

# SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY **NEWSLETTER**

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*Spring 1996*

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## *John Stafford's Retirement*

The following press release was issued after the AGM to record the tremendous period of 43 years as the Society's President:

*Dr John Stafford, who lives in Shoreham has retired from the Society's Presidency after 43 years, as the Society's first President.*

*John Stafford founded the Society in 1953 when he and a few others felt that Shoreham needed a Society to allow like-minded persons to meet and talk about birds and to pass on information. Bird-watching as a popular hobby was only just beginning; the Shoreham Society was therefore indeed pioneering. It was founded before the Sussex Ornithological Society and the Sussex Wildlife Trust.*

*John Stafford himself became well-known nationally and internationally as an experienced ornithologist. He made trips abroad to Finland, Bulgaria and Spain and in the course of his travels made friends with such famous ornithologists as James Fisher, Bruce Campbell, Richard Fitter and Eric Hosking. He accompanied the latter on a trip to Spain and helped in the making of Hosking's famous film "Wild Spain", which featured the largest European vulture the Lammergeier.*

*John became an expert in the study of Nightjars and took part in BBC Radio's Natural History broadcasts in relation to these fascinating birds. He served for ten years as a member of the Council of the RSPB, a high honour indeed. At last night's AGM of the Society the members recorded a unanimous vote of thanks to John for his unique service to ornithology and for being the 'father' of the Society. John is succeeded as President by Stanley Allen, another Shoreham resident and member since 1976, and a former Honorary Treasurer and one-time Chairman.*

Stanley Allen

## *From the Editor*

A memorable period of Sussex birding is reflected in the highlights section overleaf. Unfortunately few of the scarcer species found their way into the SDOS recording area, but it was interesting to note that some of our members were involved in the finding of some of these. Please tell me of your sightings for inclusion in Birds on our Patch, especially from the Adur and west of the recording area.

The content of this Newsletter can only be successful and be of interest if members send me news and articles. A reminder that the copy date for the Winter Newsletter is 30 September. Please send to the Hon Editor, Peter Whitcomb, 99 Barnett Road, Brighton BN1 7GJ

## *Summer Barbecue*

The 1996 barbecue will be held at the Old Rectory, Coombes on **Saturday July 13th at 7.30 p m**. The Old Rectory is exactly 1.5 miles north from the traffic lights on the A27 by Lancing College. Turn into Coombes Road towards Steyning, the drive entrance is on the left signposted with a SDOS notice.

All food is provided; meats, salads and deserts @ £3 per head. You are asked to bring your own drink, plates and cutlery. Garden chairs would be useful, though a limited number will be provided.

I should be grateful for some help from about 5.30 to set out chairs and tables and do the last minute food preparations. If you are willing to help in any way, please let me know. To enable me to organise the food, please ring me to book a ticket by July 8th. Do come even if it rains - the food will still be here!

Brianne Reeve 01273 452497

## *Forthcoming Attractions*

### *Field Outings*

On Saturday 22 June, we'll be at **Waltham Brooks** early evening to see waders and maybe an owl, then go on to **Lavington Common** for Nightjars and Woodcock. A Leader is yet to be appointed due to non-availability of original leader. Meet at Greatham Bridge at 20.00 hrs.

The **Beachy Head** area is a prime migrant site in autumn and Peter Whitcomb will try to find more than a Whinchat or two! Make a date for Saturday 7 September, morning only. Meet at Birling Gap car park at 08.00.

Clive Hope will lead a walk around **Cissbury Ring** and show members the ringing site nearby on Saturday 21 September, morning only. Meet at Cissbury Ring car park at 08.00.

Another prime site is **Pagham Harbour**, so join Richard Ives on Sunday 6 October for a promising full day's birding. Meet at Sidlesham Information Centre at 09.00.

Full details shown in programme card. If in doubt phone Field Sec., Tony Fenton on 01273 591291

### *LATE NEWS*

#### *West Sussex 24 hr Sponsored Bird Race*

On 5th May an SDOS team, namely Bernie Forbes, Dave Smith, Richard Ives and Tony Fenton set a new all-Sussex record of 136 species (all seen in West Sussex) The previous record was 128 species.

