

December 2018

Welcome to the Christmas edition and I hope that you have been able to enjoy our somewhat unseasonal weather to see the beautiful wildlife that Kent has to offer.

In this bumper issue, I'm sure that you will enjoy some very fascinating articles and hopefully, they might make for some interesting debates.

There have been some really good sightings of birds recently, including purple sandpiper, velvet scoter, crossbill, sooty shearwater, rough legged buzzard, little auk and black tern to name a few, along with some seasonal birds, such as redwing, waxwing, hawfinch and whooper swans. Have you seen any of them, or perhaps something different, especially new visitors to your garden? Why not let me know at my usual e-mail address newsletter@rspbgravesend.org.uk

OK, time to put your feet up, relax, have a cuppa and enjoy.

Paul Yetman, our Group Leader, on his 25 years with the RSPB

At the October evening indoor meeting, I was taken by surprise when our speaker, Alan Loweth, took over at the half time break and presented me with my 25-year award as an RSPB volunteer



on the Group Committee. This has got me thinking back to when I first joined the group...I 'discovered' the Gravesend RSPB local group through the annual film show which was a big event at the time and held at the Woodville Halls. No doubt, like many people, my wife and I joined and subsequently did nothing with the group for the rest of the year! So the following year, we went along to the film show, joined again and vowed to make more of an effort. A few weeks later we went on our first outdoor trip with the group to Bewl Water and Bedgebury Pinetum. David Arnold, our Group Leader at the time, was chatting to us in his usual entertaining way while we were walking along Bewl Water, when a flock of birds flew by. Barely pausing in his conversation, and without raising

his bins, he pronounced them as "teal". I was amazed. Later that day, at the pinetum, we looked through group members' telescopes and saw our first ever hawfinches sitting at the top of the pine trees. We have never looked back.

We started to go to the monthly evening talks and learnt more about places to go and see birds, about the birds themselves and were happily entertained. In 1993 David invited me to join the Group Committee. My first role was concerned with promoting Agenda 21 – a green initiative - and to raise its profile within the group and our local council. As someone with an interest in IT, I went on to set up our first group website, one of the first RSPB group websites at the time. I later took on the role of outdoor programme organiser, eventually becoming Group Leader four years ago. My original motive for joining our local group was to find out more about birding places in our local area, but it has given me so much more than that – new friendships, learning how to find and identify birds and other wildlife, simply enjoying our great outdoors and

becoming involved in helping to conserve it. It has been a case of ‘the more you put in – the more you get out of it’. And I cannot believe it started 25 years ago!

Let Nature Sing campaign from the RSPB

Did you know the UK is now one of the most nature-deprived countries in the world? Across our islands, many much-loved species of plant and animal are disappearing from one generation to the next. This has huge consequences for society. The nature that sustains us with food, fresh water and clean air, with the wonder and beauty that lifts our spirits, is fading away - but how many politicians are talking about it? As we shape the UK’s future outside of the EU, it’s more important than ever that our politicians know nature is really important to us – to our families, our community, our health and wellbeing... If they know how important it is to all of us, they will put nature at the heart of their vision for the UK’s future, and our countryside could be teeming with an abundance of life once more. You may have seen our new campaign – Let Nature Sing – which launched this month in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and will launch in March in Scotland, celebrating the wonder and music nature brings to our lives; making a statement to politicians that we don’t want to lose it. This campaign is all about sharing why we love nature so much and want to bring it back to its full glory, whether by you giving nature a home in your garden, or politicians establishing world-leading new laws – we can all play our part in letting nature sing. But time is running out for nature – so we have to act now. Let’s call on politicians, and each other, to do everything we can to help nature. It’s not too late to save it. Your local group can play a crucial role in this campaign and the big changes we’re calling for.

Here’s what you can do to help:

Action 1: Spread the word and sign the pledge to Let Nature Sing:

- Ask your committee and members to sign the pledge
- Ask your friends and family to sign the pledge

rspb.org.uk/letnaturesing

RSPB warns of ‘apocalyptic’ seabird decline in Shetland

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) said the sharp drop off in the seabird population in Shetland was unprecedented. Scientists have attributed the downward trend to a series of factors, including climate change, declining food sources and the scourge of plastic pollutants.

Helen Moncrieff, RSPB’s area manager for Shetland, said at the society’s sites in Dalsetter and Troswick there were only 110 Arctic terns last week, compared with around 9,000 at the turn of the millennium.

Figures show while there were 33,000 puffins on the island in the spring of 2000, the population stood at just 570 last year. There are no signs of any recovery in 2018, although it is still early in the season.

