

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Autumn 1998

Birds on our Patch — May to October

The highlight of the year was surely the successful breeding by Peregrines in a nest box on the roof of Sussex Heights in Brighton. Two females fledged at the end of June and a third egg which failed to hatch was removed for analysis. The Peregrines attracted a great deal of media interest featuring on local TV and radio, in several national and local newspapers, and the BBC Natural History Unit obtained good shots of the female arriving at the nest with a pigeon which it fed to the young. The best place to look now for Peregrines in Brighton is in the West Pier area in late afternoon. Four Ring-necked Parakeets have also been seen there regularly.

Regular watching from Brighton Marina has continued to produce good birds including Marsh and Montagu's Harrier on 16 May, a Storm Petrel on 11 July and 3 Mediterranean Shearwaters on the 23rd. Both Marsh and

Montagu's Harrier were also recorded at Chantry Hill in August.

Most local watchers seem to have experienced a relatively quiet September. Early in October, a Honey Buzzard was seen from Hollingbury, a Firecrest was ringed at Cissbury and one was also seen in a Worthing garden. Around the same time 30 Ring Ouzels were counted at Sheepcote with smaller numbers at other sites. However, numbers in Sussex did not approach the many hundreds which easterly winds brought into Kent at the same time. Brambling and Woodlark appeared at Goring Gap, Redwings began to arrive but Fieldfares seemed to be scarce. Everyone seemed to be seeing exceptional numbers of Chiffchaffs with many more than usual in gardens.

Thanks to Richard Ives,
Peter Whitcomb and others.



Montagu's Harrier

Forthcoming Field Trips

- 22 Nov Chantry Hill with Bernie Forbes**
An afternoon walk which should be good Buzzards and other birds of prey.
- 27 Dec Shoreham/Adur with Stanley Allen**
The traditional post-Xmas walk. Possibilities include Purple Sandpiper and Black Redstart.
- 9 Jan Dungeness with Tony Fenton**
Remember RSPB membership cards. Smew, divers and grebes are usually among the winter attractions here.
- 21 Feb Apuldram/West Dean Woods with Dave Smith** Morning around part of Chichester Harbour for wildfowl and waders, transferring to West Dean later for raptors and woodland birds with a chance of something unusual.

See your programme card for full details.

Indoor Meetings

- 1 Dec Tony Marr - The Agony and the Ecstasy**
Tony who started birdwatching with SDOS as a teenager in the 1950s makes a welcome return. He has a reputation locally and nationally as a highly entertaining speaker.
- 5 Jan Stephen Knapp** will be talking to us not about Pagham Harbour but about the very exciting **Reserva Ecologica de Guapi Açu in Brazil** for which he is the Project Director. This important area of Atlantic rainforest, just 60 km from Rio de Janeiro holds over 400 bird species, including 46 mentioned in the Red Data Book, as well as many rare and endemic plants and animals. What better way to cheer up a chilly winter evening than to come and hear about Steve's adventures there, so far?

East Anglia - special feature

Clive Hope, visited Norfolk from 5-12 September . . .

My wife and I usually visit Norfolk in September hoping for a combination of fair weather, reasonable daylight and autumn migration in full swing. Also other attractions are still on offer should the birding flag. Each year is different which to me is the biggest stimulus to return. This year, we enjoyed probably our warmest week there in thirty years. From the bird point of view, too much south and westerly wind did not produce a 'classic', but as always there was much to interest.

On our way, we stopped at the inland Weeting Heath reserve where Stone Curlews breed and also gather in September prior to migration. We were delighted with 13 Stone Curlews and 8 Woodlarks.

The hoped-for north-westerlies, which bring variety and numbers of seabirds, did not occur. Nevertheless, a few Gannets, Fulmars and the odd Arctic Skua were always just off shore with still good numbers of Sandwich and Common Terns near the tide-line. We saw Black Terns nearly every day and the first Red-throated Divers of the autumn had arrived. A Velvet Scoter, close enough to see the yellow on its bill, was with a large flock of Eider just off Titchwell.

