

May 2018

Welcome to Spring with glorious sunshine and lots of birds to see. Thankfully, the 'Beast from the East' has gone for good and we can all enjoy the sights and sounds of our avian friends. Now is the time to join us on a walk to find some lovely birds, that might still be foraging for nesting materials just like the blue tit below.



Migrant birds, including cuckoo, swallow, house and sand martin, black redstart, chiffchaff, blackcap and wheatear are already here – it would be a shame to miss them wouldn't it?

On some of our recent walks, we have been fortunate enough to have had good views of lesser spotted, great and green woodpeckers, coal tit, willow warbler, tree creeper, nuthatch, golden eye and various raptors to name but a few. All details of our group events are available on the website - it would be lovely to see you.

This edition of the newsletter contains, what I hope you will agree, some very interesting articles

and we are planning to include guest contributors in future issues. So relax, put your feet up, have a cuppa and please enjoy.

Birds and the law

At this time of year there are many birds setting up territories, nesting and some are already feeding their young. It is a good time to remind all bird and wildlife watchers and photographers of the Code of Conduct relating to our birds and wildlife in the UK. Particular attention should be paid to the section on the Law, where disturbing a bird at or near the nest is a criminal offence.

It is often easy to find yourself near a nest site for example, walking along a path, you stop to look at something and birds start alarming nearby. It is your responsibility to move away from the area as quickly and quietly as possible. Full details with some helpful field skill points can be found on the two links below via the RSPB and BTO websites.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/birdwatching/the-birdwatchers-code/>

<https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/u10/downloads/taking-part/health/bwc.pdf>

Save Lodge Hill

Lodge Hill, the most important site for nightingales in the UK, is once again under threat from a new housing development. We need your help again to save it.

Medway Council's new public consultation runs from 16 March to 11 May 2018.

Please go to the RSPB campaign site and take a couple of minutes to make your voice heard by sending a message to Medway Council - it is very easy to do. <https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/campaigning/protecting-wildlife-sites-near-you/save-lodge-hill/>

The nightingale is one of our most severely threatened birds – its population has declined by more than 90% in the last 50 years. Fewer than 5,500 pairs now remain across the country.

The range of nightingales has also contracted dramatically, so they are now found only in the south and east of England.

Lodge Hill in Medway is their best remaining site, critical for their survival, and so special that it is protected for the nation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Thank you in advance for adding your voice to this vital campaign.

Paul Yetman

Cliffe Pools beach clean up - 24.02.18

Karrie, Peter and I joined the event organised by RSPB Volunteer, David Saunders, to clean up the foreshore at Cliffe Pools. Thankfully it was a beautifully sunny day but there was a definite chill in the air. We organised ourselves into small groups and drove out to the sea wall. The temperature immediately dropped as we were greeted by a very blustery wind which intensified the chill. David then briefed us on the task ahead pointing out a large empty walk-in skip which he said he hoped we would fill with plastic by the end of the day, so that it could then be sent for recycling. My initial thought was that this was slightly optimistic but once we had helped each other clamber over the sea wall (a bit of a challenge in itself!) I realised that this might not be quite so difficult after all. Despite seeing photos of the rubbish beforehand it was quite a shock to see how much plastic had built up on the shore line. Armed with litter pickers and black sacks the task began. The larger items, mainly plastic bottles, were soon dispatched as people walked along and then disappeared around the corner. However we stayed in the small bay picking up the smaller items, jokingly calling ourselves the 'microplastics team'! In fact, we spent the whole morning on a very small section of the foreshore as there were so many small items to be collected.

During the morning we kept seeing full black sacks being taken over the wall to be put in the skip but had no idea of the number until about 1.45 pm when we were told that the tide was now coming in and the skip was now full so it was time to go. The larger items that had been collected included plastic drums, life jackets, nylon rope, pens, supposedly disposable lighters, cups, cutlery and an overwhelming number of plastic bottles. We were amazed that the skip was full as we had only managed to fill a single bag each – not because we were slacking (although we did get interrupted when Pete was interviewed by the BBC Southeast crew) but because we had painstakingly handpicked through the seaweed extracting thousands of cotton buds, bottle tops and small scraps of plastic packaging such as sweet wrappers, which had been partially broken down and buried.

So how many bags were collected? A total of 600!

A very worthwhile morning's work we decided – and yes we had fun too! It's good to know that we helped to fill that huge skip and that at least those 600 bags of plastic won't be polluting our river and harming our wildlife.

