gravesend RSPB Local Group

**Note: There will be a Coach Trip to Abberton Reservoir and Fingrinhoe Nature Reserves, Essex, on Saturday 17th November 2012. Details to follow.**