



SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Winter
2008

NEWSLETTER

Sightings in our area October to December

A rather disappointing September and October eventually livened up with some exciting sea-watches and the appearance of a few scarcer visitors late in the year. Other than one or two Ring Ouzels at Cissbury and Truleigh Hill, the odd Firecrest in the nets at the former and Black Redstarts at Ferring and Shoreham, there was very little unusual reported in October. Swallow, Meadow Pipit and finch movements were fairly good, however, so regular coast watchers had something to log. A good movement of Fieldfares (nearly 300) and Woodpigeons (765) over Hollingbury was in progress on 18th and there were many more of the latter in the next few days. A good find on Henfield Levels were four Tree Sparrows, a real rarity these days, along with a Green Sandpiper. At the end of the month, a massive 950 Gannets along with a few Little Gulls (maximum of 32 on Nov 1st) passed west at Worthing, something of a prelude to the events of the next fortnight. Woodpigeons may not be everyone's cup of tea but the spectacle of huge flocks passing over high to the west on several early mornings in early November was a stirring sight. An Avocet was on Ferring/Goring beach on 4th and a late Arctic Tern was in Shoreham Harbour on 9th. The weekend of 10th and 11th will be remembered for a long time by those witnessing the unprecedented movement of sea-birds that took place. A storm in the North Sea, which incidentally had engulfed the coastal marshes there, drove masses of these birds south into the Channel on strong north-westerly winds. Five hundred Gannets were fishing off Worthing with 400 Kittiwakes off Shore-

ham on the first date; also on this day the first of the autumn's Little Auks appeared passing offshore as well as all three diver species. Next day was the real bonanza with well over 600 Kittiwakes, 300 Gannets and forty or so Skuas (Arctic and Pomarine) passing west and all readily visible through the morning. Add to these more Little Auks, some landing close-in on the sea, as well as Razorbills and Guillemots and some idea of the event may be appreciated. A Red-necked Grebe was off Goring on 13th when a late Sooty Shearwater passed east. Snow Bunting are always a welcome sight and the presence of one for a few days near the Bluebird Café at Ferring attracted admirers although it was sometimes elusive. Also nearby a smart Black Redstart was occasionally on show. At Brooklands, meanwhile, a female Long-tailed Duck took up a lengthy residence but a Grey Phalarope at Shoreham Harbour mouth was a one-day bird. Another Long-tailed Duck was then found on Hove Lagoon which remained into the New Year. Nearby in Southwick Canal a very obliging Little Auk delighted watchers with its approachability and photographers had a field day. A bird not seen very often in our area was an immature Glaucous Gull which loafed around the Harbour and Canal to complete a memorable trio. On the Downs meanwhile, one or two Hen Harriers took up winter quarters and Short-eared Owls were seen near Chanctonbury and Beeding Marshes. A small number of Bramblings appeared with other finches at the former of these sites.

Clive Hope

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

INDOOR MEETINGS

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

March 11

Update on Allsorts at Pulborough Brooks

by Peter Hughes

April 8

AGM followed by India and Sri Lanka

by Jim & Jane Weston

FIELD OUTINGS

Feb 24 (Sun) half-day

Ferring

Meet 09.00 in Bluebird Cafe car park, OS 198, GR TQ092015.

Leader Clive Hope

March 8 (Sat)

East Head & Snowhill Marsh

Meet 09.00 at East Head car park (charge payable).

OS 197, GR SZ765984.

Leader Paul Stevens

April 20 (Sun) am only

Goring Seawatch - changed location

Meet 08.00 at East end of Pattersons Walk, OS 198, GR TQ100015.

Leader John Newnham

April 27 (Sun)

Burton Pond

Meet 09.00 in Burton Mill car park, OS 197, GR SU978181.

Leader Paul Stevens

May 3 (Sat) am only

Greatham Dawn Chorus

Meet 05.30 in Greatham Bridge car park, OS 197, GR TQ032163.

Leader Brianne Reeve

More details on page 4....

