

SHOREHAM DISTRICT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 1999

Conservation matters need our attention

Many members missed the AGM and the following is an edited and updated version of the report to the meeting given by our President, Stanley Allen . . .

I think you will agree that we have had another successful year with a good variety of outings and entertaining speakers. I would like to tell you something about the council's work especially our involvement in a number of local conservation issues. There have never been so many as at present.

Probably our main concern relates to the plans for the development of Shoreham Harbour. The River Adur and its mudflats and estuary are at the heart of our area. We are lucky to have such diverse habitat, recognised by SSSI Status from the footbridge to Cuckoo Corner.

A year ago the local authority commissioned consultants (Moss) to prepare a report on the future development of the Harbour, bearing in mind that it is primarily a commercial concern. The Moss Report contains some excellent suggestions especially as to improving the wholly inadequate road and rail structure. However, they also made far-reaching suggestions for recreational development, including a tidal barrage which has caused us, the RSPB and others great concern. Following the AGM, I attended a meeting at Adur Civic Centre. The good news was that the proposed barrage has been dropped, but a weir is now substituted. We were told that this is 'very much on the back burner', but we and the RSPB will not be entirely happy until it is dropped completely. Here, members can help. There will be a large exhibition of the plans in July and I urge you to go, and, at any opportunity, express opposition to the weir.

The future of the cement works is also in the balance and here we are represented on a working party co-ordinated by the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. It is too soon to give details of the ideas which have come forward.

Widewater is another key area in which we have great interest and here WSCC have set up a widely representative working party. Widewater is a very precious rarity - a lagoon separated from the sea by a fragile shingle bank. Sadly, its wildlife is declining rapidly for unknown reasons. The working party wants to find out the reason and especially why its salinity is diminishing. I expect many of you know that a very rare sea anemone was found there some years ago (*Anemone iwelii*) the only other known site is Cape Town Harbour. Sadly it has apparently disappeared from Widewater and certainly the birdlife there is nowhere near as diverse as it was 10 years ago.

There is a proposal to build an 18 hole golf course to the west of the airport. Bernie Forbes and I recently attended a meeting with the course consultants and we feel that we have got them interested in including features which will improve the birdlife and the natural environment.

We have also contacted the developers of the new Southwick gas-fired power station to enquire whether a Peregrine nest box could be incorporated. We were told that the RSPB had already requested this and that it is likely to be done. Last, but by no means least, we are represented on the WSCC working party studying wildlife on Shoreham Beach in the hope of obtaining local nature reserve status for this important habitat. The colony of rare Chiding Pinks was nearly destroyed by a bonfire last November but thanks to timely efforts by the WSCC ranger the bonfire was moved to a site where it could do no harm.

Anyone who would like further information especially about the proposed weir is welcome to 'phone Stanley on 01273 463332 or email him at: sallen@rapma.demon.co.uk

SUMMER SOCIAL Wednesday 7 July at 7.30 pm in the garden at the Old Rectory, Coombes

Following our very successful evening last July when the food was provided by *Truffles*, we have decided to do the same this year. Please put the date in your diary now and ring Brianne on 01273 452497 or fax/answerphone on 01273 440311 to book a place.

Brianne would like to hear from you as soon as possible and by Friday July 2nd at the latest. The Old Rectory is exactly 1.5 miles north from the traffic lights on the A27 by Lancing College.

The charge per person is £5 for a huge choice of delicious food. Please bring your own drink and glasses. A choice of non-alcoholic drinks will be available at a nominal additional charge. Do come for the good company and a relaxed evening!

Who else is interested in garden birds?

Our garden is situated on the eastern side of Ferring Rife and its location has provided a good variety of 'avian' visitors over the years. One of the pleasures of garden birdwatching is the anticipation of seeing something a little different from the regular blackbirds, robins, and blue tits. During spring or autumn, as migrants are moving through, we often see a Chiffchaff or Willow Warbler darting from the cover of shrubs to collect an insect from the lawn or perhaps a Blackcap will be skulking through the pyracantha or cotoneaster feeding on the berries. Other visitors have included a Redstart investigating a pile of compost, a Wheatear perched in a willow, and a juvenile Cuckoo one early September day.

