Welcome to the Spring edition of Tonbridge Local RSPB Group’s newsletter. We’ve news from local reserves, the RSPB’s views on the nightingales versus housing battle at Lodge Hill and a challenging cryptic crossword.

Letter from the Leader

Dear friends and supporters,

The importance of the RSPB’s work was highlighted by publication of the State of Nature report last September. A collaboration between over 50 wildlife organisations, including the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts, this showed, on balance, nature doing rather badly in the UK. Primarily it seems to be changes in agricultural practices that are causing much of the decline in diversity. As well as reserve management, the RSPB is working with many sympathetic farmers to try to reverse the decline. Politically, the EU decided in December to maintain and further implement the Nature Directives after a two-year review and a grassroots campaign spearheaded by the RSPB. If you took part in this lobbying, thank you! As Brexit takes its course it will be important to ensure, as a minimum, that UK regulations incorporate these standards and processes. For all these reasons, your continuing support is vital.

At our indoor meeting in September it was encouraging to hear from Alan Loweth about the creation of Broadwater Warren nature reserve from a conifer plantation acquired in 2007. It was a fascinating story, showing how much enthusiasm, hard work, and skill RSPB staff and volunteers brought into realising a powerful and imaginative vision. I was particularly impressed by the team’s confidence, based on scientific knowledge, that the new habitat would attract special birds like woodlark, tree pipit and nightjar. They were right – all those species, and many others, have come.

From Broadwater Warren, in our next meeting John Buckingham took us as far away as possible, to New Zealand. Then in November we were back in Kent and, in December, on the shores of the Baltic. But do our nature talks, usually a single presenter showing still photos, really compete with the utterly amazing nature films on TV these days? Yes they do. Having the presenter there in the flesh is a more real experience. It’s the same difference that makes theatre still popular despite the high production values and special effects of films. At our meetings you can ask questions, and chat with the presenter at half time. On TV you may get a superficial spectacle, a sentimental ‘will the cub make it’ story, or the wildlife equivalent of a car chase. In contrast our presentations are geared to an audience that wants more depth, more information (and more birds, even though we’re not just about birds!).

When it comes to our field trips, the difference with the TV experience is even starker. Being in a hide in the middle of a reserve on the north Kent marshes, looking at hundreds of waders and wildfowl of all shapes and sizes, watching out for a ranging harrier or peregrine – there’s nothing like it.

Meanwhile, your committee is pleased to welcome Tamsin Day, elected at the AGM in November, as our new member, and to thank David Simmons who has stepped down after three years. In the last newsletter I appealed for a volunteer to take on the vacant treasurer’s job, but so far this post remains vacant. I’m grateful to Geoff Mason for taking this on in the interim, but this can only be for a limited period as he has the major job of organising the quiz night. For the group to continue, this post must be filled. Please think about it.

Best wishes,

Martin

Pictured: tree pipit. making a comeback at Broadwater Warren. Credit: Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

Visit our website: www.rspb.org.uk/groups/tonbridge
News

Broadwater’s 10th anniversary year

This year marks ten years since the RSPB took over Broadwater Warren near Tunbridge Wells and began its transformation into a stunning nature reserve. To celebrate, there will be a range of special events including a dawn chorus walk in spring, a family activity day in July and a fungus foray in the autumn. Warden Matt Twydell is keen to determine how many species call the reserve home and to focus efforts, a bioblitz is planned for June. RSPB ecologists will visit the site ahead of a public event on June 10. Matt’s latest addition to the bird list was a ring-necked parakeet which flew over the car park in January, bringing the total to 92 bird species. Further notable sightings have included woodlarks singing across the heath, a Dartford warbler, several stonechats and a ‘cronking’ raven as well as a flock of a dozen crossbills.

Dates for your diary include:
May 6, 5-7:30am: dawn chorus walk
May 20, 9am-12noon: sleepy dormouse search
May 25, 7-10am: learning bird song walk.

Further details of these and other events, including charges where applicable, will be publicised on the reserve’s website, or contact the Wealden Office on 01892 752431 or broadwater.warren@rspb.org.uk.

Spotlight on Tudeley’s meadow

The recently restored Brakeybank meadow at Tudeley Woods RSPB reserve will take centre stage this summer as part of National Meadows Day. Celebrating the diversity of wildflowers found on the reserve, visitors on the day will be given a guided walk to see some of the resident flora including the orchids. Last year, visitors were able to help spread green hay to aid the recolonisation of areas reclaimed from encroaching scrub and trees.

The national awareness day is organised by charity Plantlife in collaboration with 11 other organisations including the RSPB. As well as protecting this important natural habitat, it aims to raise awareness of the plight of wildflower meadows and grasslands and equip communities with the knowledge and skills to halt further decline.

To book a place on the July 2 event at Tudeley Woods, which will run from 11am until 3pm, contact the Tudeley team on tudeley.woods@rspb.org.uk or 01892 752430.

What’s on the menu for goldfinches?

Results are in of a goldfinch feeding survey which was conducted between November 2015 and February 2016 by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Garden birdwatchers helped determine that sunflower hearts were overwhelmingly the preferred option, with nyger seed coming second. Natural foods were also taken with teasel and thistle the favourites.

