

The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the April 2015 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. I hope you are all doing your bit to give nature a home and have birds breeding in your nest boxes and other nature in your garden. My frogs have filled my pond with frogspawn this year and dunnocks are nesting in my hedge! We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of spring and summer outings.

In this newsletter we have a warm welcome from our new Group Leader, Valerie Hall. Michael keeps us up to date with his secretary's report and John updates us on the state of our garden birds. We have our usual update from Leighton Moss, and also news from Jacqui Murphy on her new life on Mull.

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 September 2015.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Secretary's Report Spring 2015

The spectacle of thousands of flowering snowdrops in our local woodlands, along with the first birdsong and increasing hours of daylight are for me a timely reminder that spring is well on its way and also a reminder to tell you about our forthcoming events.

On Tuesday the 19th May we are holding a joint outdoor meeting with the RSPB South Lakeland Local Group. This walk will be in Barbondale - a lovely upland valley that is the haunt of cuckoo, redstart and that rare mountain blackbird, the ring ouzel. We will be meeting outside Barbon Church (grid ref: SD630825) at 6.30 pm. On Friday 29th May, the first of this year's "Evenings at Leighton Moss" takes place, again we meet at 6.30 pm, this time in the main car park of the reserve.

As wildlife activity is usually in "full swing" during May and June, you are invited on Saturday the 20th June to join John and Jill Webb, when they will lead a walk from Leighton Moss, taking in Trowbarrow Nature Reserve and Yealand Haweswater to see birds, butterflies and of course, the wildflowers that will be showing at their best. For this event, a joint meeting with the RSPB South Lakeland Local Group, we meet in the Leighton Moss main car park at 10 am.

As summer draws to an end, the second of our traditional "Evenings at Leighton Moss" takes place on Friday the 28th August, led, of course, by John Wilson and meeting in the Allen Hide at 6.30 pm – *please note that due to an error this starting time is not shown on your printed 2015 programme.*

Regrettably, owing to poor weather, our Knott End outdoor meeting of the 7th January had to be cancelled. I am pleased to tell you that this has now been re-scheduled for Wednesday 14th October and we will be meeting at 10 am in the public car park at Knott End.

On Thursday 17th September we will have an extra talk at Leighton Moss at 7.30 pm on "The Inside Story of Autumn Watch 2014" by Annabel Rushton and Alistair Grubb. This will be a joint meeting with the RSPB South Lakeland Local Group.

There will also be an extra indoor meeting at the Victoria Institute, Caton, on Wednesday the 18th November, when Professor Ian Nieduszynski will present an illustrated talk entitled "The State of our Winter Migrants". This afternoon meeting will begin at 2.30 pm.

Finally, on behalf of our members and committee I would like to welcome Valerie Hall as our new Local Group Leader and wish her well in her new role.

Michael Gardner - Local Group Secretary

Introducing Valerie Hall, our new RSPB Lancaster Local Group Leader : a greeting to all our readers

My name is Valerie Hall and I have been appointed as the leader of the RSPB Lancaster Local Group, so this is just a few notes to introduce myself.

I want to pass on my enthusiasm for the work the RSPB does for birds and in protecting nature for the future. I am hoping to meet lots of members at our meetings during the year and I want to encourage all members, and non members, to join our summer outings, whether you are an expert, or beginner, or somewhere in between. You will be most welcome, an extra pair of eyes is always useful, as you may spot something missed by others. We are always looking for that elusive bird to add to the list for the day. We are willing to share our knowledge or learn from the experts, so please come along.

I have been a member of the RSPB since 1996 and have always been interested in birds and wildlife in general. It is only over the last three years that I have had the opportunity to come into contact with others who are knowledgeable about birds and nature. I have visited nature reserves, joined walks with groups and gone out with friends in order to learn as much as possible. I have also been a residential volunteer on two of the RSPB reserves and have booked again for this summer. So I am still on a learning curve but getting there slowly.

