

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group Newsletter December 2012 www.rspbgravesend.org.uk



Jeffrey Kirk, Group Leader, writes ...

As we approach the end of the year I look back on some of my personal highlights and tot up my list, which is still below the magic 200. The year has not been easy for bird watching with the inclement weather earlier in the year but our outdoor trips have generally gone ahead with not too much disruption and to date the group's list of species seen is a creditable 154. There are special memories, for me particularly, of short eared owls at Capel Fleet, redstarts at Thursley Common and on an extremely wet night, nightjars at Goathurst Common. But my star bird has to be 3 Lammergeiers which Wendy and I saw in the hills on Crete – a magnificent sight.

Many thanks to Sally for organising **the coach outings** which have been well supported. Wicken Fen was marvellous despite some of us having to abandon the brand new electric boat on one of the canals as it lost its steering – no lives lost but some wet feet! Abberton Reservoir and Fingringhoe Nature Reserves were new venues and despite the wet weather provided an interesting day out. We don't often venture into Essex but there is a lot happening over the river and perhaps we should get there more often.

Our excellent website has members' reports of their trips both locally and elsewhere. Not just birds but flowers, insects, butterflies and all the things that make a walk in the country such a rewarding experience. So share your holidays and days out with us by posting a report and photos on the website – it's quite easy!

Our 35th Anniversary Dinner which was very enjoyable (see following report). As we enter our 36th year there is probably a greater need for groups, such as ours, to keep people in contact with all aspects of nature and the environment, and to bring pressure on those who threaten the countryside and wildlife. Those threats have not gone away – particularly that to the Thames Estuary. It is, therefore, important that the Gravesend group continues its success and, together with our colleagues in the RSPB, ensure that we maintain pressure to protect birds and other wildlife both locally and nationally.

Our indoor meetings at Woodville Halls on Tuesday afternoons and at St Botolph's on Wednesday evening meetings were reasonably well attended but, recently, we have noticed a fall in audiences. Our programme includes a range of excellent speakers for 2013 and, if you have not been to these talks before, I would encourage you to join us in a friendly and sociable environment for an informative and enjoyable time.

The committee works hard to provide a varied **programme of walks and talks** and we value your comments and suggestions, so please let us know your likes and dislikes. Perhaps more importantly we need your help. We have a team of excellent volunteers but could do with additional help in setting up meetings and leading walks as well as additional committee members. So please consider how you can help and maintain the success of the group for years to come- let me know how you can help!

It has been an active time for me since I undertook 2 weeks residential volunteering at Fairburn Ings in Yorkshire which was made all the more exciting as the heavy rains in September meant the reserve was flooded. However, we did manage to clear some scrub land, move cattle and sheep to safe pastures and put in a couple of hides. A lovely reserve – visit it if you are in the area.

Email: groupleader@rspbgravesend.org.uk

**Thank you all for your support in 2012
A successful New Birding Year in 2013**

Join us at our meetings in January 2013 Join us at our meetings in January 2013

Saturday 5th January An outdoor meeting at **Shellness and Capel Fleet**.

10am morning Meet in the car park near the seawall TR042699 (ME12 4RJ).at 10am:
afternoon RSPB Capel Fleet raptor watchpoint, TR013689 (ME12 4BA). Leader: Jeffrey Kirk.

Wednesday evening 9 January at *St Botolph's Hall* with *Ralph Todd* providing
A pot-pourri from the Pyrenees and Lesvos. *Expect superb pictures and anecdotes.*

Tuesday afternoon 22 January at *Woodville Halls* on where *Andrew Lapworth* presents
Macaws and Machu Picchu A colourful guide to south Peru.

David Johnson reports on our 35th Anniversary Dinner



RSPB Gravesend Group Leaders 1977-2012
*From the left ... Peter Heathcote, Jim Martin,
David Arnold, Jeff Kirk and Malcolm Jennings*

It came and went and everyone seemed to have had a very good time indeed! By mid-August I have to admit I was viewing the prospect of the Dinner with some trepidation. Bookings were far fewer than I had hoped for – should we have gone for such a large venue? Rattling around like peas in a pod came to mind! Will the Treasurer slap my wrist for making a loss? Yet, I suppose I shouldn't have worried, numbers increased nearer the time, and Penny's calm, assuring "It'll be alright on the night" proved to be true!!

