

North Kent Marshes Threatened Malcolm Jennings



Our national and local news pages increasingly contain news of major “development plans” for our area of Kent. At the moment we are seeing continuing calls for an estuary airport, a new town at Chattenden near High Halstow, a theme park and more housing at Swanscombe Marsh, another Thames crossing at either Darford or Shorne, and a “garden city” of 15000 homes for tens of thousands of people at Ebbsfleet. Our Government even agreed not to consider the option of a Thames crossing at Swanscombe Marsh because it would get in the way of the theme park! So much for

planning. We are told that all these projects are necessary and that they will bring prosperity, wellbeing and employment to those of us living in Dartford and Gravesend. Good news then?

However as nature conservationists our concern must be whether any of this development can be achieved without loss or degradation to the north Kent marshes and the special wildlife it contains. The history of the development of the area from Greenwich to Gravesend over the last two hundred years shows that loss of the marshes has been the norm – will that be the pattern for the development further east in this century? Clearly a Thames airport will have huge environmental costs both locally and for the Thames estuary as a whole. Chattenden Woods is now an SSSI because of its national importance for breeding nightingales but the new “settlement” is to include 5000 residential “units”, two hotels, a secondary school, three primary schools and much more <http://planning.medway.gov.uk/DCOnline/AcolNetCGI.gov?ACTION=UNWRAP&RIPNAME=Root.PgeResultDetail&TheSystemkey=124463> A new Thames bridge crossing at Shorne will pass directly over the RSPB Shorne Marshes reserve. Development at the Swanscombe peninsula will destroy the only remaining section of the north Kent marshes between Dartford and Gravesend. Ebbsfleet Garden City is, I believe, to be sited in a chalk pit with direct access to the chalk pit containing Bluewater. Should the tens of thousands of people living in this Garden City want access to a real world of nature, will they be disappointed? Many politicians and others are saying that these projects do not go far enough. They want to see many more thousands of residential units constructed to meet demand and more construction to create jobs. They want planning restrictions lifted to make it easier to build without hindrance.

Who is standing up for Nature?

Group Membership <http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk/>

We have 141 paid up members. We organise 30+ local visits and two coach trips each year to see birds and other wildlife. We organise 15 indoor talks, produce 3 newsletters and we have an active website with RSS feed options. We donated £600 to the RSPB this year. **Everyone is welcome to join us and attend any of our events.**

Whatever happened to Cliffe Pools? Malcolm Jennings



“Whatever happened to Cliffe Pools?” was the question we were asked by our speaker at last month’s indoor meeting! We answered as best we could but it’s true that in some ways the Cliffe Pools project has gone quiet. But the pools are still there and still attracting birds. Our group trip report for August last year shows how good Cliffe can be.

<http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk/topics/trip-reports/page/3/>

Some of us have made several visits over this winter and have enjoyed spectacular views (really!) of thousands

of black-tailed godwits, dunlin and large numbers of wintering waterfowl, especially shoveler ducks. A few days ago I made my first Spring visit and found many nesting black-headed gulls and avocets. The constant calls of mediterranean gulls suggested that they may be breeding here too. A few lapwings were displaying and calling – for me the sound of Spring on the marsh. I also heard and saw displaying redshank (can I have more than one “the” sound of Spring?). With some Spring migrant warblers thrown in and my first sighting of grey partridge on the marsh for years and years, it was bird watching at its best.

There is a good car park and good level access and although there are no facilities (ie toilets) at Cliffe Pools (and this does make a long visit impossible for many) it is still a must go place for local people to see birds. (The public toilets in Cliffe village are OK). Apart from dog walkers (be aware that the first 200 metres from the car park can be very unwelcoming), you will have the place to yourself and on a sunny day Nature will be there in plenty. Members of the Kent Ornithological Society regularly put their bird sightings at Cliffe on the KOS website <http://www.kentos.org.uk/recent sightings/recent sightings.htm>. Of course these do tend to be sightings from “real” birders with super telescopes but a colony of screaming gulls and avocets is not easily missed. And should not be missed!

So let’s all give Cliffe Pools RSPB Reserve a bit of TLC and make it ours.

Millbrook Garden Centre



On February 15th we were involved in the opening of the new bird watching hide at Millbrook Garden Centre. Over the weekend over 200 people dropped in to see the birds and find out more about garden birds. For more see <http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk/2014/02/millbrook-garden-centre-grand-opening-of-hide/>

Rainbows and Spring Flowers



At the beginning of April some of our Group joined the 'Rainbows' of Horton Kirby once again. This group of enthusiastic and talented 5/6 year olds met us at the village hall with their leaders and together we talked about signs of Spring. We made Spring flowers out of paper, card and lots of glue, (well, there was glue everywhere anyway...) For more see <http://www.rspbgravesend.org.uk/2014/04/rainbows-of-horton-kirby/>

Reserva Ecologica de Guapi Assu (REGUA) Sue Healey

Many of you will be aware that I do voluntary work for REGUA, a private Reserve in the heart of the Brazilian Atlantic Rainforest about two hours north of Rio de Janeiro. What started as a relaxing holiday destination some 8 years ago has turned into a second home where everything feels appreciated and worthwhile. Each visit brings new excitement as the project grows both in size and just as importantly, reputation. When I first visited in 2006, very few knew of the reserve and my friends and I had the lodge to ourselves. Nowadays many birding travel companies from around the world visit. With their patronage we are able to plough more money back into the funds which enables us to purchase more land along the valley of the Guapi Assu River catchment area. The aim is to link all the high altitude areas with the lowland to give wildlife habitat corridors and also preserve the forest for future generations.



