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RSPB East Surrey Local Group

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2009

No 45

LEADER'S LETTER

Hi Folks.

We celebrated our 25th anniversary this January, what a great start to the year! Whilst we can be proud of contributing in excess of £34,000 to the Society over the years, we still need to look to the future, and continue '*doing our bit*' to raise the profile of the RSPB and conservation further still. Here's to the next 25 years then, which promises to present many more challenges for wildlife – they need all the help they can get. There's the threat of climate change, Lydd and Manston airports, and of course 'Boris Island' in the Thames Estuary - who's for bird strikes?! On that happy note I will end. Best Wishes and good birding.

Brian Hobley

B.T.O ATLAS SURVEY TQ 34

I moved to TQ34 about five years ago. Perhaps not the most romantic of names but the Ordnance Survey grid reference defines the 10 x 10 km square which includes my home in Lingfield.

Now that the British Trust for Ornithology Atlas project is in full swing, many of us are getting used to such squares and the 25 tetrads (2 x 2 km squares) which they contain. I find that there is a great deal of satisfaction in monitoring my home tetrad (TQ34R) and submitting records online. In the first winter period I recorded 68 species and subspecies – Brian Thomas added the 69th - lesser redpoll. There was one major

surprise – great white egret – and a few 'goodies' such as lesser spotted woodpecker and stonechat. In the summer period, I recorded 81 species, though some of these were clearly migrants. The most satisfying were nightingale, a particularly showy male and spotted flycatcher, which sang in June for one day only. I also recorded reed warbler, sedge warbler and lesser whitethroat, none of which you can take for granted. But no sign of the lesser spotted woodpecker!

In TQ 34 as a whole, the figures are provisionally 89 (winter) and 98 (summer). Many of the additional species were recorded at local lakes such as Wire Mill and Hedgecourt, both of which attract a good range of birds all year round. Hedgecourt is probably best known as a fairly regular wintering site for bitterns but all sorts of unexpected birds can turn up, such as black tern, ferruginous duck, kittiwake and garganey in recent years. The surrounding farmland is also productive as the farmer usually sows seeds with birds in mind. A walk along the north shore of the lake is recommended. The farm is the only site in TQ34 where I have seen red-legged partridge. Wire Mill can also produce locally scarce birds such as goldeneye, common sandpiper and sedge warbler. As with all 'local patches', persistence pays off.

Over the last few years the British Wildlife Centre (on the A22 south of Blindley Heath) has been devel-

oped as a wetland reserve. Unfortunately, the best parts are not accessible to the public – although a certain amount can currently be seen from the bridle path which passes through Shawlands Wood. The nightingale was at the junction of this path and the A22. The reserve has added shelduck, teal, wigeon, little ringed plover, green sandpiper, greenshank and little egret to my tetrad list – and the great white egret, too.

Sometimes, luck presents you with a gift – as when a waxwing took a liking to my neighbour's garden. And at one point a barn owl roosted in a farm building close by.



Elephant Hawkmoth Maggie Noble

TQ34 is also rich in other forms of wildlife. I have a good list of dragonflies, butterflies, moths and mammals for the area – although, to be honest, I could do without the moles and the rats that regard our garden as home. My moth trap has revealed what an astonishing diversity of moths there is with nearly 500 species recorded to date. These have included a new moth for Surrey, several second to fourth records (including scarce silver-Y) and a red-data book species, heart

moth. The trap has also shown that hornets are active at night. Sometimes I am left trying to identify a moth from the wings that the hornets leave behind.



Hornet (by Ken Noble)

Coming back to the bird Atlas, there is still plenty of scope for field-work. Are magpie and peregrine the only species to be found in TQ34A during winter? In fact all the tetrads that follow the M23 corridor are seriously under-worked, and many others are still waiting for timed tetrad visits. But as you count the jackdaws and little owls, don't forget to keep an eye out for the damselflies, deer and dung-beetles that are just as crucial to the local eco-system.

