

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER JUNE 1986

COMING EVENTS

Lectures 1986:-

- *Monday 6th October:- Mr Tony Prater "Waders at Home and Abroad".
- Monday 3rd November:- Mr Oliver Ellis "Moths and Orchids of Steyning".
- Monday 1st December:- "Members' Evening"

* This is a change to the published programme. Please note that we now welcome Mr Tony Prater, the S.E. Regional Representative of the RSPB.

All lectures are held at St. Giles' Church Hall, Upper Shoreham Road, Shoreham by Sea at 7.30pm.

Field Outings:-

Friday 11th July:- Waltham Brooks and Coates Common. Meet 8pm at Greatham Bridge. Map ref-TQ032163. Leader John Dixon. Tel West Chiltington 2234.

- * Sunday 20th July:- Woods Mill, nr Henfield. Meet at 10.30am at the Mill *
 * (HQ of the Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation). Entrance fee of £1.20 per *
 * person will be payable on the day. Coffee provided. Mike Russell, the *
 * warden, will lead a tour of the nature trail and also show members some *
 * moths and mammals. This is an additional venue to the programme. *
 * Phone John Dixon on West Chiltington 2234 if further details required. *

Saturday 23rd August:- Adur Walk. Meet 9am at car park between footbridge & Lady Jane pub. Morning only. Leader Stanley Allen. Tel Shoreham 63332.

Saturday 13th September:- Ferring Rife. Meet at Lemon Tree Cafe at 9am. Map ref-TQ092015. Morning only. Leader Mike Hall. Tel Worthing 43177.

Saturday 27th September:- Sidlesham Ferry. Meet 9.30am at the Information Centre. Map ref-S0856963. Leader Dave Smith. Tel Worthing 34655. All day.

Saturday 25th October:- Cissbury Ring. Meet 8.30am at car park north of Ring. Map ref-TQ139085. Leader Bernard Forbes. Tel Lancing 753876. All day.

Sunday 26th October:- The Mumbles Conservation Working Party. Meet at Fletcher's Croft car park (opposite Steyning Church) at 9.30am. Leader Phil Clay. All day. Boots essential; forks, spades, sickles and rakes desirable!

Sunday 9th November:- East Head. Meet 10.30am in West Wittering car park. All day. Leader Colin Messer. Tel Worthing 35108.

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 * BARBEQUE:- SATURDAY 12TH JULY - See note enclosed. *
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MEMBERSHIP CARDS:- Membership cards will be issued for the 1987 season. These will be handed out to Members who pay at the Society's meetings. Would those members who pay by post and want a membership card sent to them please send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the Honorary Treasurer as in previous years.

A Few Words From the New Chairman.

To be elected Chairman of the Society is a singular honour. To follow in the footsteps of John Stafford and John Newnham is a daunting task! Obviously the two previous Chairmen have made inestimable contributions to the Society; they are the supermen of local ornithology.

The success of the Society in recent years and its current sound position now allows the first ordinary Chairman and this reflects the very good teamwork of the Committee and others who work so hard for the S.D.O.S. The excellence of recent Annual Reports is testimony to the skills and dedication of the production team. This high standard is not achieved without effort and most members, perhaps, will not be fully aware of the debt which we all owe to Messrs Clay, Forbes, Dixon, Allen and Newnham. I would offer them my thanks on behalf of all of us who take pride and pleasure in the continued success of the Society.

Inevitably some committee members come and go. May I thank Barrie Watson and Colin Messer for their many years of service to the Society and wish Colin well in his new life in Sweden. We look forward to a talk on the "Domestic Life of the Long-tailed Skua" during one of his holidays back here! It is my pleasure to welcome two new members to the Committee. Richard Weal has already made considerable contributions to the Society by the organisation of our barbeques and the weekend trip to Elmley. Dave Smith is a very active and enthusiastic birder who will bring his great energy and knowledge to the post of Field Officer and to the committee in general.

Finally, please share any thoughts you have about the Society with the Committee so that we can best represent the views of the whole society. So if you have a "grouse" about a "ruff" time or if you think the S.D.O.S. is a good "lark" which adds to your "hobby" don't be "mute", let us know!

Many thanks, Mike Hall.

