



Grey Partridge in snow



a million
voices for
nature

RSPB East Surrey Local Group

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2011

No 49

LEADER'S BLOG

The cold weather - remember the snow and ice in December? – disrupted our Christmas party arrangements. Undeterred we had mince pies, sausage rolls and mulled wine at our first Christmas party of 2011 at our January meeting instead! In February we had a fascinating insight into the international work of the RSPB from Dieter Hoffman, Head of Global Programmes at HQ. Our recent raffles collected over £100 to purchase trees for planting in Harapan, Indonesia. The talk also highlighted many of the problems faced by our spring migrants as they make it back to our shores to breed.

The extent of public spending cuts are only now beginning to unfold and we wonder how the Coalition's "Big Society" vision will impact on environmental groups and interests. At least our protected woodlands are safe following the concerns expressed by the RSPB and many of its members against recent privatisation proposals. The RSPB is committed to a strategy of growth, sustaining and developing its work programmes, but there will inevitably be tough decisions ahead.

Did you take part in the Big Garden Bird Watch at the end of January? Were you lucky enough to see Waxwings in your neighbourhood? In these small

ways we can all contribute to the knowledge of our birdlife and highlight areas of needed intervention or success. So please continue to support the work of the RSPB. But more importantly get out and enjoy your birding and report anything interesting or unusual. Finally pencil in the 28th October in your diaries as we are holding another 'fish and chips quiz night'.

John Lawrence

PEREGINE SUCCESS STORY



Peregrine falcon

That brilliant creature, the peregrine falcon, is arguably our most spectacular bird of prey. Yes the fastest animal on the planet, capable of 'prey stoops' in excess of 200 mph, is now virtually on your doorstep, so why not get out there and find one for yourself! The poisonings from pesticides (Aldrin, Dieldrin, and DDT) in the food chain in the late 1950s almost brought the species to extinction in the UK. There can't be many sadder sights than watching incubating birds crushing their own eggs because of calcium deficient shells! Even

before this infamous 'crash' in numbers the bird was an extremely rare visitor to our area. Thankfully today they are encountered far more regularly and have bred successfully in nearby urban locations such as at Sutton and central Croydon. Whilst they may not be every racing pigeon enthusiasts' favorite bird, there is no denying their majestic form. Who would have ever predicted that instead of having to travel to the Nagshead cliff face in the Forest of Dean to see them, we would have them nesting on our own 'office block cliffs' here in Surrey!

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

The first local bramblings were seen in game cover crops above Nore Hill Chelsham on 18th October. The following day at North Downs Golf Club Woldingham small parties of siskins were feeding in the alder trees, and parties of meadow pipits were moving through the area travelling north. Again at Nore Hill on the 20th two parties of fieldfares, totaling some 180 birds, moved through NW directly into a stiff wind. A single flyover crossbill demonstrating its distinctive 'chipping' call was at the same site on the 30th. Almost on the county border with Kent in Beddlestead Lane Chelsham on 25th November a large female peregrine passed south flushing

huge numbers of migrant wood-pigeons and mixed corvids, including some 300 jackdaws. A tawny owl was flushed from its daytime ivy-clad oak tree roost in the same road near Beddlestead Farm. It was a very cold and frosty morning on 29th November at Holt Wood Chelsham and 60 stock doves were feeding there in rough pasture. The following day, some 8 inches of snow fell in Warlingham, with a further 6 inches on 1st December - quite unprecedented conditions so early in the winter! The writer braved the conditions for a circular walk around the Chelsham countryside, but birds were very much conspicuous by their absence with the exception of a lone buzzard: even that was flying south no doubt looking for warmer climes! What was interesting however was chancing upon a magnificent 'igloo castle' in a stubble field at Harrow Road Farleigh- the snow conditions were obviously perfect for its construction, but it was that good I was left wondering if there were any Inuit's living locally!



'Editor's' Waxwing

It didn't take long for those magnificent winter visitors the waxwing to move from Scotland down into our area.

A flock of 30 were at Redhill on 11th December and after a wait of some 64 years your Editor finally saw them in his own Warlingham garden on 3rd March, with 10 birds feasting on cotoneaster berries.

At Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve there were black-necked and red-necked grebes, goosander and a smew, together with at least two bitterns during this cold snap and a flock of over 80 siskins graced the alder carr there on 15th. A further 5 inches of snow fell on

17th and whilst none fell on Christmas Day there was still a 3 inch deep frozen layer on what was now the 25th day of snow! Into the New Year, on 23rd January, a long staying bittern turned up at Bay Pond Godstone, as did one at Hedgecourt Lake Felbridge together with a red-crested-pochard. Gill Flinn chanced upon an amazing 12 plus bullfinches feeding on blackberry seeds on Riddlesdown on 30th, and continued the purple patch by finding 13 waxwings at the same locality on February 2nd. Other highlights during that month included the first full chorus of song thrush on 7th near Warlingham Green, 500 common gulls 'loafing' in the pasture adjacent to Woldingham Station on 14th, and a herd of 18 Fallow deer on Gangers Hill Woldingham the same day.