Shetland’s kittiwake population fell from more than 55,000 in 1981 to just 5,000 in 2011. Observers believe those numbers have declined even further. Dr Euan Dunn, RSPB’s principal marine advisor, said: “These are apocalyptic numbers. We are seeing something very dramatic happening, something that has never occurred in the history of ornithology up there.”

One puffin monitored by the RSPB was found to have flown more than 248 miles in order to find food. Dr Dunn added: “That is more than ten times further.. than we thought they were flying..”

Read more at: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/rspb-warns-of-apocalyptic-seabird-decline-in-shetland-1-4749035>

How does plastic harm animals?

Experts think that by 2050, the amount of plastic in the ocean will weigh more than the amount of fish in the ocean.

All animals, whether they live on land or in the sea, can be hurt by plastic.

They can get trapped in bigger items such as carrier bags or food packaging.

Birds, fish and shellfish can mistake plastic for food when it has broken down into smaller pieces.

One in three sea turtles and around 90% of seabirds have eaten it.

They can't digest plastic so their stomachs can become full, meaning they don't have room for actual food.

Each year, 100,000 animals in the sea are killed by plastic.

You might have seen these astonishing pictures of what look like little bits of land in the middle of the sea.

When you look closely, they're actually made up of floating plastic! The rubbish includes bags, bottles and fishing gear.

These are known as 'trash islands' or 'garbage patches'.

They're created by currents in the ocean which carry the waste and bring it together.



One of the most famous is the 'Pacific Garbage Patch' between California and Hawaii.

What's being done?

There are lots of groups trying to help tackle plastic pollution and cut the amount of plastic we use.

We now pay 5p for plastic carrier bags and the number we use has dropped by over 80%.

Certain cafés and restaurants are only giving out straws if people ask for them. Some are also swapping them for paper ones.

A group of nurseries has stopped using glitter.

Plastic microbeads have been banned from products like face scrubs and toothpaste.

And supermarkets are looking at making changes too, including making their packaging easier to recycle or even plastic free.

The Government's promising to cut all avoidable plastic waste over the next 25 years. Countries such as Germany, Norway and Sweden have a Deposit Return Scheme and it helps those countries recycle over 90% of their plastic bottles.

This means you pay a bit more for a drink in a plastic bottle, but you get that money back when you return the bottle to be recycled.

There are plans in Scotland for a Deposit Return Scheme but other parts of the UK aren't convinced.

In the UK, just 57% of bottles are collected to be recycled.

Source - *BBC Newsround online*

A report from Will Tofts – Warden at RSPB North Kent Marshes

It was a mixed breeding season on the reserves, though mainly good. Spotted flycatcher bred in the woodland again after mainly years of being absent. Yellow wagtail bred at Northward Hill for the first time since the RSPB bought the marsh. Turtle dove, in terminal decline, bred again at Northward Hill after failing to in 2017. Nightingale numbers across the south east of England have been well down, with most sites having around half their usual numbers of singing males. Hopefully this isn't the start of a serious decline, but more to do with the weather conditions during their migration that may have stopped them making the leap over the channel. Cliffe Pools nightingale numbers fell from 18 pairs in 2017 to 7 pairs in 2018.

Breeding waders across the reserves had a good year, though not outstanding. To keep the lapwing population at a steady level it is required for each pair to produce 0.7 chicks. This was the first year where we have achieved getting all 4 reserves over 1 chick per pair, with Shorne being the highest at 1.8 chicks per pair. Breeding bird numbers are listed below.

RSPB Northward Hill

Winter work started with path clearance around the trails and doing some ride management. This involves cutting back vegetation, mainly thorn species from the side of the path by a couple of metres, to allow thicker regrowth which will benefit nesting species such as chiffchaff, as well as improving ground flora for butterflies.

Sycamore within the sanctuary area has spread like wildfire in the last couple of years, so two weeks were spent cutting and herbiciding stumps. This is a slow process and eradication is probably not possible, but will be a case of stopping it spreading further into other areas of the woodland, such as the public area and minimising the impact it is having on ground flora and the establishment of broadleaf saplings.

Coppicing has started in the woodland, mainly in the sanctuary this year. We are removing large stands of old blackthorn that has become too old and 'out of condition' for our priority species, such as nightingale.

RSPB Cliffe Pools

Again path clearance was the first job of the winter at Cliffe, which is a long task - four kilometres of paths to clear. Areas of the dredging deposits on Flamingo pool have been cleared of vegetation to maintain bare ground. This is invaluable habitat to species such as solitary bee species, as well as nesting waders such as lapwing and ringed plover.