Garden Bird Feeding Survey

Many thanks to all contributors. The B.T.O. are likely to change the format of their national garden bird feeding survey and it may be sensible for us to change our format at the same time. It is hoped to have details by the Autumn.

Preliminary Results of the Survey - Winter 1985/86:- The extreme and prolonged cold of the 1985/86 winter once again brought a number of less usual species into our gardens. At the same time some observers reported lower numbers than usual of common species such as Greenfinch and tits. As with 1984/85 Redwing, Fieldfare and Blackcap became regular visitors and in addition Treecreeper, Yellow Hammer, Skylark, Siskin, Brambling, Linnet and Tawny Owl were reported.

Fieldfare and Redwing were the commonest winter visitors although numbers of Redwing were rather low. The Fieldfare maximum in an observers garden was 32, although flocks much larger than this occurred. A small front garden in Ferring held over 200 for several days. Many observers commented on the territorial behaviour of individual Fieldfares which took up temporary residence and aggressively dominated the garden. This happened in my own garden and the bird concerned "ruled the roost" and the feeding for several weeks gradually becoming more bold and, apparently, more neurotic. It often appeared unable to feed though the necessity to drive off all others. Strangely, only a Pied Wagtail showed sufficient aggression to become immune to the attacks of the Fieldfare.

As a very general trend most of the commoner species appeared to peak in December with subsequent declines although gulls, where they did occur, maintained an increase as the winter continued.

Mike Hall.

That Questionnaire...

If you are one of the 46 who remember filling in a questionnaire last year you might like to know that they have not been filed away and forgotten. The general intention, as stated at the top of the questionnaire itself, was to identify the needs and problems of individual members in respect of the Society's activities, and to explore various solutions. The number of responses exceeded Committee's expectations and furnished some interesting and even surprising revelations.

Firstly there were some basic questions relevant to members' interests in birds. As Secretary particularly, one is conscious of a noticeable turnover in membership; a state of affairs belied by a small but steady annual increase in membership disguising a small number who fail to renew. It was interesting in this respect that half of the returned questionnaires were completed by members who joined a rejuvenated Society following the Extraordinary General Meeting of September 1980. This necessarily raises questions about the nature of the Society itself; its present rather than past objectives and interests, bearing in mind that we still have a sizable contingent of founder or near-founder members!

It seems clear that members no longer require, as once perhaps they did, a basic knowledge about how and where to find birds. No one admitted ignorance about any locality in the area, all but one possessed binoculars, while no less than 28 had telescopes. Conversely, those needing advice on optical equipment, literature or clothing were relatively few. Likewise, most of us seem to be mobile these days; only 5 complaining of transport problems in contrast to the days I can remember when railway timetables were issued with details of the field outings!

The greatest demand would seem to be for the organisation of a "grapevine" - as many as 37 claiming to miss birds because they do not hear about them. In 1985 Ring-billed Gull, Cetti's and Yellow-browed Warbler, Lapland Bunting and Sociable Plover (have I forgotten any?) all stayed around in the area, affording excellent viewing opportunities. There is every likelihood, with more skillful and regular watching in the area that this run of interesting birds will continue.

Other basic areas where improvement might be called for are related to fieldwork. There seems to be a great deal of potential for survey work. While a maximum of 13 from those who responded had contributed to any one survey as many as 40 expressed a willingness to participate in future. More potential also exists for a greater gathering of records; 36 members claimed to write down what they saw but only 11 submitted those records to the recorder. One solution may be to issue recording forms; 17 members were in favour of this idea. Not many professed difficulties with identification, or what is perhaps more problematic, with writing descriptions of unusual species. This probably reflects disinterest in these areas as much as anything, but surely underestimates their importance.

Other Society activities could be said in the main to meet with qualified approval. The report attracted little criticism; 17 preferring to have it by the A.G.M. as against 20 who opted for a more accurate report at a later date. Field outings, if anything, are becoming more popular: 14 wanted more, 4 preferring outings on Saturdays, 7 on Sundays - but most people not minding either way.