I was born in Manchester and visited places in Lancashire on days out with my parents and, later on, on camping trips with my own family, so it is good to be living near my home county again. I have been a bit of a nomad as I haven't lived in one house for much more than five years at a time, but it does mean I am familiar with numerous areas of Britain. I lived in Scotland near my son and his family for a while and was involved in a family business, when they moved to work abroad, I moved back to England. This gave me more time to develop my own interests and when I arrived in Ingleton in April 2014 and retired in October 2014, I took the opportunity to become more involved in the RSPB and joined the RSPB Lancaster Local Group. I am now hoping to keep my feet firmly planted in Ingleton as I also have voluntary commitments with a Community Interest Company based in Ingleton and a Cumbria Wildlife Trust local group. This all keeps me busy using skills from my working life, adding to my knowledge of birds and wildlife and making new friends.

Valerie Hall

Changes in Garden Birds Over the Years

It's quite fascinating to me to consider how garden birds and garden feeding has changed over my nearly 70 years of bird watching. During the 1950s very little feeding was done as food was still scarce and it was just a case of "putting out the crumbs for the birds". By the 1960s though feeding had started and I well remember an early committee meeting of the Lancaster & District Birdwatching Society when an excited member gave us the news that he had a greenfinch taking food in his garden for the first time! Another early memory was of the first report of a great spotted woodpecker taking peanuts. It was reported by the then Bishop of Lancaster, but it was in his curate's garden not his! Interesting that at that time great spotted woodpeckers were thought to be on the decline.

Since those early days the variety of food available and the amount people can afford to put out has increased dramatically and the birds have responded. Many, I am sure, have retained or increased their populations at a time when changes in agricultural practice has seriously reduced the weed seeds available to them during winter. One species which has certainly benefitted is goldfinch, a very rare bird in the early years but now a common garden bird. A good example of this is Andrew Cadman's Over Kellet garden where he ringed 143 last year. A species that has recently benefitted is tree sparrow, they have been reported in a few gardens for several years, but this year many people tell me they have had them for the first time this winter. I had reports of a peak count of 34 in a Warton garden.

One interesting question is how many birds visit your garden? Ringing can certainly throw some light on this. We have made 6 ringing visits to Jerry and Barbara Martin's garden near Silverdale. The most blue tits they see at once rarely exceeds 10, but we have caught 140 different blue tits and they are still seeing un-ringed birds. They occasionally see 3 great spotted woodpeckers together but we have caught 8. Other totals include 36 coal tits, 44 great tits and perhaps surprisingly for a territorial species, 13 robins.



(Yellowhammer © Ken Harrison)

Each year the Lancaster & District Birdwatching Society publishes a report on the birds of the area. We are especially interested in receiving any records of three species visiting your garden. They are tree sparrow, blackcap and yellowhammer. The latter is rather special, at the moment we only know of gardens in Hutton Roof and Burton in Kendal that they visit. Here they feed table seed on the ground or in one case on a wall. So please send your records to me at johnwilson711@btinternet.com - all I need are approximate numbers and time of year.

John Wilson

News from Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserve

March 2015

Wildlife update

From frolicking otter cubs to bold bitterns, Leighton Moss has had some truly stunning wildlife spectacles over the past six months. There have been up to seven otters spotted regularly from Public and Lower hides over the winter months. They are keen to play all day, often right in front of the hides. This unusually bold behavior offers both fantastic views for visitors and great photography opportunities. Over Christmas, visitors were lucky enough to see the otters “ice-skating” across the pools, a wonderful sight that caused quite a stir - they even featured photos of it on regional news and *BBC Winterwatch*.



(3 Otters on the Ice © Richard Cousens)

Though our otters have been stealing quite a lot of the glory over the past few months, there have been several exotic visitors that have been rather exciting too! We were treated to a visit from a green-winged teal in February, they aren't commonly seen at the reserve as they are an American duck. The best way of telling our usual teal from a green-winged teal is looking for the white stripe on their sides whilst they are swimming about. On the common teal, the stripe runs horizontally, whereas the green-winged teal has a vertical line. There are only a few records of this bird being on the reserve, so it was great to see here.