So eventually about 60 guests enjoyed a delightful meal, enlivened by animated discussion as every-one attempted to wrestle with Sue's birdie quiz. The outcome was inconclusive with three tables sharing the sumptuous prize of mini-chocolate bars, but I'm still of the opinion that Malcolm's table cheated! We were fortunate to have some guests along from the RSPB

including the four residential volunteers from Bromhey Farm and Rolf Williams, the Regional Public Relations Officer. Rolf thanked the Group for all the help given by numerous volunteers over the years and for the many donations we had made. He said the RSPB could not do without the support of Groups like ours and wished us well for the next 35 years!

Perhaps the highlight of the evening, however, was the cutting of the wonderful anniversary cake by Jim Martin our founding Group Leader. Jim now lives in Shropshire but has always kept in touch with the Group that he started in 1977. Jim was leader for the first 7 years of the Group's existence and assisting him to cut the cake, we were honoured to have the other four leaders who have seen us through our first 35 years. David Arnold took over from Jim for 13 years and the baton was then passed successively to Peter Heathcote, Malcolm Jennings and then to the present 'incumbent' Jeff Kirk.

The tables were then cleared and we spent the final part of the evening being royally entertained by Peter Heathcote who had assembled a collection of pictures both ancient and modern. Most people present were able to recognise themselves taking part in Group meetings and events, bringing back memories and often causing much hilarity. Thank you Peter, it rounded off the evening splendidly.

Finally, I would like to thank Sue Healey and Sally Jennings for the help they gave me, and, in particular, I would like to thank Penny Leeves, who apart from keeping me sane, organised the cake, the raffle and the splendid table decorations. *Till our Fortieth ... perhaps!*

Alan Else and Paul Yetman report on ... Website hacking – and safer passwords

Many of you will know that our website was "hacked" in November.

The first thing to say is that we don't know for certain how the hacking took place – it could be they got lucky and identified one or other of the passwords for our 2 administration accounts, but this is doubtful as we both use long and complex passwords (the reason for this will be explained later in this article). More likely is either a "back door" in the software we use to develop and maintain the site, or the host server "where our website lives" was compromised making all websites on that server vulnerable.

Whatever the reasons the consequences could be very significant, as once a hacker gets into your system they have access to all data. In our case, they simply replaced our own pages with their own nasty images. But imagine if they hacked in to something much bigger like Facebook, eBay, or Amazon. They could download the user account database and use de-encryption software to identify user passwords.

This wouldn't be a huge problem in itself, but for one fact known to the hackers: Most people use the same password for all the websites they access because it's easier than having to remember a whole set of different passwords. Most services will store an encrypted (technically, a "hashed") form of your password. What that means is that hackers don't get a simple list of user names and passwords. What they get is a list of user-ids and password hashes. What's good about hashes is that you can calculate a hash from a password, but you cannot do the reverse, so you cannot work out the password from the hash. As a result, you would think that by being hashed it'd be pretty unhackable, but sadly that's not so.

Computers these days are fast. So fast that even the best eight character passwords should no longer be considered secure. 10 is better, but you really should consider moving to 12 or more or the long run, and include special characters if you can. **Be safe!**

A more detailed version of this article is on the website (.. Editor)

Email: webmaster@rspbgravesend.org.uk

Distribution of the Newsletter, Membership Renewal Form and Programme

Regretfully we had to raise our annual subscription to £3.00 per person for 2013 because of increasing costs, particularly postage. For this reason we are sending these documents by email to members who have asked to receive news items by email.

Please print out the renewal form and return as shown. If you wish to have hard copies of these documents just let us know but they will be available at our meetings.

Email: membershipsec@rspbgravesend.org.uk

Jeffrey Kirk reports on the Future of RSPB Reserves in North West Kent

Sue Healey and I met with Chris Corrigan, RSPB Regional Director South East Region, and Alan Johnson, RSPB Kent Area Manager, at their request to discuss the RSPB's situation in North Kent. This follows the announcement that the RSPB is to withdraw from the future management of **Elmley Marshes** and, if the negotiations with the landlord, Philip Merricks, go according to plan the RSPB will hand over management of the site to the Elmley Conservation Trust (ECT) in April 2013. A full press release will then be available.