Mealy Redpoll

I purposely delay cutting my lavender to attract finches to the seed heads. To date the goldfinches and redpolls have declined the bounty this year, but the latter have been regular on Gordon Holmes' feeders in Caterham. He might even have had the rarer mealy redpoll amongst the more common lessers!

Finally a pack of some 30 hare hounds from Poynings, Sussex were 'working' the fields between Beddlestead and Biggin Hill on 17th, and as many as 8 hares were seen. This is a remarkable recovery of the species in the Chelsham area where they have been largely absent for the past 5 years.

RAY TURLEY

I, like so many others, was shocked and saddened by the recent and sudden death of Ray Turley. Birding at Dungeness and elsewhere will never be quite

the same again. To quote John Cantello: "his skill as a birder and artist was only exceeded by the warmth and generosity of his character. Did I ever meet him without coming away with a smile? I doubt it. Ray was one of those rare people who enhanced life and we are all the poorer for his passing. I'm sure that the Elysian Fields are already echoing with his cheerful banter as he gets to grips with a whole new avifauna."

MAGIC OF THE FARNES

It was the spring of 2009 and my son Sam wanted to check Northumbria University out- it wasn't so much the academic qualities but more the nightlife, pubs, and rugby facilities! When he had completed his in depth recce, we decided to travel north from Newcastle to view the beautiful countryside and heritage coastline. It is truly stunning and well worth a visit.



Male Eider Duck

After checking out the famous Craster kipper smokery we headed to Seahouses and were very lucky that the sea conditions were just about safe enough to get a boat out to the famous Farne Islands. Our route took us close to several islands and past the lighthouse from which Grace Darling in 1838 made her heroic sea rescue of 9 survivors of a paddle steam ship wreck. We had picked the perfect time of the year (May); since breeding birds filled the air, cliffs and sea around us - everywhere we looked in fact. Grey seals were in abundance, and the diminutive and comical puffins darted past the boat from all directions. We were dropped off on the main island and for two hours we were at one with nature

in a magical and almost 'surreal' setting.



Shag

Nesting eider ducks, common and arctic terns, guillemots, razorbills, puffins and shags were all around us and virtually at our feet. The experience with the wildlife reminded me of my trip to the Galapagos, everything was so close; you could almost touch the birds sitting on their nests or outside their burrows. The cacophony of sound was something else (as was the reek of guano), and the diving terns didn't disappoint either!

If you are ever up in the North-East don't miss out on the experience; you won't regret it. There is so much else to see in the area, especially the spectacular castles at Bamburgh, Dunstanburgh, Alnwick and of course the magical Lindisfarne.



Lindisfarne

You have also got Kielder forest nearby and it's only a stones throw to the picturesque border town of Berwick-upon-Tweed. Sam got a place at University and whilst he is there I will be making more trips north to see him, and to further explore a spectacular and unspoilt gem of a county.

GOING CUCKOO IN CAPEL

Brian Hobley had a bizarre phone call recently from a gentleman living at Capel, a village between Dorking and Horsham. Apparently he has a large 'humane' peanut bated rat-trap in his 15

acre holding. The odd pheasant has been caught in the past, but on 24th February he was doing his usual 7.30 a.m. rounds when he found a grey backed bird in the trap which from his overhead viewpoint he initially took to be some type of dove. On closer inspection, however, he was adamant he had caught a cuckoo!! Both Brian and I quizzed him separately and at some length on the bird's ID. Unfortunately he explained he was so concerned to release the bird as soon as possible that he didn't think to take a photo. We suggested a 'grey' sparrow hawk as a possible confusion species but he knew this species well and ruled it out straight away on the basis of a non hawk like bill shape. He described the extent of its barring, its long wings and short legs perfectly and I have to say that this doubting Thomas was impressed!! As you will know the very first cuckoos to reach the UK from Africa have been known to be here in late March, with the first song heard in mid April. This famous sound of Spring triggered perhaps the most celebrated correspondence in history - the first cuckoo letters to the Times. It's a great shame therefore that we can't authenticate our 'rat-trap visitor'! The bird also inspired great composers like Handel, Beethoven, Saint-Saëns and Frederick Delius. The last named of course wrote 'On hearing the first cuckoo in Spring' and was incidentally laid to rest at St Peter's Limpsfield alongside Sir Thomas Beecham. Official figures suggest that this iconic harbinger of Spring has declined in this country by over 65% since 1980. As previously discussed it is my view that the species decline locally in the last 10 years has been nothing short of catastrophic and far in excess of the official figures from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and others. In the Ordnance Survey 10 kilometer square 'TQ 35' (encompassing Chaldon in the

