

The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the October 2015 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. I hope you are all doing your bit to give nature a home. One of my bird boxes was hijacked by wasps this year! We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of indoor meetings and wildlife watching outings.

In this newsletter we have a article on residential RSPB volunteering from our Group Leader, Valerie Hall. Michael keeps us up to date with his secretary's report and John asks where have our blue tits gone. We also have our usual update from Annabel at Leighton Moss, including her recent appearance on BBC Countryfile.

If you would like to contribute a short article, or have any interesting wildlife news from your local patch, please email your contribution for the next RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter to kenharrison_1@yahoo.co.uk no later than 30 March 2016.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Secretary's Report Autumn 2015

Our indoor meetings earlier this year were very well attended. This Spring, at the Over Kellet Village Hall, members enjoyed two talks, one entitled "A Tanzanian Safari" and the other "From Seagulls to Eagles", given respectively by Ken Harrison and Peter Smith, and each illustrated with their own excellent wildlife photography.

In June, we went out of doors with John and Jill Webb on a very enjoyable circular walk to see the varied flora, fauna and geology of the countryside adjacent to Leighton Moss. On our traditional end of summer "Evening at Leighton Moss" with John Wilson, several of us for the first time, enjoyed elevated views of the reserve from the newly opened "Skytower". Looking ahead, on 18 November at 2.00 pm in the Victoria Institute, Caton, Professor Ian Nieduszynski will be giving an illustrated talk entitled "The State of our Winter Migrants" and on Friday 11 December we have a now regular fixture on our programme when Bill and Chris Ashby invite members to join them at Hest Bank shore for wader watching, on that occasion we will be meeting up at 9.30 am. Please note that we will be meeting at Teal Bay (VVV Health & Leisure Club) car park (SD461659), and not Hest Bank as previously advertised. If you are driving along the Promenade towards Carnforth, you pass the golf course on your right and then take the next left towards the health club.

As all of our outdoor meetings are inevitably subject to the vagaries of the British climate, I would recommend that you ring me on 01524 65211 if the weather forecast is poor, as in the event of a cancellation I am usually informed about this 24 hours earlier by the person leading the walk.

Those of you who attended our AGM in September will have heard that after some 25 years of service, Eileen Harrison has decided to retire from our local group committee. Over the years, Eileen along with other tasks, would handle bookings for coach and minibus outings as well as organising the secondhand book sale that we used to hold every other year. Again, on behalf of the membership, many thanks.

At our AGM two of your committee (myself and our newsletter and web editor Ken) received log service awards for 10 years as RSPB volunteers.

Finally, may I make a “plea” for new recruits to our committee, especially anyone who would be willing to eventually take on a key role in the running of the local group. I say this as our Membership Secretary, Jennifer Rae, wishes to stand down from this role at the next AGM and likewise, myself, as I would like to stand down as Secretary as from the 2017 AGM. Similarly, if any of you have good bird identification skills we would welcome offers from individuals (and they don't have to be a committee member) who would be willing to lead some of our outdoor meetings. Your participation is always most welcome.



Michael Gardner - Local Group Secretary

(Ken & Michael © Valerie Hall)

RSPB Residential Volunteering

Residential volunteering, “What is that?” you may ask. It is going to stay on or near a nature reserve and volunteering. “That sounds good” you may say. It is, it's a great experience but you have to work on the reserve, it isn't a holiday.

My first experience as a residential volunteer was in Scotland in 2001. I was living near Aberdeen and was a member of the Scottish Wildlife Trust. I saw an advert in their magazine asking for volunteers to help on Handa, a small island off the northwest coast of Scotland. So I applied and was accepted. I did not know what to expect and was rather nervous, but I had an amazing week and really enjoyed the time I spent there. As the island is only occupied in the summer months by a warden and volunteers for the Scottish Wildlife Trust the facilities are fairly basic, as they are also on some RSPB reserves. I was determined to repeat the experience as soon as I could, but circumstances determined that it was to be a few years before I could volunteer again.

It was at the end of April 2012 when I volunteered for a second time. It was for the RSPB, for a week on their reserve at Mersehead in Dumfries and Galloway. This is a fairly small reserve, but with a variety of habitats, a beach, an estuary, freshwater lagoons and a small wood. On this reserve the accommodation is in the centre of the reserve and is quite modern, as it is in a converted farmhouse. It consists of a flat with 3 bedrooms housing long and short term volunteers, a shared kitchen/diner, lounge, bathroom and a shower room. Below the flat there is an education room, a conference room, offices and a kitchen. I shared a bedroom with a lady of similar age to me; we became friends and now volunteer together.

