



SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Autumn
2008

NEWSLETTER

Sightings for July to September

Reports for July and August mostly consisted of sea-birds and waders. In July, Curlew, Whimbrel and Common Sandpipers were noted off Ferring in small numbers. A Manx and two large Shearwaters were seen off Worthing on 6th and Gannets totalled 79 with a dozen Kittiwakes on 19th.

Another Manx and a good movement of Common Terns with at least 700 in the day passed there on August 3rd with both Bonxie and Arctic Skua the day before. A male Pied Flycatcher and 12 Crossbills were good finds at Cissbury on 7th and Willow Warblers were on the move on 14th with 40 counted there. Swifts were still fairly numerous and widespread at this time. Three Black-tailed Godwits passed east at Goring on 22nd and there were about 60 Common Terns feeding offshore there.

September started well with a much appreciated flock of Yellow Wagtails on view at Botolphs from 1st for several days with a probable Black-headed (race *feldegg*) amongst them. On 2nd, two Redstarts and a Spotted Flycatcher were at Goring Gap and on 8th, a wide range of migrants (warblers, chats, Redstarts, Pipits and Spotted Flycatchers) were on show at both Wild Park and Cissbury. Also in this day, a Honey Buzzard passed over Upper Shoreham in the afternoon and there were at least 20 Wheatears and six Whinchats at Botolphs. A Wryneck was at Sheepcote on 11th in an exceptional month in the county for this species. One or two more Honey Buzzards passed over Brighton on 12th, a prelude to unusual numbers for our area. The first Ring Ouzel was found at Chancetonbury on 13th, a Wryneck was at La-

des Mile NR and a Marsh Harrier was over Shoreham Harbour next day. Another Ring Ouzel was at Sheepcote with two Dartford Warblers on 15th. East winds set in from mid month and triggered a heavy coastal movement of Siskins and hirundines with over 500 of the former passing Ferring between 16th and 18th. On the latter date, a Honey Buzzard flew out to sea there and an Osprey spent 40 minutes along the shore fishing and being pursued by the local crows and gulls. Another Osprey flew over Washington. Next day, a Ring Ouzel was at Wild Park. An unprecedented movement of some 50 Common and two Honey Buzzards passed east over Brighton in the early afternoon on 20th. There were 18 Little Egrets on fields at East Kingston on the edge of our area on 21st and a Pied Flycatcher, five Redstarts and many Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps at Cissbury. Wheatears continued to be regularly seen at the coast and on the downs. A Short-eared Owl flew west at Goring Gap early on 24th.

Clive Hope

Forthcoming Events

Many of you will have heard of David Cromack, our **October 14th** speaker. He edited Bird Watching magazine for 18 years before moving on to work with his wife, Hilary, in their own company, Buckingham Press. David always describes himself as 'a journalist with a keen interest in birds' but he has visited at least 20 countries for work and birding holidays. Come and hear how magazines are put together and what editors are looking for when they decide to select images.

Richard Ranft makes a welcome return on **November 11th**. Originally trained

as a zoologist, Richard is head of the British Library Sound Archive in London and has travelled widely to record the sounds of birds and other creatures. He has produced several excellent CD audio guides and his talk will feature a combination of photographs with high quality sound recordings. Our last talk for the year on **December 9th** will be given by Jeff Baker from the BTO. He has worked for them in various capacities for 37 years and currently heads their Membership Unit. Jeff spent 13 years working on the Helm identification guide, 'Warblers of Europe, Asia and North Africa' published in 1997. He has written and illustrated several articles on warbler identification and is the author of the highly regarded, 'Identification to European Non-Passerines'.

Our remaining outings of the year start with a walk in the Cissbury area on the eastern side on **October 19th** with Bernie Forbes when we may pick up some of the migrant winter thrushes and the possibility of a few raptors. On **November 23rd** Paul Stevens will lead us round the Shellness area in Kent which usually produces a varied and interesting bird list. This is a long drive so if you want to go ask at the indoor meetings if car-sharing can be arranged.

We are back with Bernie for an exploration of the Arun Valley at the end of **November on the 30th** followed by Dave Smith seeking out some woodland birds at West Dean in early **December on the 7th**.