Winter highlights have included Fieldfare and Redwing and even Snipe and Woodcock in very cold weather. Once a large flock of Siskins twittered into an alder tree.

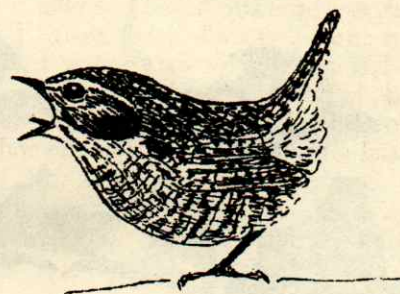
We have kept records of all the birds seen in the garden since 1989 and despite the enjoyment of seeing the species mentioned above, it is the constant observation of the more common birds which indicates fluctuations in numbers over a period of time.

The physical content of our garden has not changed much over the years although shrubs have matured or been

replaced. We have always provided water, food such as peanuts or scraps and, of late, sunflower seeds. Shrubs provide cover and berries and cosmos *Cosmia bipinnatus*, has guaranteed the arrival of Goldfinches. Conversely the loss of some conifers seemed to coincide with the disappearance of goldcrests. We only use insecticides in desperation - such as when blackfly threatened the runner beans!

From our records, it would appear that some species are in decline. For example, while the numbers of Blackbirds, Blue Tits and Robins have remained more or less constant, the once numerous House Sparrows and Greenfinches have declined. Plotting a graph of numbers against time shows a similar rate of decline for these two species. Why should this be? Have other members noticed the same or have 'our' Greenfinches or House Sparrows deserted us for you?

Like some other members of SDOS, we contribute our records to the BTO Garden BirdWatch. I have volunteered to organise an SDOS garden bird survey in a similar format to that of the BTO to replace our present garden survey. Hopefully, as many garden watchers as possible will contribute their records to make this a meaningful exercise.



Let's hope there will always be birds to watch in our gardens!

Martin Ford

So, contrary to what we said in our last Newsletter, an SDOS garden survey will continue. With this Newsletter, you should receive a brochure about the BTO Survey. This monitors garden birds all through the year and has proved remarkably popular.

You will be able to do the SDOS survey only, but we feel that many members will want to do both. You do have to pay £10 pa to join the BTO survey but some 10,000 plus birdwatchers nationwide are happy to do so and you would receive the excellent quarterly Garden BirdWatch newsletter. Although the monitoring of common birds is the real objective of the survey, you never know what may turn up if you watch carefully, especially if you live near the south coast as we all do.

BIRDS ON OUR PATCH

By all accounts a rather a quiet winter no doubt due to the relatively mild weather. Apart from a Pallas's Warbler in November near Brighton Marina, the most exciting birds were just outside our area. A Cattle Egret at Ovingdean was made public on 24 January after having apparently been present for some time before that. The bird was still there in mid-May. In mid-March two male Surf Scoters were on the sea at Pett Level with a small flock of Velvet and Common Scoter.

Early spring migrants in March included a Yellow Wagtail at Widewater beach (9th) and a Sandwich Tern off Brighton on the 12th. A remarkable fall of Black Redstarts occurred on

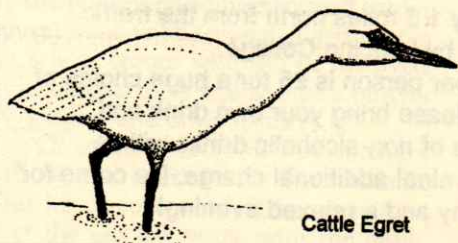
24/25th with perhaps as many as 50 birds to the east of Brighton, including 22 at Sheepcote. At Easter, a Stone Curlew flew over Whitehawk Hill and a Serin was a flyover at Brighton.

Seawatching from Brighton Marina produced a Sussex record with 87 Avocets in one flock on 21 April. During first few days of May, easterly winds produce a good passage of Pomarine Skuas for watchers at both Brighton and Worthing.

