

# SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

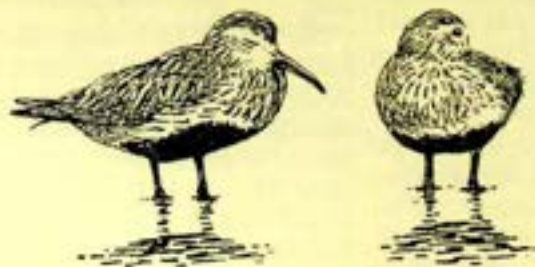
September 2004

## Autumn Welcome

I am writing this in the last week of August, before I leave to spend a month with the wardening team at Titchwell. Autumn on the Norfolk coast is always exciting, with my favourite waders in great numbers and variety. I hope to see little stints and curlew sandpipers, with perhaps a wanderer from America or Siberia. Lately I have been counting the ringed plovers and dunlin at Widewater and Shoreham, inspecting them for anything unusual. The quantity is growing, and I wish others luck in finding quality.

we can look forward to seeing places we know, and others we shall want to explore, with a wide range of flora and fauna.

John Maskell will introduce us to Balazs Szigeti and the wild delights of Eastern Europe, where the countryside is less damaged by development and intensive agriculture, and the fields still hold bustards and corncrakes. John and Shena have written in previous newsletters about their adventures – come and see for yourselves.



In the last newsletter, Stanley Allen wrote about the high water levels at Widewater, limiting the feeding opportunities for birds. In this issue, Bernie Forbes explains what is happening there now, and Chris Cockburn, RSPB Warden tells us about the Adur Estuary reserve in Shoreham.

One compensation as evenings grow darker is a new series of SDOS indoor meetings. Chris Wright has once again found some fine speakers and subjects, and we look forward to seeing plenty of people at these friendly gatherings.

Our first visitor is Patrick Coulcher, all-round naturalist and author of books on Scilly and the Cuckmere valley, as well as the South Downs. Patrick has walked most of the Downland paths, and

Pete Hughes will show us the Arun valley as seen by a Warden dealing with 'Cows, Ducks, Snails and Water'. We have on our doorstep one of the great success stories of habitat restoration, from drained dry fields to the core of an internationally important wetland in ten years.

You can visit the valley with Bernie Forbes in December. Before then, Chantry Hill should hold some birds of prey, and will the bramblings and other finches flock there again? Shellness also has harriers, with wildfowl, and waders swirling into roost.

Finally, Santa will be at Shoreham Fort for a Seasonal Saunter at 9.00 on December 28th.

*Keith Noble, Newsletter Editor.*

### INDOOR MEETINGS

Meetings are held on Tuesdays at 7.30 p.m. in St. Peter's Church Hall, West Street, Shoreham.

#### October 5th

**Natural History of the South Downs**

Patrick Coulcher

#### November 2nd

**Ecotours in Eastern Europe**

Balazs Szigeti and John Maskell

#### December 7th

**Pulborough and Amberley Reserves**

Pete Hughes, RSPB Warden

### FIELD OUTINGS

**October 23rd—Sat.**

**Chantry Hill, Storrington**

Meet 09.30 in car park at Chantry Hill.

OS sheet 197. GR TQ087119

Leader Chris Wright 01903 814859

**November 27th—Sat.**

**Shellness, Sheppey, Kent**

Meet 09.30 at start of bumpy road to NNR car park.

OS Sheet 178. GR TR046693

Leader Chris Wright 01903 814859

**December 5th—Sun.**

**Arun valley**

Meet 09.30 in Greatham Bridge car park.

OS sheet 197. GR TQ032163

Leader Bernie Forbes 01903 753876

## Widewater levels

Bernie Forbes has succeeded Stanley Allen as the SDOS representative on the Widewater management group. Here is his account of what they do.

The other members of the group are Andy Horton of the British Marine Life Study Society, Susan Heather and David Wood of Friends Of Widewater Lagoon, John Knight and Neil Mitchell of West Sussex County Council's Countryside team, and Richard Wickens of Lancing Parish Council. The group seeks help on environmental issues from Jon Curson of English Nature and Kate Potter of the Environment Agency.

The group aims to: consider management issues and proposals, and advise on practical solutions; monitor and review the implementation of the Management Plan; assist with monitoring and research, and identify priorities for study. Well, that all sounds very complicated, but we hope we can look after Widewater and make it better for all users.

One of the biggest problems is who owns it and looks after it. There are various parties involved—Adur District, Lancing Parish, and West Sussex County Councils, and the Environment Agency. This hotchpotch could lead to problems and confusions, so the Management group tries to steer a clear path.

