

Gravesend and District RSPB Local Group

Newsletter April 2013

www.rspbgravesend.org.uk



Welcome to our first newsletter for 2013

*Jeffrey Kirk, Group Leader, writes on the **AGM and Future of the Group***

On 8 May there will be a short AGM to consider the accounts and confirm members of the committee.

After 3 years as Group Leader I will be stepping down and as a new leader has not yet emerged, arrangements for the continuation of the Group will be outlined. The RSPB is content that the Group can continue for a year, during which, hopefully, a Group Leader will be appointed. **Paul Yetman** has agreed to take on the role of Group Contact to act as our link to the RSPB. For the next year to May 2014 the present committee have said they are happy to continue with **Neville Lunness-Barnes** as Treasurer (we were able to donate £400 to the RSPB this year), **Sue Healey** as membership Secretary, **Penny Leeves** organising our speakers and **Paul Yetman** planning outdoor walks. **Sally Jennings** is Publicity Officer and continues to organise our coach trips whilst **Julie Peeling** provides advice on educational matters and **David Johnson** gives assistance as required. **Josie Brown** will continue to organise the sale of RSPB items. **Alan Else** and **Paul Yetman** will continue to maintain the website. We also welcome to the committee **Sue Provins** who has agreed to take on the duties of Secretary.

As a further change there will be specific teams to run the **indoor meetings** and **John and Ann Prestage** have agreed to lead the Wednesday evening meetings for the rest of the year and similarly **Sally and Malcolm Jennings** have also agreed to take on responsibility for the Tuesday afternoon meetings. Leading the **outdoor meetings** will be covered by either members of the Committee or volunteers from within the Group. The committee is also considering the use of St Botolph's Hall and a new, better venue for us is currently being sought. Hopefully we will have some more news at the AGM.

We are always looking for new volunteers to help in running the Group. We are a strong, friendly group with an impressive programme **so please consider how you can help to maintain this success**. Any committee member will be happy to hear from you.

Needless to say I am indebted to the committee who have made my role as leader an enjoyable and rewarding time. And, of course, many thanks to all members of the group who have supported me and the group so well over the past three years.

Group leader's thoughts It is with some regret that I am stepping down as leader. The last three years have been as eventful as ever but family circumstances mean I need more time with them. It also gives me the opportunity to reflect. The group remains as healthy as ever with a programme that others would envy but clearly there are pressures on people's time and we need to explore how we can improve – and in particular our Wednesday evening meetings. The committee is actively looking at this.

The RSPB has continued to press the Government on wildlife issues with mixed results. There have been some successes – the stopping of the cull of buzzards and internationally the campaign for better fishing practices to save the albatross are just a couple. But with the UK failing to meet its biodiversity targets and internationally conferences such as Rio failing to come to any sort of agreement on global warming there remains much to be done. It is vital that the RSPB continues to champion the needs of wildlife, and local groups have an important role to play here making people aware of the threat to our countryside. Not easy in a period of economic downturn when for many people their worry is jobs and housing. With this in mind it is to be hoped that the rebranding and associated publicity will raise people's understanding of the threat to nature and the need to act. **Email: groupleader@rspbgravesend.org.uk**

Wednesday evening 8 May at St Botolph's Hall, Northfleet **A Naturalist in Kent**
John Buckingham, a popular speaker with a wealth of knowledge, talking about his life and work in Kent.

Check your programme (or the website for details) for details of the outdoor meetings throughout the summer... Here's a few

- **Tuesday 21 May 10am - 1pm at LULLINGSTONE COUNTRY PARK**
- **Saturday 25 May 5am to 9am (approx.) DAWN CHORUS AT NORTHWARD HILL RSPB RESERVE**
- **Sunday 9 June 10am - 4pm KNOLE PARK NT**
- **Tuesday 25 June 10am - 1pm SEVENOAKS WILDFOWL RESERVE**

Review of year ...Jeff Kirk reports on behalf of the Group

Once again the committee organised a full and impressive programme of walks and talks and our thanks go to them for their hard work. I should also like to thank all the other members who have contributed to our success over the last year – too many of you to name! There have been successful coach trips to Wicken Fen, Fingringhoe Wick and Abberton Reservoir. A number of volunteers have led our popular weekend and Tuesday morning walks and we saw 154 different species, an impressive total. If you have not been on one of our outings then I would recommend that you come along and enjoy the companionship of the group and benefit from the expert knowledge available. Reports of all our outdoor meetings are posted on the website. Tuesday afternoon talks at Woodville Halls continue to be very popular but audiences for our evening meetings at St Botolph's have declined recently not helped by the poor weather. The committee arranges events that members have told us they enjoy so if there is anything that you feel we are missing and would like included please speak to a member of the committee.