In addition, the original river course has been reinstated (after being drained to provide cattle grazing and coffee, corn and sugar cane) and expanded in a wetland restoration project within the reserve. Within days of the dam being breached and the wetland area flooded we had capybara, cattle egret and broad-snouted spectacled caiman in residence. The area has a high biodiversity, demonstrated by the numbers of species already identified or found: 47 species of amphibians, 58 species of arachnids, over 460 bird species, 61 mammal species, 200 Odonata, 33 hawkmoths (and several hundred moths still to be identified) and 42 reptiles. Last October and November I was

lucky enough to be present when the reserve started its first major planting programme funded by the Brazilian Petro-chemical company Petrobras. The company has granted sufficient money to fund two years planting of a total of 170,000 trees on previous grazing land. We started on November 4th, the hottest and wettest time of year - but the best time to plant trees apparently! Over the next four weeks the REGUA team managed to plant 80,000 saplings on undulating rock-hard ground which cattle had been grazing until the beginning of the year. With sweltering heat, ticks, ants, and back-breaking work it wouldn't be everyone's idea of a great time! But from the project directors, to the ladies who do the cooking, the rangers who protect the forest and the gardeners who grow saplings, every one of us believes wholeheartedly in the project.

I can't wait to see how well the trees are growing when I go back later this year. For more see <http://www.regua.co.uk/index.html>

Tuesday Indoor Meetings – Change of Venue

Due to circumstances beyond our control we have had to move all of our afternoon indoor meetings to the Masonic Hall in Gravesend. Our next meeting is not until September 2014 but please make a note now. The Masonic Hall is in the centre of Gravesend and has some free car parking. Full details will appear on our website and we will carry a reminder in our autumn newsletter.

Tuesday Outdoor Trips.

Our programme of Tuesday morning wildlife walks starts on April 22nd with a visit to Northward Hill. Meet at 10.00 in the Main car park at Bromhey Farm. Hear nightingales!

Pocock, Swanscombe Marshes and Ravens. Malcolm Jennings

Alan has been on at me for several years to go to the marshes on the Swanscombe Peninsula. It's Alan's local patch. As some of you will know, Sally and I with others from our group have been working on a project related to Robert Pocock of Gravesend. For those of you that somehow have not heard of him – Robert Pocock, 1760-1830, lived in Gravesend and was a printer, historian, botanist and naturalist. Our Robert Pocock Herbarium Project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Kent Wildlife Trust have been searching the herbarium at the Natural History Museum in London for plants collected by Pocock in our area. See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Robert-Pocock-Herbarium-Project/333265860142783> and <http://pocockherbarium.blogspot.co.uk/>

We have found over 200 plants specimens - "Pococks" as we call them. And many of them were collected by him at Northfleet and Swanscombe. Thus it was that over the last few weeks Sally and I visited the Swanscombe area in search of the actual locations on the specimen labels. And now I know why I should have gone birding there before and why I should have listened to Alan. The Swanscombe Peninsula contains several large reed beds, a large wet grazing marsh and a long Thames frontage that, as the name suggests, pushes out into the Thames. There are also the "brown field" remains of the previous industrial use. And we saw lots of birds, butterflies and the third British record of a tiny parasitic wasp. Brilliant! This wasp was my star sighting of our visits – but I don't



expect you to agree with me! So, as second best, I give you Sally's photograph of the raven that we found. Swanscombe Marshes appears to have been deserted by the authorities. Dumped rubbish and litter have accumulated around the edges of the site. But it would make a great local nature reserve – somewhere that wildlife can thrive and a real green space that people can enjoy. I will definitely be going back in May this year. These marshes will be full of reed warblers, sedge warblers, cuckoos and more. See you there Alan. I nearly forgot to mention that we found the wild wallflowers that we wanted to see. As did Pocock.

Reminder - Coach trip to RSPB Minsmere Reserve on Sunday 1st June 2014

Tickets still available - Everyone welcome!

Join us on this trip to the seaside and the excellent bird reserve of Minsmere, to see all kinds of birds. There are hides, trails, a good visitor centre & cafeteria. The coach leaves **Gravesend Railway Station, Clive Rd**, at **8.00am** and leaves Minsmere at about 5.00pm. Please take RSPB membership card if you have one. There is an entry charge for non-members.

Tickets **£19** each

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)

ALSO

Look out for details of our **November 15th** coach trip on our website soon.