The recent installation and operation of the Mitigation pipe has been a contentious issue. The aim of this sluice is to increase the water level, and some local residents want a pretty pond without muddy edges. Therefore careful monitoring of levels is needed to create a balanced habitat for flora and fauna.

What happens now? Well, the sluice has been set up with the valve at 50% open, and the boards in place to keep out sea water from tides less than 5.8 metres. So when tides are higher than this, water flow can take place. This replenishes water at times of peak evaporation in summer. It should allow plenty of muddy edges for wildlife to feed and flourish, including the ringed plovers which attempt to breed here, and other waders on passage.

Monitoring is in place, and visual checks are being made. If water levels fall very low, or there is fast evaporation in very hot weather, the valve could be opened to its maximum, or boards may be lowered to allow lesser tides to top up the lagoon. This procedure will be in place for one year to see if it works, with a review at a later date.

Bernie Forbes, SDOS President

## Adur Estuary RSPB Reserve

"What reserve? I never realised the RSPB owned a nature reserve at Shoreham."

I often hear this comment when I talk to people on one of my infrequent visits to the reserve; once, when I submitted records to 'another' ornithological society, much the same was said!

But the RSPB does indeed own 10.26 hectares of saltmarsh and intertidal mudflats West of the Adur and South of the A259. It is often viewed from Coronation Green, from the Adur Drawbridge and, of course, from the footpath alongside the houseboats. When the RSPB Regional Office was in Shoreham, the reserve was frequently monitored. Now the Warden of Langstone Harbour (who is also the RSPB regional Health and Safety Coordinator) manages the reserve; unfortunately his workload allows only limited time for visits. The region's Reserves Manager also carries out the monthly WeBS Core Counts.



The RSPB bought the site in 1986 to remove threats from development. In 1987, English Nature designated the Reserve, together with the River Adur up to and just beyond, the A27 flyover, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), for its mudflats and saltmarsh, and the sometimes internationally important numbers of ringed plovers. The estuary contains the only significant area of saltmarsh between Rye and Pagham Harbours.

Following a survey in 2003, English Nature declared the SSSI to be in 'favourable condition' and the RSPB aims to maintain that condition. As the main threat to wintering waders is from disturbance, and as trampling damages fragile saltmarsh, the RSPB operates a restricted access policy.

The last few years have seen an apparent decline in the number of small waders using the estuary, which seems relatively greater than that in other south coast estuaries. Many readers will fondly remember the busy flocks of dunlin that fed between the houseboats and the drawbridge. Perhaps the decline is due to the colonisation of bare mud by cord grass, *Spartina*. Interestingly, the SSSI citation stated that the estuarine plant communities were unusual for the relative scarcity of cord grass. In contrast, cord grass communities in other south coast estuaries are fast disappearing, for reasons unknown.

However the availability of safe roosting sites is of prime importance to wader populations and evidence from high tide counts suggests that there is a shortage of undisturbed sites. The increased aircraft usage at Shoreham Airport and the popularity of Shoreham Beach for recreation may be among the reasons for the decline in the use of known roosting sites. The Warden would greatly appreciate any records indicating the size, location, (Grid Reference, please) and disturbances of small-wader roosts.

A programme of four monthly winter low-tide counts, started in 2002, should give a better understanding of the areas used by small waders. Some of the low tide counts were higher than the corresponding high tide roost counts. Any bird count records from within the SSSI would be very useful and much appreciated.

No waders have been confirmed as breeding on the reserve, which is mostly flooded on the big spring tides, but the behaviour of an oystercatcher suggested that there might have been a nesting attempt this summer.

Apart from the species already mentioned, the site is much used by lapwings, redshanks, snipe and turnstones. A great experience is to watch the emergence of

### 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.
- John Maskell



140 or so previously unseen snipe from the saltmarsh as the big tides flow in. One redshank of note was the 'white' bird that was regularly recorded here in the nineties; it is interesting that a 'white redshank' was regularly seen at Farlington Marshes in Langstone Harbour in those years, but always earlier in the autumn.

Many people appreciate the reserve for its landscape value and as an interesting area to walk around on the surrounding footpaths. The RSPB hopes, with cooperation from Adur District Council, to provide signs for the reserve to remind people of the importance for wildlife. We are also addressing the problem of abandoned and derelict boats on the site.

The Warden's contact details are:

Chris Cockburn  
RSPB Warden Langstone Harbour  
Unit 3B, The Wren Centre  
Westbourne Road  
EMSWORTH  
PO10 7SU  
Phone/fax 01243 378784  
Mobile 07764 290629

## What was about?

As a reminder to those who were there, and to encourage others to come on our outings, here are accounts of two memorable days this Spring.