Bore da

With a pair of Bramblings and three Siskins already in, I decided to start ten minutes early. By 10.15 they were still the chief interest of a rather disappointing hour. Greenfinches and Chaffinches, which had both peaked at thirty in the rainy days of the previous week, were in single figures and only two of the potential dozen Goldfinches appeared. The regular Blackcap waited until the afternoon and the Coal Tit and little band of Long-tails failed to show. The result was just 27 birds of ten species.

Big Garden Birdwatches are often like that, but as it was the first time in a new home the temptation to nudge the numbers towards what I hoped to see was greater than usual. Our garden in Brecon is at least twice the size of the one we left in Steyning. It is halfway up a hill, two minutes from the town centre, but just as close to fields and hedgerows with big oaks and ashes. We face Southwest (and the lazy wind has just slammed the side gate open again), looking over the town to the Beacons. The previous owners were keen gardeners, so within tall hedges of hawthorn, holly, ivy and leylandii, we have lawn, vegetable garden, plenty of shrubs and well-filled flower beds. The tallest tree is a forty foot ash, and there is a fine magnolia, (nearly as big as Barrie Watson's which I long envied). We moved in October, so there is much to look forward to as leaves and flowers appear. At the moment, we are enjoying many clumps of snowdrops.

For nearly four years in Steyning we completed Martin Ford's forms for the SDOS Garden Bird Survey, recording the maximum of each species week by week. From Christmas 2003 to last September between 21 and 27 species in each quarter used the garden, or in the case of Martins nested on the house. The grand total was 44. Greenfinches were the most numerous, reaching 40 last January. As with several of the regulars, their numbers were typically highest in mid-winter and at the end of the breeding season. Sparrows and Starlings came next at 22, and Blackbirds 21. Blue Tits normally totalled up to six, but with lots of youngsters reached 18 one August. Long-tailed Tit was the only other species to make double figures – ten last July.

Welcome visitors each winter were Blackcaps, usually seen singly but in one

season I could recognise at least three different individuals. A few Reed Buntings turned up, often in February and March, and two or three Siskins also came towards the end of winter. Little flocks passing over in the autumn were ineligible as they never stopped in the garden. In 2006, a couple of Stock Doves regularly picked seed off the lawn from January to mid-May. Each August and September the odd summer visitor would slip through, Reed Warbler twice, Garden Warbler, Whitethroat, and Spotted Flycatcher just once. Occasionally a Heron took a look at our tiny ponds, and perhaps the most unexpected bird was a Kingfisher which perched briefly on the trellis arch one December.

Our Steyning garden and those of our neighbours were well-established, and we had a tall thick box hedge containing an apple tree, a plum and a lilac. A slim silver birch, which we saw grow up from a seedling, graced our southern border, there were many fruit trees nearby, and a tall ash and holly behind us. To south and east were the wooded mound of Bramber Castle, and the Adur valley with its rough grazing and reedy ditches. These surroundings and our position as the highest house on this side of town helped to make it a good site for birds, with the added attraction of seed and peanuts all year round. There was other wildlife too. We restored one small pond and created two more. Frogs bred there, and Smooth and Palmate Newts, with an occasional Great Crested. There were Slowworms and sometimes a Toad or Grass Snake. Southern Hawker, Common Darter, and three damselfly bred regularly and last summer an Emperor (Empress?) laid eggs.

Making a pond is now high on our To Do list for the new garden, which is already showing real promise. We use a version of the SDOS form to keep weekly records here. With the coming of winter and provision of four seed and three nut feeders, the bird numbers and variety have increased greatly. A peak of thirty Greenfinches is not far short of the best Steyning counts, while thirty Chaffinches and twelve Goldfinches and Siskins are better. Redwings and Fieldfares ate the haws in November, three different Bramblings are visiting

now, Goldcrests flit through and once a Treecreeper. The species total already stands at thirty. Overhead we have Buzzards and Ravens nearly every day, and Goshawk and Peregrine in the past week. Kites pass here frequently, (and the other day we watched and photographed more than a hundred floating above Gigrin Farm, swooping for scraps, and so close!).

