

Newsletter of the Gravesend RSPB Local Group

NEW DAY and NEW VENUE for EVENING MEETINGS

In future our evening talks will take place at **Northfleet School for Girls**, Hall Rd, Northfleet, Gravesend, DA11 8AQ. Meetings will be on **Thursdays** starting at the slightly earlier time of **7.30** and entry will be **£3.50** including refreshments. Parking is free. Everyone is welcome. Our talks cover a wide range of interesting nature topics. Please do come along and support us at this new venue which we hope will be a good, comfortable base for our future Group meetings.

On Thursday 9th January Peter & Pauline Heathcote will tell us about the exciting wildlife of 'Belize'.

Don't forget our **Tuesday afternoon meetings** continue at the **Woodville Halls**, Gravesend. Entry **£2.50** sorry no refreshments.

On Tuesday 28th January at 2pm Chris Ward's talk is 'Waders, waders, everywhere'.

Birds News from Northward Hill

Roger Kiddie

During November there was the usual influx of winter migrants with the expected arrival of redwings, fieldfares and brambling. The weather was such that most of these birds flew further west as soon as they arrived and there were only small numbers to be seen locally. Ringing is showing that there has also been an arrival of continental blackbirds which are generally rather larger than our own birds.

In the second week of November in North Kent, an increase in the numbers of redpolls was noticed. A quick trawl through the internet will demonstrate the confusion that exists about the identification of species and sub-species of redpolls.

On 16th November, while ringing at RSPB Northward Hill we managed to catch several redpoll and we were quickly able to establish the presence of both lesser and common redpolls.

The photograph shows the common redpoll on the left and the lesser redpoll on the right. These birds were feeding on the alders at Bromhey Farm.

Lesser redpolls breed over a large part of the UK while the "common" redpoll breeds only in continental Europe and is seen only infrequently in England.

I am now much happier about identifying the two species in the field. The common redpoll is so much paler that it would seem difficult not to notice the difference.



RSPB Reserves – News Snippets

Malcolm Jennings

Restoration work continues at Great Bells Farm Reserve on Sheppey where some earthworks have now been completed.

Restoration work on the Seasalter Levels near Whitstable is continuing. The final stage of compulsory purchase of the “Plotlands” is in progress to enable RSPB management to return this SSSI to favourable condition.

Amy Winchester, is now the new warden at Blean Woods - Canterbury.

The RSPB is now involved in the management of Higham Marshes. This area of important grazing marsh is between the RSPB reserves at Shorne and Cliffe.

At Shorne Marshes electric anti-predator fencing has been erected enclosing the important areas for breeding lapwings and other waders. Mammals, particularly foxes, are thought to be a major problem for these ground nesting birds. The fencing seems to have worked this year as the number of lapwing chicks fledged reached the “sustainable level”

At Northward Hill a new hide and new scrapes have been created between the existing reservoirs. Earthworks and planting is ongoing to create a screen to reduce bird disturbance.

84 pairs of herons and 64 pairs of little egrets bred at Northward Hill
540 black-headed gulls did well at Cliffe Pool
25 singing male nightingales were recorded at Northward Hill and 20 at Blean
1 pair of turtle doves nested at Northward Hill
13 pairs of willow warbler were recorded at Blean Woods.



RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch Julie Peeling

25th-26th January 2014

As I write this, we are four weeks away from this annual event, so I thought it would be an appropriate time, before you all get busy over the Christmas period, to remind you that it's not that far away.

Several hundred thousand people have joined in, in the past, and it is hoped by the RSPB, that 2014's participation will exceed this. It's your opportunity to really get involved in some “citizen science”, that can only benefit the natural world. The data collected is analysed by professional researchers who can then report, not only on how our garden birds are faring, but also on the health of our own environment. This is something that is vital to us all!

It means a small sacrifice of time on your behalf. All you need to do is to count the birds that enter your garden, (or green space) over a period of an hour, over the weekend of the 25th/26th of January.

