

December 2015

Paul Yetman – Group Leader

As is tradition at this time of year let me indulge and reflect on what the group has done in the past twelve months. The group offers a variety of activities to attend or get involved in. Our indoor meetings this year have taken us across the globe from Colombia up to Iceland across to Romania and back to our own home patch with the works of Robert Pocock, a naturalist from Gravesend in the early 1800s. We have learnt about ringing, how starlings manage to fly in huge murmurations without crashing into each other, and that monarch butterflies can migrate from north America to a specific forest in Mexico and do so in one season and one generation, whereas they take several generations to migrate back. Of course you could have seen this on the television, but at our talks you find out what it's like to be a visitor there (surprisingly cold!) and of course you can ask your own burning questions.



Our outdoor trips have included firm favourites such as Dungeness, Elmley and Stodmarsh – those who went on our last trip to Elmley were treated to fantastic views of short-eared owls. Then there was the dawn chorus at Cliffe Pools: a very early start at 5am (it was pitch black) ensured we heard all symphonic movements – from the early blackbirds and robins, to the wader roost waking up, cuckoos and then nightingales bursting forth as the light seemed to suddenly switch on. My favourite of the year was at the other end of the day, when we went on

a bat walk with local expert Simon Ginnaw, learning how to age ancient trees (by hugging), how to separate pipistrelle and soprano pipistrelle bats and seeing the ghostly Daubenton's bats flickering over the mote was truly magical – surely these inspired the stories of fairies. *[Ed: missed it? – we are repeating our dusk visit to Mote Park in 2016].*

On our coach trips, we visited Minsmere in the spring and many of us were rewarded with sightings of bittern from the elevated 'bittern hide' and last month we were treated to the ultimate birding luxury, a centrally heated observation room with comfortable seats, in which to relax and watch the wild whooper swans come to us to feed. The beauty of coach trips is that after a busy day out walking and birdwatching (or just enjoying the scenery and the café facilities!) you can let the coach take the strain and bring you back home – wonderful!

We have also been out volunteering, clearing an invertebrate bank at Cliffe of excessive vegetation and general litter and mess clearing. I am always saddened by the quantity of every day plastic pieces that drifts up onto our shores. Bottle tops, 'q-tips', tile spacers, combs, sweet wrappers - some that were clearly over 20 years old! If you need convincing to reduce your plastic footprint and dispose carefully of what you use, this is it!

These are some of the reasons why people join a local group. Or it could be that you just want to connect with the local area and find out what's going on around us. And for this purpose our website and Facebook page are the best way to do so. If you have not already done so, please do sign up to receive email updates to ensure you stay up to date with all the news, announcements and reports that are posted. (Your email address is only used for this purpose). And don't be shy, our website allows you to contribute as well by adding comments or joining our Flickr page to share photos. Or if you wish to write an article, please send the copy to our webmaster for review and inclusion.



As well connecting our members to the local area and the works of the RSPB I am keen that our group also connects to the local community and shows the importance of our local area and the wildlife it supports. Engaging with the public in accessible ways, means going to public events such as the Gravesend annual regatta and Christmas school fayres. We did both this year. At the regatta we ran a mask colouring stall which was very popular with the young children and at the recent NFSfG fayre we made Christmas robins and origami cranes as tree decorations. These

events can be tiring but fun and often it is those small interactions, a seed planted in a young (or not so young) mind, that are the biggest reward. I always welcome more volunteers, so if you would like to help at such an event in the future, please let me know.

Alongside this newsletter we have issued our programme for 2016 which has many more exciting talks to come to and places to visit over the coming year. Please browse through and make a note in your diary of those you don't want to miss!

Whatever your own reason for joining let me thank you in advance for your continuing support by promptly returning your membership renewal form and payment, and encouraging your family, friends and neighbours to join as well. The more members we have the more we can do to help save and enjoy the natural world around us.

Wishing you all a very merry Christmas and happy New Year

Northfleet School for Girls Christmas Fayre - Irene Robson

Last Saturday a group of five volunteers from Gravesend RSPB manned a stall at the Christmas fayre held at NSFG where we hold our Thursday evening meetings. We were in prime position right opposite Santa's grotto hoping to attract visitors to our stall as they passed to and fro. Along with RSPB sales Christmas items, we were offering, for a donation, pin badges, cakes, biscuits and an activity for the children. They had the chance to make a cone robin decoration or an origami one. It was a slow start but having fortified ourselves with teas and mince pies we began to build an interest in the robin making and sold a few cards, calendars and pens. By the end of the afternoon we had raised a modest amount in donations and sales and had thoroughly good time, especially eating the home made cakes.