There is no equivalent of SDOS locally. I have joined Gwent Ornithological Society for its meetings and outings in the next county, and enjoyed a presentation on the birds of Egypt, ancient and modern, by our old friend John Wyatt. Gwent stretches south to the Severn, and I look forward to visiting Newport Wetlands, where an RSPB Centre opens soon. Breconshire, through its Wildlife Trust, produces an annual Bird Report, and has an attractive website with Current Sightings and a Gallery of photographs – take a look at www.brecknockbirds.co.uk. I met the County Recorder and about fifty other people on a Trust New Year event at Llangorse Lake, a beautiful place with reedy and marshy edges, small copses, and a large varied population of diving and dabbling ducks. Displaying Goldeneyes looked lovely in the sunshine.

The county is big and wild, with the Beacons and Black Mountains, the valleys of Wye and Usk, moorlands, forests and pastoral farms. It is sparsely populated, and the last Bird Report had 77 individual contributors, compared with Shoreham's 55 and Sussex well over 600. However, there has been good coverage of many areas, especially by Martin Peers and Mike Shrubbs (yes, the same), who have now moved away. The Atlas survey will be the opportunity to produce a new account of Brecknock's birds. My first tetrad contains a heather and bracken hill with sheep fields sloping down to a rocky stream. I am also hoping to take on a WeBS site along the Usk and help with surveys of the military areas above Senybridge. From home, my walks with the Shelties, Indie and Summer, go up Slwch Hill to big views from an ancient fort, or down to the Usk and Canal for Goosanders, Dippers, Grey Wagtails and Kingfishers. Just as at Steyning there is a Sewage Works nearby. It may hold more than a hundred Pied Wagtails, but I can only find one wintering Chiffchaff – they appear to be quite scarce here.

To sum up, Alison and I are very pleased with our new house, the garden and its birds. I miss the friendly SDOS, but am getting to know some of the birders here, and putting sightings and pictures onto the website. I can't expect to see Long-tailed Ducks, a Little Auk or a Glaucous Gull, but there will soon be Ring Ouzels, Whinchats, Pied Flycatchers and many more birds to find in this grand spacious land of hills and forests, lakes and valleys.

Keith Noble

From Cranford via Dartmoor and Lark Rise

Recently we have had a fascinating variety of dramas on television but, apart from the pleasure they have given, an extra delight is gained from listening to what is happening in the background. When my eyes began to fail me I had no choice but to develop my hearing and identifying bird song became an important part of my everyday walks. I used various recordings on tape or CD to backup my knowledge and found these very helpful. The trick is not to try to learn too many songs too quickly. Just listen in your garden to the difference between a Dunnock and a Robin, the incredible vitality of a Wren and the confident call of the Great Tit as against the rather wistful Blue Tit. You need to make your own decision as to how they sound to you. I have often been frustrated by the written sound in a Field Guide!

There is nothing better than just listening and making your own observations. One thing I have noticed is that birds of the **same** species do not interrupt each other in song – do listen and see what you think. However birds of different species often sing against each other which makes it easier to compare, for example, the songs of the Blackcap and the Garden Warbler. Both have beautiful songs but the former has a shorter, liquid song with a very obvious sudden cut off at the end. The latter rattles on as though it doesn't know how to stop.

As spring is on its way it will not be long before the Chiffchaffs arrive, a song that is the easiest to recognise. BUT how soon do you hear the 'prrrt prrrt' response call? I believe this comes from the female bird which arrives later than the male. The 'prrrt prrrt' call is not heard at the beginning of the spring arrivals

only once the birds have selected a mate.

And so back to my title. I hope many of you will have been watching some of those excellent dramas (Sense and Sensibility should be added to the list). There have been many scenes in the countryside and whether by intent or chance some very good examples of bird song: Skylark, Buzzard, Stonechat, Wren, Yellowhammer and Blackbird and a short snatch of a Cirl Bunting in the programme on Dartmoor. However the one which has appeared most often is the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker drumming in both Cranford and Lark Rise! I was really pleased to be able to identify them. If you would like to learn more bird song, give me a call and /or join our Dawn Chorus outing on May 3rd.