The year ends with our usual gathering on **December 28th** at Fort Haven on Shoreham Beach when we hope to provide some festive fare to whet your appetite for 2009. **Chris Wright**

Ladies Mile Open Space

Since January 1985, I have done most of my birding on the South Downs. For the past 12 years, these adventures were often shared with Merlin, a flat-coated retriever whose posh name was Silver Badger Black Magic. The radius of our excursions was dramatically reduced when I had a stroke on 17th January 2008. It took nine days for Merlin to get me as far as Ladies Mile Open Space, a site that until then we had virtually ignored despite it being less than a kilometre from our front door. The next few months were a revelation.

The Ladies Mile Open Space stretches from the Ladies Mile Road in Patcham up to the top of Carden Avenue in Hollingbury. It consists of the Ladies Mile Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and the old Patcham Fawcett School playing fields. The site, which is dominated by an O₂ phone mast, runs along a chalk ridge between two valleys that are now filled by the Mackie Estate to the north-west and Hollingbury Industrial Estate to the south-east. The LNR (declared in 2003) includes about 7.5 hectares of grassland and 6.1 hectares of scrub, while the playing fields add another 1.4 hectares of rough grassland and old 'hard' courts. The main entrance gate (OS map reference TQ 316092) is at the end of Ladies Mile Road; there is ample parking and a nearby stop for the 56 bus service. The gate is next to the Windmill View housing estate that replaced Patcham Fawcett School. The windmill in question is Patcham or Waterhall tower mill visible high on Coney Hill to the north-west; it was built in 1885 for Joseph Harris, the Patcham baker (for only about £1000). Viewing the mill on every visit, Merlin and I fantasized about the female Great Snipe shot near there on 18th September 1909; her remains are in the Booth Museum at 194 Dyke Road.

There are several other entrances to Ladies Mile; one on The Deeside (OS map reference TQ 313093) is conveniently close to where the 5 and 5A bus services terminate at the Mackie Avenue Shops, although it requires a steep climb onto the reserve.

Ladies Mile Open Space was finally isolated from other natural areas by construction of the A27 Brighton bypass. Fortunately, it is very close to the much larger Stanmer/Coldean LNR and Hollingbury/Wild Park LNR. Ladies Mile retains patches of species-rich chalk grassland, with showy orchids and diminutive plants such as Milkwort and Fairy Flax. The scrub on Ladies Mile is concentrated on the steep northwestern slope above

the Mackie Estate, and provides nesting and roosting sites for many birds, in addition to berry crops throughout the year. There is an interesting mix of native and garden plants. Sadly the bluebells are the introduced Spanish species. One plant 'escape' of particular interest to birds is Honesty, whose translucent round seed heads are just as popular with Bullfinches as dried flower-arrangers.

Ladies Mile is home to a variety of common birds, but like many other sites near the south coast can attract less familiar birds on migration, especially in the autumn. On some mornings, each bush seemed to hold a different species; although not as exciting as Beachy Head after a heavy 'fall', these were days on which grumbles about the alarm clock were quickly forgotten.

Ladies Mile gives generous views of the sky. Combined with the vocal responses of the colony of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls nesting on the roofs of Hollingbury Industrial Estate, this makes spotting birds of prey unusually easy. Sparrowhawks, Kestrels and Common Buzzards were all regular; Peregrines and Hobbies made up most of the other sightings, while three singleton Red Kites, a Marsh Harrier and a Honey Buzzard whetted the appetite (literally since Merlin received a dog treat after adding a species to his patch list). When we started at Ladies Mile, Merlin and I started mapping bird territories. Even in January, the high density of singing Song Thrushes in the scrub and gardens of the Mackie Estate was striking. Standing by the mast on the LNR, it was possible to hear up to seven males at once. As detailed survey continued it became clear that this was an underestimate of the number of territories; partly because females defend winter territories without singing and partly because few males sing every day. Looking out North-North-West over the Mackie Estate from the mast, Patcham Nursing Home in Eastwick Close is conspicuous near the bottom of the valley; this was converted from Eastwick Barn, which was built in the early nineteenth-century on the site of a barn belonging to Walter de Eastwyke recorded here in 1296.

A winter surprise was that in late February and March a Barn Owl crossed the A27 bypass to hunt Field Voles on the LNR. Another unexpected visitor was a Roe Deer. Although Ladies Mile can be very bleak in winter, single

Chiffchaffs were seen on three occasions between 2nd and 17th February; in addition, one was foraging in a lavender hedge in a Ladies Mile Road garden on 21st February. On 14th February a female Blackcap was feeding on ivy berries in nearby Carden Crescent. As usual, both warbler species were regular in January and February in our garden, with maximum counts of three for each.

