

August 2018

Wow!! What scorching weather in the past couple of months and I hope that you and your garden wildlife kept suitably hydrated during the heatwave. Our birdbath and feeders had to be topped up at least once a day, mainly due to the juveniles that decided to descend upon our garden. We had an abundance of starlings, goldfinch and blue tits. What did you have visiting your garden? It would be nice to know and you can e-mail me on newsletter@rspbgravesend.org.uk with your findings.

This month's guest contributors are Pete and Karrie Hall talking about butterfly surveying, especially the **White-letter Hairstreak** accompanied by a lovely photograph taken by Norman Hogben.

The Famous Grouse and the RSPB – a spirited partnership!

In 2018 we are celebrating ten years in partnership with The Famous Grouse whisky distillers. In June 2008, The Famous Grouse launched a new whisky — The Black Grouse — and partnered with the RSPB to help save the whisky's namesake. Ten years on, we are delighted to announce that the partnership has so far provided over £650,000 for essential black grouse conservation work.

The Famous Grouse supports seven nature reserves: Abernethy, Corrimony, Wood of Cree, Inversnaid and the Crannach in Scotland, Geltsdale in the north of England and Lake Vyrnwy in Wales. It was thanks to the partnership that RSPB Scotland was able to purchase the Crannach reserve.

The company has played a vital role in the conservation of black grouse; helping to improve grouse habitats across 85,000 acres of reserve land, supporting the planting of 185,000 native trees and the mowing of 30 hectares of heather amongst other work. This funding has also enabled the RSPB to work with Scottish National Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland to review and identify the habitat requirements for black grouse and to prioritise resources accordingly across the wider countryside.



A success story for the partnership is RSPB Geltsdale, where in 2015 the reserve's largest ever single lek was recorded, made up of 28 males. The overall lek count for 2015 at Geltsdale was 59 males, up from 27 males in 2012 and 2013.

To find out more visit: rspb.org.uk/famousgrouse
I'll drink to that ☺ Have you witnessed a lek in Scotland? Why not send me an e mail and share your experience of this fabulous occurrence – newsletter@rspbgravesend.org.uk

Butterfly Surveying for the RSPB @ Northward Hill

You may be wondering why we're writing about butterflies and not birds. We have always had an interest in both and became life members of the RSPB many years before joining in with the local RSPB group. Subsequently, we joined Butterfly Conservation and regularly go out on trips with the Kent group.

We think it became common knowledge among the RSPB group that we had a love of butterflies and it was suggested that we might like to help with butterfly surveys at Northward Hill, the local RSPB reserve. We agreed and were shown how butterfly recording was conducted along a transect.

At Northward Hill the transect is a circular path within the Sanctuary (an area not accessible to the public) which encloses the heronry and rookery. From early April until end of September this is walked once a week and the counts of species seen are recorded. The information collected shows when the first emergence of a species occurs and how they fare over the years.

We helped out with the transects for a number of years and were then asked if we would like to specialise and undertake White-letter Hairstreak recording. They fly in the top of trees and are difficult to spot during the normal transect walk. As Northward Hill is a large place, it seemed sensible to use the same transect and walk this once a week from mid-June to early August to coincide with the White-letter Hairstreak flight period.

The sole food plant of White-letter Hairstreak is Elm and since the advent of Dutch Elm disease in the mid 70's there are no large mature Elm trees left on the reserve. However, they do send out suckers which live up to 10 years or so and reach some 15-20 feet before dying back. Knowing very little about trees, we had to do a crash course on what an Elm actually looks like. Similarly neither of us had knowingly seen a White-letter Hairstreak which was pointed out as being incredibly elusive.

Our first survey was in June 2015 and whilst walking to the sanctuary we noticed a couple of trees that might just be Elms and amazingly a small butterfly flew up from the top and landed again almost immediately, but most importantly, it was in clear sight allowing us to easily identify it in the binoculars as a White-letter Hairstreak. What a way to start and a great boost to the morale! Even better, more were seen that day and in the weeks that followed, but by early August it was over and no more were seen.



Since then we have carried out these surveys each year. On 4th June 2017 whilst out doing a reptile survey in The Sanctuary we noticed a small butterfly flying off an Elm and, as before, it flew around the top of the tree before landing in clear sight. A couple of photos were taken and on review it was a White-letter Hairstreak – the interest here was that, according to Butterfly Conservation, this was nine days earlier than the first recorded in 2016. We then felt obliged to start the White-letter Hairstreak survey in early, rather than mid, June 2018. The result was none were seen on 6th nor on 13th June with the first being seen on 25th June. We have yet to find out if that was typical for this year, although there had been a sighting of one on 31st May in Middlesex.

One of the great pleasures of undertaking this survey is that we have access to a special place where we are able to see many more species of butterflies. We have seen a family of hobbies, heard turtle doves and regularly seen buzzards and kestrels as well as an astonishing number of dragonflies, including Southern Migrant Hawkmoths this year.

The RSPB is not just bird centric - it's there for all wildlife. As volunteers we feel valued by the RSPB and the staff at Northward Hill. The information we collect is used to help with management of the reserve and is passed on to Butterfly Conservation for their records.

