



SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 2003

Lesser Whitethroat—A New Sussex Overwintering Record

A garden backing onto a large secondary school and fronting a busy road does not seem a likely place for a Sussex record. It was, therefore, a surprise to see in my back garden on 17 November 2002 a

small dainty bird which I quickly identified as a Lesser White-throat. A check of the Sussex Ornithological Society annual reports established that the latest recorded departure date for the County for this species

was 21 November when one was recorded at Burgess Hill in 1957. Needless to say a close watch on the garden was kept. It was an irregular visitor and after several days absence there was excitement on 23 November when it reappeared and created a new record for the latest departure date. Little did I know at the time that there was to be no autumn departure date and that it would stay in the area for more than four months, and become the first record of a Lesser Whitethroat to overwinter in the County.

It spent the first week searching shrubs for natural food and then showed an increasing awareness of the greenfinches on the seed feeders. Ten days after first appearing in the garden it made an unsuccessful attempt to land on the niger feeder. Its progress in possibly learning to take seed from feeders was rudely interrupted by frequent visits to the back garden by the local male Sparrowhawk

over the next few days, during which time it was not seen and few birds were brave enough to visit the feeders.

At the beginning of December it re-



appeared in the front garden on the ground under two peanut feeders which are used by sparrows and are sited close to the house to reduce hawk predation. It readily adapted to feeding on peanut remnants but it was a week before it tried to cling on to one of the feeders. Its skill gradually improved until it pecked hard enough at the peanuts to obtain food on 24 December. It was very timid and would only visit a feeder when other birds were not there. It was at the bottom of the pecking order when feeding on the ground, and the resident Dunnock had the rare opportunity to be dominant.

It proved its ability to survive adverse weather when mild conditions in December were followed by a light covering of snow in early January, and the pond nearby was frozen over for several days. Strong easterly winds at this time made the temperature feel like minus 5°C.

Its visits to the garden were unpredictable and sometimes several days would pass without it being seen. It did not appear to

be wholly dependent on the peanuts and after feeding it could be seen flying strongly out of sight. It is not possible to say how much natural food it found or whether it visited feeders in other gardens.

Bird watchers experienced in identifying the different races of Lesser Whitethroat examined some rather less than perfect photographs I took and notes of its behaviour and agreed it was a standard first-winter bird.

Still being seen in the last week of March, it has provided a memorable period of garden bird-watching. Ken Hearne

An important Change and Information Update regarding a Forthcoming Field Trip

Please note that the
Field Outing to West
Dean Woods to be
led by Peter Whitcomb

will now take place
One week later than
shown on your 2003
Programme card,

i.e. on
Sunday 27th April
Meet at 09:00 in the SWT car
park at Grid Ref. SU 845152

Please also see the note on
page 4 regarding June 15th

Not real birding?

One criticism of this Newsletter that has leaked back to me since I became editor, is of the space I've devoted to garden bird-watching and the like. After all it's not 'real' birding is it? Cynically comparing our list of field trip leaders with that of members who contribute to our Garden Birdwatch scheme might be thought to support this view (though I know that there are many who simply do not have time, or just can't be bothered, to record garden, or indeed any, birds). It is interesting to compare the approaches of our two popular birding magazines (which I once unkindly compared to the *Mirror* and *Telegraph* of the birding world). *Bird Watching* always devotes several pages to garden bird-watching; whereas *Bird Watch* never does — let alone *British Birds* (the birders FT?) or *Birding World*. Interestingly, the American magazine *Birders World* probably gives the subject to a higher proportion of space than any British bird magazine.

But, let's face it, it is advertising as well as readership that drives magazines, and garden feeding is now quite big business, though as yet nothing like as big as in the States. 'Real' birders are a notoriously mean lot (I will never forget one of our trip leaders stating "no 'real' birder will pay for car parking unless absolutely necessary"). Once you've got your 'bins, your 'scope and your field guide, you need spend little else (though it is easy to do so!) No expensive marina mooring fees, no expensive glider tows. You only need to watch the cash desks at a garden centre to see how rapidly money is spent on gardening. Similarly watching the till at Pulborough Brooks RSPB quickly shows the proportion of sales devoted to bird feeding, and this is only the tip of a large iceberg.