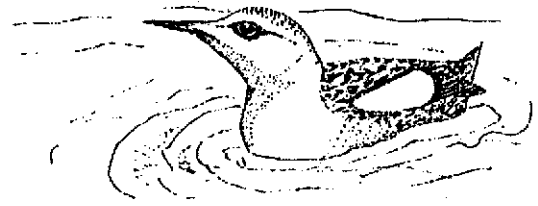
The money raised is still being counted but we can tell you that several hundred pounds has been raised for the Breast Cancer Research Unit at Worthing Hospital.

### *Birds on our Patch*

#### *Winter/ Spring*

Local news has surely been dominated by the abnormally high numbers of rare grebes sighted in our area - some staying a while offshore or in the harbours. Slavonian, Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes were recorded, many in summer plumage. Brighton Marina had a long-staying Red-throated Diver and a Great Northern Diver put in an appearance in February and a Little Egret was on Ferring Rife.

The usual wintering numbers of Purple Sandpiper and Black Redstart were present at Shoreham and Brighton Marina and regular study of gull roosts helped a bumper crop of Mediterranean Gull sightings. Perhaps the highlight of the winter was a Black Guillemot, found at the Marina on 23 December, staying until at least March. An Avocet was on the lower Adur in February. Wintering Blackcaps were widely reported from gardens, also two Firecrests at Woodvale Cemetery. News of a wintering Ring Ouzel in the Sompting area was not well-known.



In March, seawatching at Worthing produced 1300 Brents and the first Sandwich Terns and Sand Martins on 19th; Little Gulls, Garganey, Scaup and Long-tailed Duck amongst a varied passage on 21st. Rather low numbers of scoter, skuas and waders were apparent. Spring migration of passerines locally has also been unspectacular, with early known arrival dates: Swallow 23 Mar, Swift 25 Apr. Only one Grasshopper Warbler was at Sheepcote; a handful of Wood Warblers in Wildpark; Nightingales singing in Lower Adur near Cement Works; otherwise little of note. Finally, the Dartford Warbler on Hollingbury Camp has been actively trying to attract a mate, well into May.

Peter Whitcomb, with a little help.

#### *Sussex Highlights*

Around the New Year, a Snow Bunting was on Pett Beach and a Lapland Bunting at Rye. Rye also hosted at least 2 Bitterns for a period. Two Great Grey Shrikes were at Ashdown Forest until March.

A notable double act in February featured a Rough-legged Buzzard and a Red Kite in the West Dean Woods area from 11-28 Feb. Further east a Great White Egret stayed on Horse Eye Level, Pevensey, moving briefly to Pagham at the month end.

A Ring-necked Duck stayed 2 days at Warnham Millpond in March, which proved the best month to see Waxwings. Large flocks roved gardens mainly in East Sussex with largest numbers in East Grinstead, Burgess Hill and the Hastings/Bexhill area. A White-spotted Bluethroat was at the Cuckmere on 23rd, the same day producing early migrants of Redstart and Marsh Harrier nearby. An Iceland Gull was on Seaford Beach on 25th.

A Marsh Harrier flew through Amberley Levels on 5th April. A couple of Ospreys passed through Arlington Reservoir and there was an early Black Tern there on 13th followed by a Cuckoo the next day. Two Hoopoes were found in the Beachy Head area. A Purple Heron stayed around the Norman's Bay area for a week, showing amazingly well at times. Both Cirl and Little Bunting were seen feeding on consecutive days at Sidlesham and at the month's end there was a Dotterel at Iford Hill, Kingston.

Stop Press: Night Heron and Ortolan Bunting at Rye Harbour on 4th May; Honey Buzzard on May 5th, the earliest ever Sussex Record.

## *Book Review*

*Birds & Weather* by Stephen Moss (Hamlyn 1995)

This 170 page book, designed to be read and used by active birdwatchers, provides an overview of how birds, weather and climate interact in a British context. It is divided into four sections, namely: birds, weather and forecasting; migration and weather; winter weather and birds; and climate change and birds.