The Peregrines laid four eggs in the nestbox on Sussex Heights in Brighton, and all hatched by the weekend of 8/9 May. The adults can sometimes be seen over Western Road and Churchill Square and the cemetery in Dyke Road is a popular viewpoint. Seeing the birds may take time, but if all goes well, activity at the nest should increase as the young get close to fledging around mid to late June.

Thanks to Peter Whitcomb and others

Thanks to Richard Ives for the three drawings in this issue



Cattle Egret

Nightingale Survey

I expect by now most members are aware that the BTO has undertaken a repeat national census of breeding Nightingales this spring. The British population of this musical species is said to be declining but no full surveys have been conducted since 1980. Research suggests that the decline in population has occurred mainly in the north and west of Britain whilst numbers in south-east England may not have changed significantly.

The Nightingale is quite widespread in Sussex but records in our local recording area are fairly unusual. Unfortunately the song period will be coming to an end as you read this but if you have been able get out on a warm May night and have heard a Nightingale singing please report to me the following details: 1. Site name and full 6-figure grid reference; 2. Number of singing males heard; 3. dates of observation; 4 Any brief notes about habitat.

John Newnham

Walton House, 61 Grand Avenue,
Worthing, West Sussex BN11 5BA
e-MAIL jnewnham@bigfoot.com

Antarctica and the Falklands by Clive Hope

If you attended the December 1998 meeting you will have heard Tony Marr describe his experiences leading and watching seabirds at various exotic localities. He mentioned that he was to lead a trip to Antarctica at the end of the year for Wildwings and so it was that I joined him and seventeen others that included Martin Kenefick and Mark Welfare who are known to some of you.

We began with a flight on December 28 to Buenos Aires where we stayed for a day and a half. This enabled us to make two visits to the remarkable Costanera Sur wildlife reserve only ten minutes from the city. Under the expert guidance of Mark Pearman, a local expat birder, we saw Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans, several species of heron and egret, numerous ducks, cranes and coots, pigeons and doves, Monk Parakeets, Guira Cuckoos, one hummingbird species, as well as a host of flycatchers, thrushes, cowbirds, cardinals, sparrows and finches all to give us a wonderful introduction to South American birding.

Then we joined the comfortable 22000 ton Orient Lines' cruise-ship the *Marco Polo*. From dawn on the following three days the keenest seawatchers among our group (who are only 19 out of 500 passengers) are up on deck for some exciting watching. On the first day this includes many Black-browed Albatrosses, Great and Sooty Shearwaters, Southern Giant, White-chinned and Atlantic Petrels and Wilson's Storm Petrels. In addition 100 Long-tailed Skuas, 34 Manx Shearwaters and a single Pomarine Skua are also seen. The big swell does not suit everybody and there are a few missing from our New Year's Eve celebrations.

The next day adds the beautiful Soft-plumaged Petrels (one of my favourites with their acrobatic flight), impressive Wandering and Royal Albatrosses, White-bellied and Black-bellied Storm Petrels and our first prions – small grey and white seabirds rather like phalaropes.

On the third morning we identify some of the 750 Prions as Slender-billed and add Grey-backed Storm Petrel. Later we sail into Scottish scenery but instead of Eider flocks along the shore there are Kelp Geese (and very smart they are too) and large flocks of Imperial Shags fly past the ship as we prepare to disembark for five hours on West Point Island in the Falklands. The highlight is a mixed colony of Black-browed Albatrosses and Rock Hopper Penguins. Also seen are the shy Mag-

ellanic Penguins, a bold pair of Striped Caracaras that attack our rucksacks and try to rob us of our food, Upland Geese, Flightless Steamer Ducks, brilliant Long-tailed Meadowlarks and many others. It is a perfect day with wonderful weather.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said the next morning when grey wet and increasingly windy weather greets us as we land in Port Stanley. After an hour or so of our planned trip en route to a King Penguin colony we are summoned back to the ship for an exciting ride in the tender – the ship is dragging its anchor and stormy conditions prevail.

Passing the Antarctic Convergence we enter the Drake Passage but conditions are calm. Antarctic Prions, Grey headed and Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses compensate for yesterday's disappointments. Another favourite makes its appearance – the Cape or Pintado Petrel, small parties of which follow the ship. Then our first sight of Antarctica in the evening – King George Island in the South Shetlands.