The appalling weather we have had this year has quite literally had a dampening effect on the birds that we see. In my garden despite many feeders there has been a dearth of birds using them. Where are they – have many died because of the cold? According to the Garden Birdwatch results sparrows and starlings continue to decline which I would put down partly to the weather taking its toll but other species more likely to be seen in the countryside have sought extra food in our gardens – siskins, jays and fieldfares – well, not many of those turned up in my garden! Hopefully we will see a change in the weather and a bumper breeding season.

The weather has not disrupted our outdoor programme too much although I suspect some people chose not to go out in the cold. And we continue to see a good many species. So if you want to improve your annual list of sightings come and join us on our walks and coach trips.

You will also have noticed that the website has changed to make it more dynamic and user friendly. Thanks to Paul for setting this up and to Alan for maintaining and posting the content. Let's hear about your wildlife experiences here!

Rebranding the RSPB *Jeff Kirk reports* Sue Healey and I attended the South East Regional Office Local Group Get together in March and heard from Chris Corrigan, the Regional director, about the RSPB's new corporate strategy and the reasons behind this. It is well known that nature is in trouble with a decline in many bird species. But it is not just birds, all wildlife is at risk including plants, bees, and butterflies and not forgetting marine environments. Worldwide habitats have been lost, farmland, forests and coastlines have all been affected. Help is needed and the RSPB can make a difference but it needs to change.

Whilst protection of birds is at the heart of its work the RSPB needs to look at the wider picture; helping birds also helps other species. This means working in partnership with others such as the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts and internationally with Birdlife. There is a need to liaise with local communities and enter into partnerships with businesses and commerce to make sure the message about the dangers to the environment are well understood. The RSPB does get involved to influence Government policy on marine bills and as we know locally airport campaigns as well as local planning applications. But more needs to be done.

To create a world richer in nature the RSPB needs to widen its appeal and change people's perception to ensure that they understand the wider threat to all wildlife and the impact the RSPB can have in saving nature. There is a need to maintain and increase membership in what is now a crowded market of wildlife organisations. A major concern is the disconnection with nature of children. We need to protect nature for the next generation and education will be an important element in the new strategy. So, in addition to making sure that people understand who we are and what we stand for, the RSPB needs to create a dynamic new brand that makes it more appealing and relevant to the problems facing wildlife today.

The RSPB has therefore developed a more modern looking logo and a new strap line *Giving nature a home*. These will be seen on the International Day of Biodiversity 22 May when leading wildlife organisations, some 25 in total, will come together to present a State of Nature report - an authoritative health check on the current situation. The launch of the new brand will be on 2 June with a TV campaign and a new RSPB website. Details will also be in *Birds* magazine.

This is a brief summary of a wide ranging discussion we had about the new brand but we all recognized that there must be change and the need to inspire supporters and engage new members to save our threatened wildlife for future generations. Rebranding the RSPB is part of this.

North Kent Reserves *Compiled by Jeff Kirk* Locally it has been disappointing to see the slow progress in making Cliffe Pools the flagship reserve that was envisaged all those years ago when the RSPB obtained the site. At a recent conference I was able to mention this to Mike Clarke, CEO of the RSPB. He grew up locally, knows this area well, and understands the problem. The withdrawal of the RSPB from Elmley earlier than expected also leaves a big hole in the RSPB's presence in Kent. Members of the group and me have made representations to S E Regional Office about this and we look for some action here. Hopefully the improvements at Northward Hill and the work at Great Bell's Farm and Seasalter will compensate in some way. It will be interesting to see what happens at Elmley where we are assured access will remain as before.

The group has maintained its close contacts with the North Kent reserves. Although the Friday working group has been suspended there is still a Thursday group. I have been able to help a little, not as much as I would like, in the important work clearing sycamores and overgrown woodland, and widening rides at Northward Hill this winter. More volunteers are always welcome and the staff at Northward Hill would be pleased to hear from you if you are interested. The last couple of months have seen some big changes at Northward Hill. Contractors have been on site excavating over 20,000m² of new scrapes and rills to improve the habitat for waders and wildfowl. This work, the majority paid for with a

grant from Natural England and £1,800 in donations for the specifically-named Gordon Allison Scrape, together with record-breaking levels of rainfall, has resulted in the marshland looking primed for a promising breeding season.

I should also mention the work being done by Roger Kiddie who leads a team of volunteers carrying out regular bird ringing at Northward Hill on behalf of the BTO. Roger has been ringing birds in North Kent for fifty years and you can join him to see bird ringing where you will be permitted to re-release some of the birds. Details of this exciting monthly activity 'Wild About You' are on the RSPB website reserve page for Northward Hill.