Whilst we all regretted that the RSPB will no longer have full control over this major reserve in North Kent the RSPB is confident that ECT will maintain the reserve to the standards achieved by the RSPB and visitor access will remain as at present with the possibility of additional hides. More details about this are on our website and Elmley's. The RSPB does have a reserve at **Great Bells Farm** adjacent to Elmley and major earthworks are now complete with the site returned to the grazing marsh it once was with Elmley's burgeoning wildlife spilling over into it. But, as yet, sadly, there are no plans for visitor access.

With the RSPB no longer having direct control of Elmley, Sue and I said that we hoped that more attention and resources could now be directed to developing **Cliffe Pools** to become the 'Flagship' reserve envisaged by the RSPB when the site was acquired some 10 years ago. We were told that the RSPB remains committed to developing Cliffe Pools, but that significant investment is required to transform it into a major visitor site. The RSPB channels its resources into conservation projects and seeks to develop visitor projects with funding partners, something which is difficult in the present economic environment. The RSPB does not have large sums of money available and, because of this, their ambitions for Cliffe are longer-term than was originally planned.

Sue and I said that at present the site is looking neglected despite a lot of work being done on the infrastructure. Viewing areas, benches and signage need to be well maintained and we hoped that some effort could be put into improving the current state of the site to make the visitors experience vastly better than it is at present. A greater staff presence at Cliffe and events organised by the RSPB, would help advertise and provide a great opportunity for the RSPB to promote itself.

The RSPB, to compensate for the failure to develop Cliffe as had been hoped, plan to enhance visitor facilities at **Northward Hill** over the next few years. They believe that smaller investment at Northward Hill will reap big rewards, building on the developing habitats and spectacular views. Sue and I said that Northward Hill was no substitute for Cliffe Pools but welcomed the plans particularly if they replace the benches which had been taken away!

There have been major refurbishments at **Bromhey Farm**. The large barn has been painted, and one of the cattle sheds re-roofed. The hay barn roof has solar panels installed by Ethical Power and at their expense. This means that the RSPB office is now solar powered and excess electricity goes straight into the National Grid.

The **Wildlife and Countryside Fair** was held in early September on a glorious day and was deemed a great success with 1,800 people attending; the RSPB covered their costs and 10 new members were recruited. Sincere thanks to volunteers of the Medway and Gravesend local groups, without whom the event would not be possible. Congratulations to Josie and her fellow helpers who managed to sell over £350 of RSPB goods – an excellent result. It has been decided to hold a fair next year on **Sunday 8 September 2013** – a date for your diaries!

Thames Estuary Airport: Jeff Kirk reports

I attended **The Big Airport Debate** organised by Radio Kent in October (There is a fuller report of this on our website). The principal speakers were Daniel Moylan, the Mayor of London's Aviation Advisor and Councillor Alan Jarrett, Deputy Leader of Medway Council. It was all fairly predictable with Boris Johnson's adviser putting forward plans which are well known and emphasising the need for a hub airport otherwise the UK will lose out to our international competitors, and the advantages such a scheme would bring to North Kent with jobs and improved infrastructure. Medway council are opposed, they have various initiatives in place to bring employment to the area without destroying the environment.

There was a small demonstration outside the hall by various bodies opposed to any airport in the Thames Estuary including the Friends of North Kent Marshes and the RSPB. The mood in the hall reflected this view but there were a minority there who would support such a project as it would bring jobs to Kent.

Sue Armstrong-Brown, Head of Conservation Science at the RSPB said that there have been a number of plans since the 1980s for **an estuary airport** and all have been rejected. The area is too important internationally for birds and it remains a bad idea. The RSPB view is that climate change is the most important threat we face and any need for further airport capacity should take into account carbon emissions. New airliners and a reduction in business travel plus better use of existing facilities would reduce the need for further capacity.

Will it happen in the Thames Estuary? Well we won't know now until 2015 but Sue for the RSPB is certain it will not as the area is heavily protected with both domestic and international conventions that are legally binding. Let's us hope she is right!

The State of the UK's Birds 2012

Since 1966, we've lost breeding birds from our countryside at an average rate of a nesting pair every minute....

In a recent press release the RSPB used this headline to draw attention to the ups and downs of our bird populations over the last few decades.