In 2013 we both volunteered for 2 weeks at the RSPB reserve at Mull of Galloway. This reserve is on a coastal headland with cliffs and heathland. There is no accommodation on the reserve so we were housed in a holiday cottage in the village of Drummore, 5 miles away. In 2015 we returned to Mersehead for a week in August and next year we are hoping to go back to Mersehead for 2 weeks at the end of April.

As you can see, the accommodation can vary with each reserve. It is provided free of charge, but you have to cater for your own meals. You need to be prepared to take enough food for the first few days or longer depending on the location, proximity to shops and time off to go shopping. You also need to fund the cost of transport to the reserve and back home.

You are asked to work for 5 days each week, usually 8 hours during the day, but sometimes it could be an early morning or an evening instead. The work depends on the type of reserve and the work you have volunteered for. To find out about reserves that take volunteers and the type of work they offer, go to the RSPB website and click on "residential volunteering". There is a brochure that you can download which gives lots of information about volunteering and details of the work required on each reserve. There are vacancies for long term and short term volunteers and interns. The work required could involve habitat and estate maintenance, surveying and monitoring, working with livestock, assisting in the visitor centre, at an event, or on guided walks. There is also a form on the website which needs to be sent in to head office to apply for a placement on a reserve, a bit like a job application. Some of the reserves get booked up quite quickly and the volunteering department starts to deal with requests in November each year.

This is just a general overview of residential volunteering. For me it means being in a completely different environment for a week or more, closely involved in the work of a nature reserve. It is like being part of a team who are working hard to preserve the reserve as an important place for the future of wildlife. The work I have done has been varied and not too strenuous, as I do not feel strong enough or quick enough to be of great help in very heavy work. But the placements offered vary for each reserve depending on the habitats on the reserve. Volunteers are accepted aged 16 to over 75. You meet young volunteers who are keen to gain experience for their CV, older people who are looking for a change in direction and people like me who value the chance to work in a beautiful place and hopefully contribute something to help nature.

If anyone is considering trying residential volunteering I hope this has been interesting and helpful. I would be pleased to chat about this if anyone wants to contact me. Hope I have inspired you.

Valerie Hall

Where have all the Blue Tits gone?

I have had many reports of low numbers of blue tits coming to garden feeders so far this late summer and autumn. Great tits are also down, but coal tits are doing well. In fact in some gardens coal tits are the commonest tit. What is going on? Why is one of our commonest garden birds so low in numbers?

(Blue tit nest © John Wilson)

The answer is that productivity has been the lowest we have recorded in the nest box schemes run by members of the North Lancs Ringing Group in the Arnside/Silverdale AONB and the Lune Valley. This year we monitored 153 blue tit and 120 great tit nests. Of these, 74 blue tits and 71 great tits failed to produce any young. This compares with just 14 of each species in 2014. Last year blue tits fledged 938 young, this year it was down to 303. Great tits were down from 595 to 208 this year. An increase in predation, probably by weasels and great spotted woodpeckers, was partly to blame, suggesting that the predators were short of food. However, the main reason was young dying in the nest from shortage of caterpillars, added to by the wet and windy weather in May and June which made it difficult for the parent birds to find prey items.



The low numbers of blue tits is reflected in our ringing returns from Leighton Moss, with only 146 to date after the breeding season, this compares with 422 over the same period last year. At other sites we ring, including gardens, coal tits are present in good numbers.

Other birds which appear to have done well from our ringing returns include goldcrest and siskin, which, like coal tits, are mainly conifer breeding birds. One assumes that breeding conditions in this habitat have been more favourable.

Recording birds in your garden can be most enjoyable and helps keep track of their populations. Why not take part in the BTO's Garden Bird Watch Scheme. To find out more, search online under Garden Bird Watch. The Lancaster & District Birdwatching Society is also collating garden bird records this winter of nuthatch, goldfinch, blackcap, starling, greenfinch and tree sparrow. Details from Peter Cook.
(e-mail: peter.cook33@btinternet.com)

John Wilson

News from Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserve

October 2015

Reaching new heights

We are thrilled and delighted that on 10 July, we opened our brand new elevated viewing platform known as the 'Skytower'. The 9 metre high tower was officially opened in a ceremony attended by local councillors, partners, press and the Skytower's funders: the Heritage Lottery Fund and Lancashire Environmental Fund.

The Skytower is a first for the RSPB and offers our visitors the opportunity to see right across the reedbed to the surrounding Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and out over picturesque Morecambe Bay.