Yet if it were just commercial avarice I do not believe the BTO would devote such efforts to its Garden Birdwatch and Garden Bird Feeding schemes. As anyone who has seriously watched garden birds knows, a lot can be learned from the exercise, from the ID tips picked up (which enable common species to be quickly passed over when on field trips), and from noting the fluctuations in numbers of different species throughout the year or in response to changes in the garden or additional hazards. More importantly, it is the only form of birding that many, for reasons of health or mobility, can or want to, undertake.

And, as with all birding, there is always the unexpected element. Few birders would expect a Lesser Whitethroat to turn up in their garden; none, I suspect, for it to be the first to over-winter in the County (see page 1). The Yellow-Browed Warbler that frequented Dave Smith's small garden for several days last Autumn would have gone unnoticed but for Dave's keen eyes and ears while in the garden. The garden here, somewhat larger but surrounded on all sides by nearby gardening 'deserts', has not turned up such exotica this winter, though we did record our first Siskins for more than 5 years, our first Bullfinch for 4 years, our first regular Sparrowhawk, and our first Green Woodpecker ever.

When I was a schoolboy 50 years ago (Oh, all right, 60 years ago!) 'real' bird watching largely involved looking for nests (and possibly also collecting eggs). You were encouraged to record in permanent form all aspects of bird behaviour that you observed — that was what serious bird watching was all about — quality not quantity. It would be interesting to know how much of such information is submitted to official Recorders nowadays, and indeed what means they have of preserving this material for future reference.

Then, providing sufficient time permits, none of these activities is mutually exclu-



sive. You should be able to be a 'real' birder as well as a garden watcher and recorder. I reckon that Judith and I spend as much time in the field as any SDOS or SOS member not employed professionally in the 'sport'. Ha, I can hear some say, but is it time devoted to 'significant' bird watching? 'Significant', I would reply, to whom? Jim Steedman

Widewater and the new Breakwaters

I expect many members have seen how the beach landscape in the Widewater area has changed dramatically this winter, with the erection of the new stone breakwaters. There are still several more to be erected, along the shore to the west of the beach huts; the operation, which entails transporting the stones by barge from Norway has to be suspended during the late winter months, but the job is due to finish by mid-June.

The West Sussex County Council Widewater committee, on which I represent SDOS, was concerned as to the possible effect on the ecology and water levels of Widewater, which is partly fed by sea water seeping through the bank, and partly by spring and rain water. The Environment Agency, who are responsible for the whole operation and intended to reduce the risk of properties in the hinterland flooding, agreed to our Committee's suggestion that as a safeguard for water levels, a gravity-fed pipe should be installed, and if you walk about 300 yards west from the causeway, you will see that this work is well under way.

The long pipe from the sea will be buried under the foreshore, and on top of the bank, already installed is the control chamber, which will be manually operated by the EA in consultation with our committee, as and when Widewater is requiring 'topping up'. From the control chamber there are two spurs of pipes into the lagoon — already installed. This installation cannot of course safeguard the lagoon's ecology, and there are still considerable misgivings as to how this huge change to the shoreline will or may affect the future of this local nature reserve; we must wait and see. We have made clear our objection at any attempt to create a 'mono-water' situation, whereby any mud would never appear. This is how some Widewater residents would like to see the lagoon — even as a boating lake! Only time can tell whether Widewater, with its wealth of many varieties of wildlife, both in the lagoon itself and on its fringes, will survive. Stanley Allen

The next Newsletter should be published early in September, and as usual I would be grateful of any contributions, however small and in whatever form, by the end of July. Please send any material to me at my address as given in the Report.

Winter on the Brooks

We have just come to the end of an extremely interesting birding winter on Beeding Brooks. Interest started rather earlier than usual when I went out onto the Brooks on 31st October to see if any Short-eared Owls had arrived and, rather to my surprise, I saw three flying together. This information was e-mailed to the SDOS User Group and announced at the November indoor meeting, and quite a number of members made the trip to the north end of Pound Lane to observe the late-afternoon show. By mid-November the count of Short-eared Owls had risen to four, though the fourth was only seen sporadically, and after Christmas the number dropped to two, with a third appearing only occasionally.