On the marshes, both at Cley where we were based and at Titchwell, now surely the RSPB's premier reserve,

and on smaller shallow pools along the coast, parties of 'freshly made' Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers were busy feeding. Titchwell hosted up to a hundred each of these two species as well as a Red-necked Phalarope, a Spoonbill, Little Egrets and a long-staying Black-winged Stilt making this a 'wader autumn'. Greenshanks seemed to be everywhere this year and with Ruff, Spotted Redshanks and up to five species of plover, not to mention Avocets, there was plenty to sort through. Titchwell's reedbeds also gave us Bearded Tits and a trio of Water Rails but we missed a reported Spotted Crake.

Another spectacle in the Holme/Titchwell area is the vast flocks of Knot and Bar-tailed Godwits which fly in to roost at high tide from their feeding grounds in the Wash. Many had arrived for the winter but numbers were augmented by passage birds. Winter duck numbers were also building up with over 1,000 of six species already at Cley.

The pines established on the dunes at Holkham can host a mass of migrant passerines given the right conditions. We weren't lucky this year, but were compensated by three Hobbies putting on a show hunting the abundant dragonflies. The hedgerows held a bonanza of blackberries, elder-



berries, hips and haws. One small patch near Salhouse attracted a brightly marked Icterine Warbler and we saw Whinchats, Redstart and a very confiding Pied Flycatcher there on other days.

We visited Holkham Park Lake for different species. There were Little Grebes in good numbers, Norfolk's largest concentration of Egyptian Geese and an Osprey appeared to spice things up. All three woodpeckers are present in the woods there along with Nuthatches, Treecreepers and tits. Holkham's plant centre is in a walled garden and we always come home with an attractive plant or three!

Swallows and martins were moving steadily west along the coast during the first half of the week. Swifts stayed in double figures every day - with some watched arriving over the sea.

If you haven't been yet, I would certainly recommend a visit. Several former Sussex residents have even moved there permanently. One, Tony Marr is making a brief but welcome return to speak at our December meeting.

. . . and Peter Whitcomb took a weekend break in Suffolk from 18-20 September

A special offer weekend birding break caught my eye in *Bird-watching* magazine and with a couple of pals, I promptly booked. Our base was a Westleton, right on Minsmere's doorstep. The budget weekend included excellent hospitality, wine with meals, spotless bedrooms and a leader well in touch with the local scene.

The weekend started at Friday lunchtime which at this time of year gave some six hours birding before the evening meal. We were a small group which allowed almost one to one attention. We began by twitching a juvenile Spotted Sandpiper with the leader explaining the nuances of plumage difference compared to two nearby Common Sandpipers. We noted two Little Stints and a small passage of pipits and Yellow Wagtails, but the sea was quiet. We paused at dusk just outside Minsmere and were entertained by Barn Owl, Marsh Harrier, Kingfisher and hunting Hobby.



Our first full day started before breakfast on Dunwich Heath where Dartford Warblers have recently been re-establishing a breeding colony and we saw about a dozen birds. Next we visited Benacre Broad where the 13 species of wader far outshone nearby Minsmere! The big surprise was an unannounced Spoonbill feeding among the Teal and waders. With two Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Little Stints outnumbering Dunlin and 27 Little Gulls we were somewhat reluctant to move on. Following a coffee break overlooking Covehithe Woods which produced Hobby and Marsh Harrier, we arrived at Minsmere to hear that a Lapland Bunting had been found on the beach. Probably it was hiding from the hordes of visitors that descend on the RSPB reserve every weekend because we were unable to find it.

Minsmere was rather quiet with few waders, but lots of Bearded Tits evidenced a good breeding season. We glimpsed a Bittern over the reeds, a Water Rail called and Marsh Harriers showed well. The best waders were found on a small scrape on Eastchurch Levels just outside the reserve with 2 Pectoral, 2 Wood and 4 Green Sandpipers plus a few Little Stints and Greenshanks for good measure. The little group was dispersed by an Osprey the next morning, so few people had the chance to see them.

On Sunday, our pre-breakfast ramble was to Dingle Marsh, just south of Walberswick. The interesting pools pro-

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Try some active conservation

John and Barrie would welcome help at the Sanctuary . . .

Since the Society first rented the Sanctuary from the Brighton Water Company a series of annual chores have been required to keep the copse open and useful for birdwatching and ringing. In the 1950's the annual reports describe tasks such as fence building, bridge construction, notice board erection and the building of a hide, ringing hut and heligoland trap.

In those days the copse was relatively low scrub where Nightingales regularly bred. Alas no Nightingales have bred at the Sanctuary since 1962 as the habitat has changed with the hawthorns, elder and willow growing forever taller and shading the undergrowth. Indeed the hawthorn had grown sufficiently fast for the Electricity board to employ contractors to clear a great swath the copse in 1969.