Details of how to record are available on the RSPB website, closer to the date, and this year I have been reliably informed that smart phones and tablets can be used to do your recording! How things have changed! In this coming year's bird-watch event, there's also going to be the opportunity to record non-avian species such as hedgehog, badger, grey and red squirrel, roe and muntjac deer, frogs and toads! Obviously, this will not be done over the same hour, as many species will be in hibernation or less obvious over the winter period. Keep a lookout on the main RSPB website to see how you can help.

Just to add. The bird-watch is a fun thing to do. If you get the chance to include children, neighbours, friends and relatives, it's a great way getting involved in nature and to learn a little about the natural world together. I hope you have a good Big Garden Bird-Watch. As usual, the results are published in March. And, a little tip, if no birds show up on the day, this information is just as important, so please send it in.

Chattenden Woods and Lodge Hill SSSI

Roger Kiddie

In 1984 I had been quietly beavering away at my bird ringing at Chattenden Woods for over a decade. Overnight, in 1984, I found I was working in a Site of Special Scientific Interest. But, it seemed to me, nothing changed. I carried on with my ringing, the MOD carried on with their military activities and the local natural history carried on generating excitement amongst the ringing group.

And I do mean **Excitement!**

Eight hawfinches in the net at one time....
Twenty roosting long-eared owls.....
Lesser spotted woodpeckers breeding...
Cetti's warbler turning up in a net, unannounced.....
Marsh and willow tits breeding.....
Nightingales in the scrubby areas.....
Early purple orchids, greater butterfly orchids.....
White-letter hairstreaks, silver-washed fritillaries....
Fruiting wild service trees..... (I'm still to see this anywhere else).



Over the years the centre of my activities gradually moved to Lodge Hill with its dense scrubby areas, its winter thrush roost and greater warbler populations; nightingales, willow warblers, chiffchaffs, whitethroats, lesser whitethroats, blackcaps, garden warblers, all breeding in good numbers. At this time, however, the numbers of many of the birds were dropping; hawfinches, turtle doves, lesser spotted woodpeckers and marsh tits were all becoming scarce.

Then, once again, overnight, in March 2013, I find I am working in a SSSI.

The threat of 5000 new homes on the site had overshadowed our activities for a number of years. We thought 2013 would be our final year but in March the notification by Natural England to extend the Chattenden Woods SSSI to include Lodge Hill made things look much more optimistic. Confirmation of the notification was announced in November 2013. The notification specifically mentions the nightingales (more than 1% of the entire British population) and the special neutral grassland areas. It was in one of these areas that one of our scarce moths was first recorded – the Kent black arches.

Now we must hope that the management of the site will be targeted to maintain the scrubby areas which are so important to breeding nightingales and other warblers.

BYE BYE St BOTOLPHS

David Johnson

After some 27 years, the Group will say its final farewell to St. Botolphs Church Hall on Wednesday 11th December 2013. Can we really have been there that long? Yes, it appears our first meeting at St. Botolphs was one Wednesday evening in September 1986, the actual date and the identity of the speaker have been lost in the mists of time. However, our indefatigable programme organiser Penny Leeves does have on record that, just over a year later on 27th October 1987, our first ever afternoon meeting was held at St. Botolphs, when our old friend John Buckingham gave a presentation entitled "Birds of Town and Gardens". Until 1987 the group had held only evening indoor meetings, but the addition of meetings on Tuesday afternoons proved popular, and of course they have continued ever since and are now held at the Woodville Halls.

Our long tenure at St. Botolphs has given rise to many fond memories, but also to some not quite so happy ones! Four Group Leaders have presided over meetings there, David Arnold, Peter Heathcote, Malcolm Jennings, and most recently Jeff Kirk, and all will have their own memories and stories to tell! The early days at St. Botolphs saw quite large audiences, with 70 or 80 not being unusual. Our first Group Leader, Jim Martin, had acquired a film projector from his employers, and film evenings were regular features of our indoor programme in the early years at St. Botolphs. The hall was often over-flowing on these occasions, with audiences sometimes exceeding a hundred

Other occasions which ensured a "full house" at St. Botolphs, were the excellent suppers and social evenings which David and Rosemary Arnold used to organise. Delicious buffets were provided by some friends of David who ran a catering business, and David's quizzes and entertainment were always great fun.