west to Chelsham and the county border in the east, and Kenley and Warlingham in the north to Bletchingly, Godstone and Oxted in the south); preliminary figures from the BTO's nationwide Breeding Bird Atlas (2007-2011), has only shown presence of the species in 6 of the 25 two kilometer square subdivisions (tetrads)! Some of these may only have been single sightings or records of the odd calling bird. In this connection many mistaken reports of calling cuckoos turn out to be very good imitations made by collard doves! I have failed to see or hear a cuckoo in Warlingham/ Chelsham/ Woldingham for at least 5 years! It has long been my view that a shortage of insect food is the main problem for the cuckoo and explains the loss of other insectivores. I am not saying it is the sole reason since problems on migration and in the wintering grounds could also be involved. A Dutch researcher, H Tennekes has made the case that neonicotinoids, a special group of insecticides, are causing a catastrophe in the insect world, which is having a knock-on effect for many of our birds. These chemicals were introduced in the 1990's and it wasn't long afterwards that beekeepers noticed massive declines in bee numbers (Colony Collapse Disorder). France banned the use of one of these chemicals on sun flower seed in 1999, and Germany and Italy have banned two types on maize. We took far too long to listen to, or heed the warnings of Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' half a century ago. Let us hope for the future of the charismatic cuckoo and other birds that we get our act together in time, and are not travelling down another DDT precipice!

MONEY MONEY MONEY

The grand sum of £1600 has been raised by the group this year and is to be targeted towards Woodland schemes. Pat yourselves on the back.

Brian Thomas

EVENING MEETINGS 2011			FIELD TRIPS 2011	
JAN	Wed 12 th	Gordon Langsbury: "Bird Islands of Britain" A last visit to the Group by this renowned bird photographer.	Sun 16 th	Dungeness.
FEB	Wed 9 th	Dieter Hoffman, Head of Global Programmes, RSPB. "A trip around the globe" – an overview of the RSPB's valuable international work.	Sun 13 th	Harty Ferry & Elmley.
MAR	Wed 9 th	Bill Coster: "Namibia and Hawaii/Midway" Two inimitable digital presentations of these less well-known areas.	Sun 27 th	Rye Harbour
APR	Wed 13 th	AGM – followed by Peter Holden: "A Celebration of Birds" Recollections with film clips of his 40 years' work for the RSPB.	Sun 17 th	Selsey Bill & Church Norton
MAY	Wed 11 th	Glenda Law: "Wildlife of Guyana". A recent visit to this under-reported birding destination.	Sun 8 th	Minsmere (Godstone at 7.30a.m Coach Trip).
JUN	Wed 8 th	Jackie Garner: "Birds in Art". Enjoy the work of this talented artist, combining her love of birdwatching with painting.	Sun 22 nd	Acre Down New Forest (7.00am Godstone)
JUL	Wed 13 th	Barry Wright: "Travels in South America" Birds, scenery and other strange antics from Venezuela to Argentina.	Fri 3 rd	Ashdown Forest [Nightjar Watch]*
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Sun 12 th	Amberley Wild Brooks & Pulborough
SEP	Wed 14 th	John Wyatt: "The Fauna of Ancient Egypt" More highlights from recent research and a fascinating book in the making.	Fri 17 th	Ashdown Forest [Nightjar Watch]* *7.30p.m. at Godstone, 8.00p.m. at Long Car Park
OCT	Wed 12 th	David Boag: "The Kingfisher". A reprise of his innovative study of one of our most colourful birds.	Sun 17 th	Mystery trip.
NOV	Wed 9 th	Dennis Newland: "On elephant back in Nepal" A journey through the country's National Parks and cultural sites.	Sun 14 th	Stodmarch & Grove Ferry.
DEC	Wed 14 th	Christmas Meeting – members' tales/photographs.	Sun 18 th	East Head & Snowhill Marsh.
			Sun 16 th	Reculver & Oare Marshes.
			Sun 13 th	Pagham Harbour & The Burgh.
			Sun 18 th	Shellness & Harty Ferry.

All trips start from Godstone Pond at 8.00a.m. except where stated above



Visit our website for all the latest news:
www.eastsurreyspb.co.uk

Field trips start from Godstone Green Car Park at 8.00 am, unless otherwise stated. Part day trips – see above for time and place. For details of coach trips contact Brian Holey (01883 625404).

Warm waterproof clothing and stout footwear should be worn. Bring a packed lunch for day trips. No dogs.

Alterations to some of the proposed venues may be necessary at the last minute.

NOTE: If going direct to venue please notify leader at least 24 hours in advance in case of changes.

Indoor Meetings will be held at the White Hart Barn, Godstone in 2011 starting at 8.00 pm.

Admission currently £3.00 for adults, £1.00 for fledglings.

Other events arranged during the year are advertised at the indoor meetings and on the website:

<http://www.eastsurreyspb.co.uk>. There is no group subscription, new visitors are always welcome.

Group Leader: John Lawrence (01737 553316)

Newsletter Editor: Brian Thomas (01883 623149)

RSPB is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

If you would like to receive this publication by e-mail contact the Editor, Brian Thomas (e-mail: 13bjthomas@talktalk.net).

Publications sent by e-mail will be in glorious colour.



a million
voices for
nature