We are thrilled to have a couple of tree sparrows at our feeding station. Although they are regularly seen in other parts of the local area, we don't see them often here at all, so they have caused much excitement! They've been presenting each other with nesting material, so hopefully they'll be breeding soon. Looking back into records for Leighton Moss, there were 2-4 pairs breeding here until the 1980s. There were also 15-25 of them regularly spending the winter on the reserve, feeding on grain in the Leighton Hall pheasant pens. However, a change to the feeding methods in the pheasant pens at that time meant that they dispersed. There were records of them on the edges of the saltmarsh in winter, including on the grain field near Allen hide until the late eighties, but very few sightings since. If you have never seen one, or not spotted one here before, then now is your chance! Fingers crossed they will be putting in appearances for a long time to come.



(Tree Sparrow with Feather © Richard Cousens)

We've “bean” very lucky this year as we've had some appearances from some unusual geese over the past few months. Three tundra bean geese were spotted mixed in amongst the greylags and pink-footed geese on the farmland by Barrow Scout Fields. Bean geese are not a common sight for Leighton Moss. Though they do look very similar

to greylags, they are essentially orange in all the places pink-footed geese are pink - this includes the legs and band of colour on the beak. Five European white-fronted geese were spotted in February and seem to be sticking around too. They have mostly been seen in the fields by the level crossing, but have also made appearances at Lillian's pool. They have a very distinctive "white blaze" round the base of their beak, so keep your eyes peeled if you are on the reserve anytime soon.

As well as some more unusual sightings over the past few months, the reserve has been full of the usual favourites. The bearded tits were great this year, with fantastic views from our grit trays. Bitterns also showed well from Public hide this winter, especially as the pools began to freeze. Water rail and snipe have also been showing really well from all of our reedbed hides, with regular sightings every day. Merlin and peregrines have been great on the reserve; the peregrines are now starting to prepare for the breeding season at Warton Crag.

Avocets have arrived back at the saltmarsh, with numbers being around thirty. There are great views from the Allen and Eric Morecambe hides. We are looking forward to hopefully another bumper year for them this time round. We totted up how many chicks Leighton Moss has produced, and we found that we have added 109 wonderful avocet chicks to the world since they started breeding here in 2001. I am sure you will all agree that this is a great success, and none of this would have been possible without the dedication of many staff and volunteers. And of course, as RSPB members you know that your monthly contributions are going towards many wonderful projects like this one, so a huge thank you!

As the swathes of reeds turn from golden to green we are looking forward to what spring and summer has to offer. The reedbed bursts into life with a variety of butterflies and damselflies flitting from reed to reed, or basking in the sunshine on a stem. The paths are lined with a blanket of wildflowers, such as marsh valerian, meadowsweet and lesser celandine, adding a splash and fragrance to the site. The marsh harriers will soon be skydancing and the avocets and black-headed gull colony will soon be nesting. Come and see us soon!

Staffing update

As featured in last year's newsletter David Mower retired as Warden here in June 2014 after 27 phenomenal years at the reserve. David has since been presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Charity Staff Foundation in recognition of his incredible fifty years involvement with the RSPB. Richard Miller who has been an Assistant Warden at Leighton Moss for six years has recently been appointed as the new Warden. Before working at Leighton Moss, Richard was the Estate Worker at RSPB Otmoor in Oxford. He looks forward to carrying on his work at Leighton Moss and watching the amazing wildlife flourish over the coming years.

Many of you may know that Jacqui Murphy (formerly Fereday), who has worked at Leighton Moss as Visitor Operations Manager for the past eleven years, left at the end of January. Jacqui and her husband have realised a lifelong dream and moved to the Isle of Mull, to run a holiday accommodation and wildlife tours business – Enjoy Mull. We wish them all the best for the future.

Kevin Kelly will now be taking up the reins as Visitor Operations Manager. Many of you will be familiar with Kevin as the smiling welcome of Leighton Moss, as he has been our Membership Recruitment Manager for the last two and a half years, before stepping up to this new role.

We are also pleased to announce that the post of Site Manager of Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay will be filled in July by Jarrod Sneyd from RSPB Coombes Valley. Jarrod will be familiar to many of you as he is a local lad. Jarrod was a volunteer at Leighton Moss and did his degree at Lancaster University before joining John Wilson and David Mower as part of the wardening team at Leighton Moss. Jarrod then took us the job of Site Manager at Coombes Valley. Welcome back Jarrod!