Brianne Reeve

Outing to Dungeness Jan 2008

Ten brave souls assembled in the car park by the lighthouse, on a very dull morning with a nasty northwest wind blowing. We spent only 20 minutes looking at the sea as conditions were far from satisfactory for a prolonged sea watching session. Although there was a good movement of auks going west most of them were probably Razorbills. ID was problematic due to howling wind rendering scopes virtually useless. Additionally offshore birds included a few Gannets and Kittiwakes and couple of small divers.

We relocated to the northern pit on the Dungeness observatory spending some time looking for the Red-necked Grebe that had been frequenting this pit without any success although the explosive call of Cetti's warbler was heard. The visit to the ARC pit was more successful with good views of Goldeneye and very brief diving Merlin over the hide. From the comfort of the hide we scanned various flocks of ducks adding at least 20 Ruddy Duck and more Goldeneye including 2 males. A mass explosion of scattering ducks was caused by a hunting Marsh Harrier quartering the edge of the pit and a fly-over Sparrowhawk had a lesser effect.

At the RSPB reserve we took lunch before completing a circuit of all the hides and finding plenty of avian activity in each one to keep our interest going. The wind was still blowing which made looking out of some of the hide windows extremely difficult at times. We notched up a wonderful selection of ducks and grebes including five Goosander with a superb lovely male, at least 20+ Smew with up to five males in their stunning plumage, and two Slavonian Grebes, one that was very photogenic. A 1st winter Shag lurking amongst a large roosting flock of Cormorants was very difficult to pick out and teased us with its head hiding out of sight for long periods, although we all managed good scope views in the end. Excellent male Red-crested Pochard with two female/ 1st year types were another good find in front of one of the hides.

The walk around the northern part of the reserve including Hookers pit was not easy due to the howling wind. Despite the wind, we still managed to see two Marsh Harriers hunting the swampy edges, one of which appeared to have a white wing tag on its left upper wing - perhaps one of the local birds reared on the reserve this summer! Of a non birding sighting, we witnessed a stoat chasing a terrified rabbit over a shingle ridge disappearing in to long grass not to be seen again with another rabbit taking its chance to sit tight and deploy this tactic. Unfortunately for the rabbit the stoat appeared out of the long grass and turned its attention to the frozen rabbit, both set off with the rabbit being pursued. Soon the stoat overhauled its prey and quickly dispatched the poor animal before our own gazing eyes (who needs to go to the Serengeti). On the drive out of the reserve I noticed three Carrion Crows feasting on what I presumed would be the remains of the unfortunate rabbit!

Some of the group drove over Walland Marsh on the way home stopping off to check a large herd of Mute Swans and finding seven Bewicks grazing with them. We also had a fabulous male Hen Harrier fly by-close as it was buffeted by the gale force winds. Another stop to look at a couple of Marsh Harriers quartering rough grassland enabled us to stumble upon a pre-roost gathering of at least eight Marsh Harriers - what a wonderful end to a brilliant days birding.

Dave Smith & Bernie Forbes

Walks and Talks

An easy walk awaits around the Ferring Rife area on Sunday, February 24th when Clive Hope will show us his local patch. Among the birds recorded this winter have been Snow Bunting, Black Redstart and Jack Snipe. Meet 9am in the Blue-bird Café car park for a half day outing.

Paul Stevens will now be leading the East Head and Snowhill Marsh outing on Saturday, March 8th. Red-breasted Goose and Black Brant have been stars there so far but one Little Stint has been found recently too. Another 9am start and change required for the car park.

Please note an ALTERATION to your programme for John Newnham's Seawatch on Sunday, April 20th. The meeting point will now be on the concrete structure at the eastern end of Patterson's Walk (TQ 100 015). Park on the road at the end of the sea-front opposite Goring Gap. An 8am start but will finish by noon at the latest. Wear warm, protective clothing as there is no shelter.