Next day we land at Deception Island, an extinct volcano caldera. A few brave souls bathe in the hot springs that emerge from the black sand on the beach in the middle of snow showers. Chinstrap and Gentoo Penguins make their first appearances. Humpback Whales have been seen earlier but another 17 are sighted during the evening. Magically just before dinner as we sip our gin and tonics, a Snow Petrel appears around a nearby iceberg – fantastic!

We reach the head of the Lemaire channel the next day but it is blocked by pack ice. We are at the most southerly point of the trip – just above the Antarctic Circle. We land at Port Lockroy where there is a thriving colony of Gentoo Penguins accompanied by South Polar Skuas and Sheathbills.

A similar colony inhabits Paradise Bay on the actual Antarctic Peninsula. Our final landing is made in glorious weather, in complete contrast to the previous two which have been in dull cold conditions. This is on Half Moon Island in the South Shetlands. Crabeater and Weddell seals are on the shore and Antarctic Shags and Chinstrap Penguins dominate the rocky outcrops. Antarctic Terns and Kelp Gulls are also present.

Dramatic islands are seen of snow and ice as we head back north into an increasingly turbulent Drake Passage –

a contrast to the trip south. Blue Petrels are added to the list and an amazing 400 Cape Petrels gather round the ship for a while. At last we sight Cape Horn and savour our last Black-browed Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters as we sail into the calm water of the Beagle Channel.

A beautiful sunset is a promise of what dawns as a stunningly brilliant day in Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego – not a description one can often apply to the weather here. We are off at 08.00 for a coach trip into the magnificent Tierra Del Fuego National Park, such a complete contrast to Antarctica with its forests, lakes and mountains. There are three species of Caracara, Dolphin Gulls, confiding Austral Pygmy Owls and best of all, four Andean Condors soaring over the ridges.

Other exotically named birds are seen before we move in the afternoon to the Martial Glacier. Few birds are seen but the views are spectacular. On board that evening we bid farewell to the friendly catering and cabin staff that have done us proud.

The return to Buenos Aires is by jet from Ushuaia. A final visit is made to Costanera Sur where a few more species are seen including the exquisite Many-coloured Rush Tyrant and the bustard-like Southern Screamer. In the afternoon we head off for Gatwick.

We have clocked up 160 species of bird, three of whale together with a couple of dolphin and two or three of seal. Memories of Antarctica are of pristine snow and ice-scapes in crystal clear water. Everything is deceptive in its sheer size because of the clarity of the air. Only when you have been do you appreciate the remarkable qualities of the first explorers who without any of the aids and support we enjoyed reached this last great wilderness on Earth.

Mumbles Open Day Saturday 31 July

Phil Clay and the Steyning Ringing Group invite members to visit this private reserve to look round and watch birds being ringed.

Drop in anytime between 08.00 and 13.00. Access is by kind permission of Seeboard, parking along their Steyning grid station access road, east off the A273 Steyning Bypass three-quarters of a mile north of the Bramber roundabout.

Field Trip to Levin Down

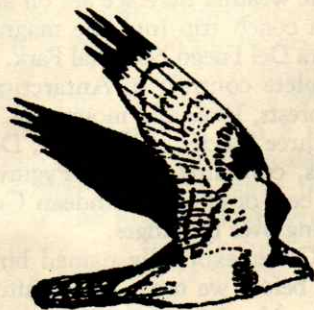
Many of you will remember the excellent talk on Levin Down by Ann Griffiths in February, following which we decided to have an extra outing there in April. The forecast was dreadful (even snow was threatened) but ten people (including Ann) turned up at the Charlton village crossroads where we were welcomed by two Swallows which boded well. The initial climb to the reserve across a field is quite steep but as you climb over the double stiles

you move into a different micro climate and begin a pleasant gentle walk (apart from one steep hill) along the eastern edge of the reserve.