On 25th January, while Judith and I were returning from the Books, having only seen a single SEO, we met Terry Goble (not an SDOS member then, though he is now!) who lives on the edge of the Brooks and got talking about Owls in the Beeding area. In the course of the conversation he casually mentioned that he had seen 'the Bittern near at the old Fish Farm a couple of times recently' and our jaws dropped. The next morning I spent a couple of disappointing hours standing in drizzle at the appropriate spot, and Judith and I revisited the site without success a couple of days later. However, while we were on the Brooks looking unsuccessfully for SEOs on 1st February, we spotted a large brown heron-like bird being mobbed by Corvids to the north, and watched with some awe as the Bittern flew slowly and sedately round to land in the fish farm area north of Beeding. After one failed attempt to watch from Windmill Hill, which overlooks this area, on 9th February I saw in the gathering gloom a large heron-like bird fly in

from the Brooks to the north.

The following afternoon, Judith and I had an excellent view of the bird flying west towards the church, when it was disturbed by intruders to the fish farm. At around this time, while trying to locate the SEOs (which by now had stopped their late-afternoon displays), Dave Sadler found a couple of SEOs accompanied by two Long-eared Owls. Subsequently, only one was seen (on several occasions - but never by us!) However, these searches



also turned up a male Goosander on a quiet stretch of water near the Owl site, which stayed for several days, and we finally managed to see this on 24th February. We had our final Short-eared Owl sighting around this time, though at least two were seen into the start of March. Interestingly, throughout the final months, these Owls never seem to have been seen hunting, and were only spotted when they were disturbed.

The fish farm site also proved excellent for seeing Water Rails. While watching the south-east corner from Smugglers Lane, up to three were seen, while Bernie counted six from the footpath running to the north of the site Jim Steedman

The Cement Works

The appeal by Callstone Ltd (a subsidiary of Hargreaves Ltd) against the failure of Horsham & Adur District Councils to reach a decision on whether to grant planning permission for comprehensive development is to be heard at the Steyning Centre. The appeal opens on April 8th, and will continue on various days through April.

The proceedings are, of course, open to the public. SDOS's interest is, as will be appreciated, restricted to the welfare of the Ravens and Peregrines; it would be unrealistic for us to object to the development. What we do hope is that the massive demolition work, which is necessary before any development commences, may be scheduled so as to avoid the time of year when these birds are nesting. Colin Shawyer of the Hawk & Owl Trust will, we hope, give evidence on the news of the behaviour of the two species so far this Spring. Stanley Allen

Subscriptions

Thank you to those members who paid their annual subscriptions before, or shortly after, 1st January.

Unfortunately 20% of our members have not yet responded to various reminders and an immediate response would be much appreciated.

Our current subscription rates are:

Junior £4

Single £10

Family £15

Cheques should be made payable to the "Shoreham District Ornithological Society" Monies should be sent direct to me:

John M. Maskell

41 St Lawrence Avenue,

Worthing,

West Sussex,

BN14 7JJ.

Thank you.

John Maskell — Hon. Treasurer

Sales Department!

The Society has two products which may be of interest to members.

These are always available at indoor meetings and usually on outings.

1. SDOS Car Sticker — £1 or £1.20 by post.



2. "SDOS Golden Jubilee" ball-point pen. Black ink. Black and white plastic pen with single commemorative inscription. Comfortable rubber grip. £1 or £1.25 by post.



A happy event

We are delighted to report a happy event in Ravenland!

Nesting has actively progressed though February and March and eggs were



hatched towards the end of the month. At the time of writing, it is difficult to be certain how many young there are — there are definitely at least two and possibly as many as four, though it seems doubtful if all will survive. The nearby Peregrines are showing considerable interest in their newly-prepared site but are not sitting on eggs as yet (early April).



Tales out of School 5 – Vectis Voyage

Leading a party of 100 nine- and ten-year-olds on a week's residential visit would probably be most people's idea of a nightmare. On many occasions I have been inclined to agree!

In early March we make our annual pilgrimage to the Little Canada Activity Centre on the Isle of Wight. Shifting holiday patterns has seen many holiday camps changing their usage and this innovative North American back-woods style venue was one of the first to dramatically alter its role and now offers a range of educational courses. It lies at the north end of Wootton Creek just opposite the busy Fishbourne car ferry terminal on the island's north-east coast. Set in mainly oak woodland the site slopes down to the tidal estuary. On a sunny day it can be idyllic but when a prevailing "north-easterly" is in action it can be very inhospitable. But there are always compensations from the fauna.

On our most recent visit I was doing my "it's time you were asleep" patrol at 1am, my charges were full of life and I was flagging. Then from the adjacent mud-flats came a cheery honking from some Brent Geese. It was so unexpected that it raised a smile. The creek was hosting four dozen Brents during our stay. Up to four Little Egrets also frequent this narrow haven.