See report at www.rspb.org.uk/news/329911-44-million-birds-lost-since-1966

Roger Kiddie reports on Migrating Blackcaps

Our ringing activities in North Kent this year have resulted in the capture of 300+ Blackcaps. Early indications are that breeding success has been low, presumably because of the very poor weather conditions in early summer. One Blackcap, trapped on 10th October, had been ringed in Brussels. This was a first-year bird still bearing some brown juvenile feathers on the cap. Details of the ringing site and date are awaited with interest.



First year Blackcap ringed in Belgium
Image: Roger Kiddie

On the evening of 6th October mist nets were erected with the intention of trapping early the next morning. The nets are closed up overnight so that no birds are caught and then opened up before dawn on the following day.

The numbers of birds caught around dusk are usually very low but on this evening there was a sudden rush of Blackcaps just as the light was fading.

The birds were ringed, aged and sexed, measured and weighed and released within a few minutes. These birds had an average weight of 23.5g. On the morning of 7th October a further 5 Blackcaps were trapped.

The average weight of these birds was 19.6g. A typical weight for Blackcap in midsummer is around 16 – 17g.

How do we explain these quite large variations in weight?

Most Blackcaps (but not all) are migrants with many individuals wintering around the Mediterranean basin. They are nocturnal migrants and just prior to departure put on a layer of subcutaneous fat which fuels their journey south. The crop of blackberries this year was very good and the Blackcaps seemed to be feeding on these throughout September and most of October. We believe that the birds caught on the evening of 6th

October were actually just starting their migration while those trapped on the following day had not quite reached their target weight to allow them to reach their winter destination.

There is evidence from central Europe that an increasing number of Blackcaps migrate north-west towards the North Sea coast. At the end of the winter these birds have only a short journey back to their breeding grounds and arrive some time before those individuals which have spent the winter further south. The birds arriving back very early tend to inter-breed with individuals with the same migratory strategy while the late arrivals only choose partners from among their co-migrants. There is speculation that this will lead to speciation with two separate species of Blackcaps gradually evolving.

The RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch on Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 January

Be part of the World's biggest wildlife survey!

Many of you have taken part in this survey which has been going for over 30 years. Almost 600,000 people across the UK took part in Big Garden Birdwatch in 2012 and between them counted more than 9 million birds. With results from so many gardens, the RSPB are able to create a 'snapshot' of bird numbers in each region.

The survey provides the RSPB with important information about garden bird populations in winter and has helped to highlight some dramatic declines in UK garden birds. In the first survey in 1979, an average of 15 starlings were seen per garden, but that fell to an average of just 3 starlings per garden in 2012, the lowest level ever. House sparrow numbers have fallen by two thirds over the lifetime of the survey too.

This decline has been alarming, but Big Garden Birdwatch has helped find out more about their numbers and distribution across UK gardens, and that has been the first step in helping to put things right.

Some bird species have fared considerably better over the years. Sightings of popular species like blue tits, great tits and coal tits in gardens have increased since 1979. Goldfinches, which were absent from the Big Garden Birdwatch top 15 in the early years, have featured regularly as a top 15 species since 2004.

To take part, people are asked to spend just one hour at any time over Big Garden Birdwatch weekend noting the highest number of each bird species seen in their gardens or local park at any one time. You then have three weeks to submit your results to the RSPB, either online at www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch or in the post. Personalised monitoring sheets will be available in "Birds" magazine

You can register to take part in Big Garden Birdwatch 2013 at www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch or call the hotline on **0300 456 8330** to receive a FREE Big Garden Birdwatch pack.



Coach trip to RSPB Minsmere Reserve

on Sunday 12th May 2013



Once again we will make a Spring trip to one of the best bird-watching sites in Britain. On the Minsmere pools and marshes we hope to see terns feeding young, marsh harriers gliding over the reedbeds, and bitterns, avocets and bearded tits all feeding families. The reserve has hides, trails, a good visitor centre and restaurant. The coach will leave Gravesend Railway Station, Clive Rd, at **8.00am** and leave Minsmere at about **5.00pm**.

Tickets are **£16** each.

Make cheques payable to *Gravesend RSPB Local Group*.

Please take your RSPB membership card if you are a member. Note there is an entry charge for **those who are not RSPB members** of £7.50 (£5 for concessions)

Tickets are available at Group meetings **OR contact Sally.**
Remember to tell Sally how many tickets you require!

Sally Jennings,
206 Lower Higham Rd,
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01474 322171
enclosing SAE for tickets
please