Omya are currently clearing a large amount of fly tipping from Francis Quarry behind the pinnacle viewpoint. This is why the public right of way is currently shut, as large dumper trucks are moving in and out of the site daily. Omya do not know exactly how long it will take to clear the rubbish, but it should be within 6 months, though probably much sooner. Water levels at

Cliffe are a continuous worry, with no input into the pools except what falls from the sky. After the dry hot summer, the levels have dropped around the site by 30cm just this year and are around 70cm lower than what we would want at this time of year. The black barn pools are now almost completely dry, which could have knock on consequences for breeding waders in 2019.

Wintering birds have so far been slim, especially wildfowl, due to marsh being dry after the summer and lack of significant rainfall yet this winter. Though 2 bewicks were on the reservoir at Northward hill on the last WeBS count, which are very early records.

The next few months will be mostly maintaining our anti-predator electric fences across the reserves and pumping water around the site to get them nice and wet for the breeding season. Hopefully we are in for a wet winter after such a long hot summer.

Breeding wader results 2018.

Site	Lapwing Pairs	Lapwing Productivity	Redshank Pairs	Avocet Pairs
Northward Hill	38	1.08	42	48
Shorne	51	1.86	79	0
Higham	58	1.12	54	0
Cliffe Pools	31	1.06	36	100

An interesting article on binoculars by Trevor Hatton

On a recent fieldtrip I heard a statement about binoculars which I'd heard a few times before, that seemed logical, but is just not so.

Why buy an 8 x 40/42 binocular instead of an 8 x 30/32 I asked? Greater light gathering I was told (true) and of course, a wider field of view (definitely not true!) Check any manufacturer's specification chart for a given range and it will be seen that an 8 x 30/32 gives a wider field of view than the similar 8 x 40/42. Don't believe me? Try it! An 8 x 40/42 will also be heavier and bulkier than an 8 x 30/32. Talking of weight I know that a lot of people find the weight of their binocular annoying; 700 grams plus being quite common. I recently bought an 8 x 30 instrument weighing 460 grams (with a field of view of 150 metres at 1,000 metres). Everybody who tried it commented favourably on the light weight, to the extent that seven people of my acquaintance have subsequently bought the same model – I should have received some commission!

Many factors should be considered before choosing an instrument. A 10 x binocular is more difficult to hold steady, has less light gathering and usually, a narrower field of view. Another thing seldom mentioned in reviews, is depth of field (the distance in focus behind and in front of the object being focused on). An important consideration is whether one feels comfortable with a binocular. It's no good buying an optically excellent instrument if it doesn't feel comfortable in use. A waterproof binocular is also important to some people. (Not to me; my waterproofing is my car or the nearest pub. Why go out in the rain?!)

Pedants will no doubt notice the use of the singular term 'binocular'. One binocular is two (bi)oculars. A pair of binoculars is two instruments.

Did you know ... that Tawny owls have binocular vision? Their eyes are in front and near each other and this offers them increased depth perception.

News from Hayley Taylor, Project Manager at Bird Wise

Bird Wise was set up in 2017 to address the issue of recreational disturbance to birds on the north Kent marshes. It focuses on the internationally protected Thames, Medway and Swale SPA and Ramsar sites, and covers the coastline between Gravesend and Whitstable. The project is funded via a tariff collected from each new property built within 6km of the protected

areas, and will mitigate the disturbance that could be caused by additional recreational visits to the coast.

The ethos at Bird Wise is on promoting positive behaviours through education and engagement to raise awareness of the birds that flock to our estuaries every winter. Whilst we on over-wintering birds, our messages will be delivered all year round and communicated through the summer season to reduce disturbance to breeding birds.

We have been busy preparing for the winter season and are looking forward to welcoming our wintering birds back to north Kent. This year we have two Seasonal Rangers who joined us in October and will be working until early April, out and about on sites along the coast between Gravesend and Whitstable. They will be speaking with the public to explain the importance of the coastal habitat and the need for birds to feed and rest undisturbed. We are planning to run school visits, lead organised walks, have 'meet the ranger' sessions and install new signage along the coast. There is lots



more information on our website at www.birdwise.org.uk and you can keep up to date with our social media feeds @birdwisenk on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. You can get in contact with us at birdwise@medway.gov.uk or via the link on our website or message via our social media pages. If you see us out on site please stop to say hello, we love to hear about the latest sightings.

What is biodiversity and why it is important?

Biodiversity boosts ecosystem productivity where each species, no matter how small, all have an important role to play. For example, a larger number of plant species means a greater variety of crops. Greater species diversity ensures natural sustainability for all life forms.

How are the RSPB involved? – an abridged version from the RSPB website

The RSPB, working closely with a large number of partners, has developed a range of biodiversity indicators for birds and other wildlife in a range of habitats and countries/regions. Such indicators can be excellent tools for communicating on the state of nature. Related work has gone one step further in creating an indicator of pressures on nature by looking into the impacts of climatic change on bird populations.