The greatest surprise in relation to indoor lectures was the preference shown (19) for travelogues with 14 in favour of scientific lectures and 8 for members' evenings etc. This equates with 10 who requested more travelogues in the Report (in fact the only substantial complaint against it) although 5 thought there were too many! There may well be some conflict of interest here between the more experienced birder looking to enhance his knowledge and skills and the member with a more general interest for who the mere spectacle of bird life suffices.

Finally, a lot of people made use of the last page to make individual contributions. I have made no mention of these but they have not gone unheeded - they have all been considered at the last Council meeting.

John Dixon.

HAS SPRING ALREADY GONE? - MY RECOLLECTIONS OF SPRING 1986

"What a Spring!" and "Do you call this Summer!" are comments I have regularly heard for the past week or two. After a bitterly cold winter the spring seemed cold and late, indeed I have only just dispensed with my gloves during my early morning seawatches and still need to wear winter jumpers to sit in the garden. Certainly the spring weather was very unsettled with rain falling regularly with low pressure and frontal systems never far away.

There were few signs of spring on the Downs in early April; no birds were singing; amongst the feeding flocks of Linnets, Chaffinches and Yellow Hammers was a Brambling and the only spring arrivals were two small parties of Wheatears. Partridges seemed scarce, not a single Hare was seen and the Lapwings were few with only 5 pairs noted in an area which supported 28 pairs in 1984. Wheatears, as usual, were the most obvious of the early migrants and good falls were logged in early April with at least 78 being seen between Widewater and Worthing on April 2nd. A few Chiff-chaffs and Willow Warblers could be heard at the Sanctuary or New Salts Farm at this time but most of the other migrants seemed slow to arrive. However, by late April most of the common species had been seen and my initial impressions are of a welcome increase in the numbers of Whitethroats and Sedge Warblers but dismally low numbers of Sand Martins, Spotted Flycatchers and Turtle Doves. I was again pleased this spring with the numbers and variety of migrants passing through my garden but I was very surprised to watch a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker climbing up the stems of reeds which border my small pond.

The first Hobby was seen arriving from the sea on April 21st and thereafter I have heard of several being seen within our area. Other migrating birds of prey have been scarce but perhaps the large raptor seen high over Hove at lunch time on April 26th was the same Black Kite which flew eastward from Pagham earlier in the morning and recorded at Dungeness in the afternoon.

Once again the spring induced a frenzy of seawatching and the large number of exciting observations from Worthing Beach can only be summarised here. Record numbers of Fulmars, Gannets, Arctic Skuas and Bonxies were seen whilst species which occur in more settled weather such as the waders and passerines seemed fewer. The best period was the first few days of May when the wind was alternating between south-east and south-west and the log on May 4th alone totalled over 3000 birds including 20 Pomarine Skuas, 50 Arctic Skuas, 50 Divers, 170 Gannets, 130 Fulmars, 1745 Common/Arctic Terns and 22 Little Gulls. Within the long hours of observations it is inevitable that unusual birds will be seen, perhaps the most colourful was a party of 5 Black-necked Grebes in full summer plumage seen swimming offshore on April 14th. Equally spectacular were a party of 13 Avocets calling as they passed on May 20th, and 3 dusky plumaged Spotted Redshanks flying against a strong wind on April 22nd. Other pleasing records were of a Long tailed Duck, 2 Great Northern Divers, one resplendant in full summer plumage, a late female Goosander, 2 Mediterranean Gulls and at least 4 Roseate Terns. The past few years have brought good movements in late May or early June but this year after May 21st a westerly airstream became established which reduced visible seabird movements considerably.

Throughout spring many of the members have been busy mapping the distribution of reed beds and counting Reed and Sedge Warblers. In some areas, like New Salts Farm, the habitat is maintained and the population is good, yet in other areas the ditches are devoid of reeds. I wait with interest to look at the final results. Open levels and reed beds are the habitats of the two rarest birds seen in our area this spring, firstly a White Stork flew South-west over Mill Hill on March 25th, interestingly this followed exactly the same flight line as the last one seen over the Sanctuary in April 1982. The second rarity, a skulking Little Bittern at the Sanctuary on June 1st, is the second for our area; a lucky species for me as the first I also found as a schoolboy doing bird census work at Steyning Mill Pond a mere 20 years ago!

John Newnham.