Sky tower update

The sky tower is an elevated viewing platform and is part of the three year Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) project that is taking place at the reserve. The sky tower is to the right hand side of Lilian's hide and will offer canopy level views over the reedbed, the stunning surrounds of the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and out towards the dramatic backdrop of Morecambe Bay. It will also make bittern and marsh harrier nest monitoring much easier for our dedicated wardening team and survey volunteers. The metal work is completed and a wooden walkway leading to it from the path has been constructed. The walkway just needs side panels or handrails to be added, but the tower is waiting for a final coat of paint. This final coat can only be applied when the temperature and air conditions are at a certain point. It is hoped that the tower will be opened soon but there is a massive amount of metal to be covered and as the timing depends on natural conditions, who knows when!! But hopefully soon.



(Sky Tower © Ken Harrison)

Anya Kuliszewski, Visitor Experience Intern

Enjoying Mull



(Loch Tuath © Jacqui Murphy)

“You either must be mad or very brave”, “wish I could do that” and “what a fantastic idea”, are just some of the comments from people when we told them we were moving to the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides for an adventure and a new life.

Why Mull?

Once you have been you will understand.

I have had a long association with this stunning island for over 30 years, volunteering and working for the whale watching/research team of Sea Life Surveys. This then developed into becoming a director of the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust. Mike has also been a visitor to Mull for as long as I have. We both have good friends here who are giving us a lot of help and support. The whole ethos of the island is laid back and accepting. There is no

real crime. I heard that something was stolen once and the police were off the Island!

Both of us share a passion for wildlife, the sea and working with people. This island has a lot to give. Spectacular scenery, a wide variety of habitats which supports a lot of wildlife all year round. There are the “big 4” including otters, white-tailed eagles, golden eagles and red deer.

On a day away from working on the house we were treated to a white-tailed eagle dropping on to the shore in front of us, two otters playing, golden eagles tumbling in the sun and red deer right next to the road, watching us, watching them.

The list is long for the Mull birds, so to name a few of my favourites: the hen harriers floating around the field of rough grassland, short-eared owls on the moorland, great northern divers in the lochs, wheatear, snipe, ravens, cuckoo in the summer, not forgetting the buzzards, often taken for granted, yet fantastic to watch with the sun on their backs.



(White-tailed eagle & gull © Mike Murphy)

We both have a wide interest in natural history and there is still a lot to learn. I particular love seeing the wild flowers coming up in the spring, the geology, basking sharks in the summer, minke whales and dolphins in the bay. Butterflies, adders, beach combing and swimming in the crystal clear sea. It's not too cold honest!

We started our adventure in September when we married in Tobermory. Our families loved the “Balamory” wedding.

We bought our lovely cottage “Dungallen” in the same week. The cottage is in Salen in the centre of Mull. We are less than 5 minutes away from the sea on the east and 10 from the west and loch-na keal, that is if you keep your eyes on the road, not the views! We have spent many days on the cottage, turning it into our home. The turning point was celebrating the heating working, it's a treat to shed several fleeces and not have frost on the inside of the windows.

We are now in the process of launching our website enjoymull. We have turned part of the cottage into a self-contained self-catering accommodation for 4/5 and will be running wildlife/scenic tours around Mull in our comfortable 9 seater minibus. What better way to fulfil our working lives than to share our love of nature with like-minded people.

If you are tempted to visit we are on www.enjoymull.co.uk or tel: 07748678630.

Jacqui Murphy

Vote for Bob

Only a few weeks to go to the general election and Bob still needs your vote. The RSPB is supporting this campaign aimed at getting help and support for nature on the agenda of the political parties.

Have a look at the website www.voteforbob.co.uk and after casting your vote and sending an email to your MP, have a look at all the photos that have been downloaded showing birds, animals, plants, views, people etc. Our display board shows some of the quirky ones, but there are lots of good interesting images. We're proud supporters of Bob. A vote for Bob is a vote for nature. Sign the petition today.



The opinions expressed by the contributors to this Newsletter are not necessarily those of the RSPB or of the RSPB Lancaster Local Group.

The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

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