Spring arrivals on Ladies Mile began with three Chiffchaffs and a Wheatear on 16th March. A male Blackcap was singing in the Dharma School garden on 22nd March. From then on, there was a steady trickle of interesting birds from a male Firecrest on 30th March to a Serin on 8th May. The latter was singing its rather breathless song, which sounds rather like broken glass being stir-fried in a wok. A particularly productive location for the spring birder is the clump of glossy green Alexanders near the base of the mast, since the insects visiting the aromatic yellow-green flowers attract many tired migrants.

Our attention soon turned to monitoring breeding success. As early as 19th April at least seven recently fledged Long-tailed Tits with their characteristic 'highwayman's masks' were seen in a nearby twitten. We confirmed breeding by 25 bird species at Ladies Mile, being particularly pleased that Lesser Whitethroat, Bullfinch and Yellowhammer fledged young on the LNR.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of summer was a male Common Quail that started calling near the mast at 06:30 on 7th June. We finally saw it over an hour later when it was flushed by a spaniel. Although less unexpected, a Red Kite drifting east the day before had been just as welcome; it was the first of several sightings.

On late summer days Ladies Mile can be quiet bird-wise. Luckily this is when the grassland is at its most attractive with sheets of Horseshoe Vetch and Red Bartsia, and the whole site teems with insects. For example, we recorded 24 species of butterflies and nine species of damselflies and dragonflies (despite Ladies Mile lacking any freshwater).

Autumn was the most exciting period for birds at Ladies Mile. During August and September, watching birds gorging on Common Elder berries was a very productive way of seeing migrants, especially Blackcaps, Whitethroats and Lesser Whitethroats. Other migrants seen taking the fruit included Common Redstarts, Whinchats, Reed Warblers,

Grasshopper Warblers, Garden Warblers, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Spotted Flycatchers and a single Pied Flycatcher. Wheatears were scarcer than in the spring, being restricted to the barest areas such as tracks and the old 'hard court' by Windmill View. Large movements of migrants overhead included Swallows, House Martins, Meadow Pipits and Siskins; less regular fly-overs were Sand Martins, Tree Pipits, Grey Wagtails and Crossbills. Arguably the 'best' autumn bird was a dementedly bold Wryneck on 13th September foraging along the edge of the track near the mast.

Merlin's bird list for Ladies Mile reached 93 species in less than eight months. He died peacefully on 1 September having visited the LNR twice the previous day. I will continue exploring the local patch that we had stupidly ignored for nearly 12 years: I shudder to think what we missed.

David Harper

Our Friendly Neighbourhood Corvids

I always find it such a pleasure to watch Goldfinches breeding in my local park. This spring in St Ann's Well Gardens, Hove, I was extremely pleased to see two pairs building nests, one at the top of a viburnum bush and another in a ceanothus tree just coming into its glorious mauve blossom. Each morning I would see and listen to a Goldfinch singing in a hawthorn tree a few yards from the viburnum bush where his partner was incubating eggs. And, of course, the colourful mosaic of two Goldfinches amidst the ceanothus blossom was a very special delight. On 13th April I watched with dismay as a Magpie predated the nest in the viburnum bush, untroubled by two agitated Goldfinches but ferociously attacked all the time by an aggressive Collared Dove! To no avail. Four days later I saw a Magpie fly directly to the nest in the ceanothus tree and ravage it. To my knowledge, there have been no Goldfinches successfully breeding in the park this spring.

During this time two pairs of Long-tailed Tits were also attempting to breed, one pair with a nest deep inside a clump of berberis by the park's pond and another pair with a nest at the top of a berberis bush alongside a busy path, unfortunately rather exposed and very visible to the naked eye. But it did mean that as one

passed by the bush the tail of the incubating female could be seen protruding from the nest's entrance hole, a rather charming and reassuring sight. Sadly on 18th April, I saw that the top of the nest had been destroyed, leaving just a mass of feathers strewn everywhere. That damned Magpie again. Happily, the well-hidden nest inside the pond berberis escaped predation and subsequently at least six lively juvenile tits graced the park from early May onwards.

Predation of nests was not only by Magpies. In the middle of May I was sitting by the pond when a Jay flew to railings just a few feet from me, looked at me as I looked at it, then flew directly to a Greenfinches' nest in a clump of bamboo alongside the pond and flew out carrying the last remaining nestling to a nearby branch where a light meal was quickly taken. Since the Jay had known exactly where the Greenfinches' nest was located, it had obviously dined from there previously. Just one snack at a time, no reason to be greedy.