Kenneth Noble

All photos ©Kenneth Noble

www.wildlife-galleries.co.uk

SPITZBERGEN NAVIGATION

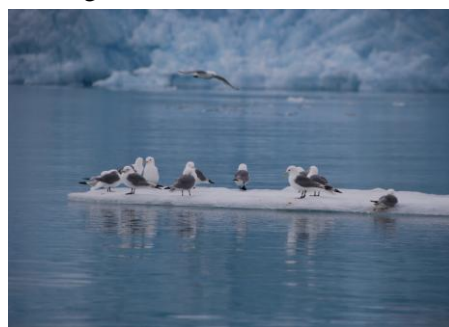
It's July 2008 and we've flown from Oslo into Longyearbyen, the capital of Svalbard. Our aim is to cruise for 10 days and enjoy the Arctic scenery and wildlife of this remote area.

Spitsbergen is the largest island forming the archipelago of Svalbard, only 1,300 kilometres from the North Pole. Approximately two-thirds of the surface is glacier-covered and although warmed by the Gulf Stream along its northern coast, it is enveloped by the Polar ice cap during the long Polar night from November to February. Why go there – it's the home of the Ice Bear.

We sail westwards from Longyearbyen along Isfjorden turning northwards towards our first landing – Ny Alesund. This is an old coal mining town with abandoned railway engine and trucks by the shore, but it is more famous as the departure point of the "Norge" and "Italia" airships which flew to the North Pole in 1926 and 1928. Today we saw Arctic foxes breeding under one of the buildings now mainly

occupied by scientists during the summer months. Arctic terns with young and purple sandpiper and snow bunting are feeding on the tundra in numbers unseen back home. There is the bizarre sight of barnacle geese goslings being rounded up by kayak at the water's edge for ringing.

We arrive next morning in front of the Monaco Glacier. We head out in zodiacs, which carry about 10 passengers, and cruise along the towering cliffs of the snout of the glacier. There are rafts of kittiwakes and fulmars resting on the ice floes in the water and the occasional skua looking for a meal.



We continue northwards stopping briefly at Worsleyneset for another zodiac cruise to view a mother bear and her two cubs relaxing. We are making for Moffen Island, a protected walrus sanctuary but cannot get very close. We are warned that the edge of the pack ice has hampered other ship's progress this season but we cruise on in open water beyond 80 degrees north – within 700 miles of the Pole. However, we finally encounter the edge of the pack ice and nudge our way into the broken ice to view a polar bear on a kill and another sleeping. Strangely they stand out, appearing golden in colour against a pure white background. Then we are passed by frolicking pods of harp seals, some swimming backwards.

We return southwards down the Hinlopen Strait which divides Spitsbergen from Nordauslandet. At midnight we are in blue skies and full sunshine. Next morning we are moored under the bird cliffs at Alkerfjellet but there is thick fog and we are limited to attending lectures or watch films on board for the rest of the day as we progress southwards.

Finally, off von Otteroya's island, the mist lifts and we have a close

encounter with one large male polar bear, initially asleep on an ice floe, but he awakes and walks off as 8 zodiacs pass by, line astern. We leave him in peace and cruise through the broken ice. We are overwhelmed by the quietness of the place.



Another misty morning but we get off again at Kiepertoya and catch eider duck resting on the snowy shore and guillemots and "tysties" in the water. The Russian Captain, aptly named Beluga, is concerned that we might not make it through if the ice, driven by the wind, converges and coalesces in front of us. He is reported as saying to our tour leader that some of the passengers may have to catch a later flight home!

We manage to pass between the islands of Barentsoya and Edgeoya safely. At Dolerittneset, we zodiac past a group of wallowing walrus and follow a large, rather dirty, polar bear as he ambles effortlessly along the shore.