The RSPB staff report that the weather has been dominating their activities this winter; the land has been positively sodden, with standing water on all the fields leaving the marshes looking spectacular. These conditions have however been ideal for the winter migrants and there has been a profusion of ducks and waders across the region. Cliffe Pools has had unprecedented numbers: 1,400 teal, 3,000 lapwing, 4,500 wigeon, 8,000 dunlin and 10,000 black-tailed godwits. The godwits, a red-listed species, represent 10% of the European population and a third of all godwits in the UK this winter. The conditions have made it very hard for the graziers, not only has the profusion of wigeon grazed a lot of the grass, the ground has been too wet to get cattle and machinery out, and the cold hit the lambing and calving season. The newly improved barns at Northward Hill have been a welcome refuge to the livestock, the farm having been hit by several driving blizzards during winter.

Given the numbers of birds, the RSPB cameraman, Toby Hough, was invited to film on the marshes over the January spring tides. He set-up a small hide at Cliffe, crawled in before dawn on the ebb, and waited all day for the birds to come. He noted that the godwits lifted off the river a couple of hours before the peak high and spent a long time roosting on the pools before moving on again to feed elsewhere. The footage is likely to be used in future airport campaign material. And in connection with the airport threat RSPB staff hosted a delegation from Boris Johnson's Transport for London aviation committee ending their tour of the Hoo Peninsula at Cliffe Pools where the birds spoke for themselves!

The Big Wild Sleep Out 9 to 11 August AND Wildlife and Countryside Fair 8 September

The RSPB is promoting the ***Big Wild Sleep Out***, encouraging children to spend a night camping out to experience the outdoors, nature, and the stars. If you have any special interests or skills and would generally like to be involved do get in touch with Rolf at Northward Hill. Likewise, the ***Wildlife and Countryside Fair*** will take place on September 8th and all help is welcomed, indeed the event could not go ahead without the help of volunteers and planning has started already!

Rolf Williams email rolf.williams@rspb.org.uk

Futurescapes and Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs).. *Jeff Kirk reports* I attended a forum entitled *Space for Nature; Land for Life; A vision for the Greater Thames* in February at Wat Tyler Country Park in Essex organised by the RSPB. The event brought together industry leaders, senior politicians, including Eric Pickles MP, and conservation groups to discuss the roles they can play, acting together to realise the potential of the unique Greater Thames landscape. What it means is enhancing existing green sites by making them bigger, better and more connected to maximise their potential and become an inclusive place for local wildlife, the economy and local communities. This ambition cannot be achieved by one organization alone, and the event marked a commitment from all sectors to work towards a common goal.

Dr Mike Clarke the RSPB's Chief Executive, said: *Since before the time when Charles Dickens conveyed the wildness of the North Kent marshes in Great Expectations, the Thames Gateway has become an engine for economic prosperity and home to six million people. The Thames Gateway is also internationally-important for wildlife, and it's our desire to enhance the region's natural capital for the benefit of people and nature. Let's not forget, a healthy economy is underpinned by a healthy environment.*

The Greater Thames faces many threats to nature, including unsustainable development and climate change and Mike Clarke added: *Without action to restore, adapt and enhance existing sites and create new ones, important wildlife could be lost from the Greater Thames within the next century.* The RSPB will be working with a number of organisations to create a targeted area of land for nature conservation within the Thames Gateway by 2020 to ensure wildlife can flourish and provide opportunities for people to enjoy nature where they live and contribute to protecting their local wildlife.

Eric Pickles spoke amusingly of his interest in bird watching and the need to both *progress and preserve* to ensure the land we have on leasehold (our *geographical birth right*) is handed over to the next generation in a better condition than when we received it. Let's hope he takes this message to Government. Professor John Lawton passionately and eloquently outlined the reasons for delivering conservation at a landscape scale, referring to the key findings of his influential report to Government, [Making Space for Nature](#) - see also the Greater Thames Marshes National Improvement Area (NIA) for more information. From industry DP World and Veolia outlined case studies demonstrating how industry can not only comply with key regulations but make a genuine contribution to improving the natural environment. Finally a representative from Thurrock Council explained their Riverscapes vision to protect and use the natural environment for the community and to support inward investment in Thurrock.

We were also shown round a new reserve being developed jointly between Veolia and the RSPB at Bowers Marsh on the site of an old rubbish tip. The reserve is not far from Basildon and will open to the public later this year and will be well worth a visit. There were also seminars where we were asked to look at how access to nature could be improved to help connect people to nature and build stronger links between nature and economic growth. Let's hope our comments are taken on board as there was a lot said about improving access to reserves and the enhancing the visitor experience.

The task now is to take forward the actions and ideas identified. It is clear that there is a lot to be done and the [RSPB](#) have a vital role to play in facilitating and informing these changes. It was unfortunate that the event was very much a South Essex based event. Although North Kent was represented no one spoke of the work being planned or done there.