But what of the park's pair of Mistle Thrushes I had written about in the Autumn 2007 SDOS Newsletter? How, I had asked, could Mistle Thrushes' nests ever escape predation, given that their nests are so exposed to corvids' ever hungry, ever watchful eyes? Last spring, to my knowledge, the park's Mistle Thrushes raised no youngsters at all.

This spring the wintering pair of Stormcocks wisely deserted the park to try breeding somewhere in a leafy residential area to the park's immediate east and on 4th May I saw a Mistle Thrush in that direction with a bill full of food. So at least the thrushes were feeding nestlings, therefore already doing much better than last spring. While waiting for the nestlings to fledge – should corvids kindly allow them to do so – and then to be introduced to St Ann's Well Gardens by their parents, I decided to visit the neighbouring Dyke Road Park to see if Mistle Thrushes were also attempting to breed there.

On my first visit on 7th May I saw a Mistle Thrush taking food into a Lawson Cypress, apparently to a nest well tucked away and mostly out of sight. Surely corvids, I thought, would not be able to find this nest! The very next morning I saw and heard two Mistle Thrushes aggressively mobbing a Carrion Crow which had entered their nest tree, thus creating a noisy spectacle watched intently by an

audience of small passerines. Even after this intrusion, nestlings continued to be fed, therefore indicating that at least one nestling remained (as a future meal?). The following morning I watched a Mistle Thrush dive-bombing a Crow as it ambled along a path near to the Cypress tree, though without actually striking the unconcerned corvid. I was pleased to see that worms were still being taken into the nest tree. On the following two mornings I no longer saw any feeding of nestlings, nor the presence of any fledglings, so I assumed that the Crow, or Crows, had returned sometime for a final helping of nestlings. Not being a regular visitor to Dyke Road Park I cannot be sure of what had happened but it looked very much as if predation by Crows had finished off all the Mistle Thrushes' nestlings.

After an impatient wait I at last saw on 25th May a juvenile Mistle Thrush on the grass of the East Slope of St Ann's Well Gardens, accompanied by its two parents. Since it was feeding itself and looked fully grown, it was at least two weeks successfully fledged. But why only one fledgling? What had happened to its siblings, if any? Had they failed to survive, even to hatch, or had they already left their parents? I feared the first possibility was the case. The remaining juvenile stayed around for two more days, leaving on the day its parents started building a nest in a dip on a horizontal branch of an oak tree, some 20 feet above the ground and on the same East Slope as in the disastrous spring of last year. After all, that patch of grass and trees is much beloved by squirrels, Magpies and Crows. Once again, I thought, the Mistle Thrushes were inviting, and would certainly encounter, disaster.

Incubation began at the beginning of June. On 3rd June a Magpie flew into an ash tree to predate a Blackbirds' nest just some 20 yards distant from and level with the Mistle Thrushes' nest. While the pair of Blackbirds protested noisily the incubating thrush sat tight, her watchful partner having also declined to go to the aid of the Blackbirds. It seemed to me there was no way the Magpie could have failed to notice the thrushes' nest, not to mention the incubating female. But perhaps from the Magpie's perspective it was presumably sensible to wait for the eggs to hatch, let the parents feed the nestlings for a few days, and then move in for a decent meal. Mere eggs are probably not worth the inevitable confrontation with their fierce

guardians. After a while a Magpie returned to the now deserted ash tree but this time the incubating thrush and her ever present partner did attack and very noisily drive away the offending intruder. Aggressive, then, the two thrushes could certainly be whenever they deemed it necessary but, unlike last spring, they otherwise kept a low profile during the incubation period. When both a Crow and Magpie were feeding on the grass directly underneath their nest they did nothing at all; when a squirrel entered the oak tree they also took no action, unlike the pandemonium provoked last spring; nor did they attack a juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker which paid a long, noisy visit to their nest tree. After all, why draw unnecessary attention to yourselves? Usually it was the Magpies who often choose to drive off the male Mistle Thrush feeding on the East Slope grass, the female then simply standing up by the nest to see