We round the southern end of Spitsbergen and arrive off Gashamna, a 17th century historic whaling centre, in Hornsund. Ashore there are mounds, former sites of blubber ovens, and many large whale bones now bleached and colonised by vibrant green mosses, orange lichens and tiny flowering alpine plants such as moss campion and purple axifrage. After lunch we reach a beautiful glacier at the head of Samarinvagen. We disembark and cruise again. At last I connect with an ivory gull, the Holy Grail for birders. Suddenly, there is a

substantial calving and one of the zodiacs is forced to speed away as we bob up and down in the after wave and brash ice resulting. As we return to the ship we catch sight of a glaucous gull and downy chick on top of an island, silhouetted with a golden halo by the afternoon sun. We barbeque on the rear deck well satisfied.

The penultimate day off Bourbonhamna we disembark and cruise towards an old trapper's known as "Bamsebu", the home of the bear. There was indeed a bear prowling around and we were unable to land but saw piles of beluga whale skulls and bones littering the beach. However, after lunch, we were able to wander on the tundra at Snatcherpynten on the Recherche fjord and admire more arctic plants, stone polygons and lateral moraines of the retreating glacier.

Out last day off Poolepynten, on Prins Karls Forland, we go ashore early to walk towards a wallow of walrus. They are very curious creatures and watch us from the water's edge. We approach cautiously having been advised that they are capable of only two types of behaviour – sleep and abject panic if disturbed!



After lunch our final excursion ashore is to Alkhorset. We get close to more Arctic foxes amongst the rocks whilst reindeer gallop across the tundra and are dive bombed by nesting skuas

Did the trip measure up to our expectations? You bet! The weather can be frustratingly unpredictable and the place names unpronounceable but the landscape and wild life, especially encounters with polar bears and walrus, were something special. Unlike the early explorers and whalers, whose footsteps we trod, we had the luxury of *sat-nav*,

emails, a warm, comfortable cruise ship and bar to return to each night. Now that's the way to travel!

Article and all photographs by John & Janice Lawrence

VOLUNTEERS FOR MALTA

'For my sabbatical last spring, I went to experience first-hand the work of *Birdlife Malta* in combating the indiscriminate shooting of birds. It was to be a month to remember! I witnessed thousands of gunshots – each one illegal - aimed at everything from night herons to golden orioles, red-footed falcons to Montagu's harriers. We were spat at, had our cars vandalised, and witnessed the intimidation that ordinary Maltese people face from the powerful hunting minority and which makes their country inaccessible to them. I also saw the incredible courage of the *Birdlife Malta* staff and volunteers – just a week after I left, one volunteer had his farm buildings torched. **But I saw real hope-** *Birdlife Malta* and their *Springwatch* and *Raptor Watch* volunteer projects are making great strides in both quashing illegal hunting and enthusing the Maltese people about the value of the island as a stepping stone for wild birds across the Mediterranean. Malta has the potential to be fantastic for bird-watching. I saw 1,000 tree pipits in the morning, wowed to the night-time calling of Cory's shearwaters at their cliff colonies; plus there are eastern treats such as collared flycatchers and pallid harrier to be enjoyed. If only the hunting and trapping can be brought under control. There's plenty you can do to help. *Birdlife Malta* needs members – I assure you your modest subscriptions will be well spent. Or go over for a week or two to volunteer – they work very hard to ensure you are safe. Or watch for whenever RSPB put out the call for help in terms of letter-writing and petitions.' (for more info go to www.birdlifemalta.org).

Adrian Thomas, Communications Officer, RSPB SE Regional Office.

(NB. Readers will recall that your Editor feels very strongly about the 'Mediterranean slaughter', having vowed not to return to Malta or Cyprus. However having read Adrian's article he

might now take up the challenge to go and help as a volunteer!). Ed.

LOCAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

Following on from the early arrival on 23rd September of winter thrushes in our area the last quarter of 2008 produced some noteworthy sightings. Five stonechats were at Court Farm Warlingham on 9th October, with a single fly over crossbill nearby the following day. Nearly 2 inches of snow fell and remained for a couple of days in our area at the end of the month; the first at this time since 1934!