The facilities offered by the hall have not always been entirely to our liking. We struggled with the curtains and on occasion had to provide our own blackouts. The heating too left something to be desired, with loudly

clanking radiators emitting little if any warmth. It has been known for some of our more mature members to be forced to leave meetings at half time, despite their thermals!

As with many halls, parking has not been easy at St. Botolphs, especially when there were clashes with other local events. I can recall arriving one afternoon only to find a funeral in progress, and had to join a long cortege following the coffin up the steps. Fortunately the procession went on past the doors of the hall! During one period, I think in the late 1990's, there were problems with vandalism in the car park. Several cars were broken into and the committee organised vigilante patrols, when armed with torches and whistles, we took turns to police the parking area. I even have memories of being provided with hand warmers on cold winter evenings!

Despite the ambient temperatures, the committee always tried to provide a warm welcome at St. Botolphs, none more so than Penny Leeves, who in addition to organising the indoor events programme, always had a nice hot cuppa and a biscuit on offer during the mid-session interval. For many years Penny was ably assisted by Jean Bailey and more recently by Pat Kagan. They all deserve our grateful thanks, as do Geoff and Cynthia Wright and Joan West, who for so many years were the "welcoming committee", sitting at the door cheerfully taking our entrance and raffle monies.

One final abiding memory for me from St. Botolphs takes me back to a dark and miserable winter's evening in (I think) 1990. An elderly lady arrived at the hall with a dead bird that she had picked up from her tiny town garden on Windmill Hill in Gravesend. It was very small and looked like a sea-bird, but "what exactly is it?" she asked. The preceding few days had been very stormy and must have accounted for the arrival in a Gravesend back garden of this tiny gem of a bird from the sea. It was a Little Auk, and to date it still remains the only one I have ever seen!!

Robert Pocock – Gravesend Naturalist – 1760 -1830

Malcolm Jennings

Not more about Robert Pocock I here some of you say! Well it is true that at the moment I am a bit obsessed with the Robert Pocock Herbarium Project. The following extracts taken from his journal 23rd January to 4th February 1823 are interesting and it is easy to imagine walking along with him.

"[Thursday] The ships and vessels running on shore to avoid the ice. Many birds have died from the frost, particularly bullfinches. [Friday] Seventeen wild swans flew (over the town) up the river yesterday. [Sunday] River filled with ice right across to Tilbury. [Tuesday] Had two scarce birds brought me, called bramblings, shot at Cliffe, about the size of chaffinches. [Saturday] Read in the paper that a snow bunting had been shot. [Tuesday] Bright sun, which is a glorious sight after such severe weather. Walked to Southfleet. Bullfinches are plenty in orchards, the old birds having the finest colours."

And this, later the same year "[Tuesday 4th November] Had brought me a little puffin [little auk], a very scarce bird, shot near Gravesend!"

Who says that lightning does not strike twice.?



Coach trip to RSPB Minsmere on Sunday 1st June 2014

Minsmere is the nature reserve that has everything and that's why we visit so often. It has birds of woodland, coast, heath & marsh - and lots of other wildlife too. There are hides, trails, a visitor centre & cafeteria. So do join us and maybe we will see the elusive Bittern and nesting Little Terns that are so special to this reserve.

The coach will leave Gravesend Railway Station, Clive Rd, at **8.00am** and leave Minsmere at about 5.00pm.

Tickets are **£19** each and are available at Group meetings

or

Make cheques payable to **Gravesend RSPB Local Group** & send to;
Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474 322171)

Please pay for tickets before the trip as the coach has to be paid for in advance

Remember take your RSPB membership card if you are a member as there may be an entry charge for **those who are not RSPB members** of £7.50 (£5 for concessions)