Objectives

The annual reporting of the state of wild birds in the UK and England, disaggregated into habitats and countries/regions to highlight particular trends of concern. The development of new indicators and the improvement of existing ones as and when possible to ensure they remain the best possible resource.

Key dates

UK & England Wild Bird Indicators are produced annually for the following: all-species and farmland, woodland, seabirds, water & wetland birds and wintering water birds, as official UK Biodiversity and England Biodiversity Strategy indicators. Most indicators start in 1970 and run up to the year before the current year. The farmland bird indicator has been instrumental in highlighting the huge decline of farmland birds in the UK and driving the policy response to this loss.

Results

Wild Bird Indicators illustrate the massive decline and subsequent lack of recovery of farmland and woodland birds in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. Seabird populations have shown a

steady decline in recent years, but breeding birds of water & wetlands have remained relatively stable. The wintering water bird indicator is way above its starting level, although even that has shown signs of decline in recent years.

The European Wild Bird Indicator shows a similar pattern for farmland birds in Europe. European-wide changes in agricultural practices drove a decline in numbers to approximately 50 per cent of 1980 levels, although overall populations of forest birds have remained stable. In addition to the WBI, the PSI shows how populations of priority species suffered up to a 60 per cent decline over the 40 years from 1970.

The CII, which illustrates the impact of climate change on bird populations, has increased strongly in the past twenty years, coinciding with a period of rapid climatic warming in Europe.

For more information, please visit <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/projects/biodiversity-indicators/>

Report from Howard Vaughan – Visitor Experience Officer at RSPB Rainham Marshes

Return migration got underway early in the summer with first black-tailed godwits and green sandpiper back by late June. Dwindling water levels stymied passage though and wader numbers were correspondingly low. However a marsh sandpiper in late July was a crowd puller, as was a dapper juvenile pectoral sandpiper for a week in late September. The sultry weather and clear skies allowed southbound passerines to keep moving and yellow wagtails, chats and passage warblers were in short supply. The amazing summer weather did have benefits with a superb breeding season across all species and insects abounded. Scarce chaser was at last added to the list and blue-eyed hawkers and willow emerald could be found amongst the usuals. Clouded yellows were numerous while three wall browns were the first since 2015. Several bee, butterfly and dragonfly species made it through to mid-November.

The odd great white egret and spoonbill dropped in on the remains of Aveley Pool and two cattle egrets spent October on the marsh. The Thames was fairly quiet although roseate tern was recorded for the fourth consecutive year and a great northern diver in early November was the first for ten years. Short-eared owls are back for the winter and three hen harriers and two rough legged buzzards on Halloween made up part of a phenomenal raptor fest that day. As we head into December the water levels have at last risen and with it duck, godwit and lapwing numbers. We now just need a proper snap to bring in some geese, swans, thrushes and finches from the east. I feel like it may be a waxwing Winter too, so get checking those berry laden trees!



Photo courtesy of Tony O'Brien

Did you know?

A pair of robins weigh roughly the same as one size 4 chicken egg.

A pair of great tits will each fly at least 100 km to collect caterpillars and carry almost their own body weight in a day.

Coal tits hide food - they take sunflower seeds and peanuts for a winter store

Migrating swallows cover 200 miles a day, mainly during daylight, at speeds of 17-22 mph

Our website gallery

The Flickr problems on our website have now been rectified and the gallery is full of new wildlife photographs. Why not take a few minutes to visit and add some of your own – they would be very welcome.

Car sharing

Is there is a particular outdoor meeting that you would like to visit, but are unable to because of transport problems? Perhaps you could try contacting me or a member of the committee, to see if we can help by arranging a lift for you. We would love to see more of you enjoying our trips.

Penny Leeves

A huge thank you to Penny for organising our indoor meetings for the last 30 years. Her hard work and dedication has shone throughout and is greatly appreciated by us all. Julie Peeling has now taken on the role and we wish both of them every success in the future.

Membership renewal 2019

If you haven't already done so, please remember to complete your form and return to Irene before 31st January 2019 with your annual subscription – thank you.

Some old-fashioned names of British birds

Can you guess what these birds are called today? 18 to have a go at ☺

Dabchick – Bachelor bird – Bonxie – Spuggie or Sprog – Peewit – Hoverhawk – Shufflewing – Stumpy Toddy – Black Hatto – Little Woody – Hedge Mumruffin – Yaffle – Ringo – Mudhen – Rain Crow – Honker – Throstle – Spatula. Answers in the next edition.

.....and finally

This year has brought us some excellent indoor meetings and field trips, so why not be a part of it in 2019 – you will be made very welcome. So, from me, Hazel and the committee, we would like to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. Happy birding ☺

Steve Cullum – Newsletter Editor



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The RSPB is the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

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