Little Green Heron – Ray Baker

A magnificent juvenile little green heron was at West Hythe Kent and remained several weeks. On 27th it was possible to view it along the Grand Military canal and then drive to nearby Dungeness for a red-breasted flycatcher. The last day of the month produced 2 Leach's petrels, 7 great and 2 pomarine skuas off Shellness, and 2 short-eared owls came in off the sea. In early November Sam Thomas noted a roosting red kite in the old Kearton reserve Caterham, whilst further afield a magnificent red-flanked bluetail graced the seafront at Ramsgate. Our group's outing to Rainham on 16th paid dividends with 2 races of rock pipit and two serins observed. Finally there was a little egret feeding opposite the Grasshopper pub Moorhouse on 24th November, and at Bough Beech on 27th your Editor saw a bearded tit in a rose-bay-willow herb by the Oast House. A very smart great northern diver was viewable close to the Causeway, the same day. The bearded tit is one of only three records for this species here, the first two being 'single observer flyovers'; I was accordingly very pleased to add it to my site tally after a 38 year wait!!

Brian Thomas

EVENING MEETINGS 2009			FIELD TRIPS 2009	
JAN	Wed 14th	Dominic Couzens: "Vive la difference." Light-hearted comparison of life styles of British and European birds.	Sun 18th	Harty Ferry & Shellness.
FEB	Wed 11th	Barry Kaufman-Wright: "Seasons of a woodland." Enjoy the flora and fauna of a typical English broad-leaved woodland.	Sun 15th	Pagham, Selsey & West Fields RSPB.
MAR	Wed 11th	Dennis Newland: "On the River Zambezi in Zimbabwe." A personal insight into game watching in changing weather conditions.	Sun 15th	RSPB Dungeness nature reserve.
APR	Wed 8th	AGM – Guest speaker- Glen Jacobs (RSPB). Learn about the RSPB reserves and attractions of nearby South Essex.	Sun 19 th	RSPB Northwood Hill & Cliffe Pools nature reserves.
MAY	Wed 13th	Patrick Coulcher : "Mountains of Scotland." Enjoy the natural history of the highlands and islands.	Sun 26th	Seaford Head. (6.30.a.m. meet at Splash Point for sea watch).
JUN	Wed 10th	David Darrell-Lambert: "Improve your bird-watching skills." Useful tips on enjoying birding, identifying birds and keeping records.	Sun 10 th	RSPB Minsmere nature reserve. Coach trip (Pick up 7.30 a.m. Godstone).
JUL	Wed 8th	Richard Pople : "Birding the Gambia." See many colourful birds in a mosaic of habitats.	Sun 14th	Stodmarsh and Grove Ferry
AUG	SUMMER BREAK		Sun 19th	Mystery Trip
SEP	Wed 9th	Gordon Lansbury : "Wild Florida." Come and see the wildlife of this popular American holiday destination.	Sun 16th	Rye Harbour and Pett Level.
OCT	Wed 14th	Mike Read: "Red Kite country." Admire the wildlife and landscapes of un-spoilt mid- Wales through the seasons.	Sun 13th	Beachy Head, Belle Tout and Birling Gap.
NOV	Wed 11th	Brian Nobbs : "Birdwatching in Trinidad & Tobago." Enjoy the flavour of South America with a Caribbean beat."	Sun 18th	RSPB Rainham Marshes nature reserve
DEC	Wed 9th	Christmas Meeting– members' tales/ photographs.	Sun. 8 th	Boat Trip. Chichester Harbour. Boat departs 9.30 a.m. Meet Godstone Green Car Park 7.30 a.m.
			Sun 13th	RSPB Elmley Marshes nature reserve.



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. Half day trips – see above for time and place. For details of coach trips contact Brian Hobley (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 2009 starting at 8.00 pm.

Admission currently £2.00 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.

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

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