Although a certain amount of bridge reconstruction and path clearance is still needed each year the largest maintenance tasks since the 1960's have been to keep the osier, hawthorn and invading sycamore cut back.

Until the 1980's most of this work was done by the small Sanctuary Committee but from 1983 until 1995 one or two annual 'gardening' parties were scheduled in the Society's programme. These were very enjoyable

and most useful as the work done by several (often up to 15) members in a morning would have taken me many hours.

During the winter of 1996/97 Bob Antonini, equipped with power tools, made a very significant contribution to the copse by opening up large areas allowing light into some areas and promoting the growth of a small reedbed. Such work encourages a rich understory of plants, including some interesting species such as Flowering Rush and Brookweed, and enhanced the habitat for both breeding and migratory birds. It also enables mist-nets to operate more effectively.

This winter I would welcome help from the membership again, Barrie Watson and myself will be cutting and burning at the Sanctuary during the mornings of **Sunday 17th January** and **14th February** from about 09.15am. Please come and join us.

The Sanctuary is reached by a private road on the east side of the A283 Shoreham to Steyning road just south of the Adur flyover at TQ208063. There is parking space either near the A283 or on the grass verge nearer the copse. Wellington boots will probably be needed and please bring saws (large ones) and lots of muscle and energy!

John Newnham 01903-247596

Winter break offer

Peter Whitcomb writes: I've found another potentially interesting birding break offered by **Celtic Bird Tours**, a relatively new company which is establishing a reputation for well-organised trips into south and mid-Wales. They offer a winter weekend for up to 8 people travelling as a group at a discounted price of £195.

The three days birding takes in the Red Kite area as well as the coast which holds specialities like Chough and Peregrine. Other likely birds include: Raven, Hen Harrier, Goshawk, Dipper, Whooper Swan and Greenland Whitefronts. Anyone interested in making up a group for the weekend of **12-14 March** should contact me on 01273 500416 as soon as possible and at the latest by the end of November.

Further details are available for this and other trips in Wales. Let's take up the opportunity to have an unofficial SDOS get-together.

Summer Social

Our social evening on 8 July was good from several aspects. We sat in the garden at the Old Rectory until well after 10 pm and there were very few evenings like that last July.

The food provided by *Truffles* was most delicious with excellent quality and choice. So, no hassle in providing the food, very little clearing up and everyone seemed to enjoy the occasion.

East Anglia - special feature (continued)

duced Little Egret (still very scarce in the area) Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Little Gull and Whinchat. Our final session started at Sizewell, which has a warm water outflow similar to the 'patch' at Dungeness. We were a few days too late to see Black Terns and skuas, but saw Black Redstarts and Clouded Yellow butterflies in some numbers. The scrub towards Minsmere sluice gave us Pied Flycatcher and we saw 2 Lapland Buntings at close range on the dunes.

Our tally was 115 species, high considering the light winds from the NW for the first two days. With so much to see at other times of the year, I will be returning next year and would be pleased to give further details to anyone interested in a rewarding birding weekend.

The editor adds: it was a happy chance that both Clive and Peter sent me reports of trips to East Anglia. I

hope it will remind long-standing members of the attractions of this not too distant region as well as tempting newer birdwatchers to explore a little further afield.

A few tips: whether you prefer an organised trip or to do 'your own thing' check the advertisement section of the RSPB's *Birds* magazine, or one of the birding magazines available from newsagents for accommodation adverts. If you are going on your own for the first time, the East Anglia volume in Helm's excellent *Where to Watch Birds* series is almost essential. The RSPB's free reserves visiting leaflet is also useful. As well as the RSPB, Norfolk Naturalists Trust and other bodies own nature reserves and many are well organised to provide helpful information about what's around, Remember not all nature reserves are open daily, so check in advance if you can.

As well as autumn, winter and spring are also excellent times to visit.



Thanks to Richard Ives for his excellent illustrations for this issue.

Rise early for visible migration

Only six members turned up for a typical September 'migration outing' around Birling Gap on the 12th. The early start does put some members off, but is arranged to show birds moving through at the optimum time. Proving this point were many hundreds of Meadow Pipits and hirundines moving during the first hour only. Visible migration also included many Yellow Wagtails (maximum flock size 23), Tree Pipits and a Spotted Flycatcher.