Enid Sydney Chadwell 1918 - 2008

It is with great sadness that we have to record the passing of Enid Chadwell who died on September the 14th just three days short of her 90th birthday. Enid would have been a familiar figure to members as a regular attendee at indoor meetings and an enthusiast for field events. She was always ready to help out in the canteen and assist in transport for anyone who had no means of getting to an outdoor event. In the many tributes to her that have been recorded on the Society's web site and in the messages I have received one common phrase has occurred, "She was fun" and indeed she was. One of the happiest persons one could wish to meet with such a positive and youthful approach to everything she did. We had travelled the world together in pursuit of birds or for the sheer pleasure of travelling to far away places. One of the Ornitholiday tour leaders has reminded me of an incident that had occurred in Kazakhstan when the group were housed in tents on the steppes. We had gone to sleep on a very hot night but at three in the morning it was freezing and we struggled around in the darkness trying to find extra clothing. Inevitably, we fell about laughing and woke the rest of the group in tents nearby. There were cries of "what are you two up to in there?" followed by laughing protestations from Enid that we were cold! It was fun.

what her partner was protesting about! In this way incubation continued until the eggs hatched on 16th June. I waited for the nestlings to become corvid meals. Nestlings? I never saw more than one yellow gape reaching for food and it soon became clear that only one nestling had hatched or that only one had survived. Had there been predation of the early nestlings? I never saw any signs of such and certainly the thrushes aggressively saw off any bird which came too close to their nestling in the oak tree, innocent victims being a Blackbird and Song Thrush. On 1st July I saw the plump fledgling in a small tree being periodically fed by one of the two parents in attendance. Sixteen days later, both adults disappeared taking their surviving offspring with them. Yes, just one nestling fledged. In two broods the two Mistle Thrushes had apparently fledged only two offspring. Why? Only one egg laid, twice? All but

Enid was a lady of many parts. She had sat on the Hove bench as a Magistrate for 25 years, was an enthusiastic gardener, a skilled sculptress and a determined car driver. Her interests included music, Scottish dancing, photography, the theatre and sport especially golf. Quite fearless and philosophical about living alone in a house that had been burgled more than sixteen times. She steadfastly refused to have burglar alarms installed or to have floodlights to illuminate the slippery path that led to her house from the road below.

An illustration of her tough spirit was in the late 1960's when together with her daughter Tracey they joined a safari group at Nairobi and then travelled by truck north through central Africa and across the Sahara to finish at Tangier. The daily journal that she wrote presents a fascinating story but sadly the photographs that she took were a failure due to a damaged shutter of her precious Leica camera. Her daughter was a well known soprano, who in her mid thirties, developed leukaemia. During her long illness Enid spent every day at her bedside, a really devoted mother. In Tracey's memory Enid founded a scholarship at the London Guildhall School of Music and she attended the yearly award ceremony but discreet as ever, she sat in the background and took no part in the presentations. We are all going to miss dear Enid none more than myself. It was a

one eggs infertile, twice? Negligent or inexperienced parents? Available food insufficient? Too much human and canine disturbance for successful feeding of nestlings? Mishaps to all but one of the first-brood fledglings? Corvid predation of all but one of the nestlings, twice? Surely it would be uncharitable to hold corvids responsible without firm evidence. And why not take all the nestlings? However, I am not too disposed to be charitable to corvids.

Referring to data kindly supplied by Peter Whitcomb, I see that in 1990 fourteen pairs of Mistle Thrushes bred in Brighton Hollingbury Camp and Wildpark together with 30 pairs of Magpies and six pairs of Crows. By 2002 the number of breeding pairs of Mistle Thrushes had fallen to only two (none at all in the next two years) while the number of breeding pairs of Magpies had increased by 50 percent and Crows by 200 percent. Hmm.

Brian Easlea

pleasure to have known such a wonderful and talented lady who had lived life to the full.

Cliff Walder

Cliff has written a very moving tribute to Enid but I felt I had to let members know some of the heartfelt messages received, personally and on the user-group, after the announcement of her death. Almost everyone mentioned her enthusiasm particularly for birding but for all her varied interests. She was always smiling, charming, cheerful and ready for a friendly chat with anyone. No-one had realised her great age: Age never seemed to feature in her approach to life. She had the mental agility of a 17 year old and the stamina of someone with only half her years. She would race off like a teenager, her enthusiasm was as if she had only just started birding. Delighted to be included in up-to-date sightings and so appreciative, always ringing to thank for the information and report what she had seen as a result. She was a wonderful character, full of life, thoughtful towards others, sharp, perceptive and very funny - so many positive attributes. She would have been amazed at all these comments from those who enjoyed her company because she was an unassuming person but I think she may have used one of her favourite phrases with a gentle smile: 'jolly good'!

Brianne Reeve