Interestingly, the presence of up to 500 children doesn't seem to upset the wildlife at Little Canada. And is it my imagination or are the birds here noisier than elsewhere? I caught sight of two Jackdaws one sunny morning huddled together in the sports hall gutter making a tremendous racket and they appeared to

be wanting to assist me with their arresting "Jack, Jack, Jack!" My vocal chords could also have been saved with a chorus of "Ben, Ben, Ben" as well! (Does the name determine the behaviour one wonders?)

In the oak woodland that gives a majestic cloak to the site Chaffinches and Great Tits predominate. In such a deciduous environment one might reasonably expect to hear Tawny Owls but the Isle of Wight is unusual in having no current breeding population. Tawnys are noted occasionally but in the smallest county all sightings should be reported to the local recorder.

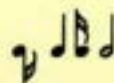
Our stay was just too early for spring migrants. How exciting it must have been to discover the Dark-Eyed Junco that visited Wootton in April 1989.

The residential centre also hosts several mammals but the speciality species is the Red Squirrel, which usually obliges on a daily basis. (The Grey Squirrel is absent on the island.) On our final morning we were gathered outside and I was addressing the assembled throng when one observant boy announced, "Look there's a red squirrel!" and all attention was lost! At such times one is inclined to "see red" but in the interest of low blood pressure one learns to "go with the flow".

If you haven't discovered the Isle of Wight then you have a treat in store; though having been born and bred there I am inclined to be prejudiced! The County Council publishes a useful leaflet the *Bird Watchers' Site Guide to the Isle of Wight* (£1.50) and this is available from the Island's many tourist offices.

John M. Maskell

Bird Song Notes



It is such a pleasure to be woken by garden birdsong these Spring mornings! The explosive Wren, the sweet Dunnock, the scribbling Chaffinch, the tuneful Blackbird, the strident repetitive Song Thrush, but what is that new scratchy little ditty sung in short snatches? Our Blackcap has just joined choir practice, today, March 6th! I wonder if Ken Hearne will be lucky enough to hear his Lesser Whitethroat this Spring?

As with all life-enriching hobbies, bird-watching is multi-faceted. It can be enjoyed at many levels. If you wished that there were more daylight hours to pursue our hobby, then give yourself a treat and buy some birdsong CDs or tapes to play in evening traffic jams - both calming and educational! Most of us need to hear something at least three times before we can learn it ("yes dear, I heard you the first time!"). So there is nothing like practice to make perfect. As I see it, there are three ways to improve:

1. From the bird itself. Track it down, watch it singing and try to link it to something familiar.
2. From other birders. On our SDOS walks never be afraid to ask. Richard Ives has taught me so many and if you catch Bernie in entertainment mode, you will get a full demo!
3. From tapes or CDs. Pulborough RSPB has a good selection, including John Wyatt's affordable series of *Teach Yourself Birdsounds* tapes. If you want a complete state-of-the-art CD compendium try WildSounds (Tel: 01263 741100) (www.wildsounds.com). They can provide the Roche-Chevereau CDs, at present on special offer with 10 CDs at £58.95, or 4 CDs at £39.95.

I will bring some catalogues along to our next meeting....

Good Listening!

Shena Maskell

Stop Press: Chiffchaff joined the choir on March 20th.

Field Outing to Shoreham Sanctuary : 15 June 2003

Due to the new security gate there is no longer room to park in the Water Board entrance, as in the past. Members should therefore park near the Red Lion at the west end of Old Shoreham Road and walk up the A283 to the entrance gate which will be unlocked for them. If you feel that you cannot manage this, please contact Chris Wright on 01 903 814 859. If it rains it will not be possible to mist net and visiting the copse may not be worth while. If in doubt, ring John Newnham on 01 903 247 596.

Illustrations

Richard Ives drew the Green Woodpecker illustration on page 2, and Judith, my wife, the Raven on page 3. The remaining illustrations (Lesser Whitethroat, Bittern and Goosander) are all reproduced with thanks from an elderly paperback entitled the *Fontana Bird Guide* by R.S. R.Fitter and R.A. Richardson. This publication is a cut-down version of *The Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds* and well worth looking out for on second-hand paperback stalls (my copy cost all of 15p. not all that long ago!) mainly for the excellent line illustrations by Richie Richardson. Highly recommended.