Quite close to the car park, we found a nice selection of mixed warblers and dozens of Wheatears and Whinchats. A swooping Hobby gave exciting views but narrowly missed its prey which survived with the loss of a

good many feathers. The undoubted highlight came when the leader, in trying to get members a better view of a Redstart, accidentally flushed a Short-eared Owl. The owl gave really good views, then surprisingly soared quite high to avoid a harassing crow. Later, we saw it had come down to rest in long grass near Belle Tout.

When the sun came out, we saw Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady butterflies. Later in the morning, we had to curtail a longer walk to the Chat Vale area, because of heavy rain - but by then there was little left to see apart from the resident Corn Buntings and family parties of Stonechats.

Peter Whitcomb

Bird Identification videos for hire

We have bought three videos by Paul Doherty each narrated by Bill Oddie:

- Gulls of Britain
- British Wildfowl
- British Waders

Members may borrow them for a month for a £2 donation to SDOS plus a £10 deposit. If you find the videos useful, we think you will want to buy your own copies.

The videos will be available at indoor meetings and will be due back at or before the next meeting so that they are available to other members. If you can't get to meetings and want to borrow one, please contact Brianne Reeve on 01273 452497. If this venture proves popular, the Council will consider further purchases as more videos are regularly being produced.

Sussex Highlights

Breeding season reports include news of up to 4 pairs of Firecrests in an area of West Sussex forest and Woodlarks continuing to expand and become re-established in East Sussex including Ashdown Forest.

In July, a White-rumped Sandpiper appeared briefly at Pagham and the Little Egret roost at Thorney Island began to grow reaching a new record of 235 on 21st September.

September brought some rarities which stayed long enough to be seen by many observer. Chichester Gravel Pits hosted a White-winged Black Tern and a Semi-palmated Sandpiper, the latter moving to Pagham Harbour at the end of its stay. East Sussex contributed a Pectoral Sandpiper at Arlington Reservoir and nearby, a Lesser Yellowlegs in the Cuckmere. In the middle of October two Great Grey Shrikes arrived in Ashdown Forest which may stay for the winter.



Woodlark

Garden Birdwatch



Clive Hope will be running the SDOS garden bird survey this winter but the Council has decided that the survey will not continue after this because of declining support.

A number of members already participate in the BTO Garden Birdwatch which continues all year round. You do not need to feed the birds in the summer or indeed at all to take part. You never know what may turn up in your garden and this survey encourages one to be constantly aware of what's about. The forms are really not difficult to complete and you also receive an excellent quarterly newsletter.

If you would like to join in, just send your annual subscription of £10 to GBW, BTO, FREEPOST, Thetford IP24 2BR or write for details.

INFORMATION AND REQUESTS

Subscriptions: rates for 1999 are unchanged at Single - £8.50; Family - £12; and Junior - £2.50. Please pay Treasurer John Maskell at an indoor meeting or send payment to him at 41 St Lawrence Avenue, Worthing BN43 6JA.



Records: Peter Whitcomb, would appreciate batches of records as soon as possible, please. Later records to year end should be sent by the end of January 1999. Please help by noting whether scarce or rare records have been submitted to the SOS for authentication.

Peter's address is 99 Barnett Road, Brighton BN1 7GJ.



Report: This year we printed some extra copies and you may see them on sale at various nature reserves in West Sussex. We still have stocks of this and earlier issues and if you would like to buy any or know any non-members who would like to do so, please get in touch with Brianne Reeve.



Computer: Peter Whitcomb now has an SDOS computer at very little cost so far to SDOS due to the efforts of Terry Hicks. Peter now has a great deal of work ahead over the coming winter months finding out, with Terry's assistance how to use it to the best possible effect.



Spring Newsletter is planned for May and I would appreciate receiving copy by the end of March as I will be away for part of April. Please send contributions to Pat Mulcock, Pinehurst, West Drive, Angmering, West Sussex BN16 4NL. E-mail cpmulcock@compuserve.com. Tel/fax on 01903 776251.

I would be very interested in comments and suggestions as well as actual articles. Would you like to have more about garden birds in future newsletters? Have you any suggested plants which are particularly attractive to birds and grow well in your garden? Would you like articles about bird identification? If so, is there a group of species you find particularly difficult?