As the largest reedbed in North West England, Leighton Moss is home to a fantastic variety of wildlife. Throughout the year, you can enjoy wandering through tall reeds and witnessing wildlife spectacles from the many hides, but thanks to the Skytower, you can now also experience the reserve from a completely different angle – 9 metres up in the air – and hopefully spot some of the reedbed residents much more easily. It has been a dream of ours for a while to be able to offer an elevated lookout point for our visitors and thanks to our funders, this has become reality.

The Skytower not only provides a heightened spectacle for visitors, but it will also be easier for our staff and volunteers to monitor the nests of some of the reserve's most iconic birds. From the top of the tower, rare reedbed birds, such as bitterns and marsh harriers, will be easier to spot going into and out of their nest sites, making it more straightforward to find out if breeding has taken place and how many nests we have. This is vital when it comes to making the reedbed the best possible home for them.



(Skytower © David Mower)

Staffing update

In July we welcomed our new Site Manager Jarrod Sneyd. Jarrod said “I’d like to introduce myself first as the little boy that obsessed about Leighton Moss and bitterns. I dreamed of managing my own reserve. Finally, after another 39 yrs (!) I can also introduce myself as the new Site Manager of Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserve. I feel so privileged to be working for wildlife and for you.

I volunteered at Leighton Moss in my holidays as a teenager and then when I was 20, I stayed for a full 12 months as a residential volunteer. That volunteering was the start of my conservation career. I wouldn’t have progressed without it. I won’t go into all the steps inbetween now and then, but I have been paid to work in reedbeds, saltmarsh and limestone grassland before. My journey brought me back to Leighton Moss as Assistant Warden (1998 to 2005). I also monitored reedbeds nationally and did some work on the bittern research project.

For the last 10 years, I have been honing my skills as a Site Manager in a Staffordshire woodland, RSPB Coombes and Churnet Valleys. It is an incredibly beautiful place. As the only paid member of wardening staff for almost all of those 10 years, volunteers were critical too. Together, we made Coombes and Churnet Bigger, Better and more Connected (BBC) for people and wildlife.

I’ve been here now for just a few months, but what astounds me is just how many more volunteers there are. Saving Nature is a big challenge and we can only meet that challenge together, as a BIG TEAM. Not only is volunteering a path to a career, it is incredibly fulfilling, knowing that in whatever way, you can make a contribution to Saving Nature. If you are out there and want to help with our challenge then come and join us. Here’s to the future of Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay! Let’s make it Bigger, Better and more Connected for wildlife and people!”

Former Site Manager Robin Horner has moved up into (acting) Regional Reserves Manager, responsible for RSPB reserves in the North of England.

We have also said a fond farewell to our Assistant Warden Alasdair Grubb, who moved on to become the Warden at our Dee Estuary reserves. His replacement, Nick Godden, will be familiar to some as he was an Assistant Warden here last winter and has spent the spring and summer Wardening our Marshside reserve in Southport.

Stars of the silver screen

Having hosted two seasons of *Autumnwatch* (2013 and 2014), along with appearances on the *One Show*, *Countrywise* and others, we are getting quite used to the limelight here. We were thrilled when *Countryfile* got in touch to say they wanted to come and do some filming here in mid-September as part of a programme around the new Morecambe Bay Cycleway. We proposed featuring the reedbed management work we are doing at the moment, along with our new Skytower.

All was arranged for them to come and we knew the presenter doing the interviews was to be the lovely Anita Rani. We were very excited to meet her and the crew, as *Countryfile* is not a show we have worked with before here.



(Anita and Gleb © Annabel Rushton)

As Anita is a contestant on this year's *Strictly Come Dancing* they also brought the *Strictly* film crew and Anita's Russian dance partner Gleb Savchenko along with them!! As part of *Strictly Come Dancing*, they usually feature what the contestants have been doing in the week before the show, following them round during their day job, which in Anita's case is presenting *Countryfile*.



Following an interview with Anita and our Site Manager Jarrod, we came back out of the reedbed to head up to the Skytower. However, not before Anita and Gleb had an impromptu practice of their dance steps along the path - waders and all! As you can see from the images, the less than usual flooring and footwear didn't prevent them from pulling some serious moves!

Anita interviewed me at the top of the Skytower too, and then she and Gleb just had time to practice a few more steps at the top before they headed off to their next filming location.

To keep up to date with all that is happening at Leighton Moss, visit rspb.org.uk/leightonmoss

(Jarrod & Anita © Annabel Rushton)

Annabel Rushton
Visitor Experience Manager

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e-mail address: **rspblancaster@gmail.com**

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