News from Northward Hill - Stephanie King (Residential Intern, North Kent Marshes)

Here at Northward Hill we have begun our winter work programme within the woodland. Certain areas of the woodland have been 'coppiced' which means they have been cleared of the smaller trees to allow sunlight to the ground to encourage flower and scrub growth, and also by cutting down the Hawthorn and Elder in that area will start the woodland life cycle again. So the woodland as a whole will contain trees and scrub of different age groups which in turn provides the ideal nesting and feeding sites for a variety of different birds. Within these plots some of the trees have been left standing and this is to allow them to mature. There are also some deadwood piles to encourage invertebrate activity which in turn provides some of the birds with food.

Winter Garden Birds – Sue Healey



Winter brings extra pressure on our wild birds with the need to find food and shelter. Our gardens can be a valuable haven for them, especially when the weather is extreme. Providing an easily accessible range of different foods by planting native species - especially those providing berries - and setting up a feeding station can help to support a variety of species. The addition of fat adds to their energy levels especially when temperatures drop and wild food is frozen. Fat balls, suet or grated cheese are a great addition to your bird table, along with dried fruit and kitchen scraps. More advice

can be found from the RSPB, BTO and other wildlife websites.

See the rspb page here:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/makeahomeforwildlife/advice/helpingbirds/feeding/>

Most important however, is to provide a source of clean unfrozen water, which can be used not only for drinking, but also for helping to keep feathers in good condition, which ensure birds stay well insulated and dry in cold wet weather. Be sure to keep all feeders clean and allow them to thoroughly dry out between use to help to stop the spread of Trichomonosis. For more information follow this link:

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/gardens-wildlife/garden-birds/disease/trichomonosis>

Many birds will utilise nest boxes as winter roosts. Long-tailed Tits and Wrens for example, form winter communities for roosting and Wrens often choose nest boxes. A record of 61 individual Wrens was found in one nest box in Norfolk. Blue Tits and Great Tits often choose potential nesting sites during winter, so it is worth keeping them up all year round and checking that they are clean and secure for the winter.

Feeding birds in our gardens is an important support for them all year round, and you can find new species coming into gardens whenever the food sources in the wild start to dwindle or get buried by snow. In winter, we gain more birds from the north and east as insect, berry, seed and nut supplies are exhausted - putting more pressure on food supplies.

Not only large numbers of our breeding species, such as Blackbird, Chaffinch, and Jay are on the move; winter thrushes, such as Redwing, Fieldfare, and in some years irruptions of Waxwing, mean that hundreds of thousands of birds are coming into the UK. Small birds such as Siskin, Redpoll, Goldfinch and Goldcrest move south as well. In one week in November 2015 over 200,000 Wood Pigeons were reported moving to the south of the UK. For regular information on Migration see this link:
<http://btomigrationblog.blogspot.co.uk>

We really can make a huge difference to wild birds in winter, helping to give them the best chance of survival.

Coach Trip to Wicken Fen Saturday 18th June 2016 – Sally Jennings



Join us on a trip to see one of the UK's most important wetlands. Wicken Fen is a National Trust nature reserve supporting an abundance of wildlife. Raised boardwalks and lush green paths allow easy access to flowering meadows and reed beds where birds and dragonflies can be seen. These may include marsh harriers, cuckoos and hobbies. There are viewing hides, trails and a visitor centre serving snacks and drinks. (A boat trip through the fens can be booked in advance. To do this telephone: 01353 720 274. £5.50 per person).

**National Trust members have free admission to the reserve,
Therefore tickets are; National Trust members - £16, Non-NT members - £22**

We leave Gravesend Railway Station, Clive Rd at **8am & return at about 7.30pm**
Make cheques payable to: Gravesend RSPB Local Group and send to Sally Jennings, 206 Lower Higham Rd, Gravesend, Kent, DA12 2NN (01474 322171), enclosing SAE for ticket please.
Please pay for tickets in advance as we have to pay for the coach beforehand.

Our **Autumn Coach Trip will be on Sunday October 9th** - venue to be announced on the website and in the next newsletter.

Visit www.rspbgravesend.org.uk for details of these events and more.