Britain has, the author explains, a halfway-house climate with much smaller differences between average winter and summer temperatures than most places at similar latitudes. The result is a wide diversity of breeding species but many are northern or southern species on the edge of their ranges and thus vulnerable to bad weather or slight climate change. The reasons for this are explained and the possible effects of global warming are discussed; for example, we may lose northern species such as Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting but the theoretic expansion of southern species inspires a drawing of Cley Marsh in 2020 with Great Reed Warbler, Black-winged Stilt and Black Kite. Emphasising the dangers of making predictions, the author makes clear that his main aim is to alert birdwatchers to report unexpected changes in population and range of both rare and common species.

Migration has fascinated birdwatchers for generations and here almost everyone will surely learn something interesting. While the emphasis is again on the effects of weather, different migration strategies are discussed as is the question of how birds navigate, probably there is no single method according to the latest research. I was particularly interested in the detailed explanation of how the migration strategy of some American songbirds has led to the annual 'Silly Season' each October. One might think that small birds from the far north of America would fly down the Eastern Seaboard of the United States to their southern wintering grounds and many do. However some, especially late migrants in October, prefer to take a more direct route out over the western Atlantic to their stop-over points in the Caribbean. This shortens the distance by about two-thirds but at great risk that the migrants get caught up in fast-moving westerly winds. If this happens, they have no option but to fly downwind and their fat reserves will last for a maximum of 2/3 days; accordingly while the strongest few may make it to the Scillies, the majority, having no possible refuelling stop, perish in the Atlantic.

The section about winter examines the effects of both short and long cold periods and of unusually mild winters. Why some birds move while others stay put is discussed and some hard winters such as 1962/3 are considered in some detail.

Although this book might seem expensive at £16.99, it is one of the most interesting bird books I have come across recently which I have read from cover to cover. It is well illustrated with colour photographs, line drawings and weather maps and I recommend it to those with both a serious and a casual interest in this fascinating subject.

Pat Mulcock

## *The Sanctuary*

On Saturday April 27th, 21 members visited the Sanctuary, on a perfect spring day, under the guidance of John Newnham, Brianne Reeve and Stanley Allen and with expert assistance on the interesting flora from George and Betty Bishop, who pointed out to us several plants which cannot now be found anywhere else in the Adur Valley.

Soon after the Society was founded 43 years ago, John Stafford negotiated with the then Brighton Water Company for SDOS to have the right to enter part of the Shoreham Pumping Station site to carry out ringing. Since then many thousand of birds have been tagged in this unique spot.

Our tenure was officially 'sealed' in 1974, when we were given a licence by Brighton Corporation to continue our use of the site for a minimal annual payment. That licence has since been ratified by Southern Water - but it could of course be terminated at any time - that is why we have to plan our visits to the site rather carefully, so as to cause the minimum of disturbance to the Water Authority. The gates to the area are always locked and the number of keyholders is limited.

Until a year or so ago, the Society annually had a 'clearance' morning under John Newnham's guidance; this was usually in February and was an enjoyable cold winter's day bit of exercise. One result of the recent visit was a definite proposal to restart this activity in 1997, as the Sanctuary has become very overgrown - so watch out in next year's programme for a 'fun' day - for all age groups - the kids love it!

Due to the thick canopy in the Sanctuary, particularly in Summer, you tend to hear more birds than you see; but the road from the A283 up to the site nearly always provides something of interest, particularly in April and May with most migrants singing; we had seven warbler species on 27th April, including Nightingale.

Access to the site, as indicated above, has to be somewhat limited for various reasons including security. However, visits for small numbers of members can be arranged, through the Secretary.

Stanley Allen

## *Advertisements & Recommendations*

Isle of Wight Ornithological Breaks - a helpful and likeable leader specialising in the main birding sites on the island. Dean Swensson, 11 Cornwall Road, Ventnor, Isle of Wight, PO38 1AS Tel 01983 854684

Good Centre for Norfolk birding - B&B at extremely reasonable rates. Mrs Jean Pope, Bramley, Standard Road, Wells-next-Sea, Norfolk Tel. 01328 710384

## *SDOS 'Hotspot'*

As we have had very few team totals for species seen on one day within the SDOS recording area, I am putting forward an idea borrowed from our neighbours in Hampshire.

Members may not always enjoy dashing around on a Birdrace trying to record as many species as possible. You may not have the stamina either, so the Hotspot competition is for those who are relatively inactive and enjoy birdwatching at a more leisurely pace! The object is to write down how many species you can see or hear in 10 minutes from one spot. You can sit or stand, a movement of 10 metres is allowed and you can view from any direction.