### Goring Seawatch, April 25th

What a turn-out! 21 people were lined up on the beach for the annual sea-watch outing, but only about eight of us could fit into the shelter, which had been vandalised. Thanks must go to Clive Hope and others who tidied up the bottles and debris, even laying down a green carpet to make the shelter usable. I hope no-one was disappointed with what was seen—Jim Steedman was certainly expecting some 'wonderful' species and these I think he got. Sorry there were no skuas (parties of Poms moved up the Channel the following afternoon), but some of the other birds were really interesting and some offered good views. I have never been on a sea-watch anywhere that recorded 19 Mediterranean gulls, and the flock of 23 velvet scoters, (which are just scarcer than Pomarine skuas—grand total from 1978 to 2003 is 970 Poms to 967 velvets) must be a sight to remember. The soft onshore winds gave us regular terns, waders and ducks to watch.

Here is just a selection:  
Red-throated diver 2E  
Gannet 6E  
Shoveler 2E

Common scoter 62E  
Velvet scoter 23E (with the shovellers)  
Grey plover 6E  
Bar-tailed godwit 17E & 8W  
Whimbrel 30E & 1W  
Little gull 9E  
Mediterranean gull 19E, including a party of 8 calling frequently  
Sandwich tern 63E & 2W, plus some fishing  
Common tern 188E  
Little tern 15E  
*John Newnham*

### New Forest, May 23rd

Twenty-one members gathered in the car park at Fritham and took a new route via Hiscock's Hill to Amberwood Inclosure. We heard plenty of cuckoos calling and busily flying all over the place. Good numbers of redstarts were calling from deep cover, but we managed to find one singing atop of a silver birch and giving us all superb views. We had good views of tree pipits too, most of them singing.

A high-flying raptor turned out to be a honey buzzard. It was joined briefly by a common buzzard, and soared up to a great height. The long tail and pinched wings could be made out, although all our necks were totally strained and we lost sight of the bird.

In the woods we managed to hear several wood warblers and had close views of a couple—one was displaying and going through its magical shivering flight. Taking a short break, we discovered a pair of spotted flycatchers flitting around the canopy and could just make out the weak calls. During the rest of the morning we saw grey wagtail, blackcap and nuthatch, and heard great spotted woodpecker drumming, and calling firecrest. We flushed a woodlark and had brief flight views.

We took lunch with the sun at our backs and terrific clear light, looking north across the heath and surrounding woodland. We found another honey buzzard high up, and it was joined by a common buzzard. As they gained height, we could make out the different profiles of the two species, although at a great distance. The honey was joined by a peregrine and a flying display took place. A smaller falcon, probably a hobby, joined them briefly.

After lunch, we found another pair of spotted flycatchers, and watched them closely as they whizzed around the trees. We had good views of several Dartford warblers as they busied themselves in the heather, their presence often given away by the accompanying stonechats.

Suddenly we picked up a red kite high to the south, and had prolonged views as it flew over—a very nice bonus bird. On the return journey we were entertained by a fly-over little egret, another pair of grey wagtails, and a lovely singing garden warbler. There were still more singing redstarts and wood warblers. We spent the last hour or so on the heath overlooking woodland. A hawfinch flew into the top of a pine, then off again as we trained our binoculars and had good views as it went away. We saw more common buzzards, a couple of sparrowhawks, and a pair of woodlarks. The larks' beaks were crammed full of food for young, so we picked our way carefully back to the track.

The weather was perfect and the birds on form. Even the most demanding birder could go home happy.

*Bernie Forbes*

## Quarry species

Some of you will know the old cement works near Upper Beeding. The SDOS has been involved with this site for many years, primarily because peregrines nest there. It may have held the first inland nest of peregrines in Sussex.



In the early years, when this raptor was still very scarce, we had a rota of volunteers to keep watch and try to prevent egg thieves, or potential climbers from snatching the young. The good news is that we don't have daily cover any more, although Chris Wright monitors this site on a regular basis. In fact, if Chris is not at home, his wife Paddy will tell you he is up with his peregrines.

This year was a good one for these birds; 4 eggs hatched and 3 young fledged. They are still around the vicinity, adding to the Sussex population—I think nearly 50 young may have been raised. (contd.)

## Bird Table Notes

If the consumption of Hi Energy No Mess in my Steyning-garden is a true indicator, the green-finches and blue tits had a good breeding season. Young long-tailed tits and coal tits have visited too, but great spotted woodpeckers just bounce over or call 'chick' from the old fruit trees down the road, where I think they nested. Only one youngster briefly visited the hanging peanut holders, and they have ignored the log which I drilled and stuffed with fat to tempt them. Instead, jackdaws and starlings hack and pick out that food.