Hazel Cullum

It later transpired that the total weight of the plastic collected and sent for recycling was a huge 1.96 tons! If you are interested in being part of the next clean up at Lower Hope Point, Cliffe Pools, the date is Saturday 12 May 2018. Please contact Katie Thatcher, Senior Administrator at RSPB Northward Hill on 01634 222480 or email her at northkentmarshes@rspb.org.uk .

Volunteering Day

The Group will be running another Volunteer Day on Saturday 14th July. Details to be announced soon

This month's guest contributor is Malcolm Jennings on a subject close to his heart.

Oak Apple Day



In 1660, the English Parliament passed into law “An Act for a Perpetual Anniversary Thanksgiving on the Nine and Twentieth Day of May”. It was to be a public holiday to remember the restoration of the English Monarchy. (Source Wikipedia). A sprig of oak with an “Oak Apple” was one of the items that could be worn on the day and a whole host of customs and traditions were started. (I will leave you to find out more about these – it was also called “pinch–bum” day!)The biology of the oak apple is extraordinary – and far more interesting (to me) than all these silly customs. It

is a plant gall (i.e. a growth on a plant) that is caused by an insect laying eggs in an oak bud in January. She (there are no males!) emerges from below ground from a small pea-like growth that developed on the roots of the oak. She is wingless and starts the long climb up the trunk of the oak tree. She will walk along branches and twigs until she finds a suitable bud and there she will pierce the bud with her ovipositor and lay her eggs. These will be either all male or all female eggs. When the eggs hatch in early spring the larvae will somehow induce the oak to rapidly produce large numbers of cells – rather like a cancerous growth. The maggot-like larvae live within this and quickly feed up on the enlarged cells. They then pupate and very soon, in June, they emerge as winged adults. They are half the size and look nothing like the insect that laid the eggs! Males and females from different oak apples then meet and mate. The males have nothing else to do and soon die but the females then fly to the ground and burrow into the soil to find the roots of the oak. She lays single eggs along the root and presumably that is the end of her life too. The eggs hatch and the larva induces the pea-like growth on the root – the process is very slow and the larva spends at least two years below ground before the wingless female emerges and starts her slow climb back up the tree. I have seen the wingless female twice and the subterranean gall once but the oak apple itself is often very common. I think it's an amazing story. But really that is only a small part of it. The oak apple itself is quite nutritious so several other insects lay their eggs in the gall. When they hatch their larvae compete for food with the rightful owners of the gall – but they don't eat them. More interesting (to me) are those insects, parasitic wasps that lay their eggs through the gall, into or on the larvae in the gall. The parasitic larvae then eat them up until nothing is

left but a bit of skin. So, the gall may have started out with 40-50 eggs of a single female but could produce any number of insects of about six different species. Several of the parasitic wasps remain in the oak apple, on the ground or on the tree, until the following year when they emerge - just as the next generation of oak apples is developing and ready with juicy larvae to parasitize.

It is an incredibly complex story. For some of these species the oak apple is their whole world. They know nothing else. Although they are competing with each other, they are totally dependent on each other too. Synchronisation is everything. Taking out one species will affect the populations of all the others. Lose the oak tree of course, and *Biorhiza pallida*, for that is her name, cannot start the process that supports the lives of so many other species. Whenever I see an oak apple I try to visualize the processes going on inside the gall. It also causes me to reflect upon the problems of our own world.

The public holiday on 29th May was formally abolished by parliament in 1859. I think it should be reinstated as "Earth Day"!

Malcolm Jennings

Gravesend Regatta

This year the Gravesend Regatta will take place on 16 & 17 June on Gordon's Promenade. The Gravesend RSPB group will be at the Regatta and we are looking for some help and volunteers. This is a great opportunity for the group to meet members of the public and raise awareness of conservation issues.

Our theme will be picking up on this year's conservation hot topic of plastic waste. We intend to run theme-based quizzes, games and competitions and to make a sculpture out of plastic that can be recycled.

You can help by collecting plastic bottle tops and plastic that can be recycled. Please bring along to our next indoor or outdoor meetings in clear recycled bags so we can recycle them easily at the end of the weekend.

We are also looking for volunteers to help us run our event: can you spare a few hours? You don't have to be an expert, just like talking to people and have an interest in nature. If you can help, please speak to any member of the committee.

Thank you in advance for your help and support.

Paul Yetman

..... and finally

Some nice sightings have been reported at Dungeness. On 20th April these included 40 willow warbler, 16 chiffchaff, sedge and garden warblers, nightingale, firecrest, tree pipit, yellow wagtail, 2 bramblings and **17 red kites!!**

Happy birding and look forward to seeing you soon.

Steve Cullum – Newsletter Editor