You may decide your spot is in your own garden or a vantage point with a good view with diverse habitat. Individuals are encouraged to enter the competition from the date of newsletter to the year end. Have as many attempts as you like, but they must be within the SDOS area. Entries to Peter Whitcomb should include name, location, date, time and a list of birds seen. Optimum time could be late August or could it be December?

Ongoing progress and highlights will be printed in the next newsletter and at the end of the competition a framed print will be awarded to the winner.

## *INFOVOLS at Pulborough Brooks*

When Chris and I moved to Sussex in June 1994, we soon enquired about volunteering at the new RSPB Reserve. We'd always wanted to be involved with a nature reserve, both to learn something of what is actually involved in reserve management and to try to help others, especially new birdwatchers, to enjoy the reserve and its birds and other wildlife. I am conscious that many readers of this newsletter have known Pulborough and the Arun Valley for much longer than I have but I hope you will bear with me and even perhaps see the reserve in a new light for it fulfils a multiple role.

As a large organisation, the RSPB tries to ensure some standardisation of approach among its representatives and before we were let loose on the public we underwent a training session in the centre with Ian Spindley, the reserve's Publicity and Visitors Officer. We also attend the bi-annual evening volunteers' workshop which is a useful forum for discussion between volunteers and the reserve's staff and updates us on future plans regarding reserve management and facilities, events and indeed anything of mutual interest.

The reserve has thousands of visitors every year; some are experienced birdwatchers; many are new or potential birdwatchers; many are RSPB members but others have simply been attracted in by local publicity; there are those who come mainly for a safe and peaceful country walk and disabled people who are thrilled to find that the reserve's free Battricar gives them access to the countryside and birdwatching. As Infovols, we try to ensure

that all visitors enjoy their visit, see and identify at least some new-for-them birds and learn a little about the reserve and the RSPB. We chat to people in the centre, on the nature trail and in the hides and show them birds through our 'scopes and their own or hired binoculars; we also lead or help with guided walks. We explain how to choose and use binoculars or telescopes; many first-time visitors have left their binoculars at home and often we have to dissuade people from buying mini binoculars.

Showing people birds is usually quite easy in winter unless a freeze has driven everything away. March and April were excellent in 1995, with Golden Plover staying late, a good selection of passage waders, including very close Little Ringed Plover and later on, wonderful Nightingales singing full blast on a hot afternoon. As May draws to a close the Brooks quickly dry out in a hot summer and finding birds can be difficult. A few Green and Common Sandpipers usually help out in late June and July and one can turn to Butterflies for a change. However, we eagerly await late August, when waders should increase and we can expect a good showing of interesting and reasonably visible passerines such as Redstarts, Whinchats and Flycatchers along the hedgerows. As late autumn arrives, to our relief the ducks come out of eclipse and Ruff and Snipe become easily visible.

Most Infovols reckon that they develop a sixth sense as to which visitors to leave alone; nonetheless, we've all encountered people with all the latest gear including telescope who actually turn out to be very inexperienced and glad of our help. So if you just want to birdwatch in peace, please try to bear with us as we try to help new birdwatchers; more RSPB members means more money for nature reserves and increased influence with the powers-that-be.

If you haven't visited Pulborough Brooks for a while, do come soon and don't forget to check the shop - you may be surprised by the excellent selection of bird books. A snack in the tearoom is also an attractive option and Nuthatch, Marsh Tit and Woodpeckers visit the terrace feeders. If you have the time to spare, perhaps you may consider joining us as Infovols. Enthusiasm and interest in meeting people is much more important than birding expertise although owning a telescope is a great help. You can telephone volunteer co-ordinator, Rona Betts (tel 01798 875851) or speak to Ian Spindley or anyone at the centre. The reserve is open daily from 9 am to 9 pm (or sunset if earlier) and the centre from 10 am - 5pm.

Pat Mulcock

## *South Downs Way*

Two members are rumoured to have been walking the South Downs Way (in stages) and hopefully can be persuaded to write up their notes which includes sightings recently of Black Redstart, Hen Harrier & Lesser Spotted Woodpecker en route. Watch this space!