The morning was filled with recently arrived migrants; we lost count of Blackcaps, Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. We were rewarded with close views of nine different butterflies with Duke of Burgundy, Green Hairstreak and Grizzled Skipper all remarkably early. The wildflowers were breathtaking - especially the sweet violets and cowslips. But our best sighting was an Osprey floating over head and Stanley Allen saw a Buzzard. There is no doubt that this is an exciting place to visit and shows great promise for the rest of the summer.

I'm sorry if you didn't hear about the April outing. The Sussex Wildlife Trust are holding open days there on 7/8 August and we have another outing coming up on 21 August.

Brianne Reeve



Osprey

Sarah Patton writes from Pagham

I was very pleased to be appointed as the Assistant Warden here last October. My main area of responsibility is 'Visitor Services' which leaves me in charge of the Visitor Centre and the Voluntary Stewards who (wo)man the Centre, provision of information and interpretation and overseeing the delivery of the Environmental Education service. I sometimes manage to venture out onto the Reserve and enjoy occasionally taking part in bird counts and leading guided walks. I am maintaining my keen interest in moths and will be leading the trapping on the Reserve.

I have initiated a couple of major projects in the last few months which will, hopefully, prove to be of interest to naturalists. We started on a new pond near the Visitor Centre during the winter to replace the pond with a damaged liner. A number of problems were encountered so the project will probably not now be finished until the autumn, but the exciting news is that it is now planned to be part of a larger project. A large part of the grassed area by the pond is to be transformed into an educational wildlife area, particularly for school groups who will be involved in its design. There will also be a butterfly 'garden' and other features.

Of more interest to birdwatchers will be the overhaul of Tern Island. This has become choked by vegetation over the last few years, with the result

that Little Terns no longer breed there. In consultation with John Badley (RSPB Langstone), English Nature and our Scientific Steering Committee, we plan to undertake a botanical survey this summer (to establish the distribution of Chidding Pink). Then, in the winter, the Environment Agency will use their shingle-moving machinery to scrape the soil away that has formed on the surface. It may be some time before Little Terns decide to move back, but the changes should prove beneficial to other shingle nesting species such as Oystercatchers and Ringed Plovers.

Although much of the work is routine and predictable, you can sometimes get involved in the unexpected. Our Coastal Plain team were working on Pagham Spit recently putting up the posts for the seasonal fencing. We noticed a Gannet in distress and the Manager bravely removed his trousers and waded out to rescue the bird. It was in a terrible state with fishing line around its neck and down its throat and hooks stuck into its body. On the other end of the line was a dead Black-headed Gull. We took the bird to Brent Lodge where they managed to remove the line and hooks. A couple of days later, having eaten them out of house and home, we released the bird back at Church Norton - a happy ending.

INFORMATION

AND REQUESTS

If you haven't yet paid your 1999 subscription this is the last Newsletter you will receive. Please stay with us. Send your dues forthwith to treasurer John Maskell, 41 St Lawrence Avenue, Worthing BN14 7JJ. Please note that this is John's correct postcode and not as shown in the last two newsletters. Subscription rates are: Single - £8.50, Family - £12, Junior - £2.50.



SDOS Recorder Peter Whitcomb submitted the longest list of birds for the BTO New Year Bird Count. He found 82 species between 7.45 am and 3.40 pm to beat his nearest rival by just one. There were few lists of more than 50 species.



If you have access to the Internet, you will want to know that the Sussex Ornithological Society's web site is now up and running and includes recent Sussex sightings. The address is www.sos-org.com. UK rarity news, updated hourly can be had from www.birdguides.com.

The Internet is a very useful source of information for planning birdwatching holidays especially in the US and Australia.

For Texas try starting from texasbirding.simplenet.com; while if interested in Arizona an excellent site is at www.aztrogon.com; and for Australia - www.ausbird.com.



Several SDOS members visited the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water last year and considered it well worth the long journey. This year's fair runs from 20-22 August and is supporting Brazil's Atlantic Forests.



The Autumn Newsletter is planned for October and contributions are welcome. Please send to Pat Mulcock, Pinehurst, West Drive, Angmering, West Sussex BN16 4NL by 15 September. Thanks to all those who produced so many excellent contributions this time, that it was difficult to squeeze everything in.

Work on the 1998 Report is proceeding but we cannot estimate at present when it will be ready.