On Sunday, April 27th we will again be linking up with Paul Stevens at Burton Pond when spring migration should be well under way. No doubt the elusive Lesser Spotted Woodpecker will be – elusive! Come on Paul – how about a Hawfinch or two! This outing usually provides a good bird list. Meet in Burton Mill car park at 9am.

Our Indoor Meetings will continue on March 11th when Peter Hughes will be giving us an 'Update on Allsorts at Pulborough Brooks'. It is three years since Peter talked to us about the Pulborough and Amberley Reserves and many innovations have taken place in that time. Anyone who reads Peter's excellent articles in the West Sussex Gazette will be looking forward to an interesting evening.

From the emails.....

The following nuggets are taken from the SDOS email group. To join the group contact Terry Hicks at terrance.hicks@talk21.com

Snatch and grab

I was watching three barn owls quartering the fields of the LNR at Beeding. One of the owls swooped down and came up with a large vole. As it flew off to dissect the unfortunate creature a kestrel appeared and flew at the owl, swerving underneath it and snatching the clearly desirable vole from its talons. Gosh!

Following the AGM on April 8th Jim and Jane Weston will be telling us about their trip to India and Sri Lanka very different from Jim's last talk to us when he described his epic voyage entitled 'Atlantic Odyssey'. As I write this Jane is recovering from a broken ankle sustained on a Boxing Day hike with the family which resulted in her being air-lifted to hospital and Jim losing his dinner – but that is another story!

Chris Wright

How to get there....

We use grid references to indicate our meeting places for our outings but it seems some members find this a problem so I thought I would try to point you in the right direction! The majority of our outings can be found on Ordnance Survey (OS) sheets 197 and 198. On February 24th for the outing to Ferring Rife we have a particularly easy grid reference, TQ 092 015. Using OS sheet 198 look at the far left (west) side of the map where you will find the letters identifying the 100,000 metre square: **TQ**. Next take the **vertical** grid line on the outside edge of the map which is labelled 09 at the top and bottom of the map. Looking at one of the small blue squares move along the bottom line to the right (east) dividing it into tenths. You only have to get to two tenths and this will give you the easting number: 092 Now you take the second half of the grid reference, 015, which is called the northing number. Run your finger up the left edge of the map till you get to the 01 horizontal line and then estimate half way up (north) which gives you 015. Where the lines 092 and 015 cross you will find the car park just south of Ferring Rife. TQ 092 015

The new meeting place for the Seawatch on April 20th is very close, can you find it at TQ 100 015? Try

finding some of our other venues and you might find grid references are not as bad as you thought!

Brianne Reeve

Newsletter Editor

Very many thanks to Keith Noble who has so ably produced lively and entertaining newsletters since 2004. I have stepped in to edit this edition but no more!

So we need a new Editor to produce this Newsletter three times a year. Keith said that if he could manage, anyone with just limited computer skills could do it. Please let Brianne Reeve know soon if you are willing to consider this vacancy. We also need illustrations. Surely there must be some closet or budding artists amongst us?

Brian Clay

Reminders

Records

Just a reminder to anyone with records for last year (2007) that now is the time to be sending them to Clive Hope. Clive's new email address is: clivehope@btinternet.com

Subscription Renewals

The subscription rates for 2008 are unchanged. Payment should be made to our Treasurer John Maskell.

John Stafford Prize

The closing date for entries is 17:00 hrs on Friday 29 February 2008. There is a prize of £100 for the best entry which should be no more than 1500 words. Entries can be emailed or sent to any of the Society's officers. They are listed in the 2006 Annual Report

Wood Sands

Whilst attempting to do part of our BTO Atlas survey yesterday Shena and I were somewhat thwarted by the work to establish the new Timberland store on Worthing seafront and ended-up abandoning our plans. Surprisingly there were no Woodpeckers or Woodcock around and obviously it was too early for any Wood Warblers or Woodchat Shrikes. Two Cranes turned out to be JCB diggers apparently gathering nesting materials. In fact the only birds of note were a splinter group of Herring Gulls. Can anyone match this?

Terry Goble

John Maskell