Norman, a fellow member of the local RSPB group, expressed an interest in coming out with us with a view to both seeing and photographing the White-letter Hairstreak. The result was the stunning photo of one nectaring on brambles, which we rarely see. Furthermore, he and his wife Sandra have now been surveying White-letter Hairstreaks in the public areas of the reserve for the last couple of years, thus adding to the overall knowledge of the butterfly on the reserve.

Pete and Karrie Hall

News from Will Tofts, Warden at Northward Hill / Cliffe

January onwards is the time we concentrate on habitat management at Cliffe Pools, having completed most of the most important work at Northward Hill, Higham and Shorne Marshes.

Most of our time is spent getting the temporary electric anti-predator fence around the Black Barn Pools working after the winter wear and tear. Several days were spent out on the islands cutting them for the large gull colony we get breeding on the islands. 2017 saw the first time that mediterranean gulls had fledged any young at Cliffe Pools, seven fledged from five pairs. This year we have up to 30 pairs of 'meds'. This can be attributed mainly to the near collapse of the breeding colony on the Medway, where high spring tides cover the islands and flood out a large amount of nests.

Scrub plots at Northward Hill are also cut around this time. Each plot, Lipwell, Secret Car Park and the scrub just above the cherry orchard are cut on rotation of around every 12 years. This stops it developing into woodland, providing habitat for those bird species that prefer developing scrub to nest in. Our target species for these areas are nightingale and turtle dove, but the length of rotation also allows for optimal habitat for species such as whitethroat, lesser whitethroat and garden warbler.

January onwards is also the time where we make any improvements to anti-predator fence across the reserves. We currently have four in the North Kent Marshes, two permanent fences at Northward Hill, one permanent fence at Shorne and a temporary fence at Cliffe Pools. Since they have been installed, they have helped increase productivity of key breeding waders such as lapwing and redshank by excluding mammalian predators such as foxes and badgers. Maintaining them throughout the breeding season is one of the key jobs on site, and the one that takes up the most time, with the total length of them being over 10,000 metres, a lot of walking.

The breeding season has so far had its ups and downs. Waders seem to be faring relatively well, however resident passerines such as dunnock, wren and robin took a 'hammering' in the Beast from the East. Nightingale numbers are also down a lot, almost half from 2017 numbers at Cliffe Pools and Northward Hill. This is seemingly the same across the whole county. This is likely to be due to birds just not making it over to these isles and staying to breed on the continent rather than a large population crash, though we wait to see if this is the case. However, turtle dove have been seen regularly at Northward Hill, after their extinction at the site last year and yellow wagtail are breeding on the marsh for the first time in a very long time.

RSPB Rainham Marshes with Howard Vaughan

The adult and immature spoonbill from late June lingered into July with both birds until the 3rd and just the youngster till the 6th. Amazingly, a new immature arrived on the 12th for two days. Little egrets peaked at 46 and a melanistic juvenile grey heron turned a few heads. Wader passage was confined to Aveley Pool as the rest of the reserve was now dry and black-tailed godwits steadily rose towards 60 along with two families of little ringed plover, three ruff and a few tringas that included a wood sandpiper on the 22nd and 23rd and rarity of the year on the 27th, when a juvenile marsh sandpiper was found. It lingered until early on the 29th before heading downriver to RSPB Cliffe Pools. This was the first on the site for 55 years... The grasshopper warblers went quiet again by the end of the first week and an early spotted flycatcher was seen on the 5th. I am pleased to report that once again a pair of marsh warblers was present during the breeding season (in an area with no public access) and both pairs of marsh harriers brought off three young apiece. A single red kite was seen on the 14th and a raven was back on the 21st. Several different caspian gulls were noted along the Thames including the first 2018 juveniles anywhere in the UK, while yellow-legged gulls peaked at 42 on the 18th along with several sightings of juvenile med gulls.

Coach trip to WWT London Wetland Centre Sunday 18 November 2018

The coach will leave Gravesend Rail Station, Clive Rd, Gravesend, (opposite Debenhams) at 8.30 am and return at about 6.00 pm. Further details can be found on the website.

Ticket price: Wildfowl & Wetland Trust members £16.25

Non-WWT members £26.00 (includes entry)

Tickets will either be available at Group meetings OR make cheques payable to Gravesend RSPB Local Group and send, enclosing sae please, to Hazel Cullum, 10 Nursery Road, Meopham, Kent, DA13 0NF (01474 812626)

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

Just to remind you that our indoor meetings start on Thursday 13th September at the Northfleet School for Girls, where John Lawrence will speak about being '**FOOTLOOSE IN NAMIBIA**' – independent travel in Africa. 7.30pm – 9.45pm

On Tuesday 25th September, our first afternoon speaker will be Victoria Golding, talking about '**WILDLIFE ON YOUR DOORSTEP**' A close look at the wildlife of our local natural places.

Masonic Halls Gravesend 2pm – 4pm We hope to see you there.

..... **and finally** Did you know :

Chaffinches have accents! Chaffinches from France sing different songs to those in the UK and even within the UK there is a variety in the songs of Chaffinches in the North, South, East and West.

There are 59 species of butterfly and 2,500 species of moths in the UK, with more establishing every decade following migration from continental Europe. They are found from the shoreline to mountain top, and occur in a wide variety of habitats.

Stay safe and I hope to see you soon. Steve Cullum – Newsletter Editor.