However, arising from proposals in the [Making Space for Nature](#) report DEFRA has made available £7.5 million for Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs). Of the 12 projects that bid for a share of this money £500,000 has been awarded to the Greater Thames Marshes NIA which includes the Hoo peninsula and Isle of Grain. The money will be used to create and enhance grazing marsh, salt marsh and mudflat habitats, and encourage local people to get involved with nature. Incidentally this announcement seems to contradict any plans that the area could be built on for a new £50 billion hub airport proposed by architect Lord Foster or an island airport put forward by London Mayor Boris Johnson.

The RSPB, under Julian Nash at Northward Hill, will be responsible for £100k of this grant for the restoration of 159 ha of grazing marsh at Higham Marsh in North Kent on privately owned land which is currently not managed for conservation, but which would provide a critical connection between RSPB managed core habitats at Shorne Marshes and Cliffe Pools. This money is destined to bring the hydrology up to the standard of Shorne Marshes & Northward Hill. Three staff members will be funded with an equivalent amount of money for two/three years, a project officer to co-ordinate everything with our Greater Thames Futurescape and drive the NIA project forward, a farmland advisor to work directly with farmers and help them to manage their land more sympathetically for wildlife and a community engagement officer (CEO) to bring the work to the attention of the wider public in the NIA region. Once the CEO is in place it is hoped that they can come along to one of our meetings to tell us more about this project and its role in the Futurescape initiative.

Pond-Dipping In The Ice *Julie Peeling, who works with the RSPB, wrote this report in mid-March .*

This time last year, I can distinctly remember our warden at RSPB Rainham Marshes, looking desperately out of the window of the visitors centre, with a very worried look on her face and saying *I wish we had some rain!* The rest, as they say, is history...

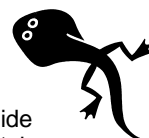


The continual precipitation, from then on, didn't stop us field teaching on the reserve and the extra water gave us some excellent pond-dipping sessions with the pupils. It also gave us some great opportunities to explain to the children why water is so vital to the health of a reserve, its wildlife and to people, of course. So we wasted no time in using what was to become a cool and somewhat drizzly summer to get the 'message' across. We are always surprised by the resilience of children during the tougher weather conditions and to be honest, the discomfort of a little rain or chill is usually vocalised by the adults. However, we've been supported by some fantastic teachers, support assistants and parent helpers who have been more than willing to 'muck in' and get their hands wet and dirty.

In the extremely cold times, we as RSPB Field Teachers, have had to think on our feet and adapt the programmes so we give the pupils most, if not all, of the excitement that comes with a day trip to a nature reserve. So, in the very worst of the cold, the children have had a quick pond-dipping session, where we haul out as much as possible on a rota then warm up basis, making sure they ALL experience dipping. Then the trays of water and aquatic creatures are brought inside the education zone classrooms, for closer examination.



The oo's and ah's say it all, as the mystery creatures of the ditches zip across the water wiggling and paddling their way in the trays. It's always rewarding to see the children's faces as they observe, usually for the first time, this miniature world of wonder with its predators and prey, carnivores, herbivores, omnivores and detritivores, all part of a network of food chains and webs that support life on the reserve. Questioning the children on how these animals live and breathe, reproduce and survive nearly always throws up a budding David Attenborough and that is always very encouraging.



Although all of us would like to see a bit of spring return now, pond-dipping in the ice does have a positive side and it's all worthwhile when at the end of the day the children tell you they've had a great day and are definitely coming back for more, even if the weather is British.

Sue Healey reports on York Road Academy.... You will recall that Malcolm, Sally and I have been involved in supporting York Road Academy (Dartford) set up their wildlife garden. Thanks to the generous support from RBS, we have been able to donate the sum of £250 to the school to continue our support for the project. This will be used to create a hide for the children to view the wildlife garden with minimal disturbance to the wildlife and also to enable the children to continue to feed the birds in the forthcoming months. Sally also presented some RSPB wildlife pin-badges which the children are now proudly wearing.

It's always a delight to meet people with an enthusiasm for nature and conservation, and none of this would have been possible without the dedication and motivation of Julie and the Head and Teaching Staff at the school. The children have responded well to the nature club and some of their pictures can be seen in our gallery. *Thanks to all concerned.*

read Sue's report on Migrants in Morocco on www.rspbgravesend.org.uk



Sally Jennings says.....Look out for details of our 16th November coach trip.

The destination and cost will be announced in our Summer newsletter, at Group meetings and on the website as soon as possible.

**Wednesday Evening Indoor meetings resume on 11 September
Tuesday Afternoon Indoor meetings resume on 24 September**