



Chair's report for the reporting period 9 March 2022 to 14 March 2023

Introduction

It is with great pleasure that I present my second report as chair of SDOS. Our last AGM was held via Zoom, after which we became more confident about a gradual resumption of face-to-face meetings, guided walks, bird surveys and outreach activities. It is an enormous relief that as a society we have survived the restrictions of the Covid period and emerged in a strong and healthy state.

In line with our mission, “*we continue to maintain and enhance our members’ interest in birds and natural habitats*” and this is all made possible by the hard work and dedication of members who volunteer their time and expertise. Without our volunteers we would not be able to offer an extensive programme of walks and talks and I thank you all.

It is also my pleasure to thank my Council colleagues for their incredible contributions over the past year. You all make a huge difference and the society is thriving because of your dedication, energy and enthusiasm.

Council will look slightly different next year because Clive Hope is standing down after 19 years. Clive was Hon. Recorder between 2004 and 2013 and has led around 50 outings. On behalf of Council and all our members, I wish to place on record how grateful we all are to Clive for such a magnificent contribution and we look forward to seeing him out birding and enjoying his ‘retirement’.

The remainder of this report is structured around our four Aims for the year and illustrates, mostly in numbers, how successful we have been. I am very proud to present this Annual Report to our members.

Aim 1:-To promote the study of birds, especially within the society’s recording area

We produced three junior newsletters for our younger members, and want to reach more young people in the coming year.

Six indoor meetings have been held at a new venue, with many people returning to enjoy high quality talks and presentations. The new venue has presented a few challenges that we are confident of overcoming very soon.

More than 1,000 people have signed up as followers of our Facebook group - Shoreham Birding - a 33% growth in just a year. A small number of new members have been recruited via this route and SDOS is now much more widely known.

Two highly acclaimed bi-annual newsletters were produced with both editions boasting over 60 pages of informative content.

Eighteen walks were delivered by volunteers, with one attracting 35 participants. We are very pleased that our walks continue to attract a high level of interest, and equally pleased that new routes are being offered in the coming year.

Aim 2: To promote the protection of birds and their environment, especially within the SDOS recording area

We provided two substantial written responses to public consultations: one conducted by the fisheries regulator (Sx IFCA) regarding hand gathering (bait digging etc) on the Adur Estuary SSSI; the other was a response to South Downs National Park in relation to the cement works housing scheme. (See Appendix A for more detail.)

We provided an awareness session for a water sports activity centre, promoting eco-friendly paddling on the Adur Estuary SSSI, and a talk was also given to a residents association in Shoreham (focussing on the birds of the SSSI).

Twelve bird surveys were carried out at Cissbury Fields, providing a baseline against which population trends can be monitored in years to come.

SDOS participated in 12 meetings with the Ouse and Adur Rivers Trust and organisations like the RSPB, Natural England, and Sussex Wildlife Trust, to find solutions to the growing problem of recreational disturbance on the Adur SSSI, erosion and sewage incidents. We are hopeful that interpretation panels will soon appear alongside the SSSI - this would represent tangible success and a reward for our efforts.

We carried out ten bird surveys at New Salts Farm (NSF), spanning spring to autumn, and maintained a dialogue with the NSF project team, advocating for the needs of birds.

We have contributed to World of Widewater and Friends of Shoreham Beach committee meetings, offering our ornithological expertise. This results in high levels of cooperation between all three organisations and shared events.

Aim 3: To work with the local community to promote an interest in birds and their knowledge of local conservation issues

We have been involved in two educational outreach sessions, based at Widewater, with each session reaching approximately 90 children from Seaside School, Lancing. This was a joint project with World of Widewater and Friends of Shoreham Beach. These have proved to be very popular with the children and the school has asked for more events.

In August 2022 we participated in the Cissbury Fields Bioblitz event, showing some 60 – 70 local residents what was on their doorstep and promoting SDOS to a wider audience.

In January 2023, a session for a U3A group from Brighton and Hove was delivered to great acclaim. Approximately 15 participants joined the walk and the feedback was very positive. We are always keen to partner with the U3A group.

We have contributed seven articles to local magazines, websites and blogs, raising the profile of SDOS and sharing stories about birds in and around Shoreham.

Aim 4:-To maintain systems and resources - for the efficient running of the society

In May 2022 we finalised two key policy documents: A Health and Safety policy and a Safeguarding policy.

In May 2022 we finalised a junior member 'membership package'.

During the year under report, we completed 29 risk assessments to cover our walks and talks programme.

Council members donated over 900 hours of time to SDOS.

Conclusions and thanks

I'm immensely proud of what has been achieved over the past year and I think that SDOS is reaching and influencing more people than ever before. Enthusing people about birding is what SDOS is all about - and I'm sure that we will continue to flourish and welcome new people to the society in years to come.

Tony Benton
Chair - SDOS

14 March 2023

Appendix A:- Our approach to public consultations

During the year covered by this report, we responded to two public consultations, and it is appropriate to summarise here our approach:

1. The **fisheries regulator (Sx IFCA)** conducted a Sussex wide **consultation regarding hand gathering**, and we responded with regards to the **Adur Estuary SSSI**. Hand gathering includes bait digging, the use of crab tiles and shell fish collection. Our substantial submission included photographic evidence of bait diggers disturbing birds, coupled with detailed observations regarding the frequency and intensity of bait digging and likely consequences for the fauna and flora of the SSSI. We also made use of research from Sussex Ornithological Society which demonstrated how waders have declined at a faster rate on the Adur Estuary SSSI than anywhere else in Sussex. Our approach was evidence based, meticulous, and persuasive, arguing that bait digging (and the use of crab tiles) was incompatible with the conservation objectives of the SSSI.
2. We also provided a very detailed response to a consultation held by **South Downs National Park Authority** in relation to the **cement works housing scheme and Plan**. Our approach was to outline, with hard data, what was known about birds using the site, including scarce and sensitive breeding birds such as Peregrine Falcon. We also consulted a number of SDOS members who had detailed recollections of what they had personally observed over many years. Our response went through seven iterations before it reached a standard that we could be proud of. The finished product was a tightly argued, evidence based, and constructive document, that was easy to read and impactful.

In summary our submission suggested -

“that the development of the Plan should consider the need to conserve the present ornithological value of the site but also grasp the opportunity to enhance the ecological interest of those large areas of the site that will remain unsuitable for development. We believe there is an opportunity here to develop a large site for quiet nature-based recreational activity which would be an appropriate use, both from the perspective of minimizing disturbance to important breeding species, and in the context of the ambitions for ecological regeneration and rewilding that are implicit in the Adur Regeneration Project. Such a strategy would seem to us to be in keeping with the purposes of the National Park: to conserve and enhance the natural wildlife and beauty whilst also promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the Park’s special qualities”.

We are now waiting to see what South Downs National Park Authority decides to do next, and are confident that our approach reflected positively on our expertise and integrity as a voice for birds locally.