August has brought willow warblers to chase flies round the birch tree, and two 'lbs' peeping out of the lilac and tamarisk, one in shades of milky coffee with a round friendly face, the other more tawny, low-browed and sharp-billed—a garden warbler and a reed warbler. They brought my garden total this year up to 33. I'm entering weekly counts on the SDOS Garden Bird Survey Forms, which can be obtained from Martin Ford, 29 Foam Court Way, FERRING, BN12 5RD.

Please send me all your most interesting garden observations for the Winter newsletter.

Keith Noble

## I will lift up mine eyes...

On fine days this autumn, why not head for the hills, choose a sheltered spot with a big view, make yourself comfortable and—no, don't go to sleep!—scour the sky for birds of prey.

As the local population of buzzards, and national populations of ospreys, marsh harriers and kites increase, there are more birds to look for. Their numbers are augmented by migrants from the continent. In the record-breaking late September of 2000, 85 honey buzzards were noted in our Area, mostly by members of the Whitcomb family watching from Hollingbury. Here are some tips from our Recorder, Peter Whitcomb.

Records from recent years suggest the optimum time for raptor passage in the autumn is during the last two weeks of September. Common buzzards, honey buzzards, ospreys and harriers are all possible.

In urban areas with gull populations, the tell-tale sign of a large raptor passing is when the gulls go up, and their alarm calls can pinpoint the cause of the fright. There is just a chance it might be a heron, but more often it is a large raptor.

Alternatively, a walk along the Downs could be a good idea. Find a spot with a good vantage point and sit for an hour or two, any time but generally after 10am. A scope can come in handy for attempting to identify distant birds. Although not quite as good a method as with the gulls, it's worth listening for corvids which will certainly try to see off a raptor passing over their territory.

Downland sites in late autumn can always turn up two winter visitors—hen harrier and merlin—and at the same time perhaps flocks of passing skylarks or finches.

Please send your records for the Shoreham Bird Report to Peter Whitcomb, 99 Barnett Road, BRIGHTON, BN1 7GJ. Recording forms are available—please enclose postage with your request.

## Quarry species, contd.

For the last three years, a pair of ravens has made this site home, and this year a staggering 5 chicks hatched. All reached the flying stage, but unfortunately, when they are learning to fly, they are not the sharpest tools in the box. One of the youngsters was killed by a fox when it was sitting on the cliff top. Raising 4 to the flying stage is really very good. Chris has done an excellent job in monitoring these birds and acting as liaison officer with the land owners and police. He even

had 4-wheel drive activities suspended inside the quarry during the critical times for these species. I should remind members that entry to the quarry is prohibited because of safety issues. With patience, good views of peregrines and ravens can be had from the public road that runs to the east of the site on the way up to Truleigh Hill. The best time to visit is perhaps a warm sunny evening from May onwards. You could even catch all the ravens croning as they fly in to roost.

Bernie Forbes

## A good read

"there was a commotion in the flock. The calls of the geese grew louder, more urgent. Suddenly, as if detonated, the flock took wing. Thirty thousand geese lifted off the ice in front of us, wingbeats drumming the air, goose yelps gathering to a pounding, metallic yammer, the sound of steel being hammered on anvils, in caverns. The ice thrummed and sang with it. The exploded flock filled our fields of vision, a blizzard of birds. Most of the geese flew in low circles, but some settled back on the ice almost immediately, while others continued to gain height. Drifts of geese passed through, behind and across other drifts of geese; the flock kept wheeling round and round, swirling with eddies and countermotions, a salt-and-pepper chaos of blue-phase and white-phase birds lit by quick lame sparklings of white wingbacks catching the sunlight. Whole swatches of the flock went dark when birds flew side-on, and swatches flashed white when they banked or veered, breasting the light. Then slowly, goose by goose, the flock settled again: the almond shape reformed; the extravagant din dwindled; the steady flock drone resumed. For a moment, I had forgotten to breathe."

William Fiennes tracked geese from Texas to Hudson Bay. He writes vividly so that you share his journey. 'The Snow Geese' is a Picador paperback.

## Notices

You can visit the new SDOS website at: [sdos.org](http://sdos.org).

The SDOS anniversary book is on sale at meetings and for £15 plus £2.50 p&p from SDOS Pubns., 7 Berberis Court, SHOREHAM-BY-SEA, BN43 6JA.

Membership of the SDOS Internet User Group is by invitation (all members are welcome), contact: [terrance.hicks@talk21.com](mailto:terrance.hicks@talk21.com)

Items for next newsletter to Keith Noble, 19 Roman Road, STEYNING, BN44 3FN, by 22 November, please.