I find goldfinches are attracted to the seedheads of Knaautia macedonica, a scabious-like flower, in my garden. As soon as the first flower loses its petals, sure enough, the goldfinches appear. They continue to visit during the months when the seeds are available but become occasional visitors for the rest of the year, even though sunflower hearts are available in a feeder at all times—Ed.

All change for coach outing

This year’s coach outing will be going to Pulborough Brooks RSPB reserve, instead of Lakenheath Fen as originally planned. The date, May 20, and cost of £20 (plus entrance fee for non-RSPB members), remain unchanged. For further details contact Doreen (doreendixon@talktalk.net or tel: 01892 832130).

Pulborough is situated in the picturesque Arun Valley within the South Downs National Park. With a wide variety of habitats including wetlands, woodland and heathland, a good range of species should be seen and heard. There are also the added benefits of a shop, a children’s play area and a café.
**News**

*Winter update from Dungeness*

The majority of the management work at Dungeness during the winter has involved clearing willow from the edges of water bodies. This is to restore the natural fen habitat, increase diversity within the water and boost invertebrates and wader populations. A lot of willow has been cleared from the ARC trail to increase the damp sand habitat for the rare Jersey cudweed, *Gnaphalium luteoalbum*, and damp sand beetles. The pond by Makepeace hide has been improved to increase the diversity of water plants and provide an optimum breeding habitat for great crested newts. Meanwhile, the discovery area is set to benefit from a reduction of rank vegetation to increase wildflower diversity. In readiness for this summer’s Big Wild Sleepout, further tent pitches have been created.

A feeder trial has been running for tree sparrows by the Boulderwall farm house. The aim is to find out which feeders (filled with different types of seed) the tree sparrows are using most. Depending on results, it is hoped that a cheaper alternative to red millet can be used to support the sparrows in future.

Wildlife highlights have included two long-eared owls roosting in the willow trees by the dipping pond and a ring-necked duck on a lake near the reserve’s entrance. Meanwhile, scapu, white-fronted geese, Bewick’s swans, water rail, Caspian gulls, bearded tits, bitterns, marsh harriers, peregrines, chiffchaffs, goldcrests and firecrests have added to visitors’ enjoyment.

Among the forthcoming events at Dungeness is the popular Bittern Breakfast. An early morning walk, when bitterns are expected to be heard booming, will be followed by a cooked breakfast. There are four dates to choose from:

April 1, 8, 15 and 22, all running from 7-10am.

Further details of events, including prices, can be found on the reserve’s website, www.rspb.org.uk/dungeness.

To book, call 01797 320588 or email dungeness@rspb.org.uk.

**Raffle prizes please**

Donations of good quality prizes for the raffle to be drawn at this year’s fundraising quiz in April would be gratefully received. If you’ve got something suitable, please contact the organisers, Geoff and Liz Mason (see back page). We’re always glad to receive prizes for the raffles at the indoor meetings too—just bring them along with you at the start of the meeting. Many thanks!

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**Advertisement**

**Thursday Bird Classes**
- January-March 2017, 1pm-3pm -
- Hildenborough Village Hall -

Suitable for beginners to improvers exploring the delights of the local birdlife, learning more about identification, birdsong, and bird behaviour.

**Theme: Woodland Bird Ecology**

Woodlands are our most biodiverse habitat. During these classes we will look at the variety of woodlands we have in Britain, looking at our woodland bird communities and how they all live side-by-side.

For more info email: info@simonginnaw.com or call: 0808 1556452

Advertisements included within this newsletter are not specifically endorsed by the Tonbridge Group or the RSPB
Nightingales and SSSIs under threat

The RSPB is highlighting the plight of one of our best loved songsters...

New documents released by Medway Council in Kent are set to test the Government’s safeguards that prevent many of our best wildlife havens, natural habitats and beauty spots from being lost to new housing developments.

If approved, the authority’s Local Plan could pave the way for thousands of new houses to be built on Lodge Hill, land that should be protected for nature.

Lodge Hill in Kent is recognised as one of the last UK strongholds for the nightingale, an enigmatic bird that has seen its population in England drop to less than 6,000 singing males from over 60,000 a few decades ago. The decline of the species is so alarming that nightingales are listed among our most threatened birds and included on the UK Red List for birds. However, the land is being targeted by Medway Council as a prime location to build thousands of houses.

The area includes ancient woodland with rare grasslands which are home to mammals, reptiles, amphibians, rare insects and flowers as well as nightingales. The importance of Lodge Hill is so great that in 2013 the Government declared it a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for nightingales and the habitat.

In addition to being recognised as a nationally important site for nature, local people have also demonstrated that they value Lodge Hill. Echoing the concerns of conservationists, local communities spoke out when the local authority approved a developer’s planning application to build 5,000 houses on the area back in 2014. The strength of opposition from local groups could not be ignored and the decision will go to a Public Inquiry in 2018.

Alan Johnson, south east conservation manager for the RSPB said: “Flying thousands of miles from Africa, nightingales arrive at Lodge Hill every year to spend the summer in Medway where they nest and raise young. As they arrive they blend perfectly into their environment as they serenade the Kent countryside with their distinctive song. So it is deeply concerning that one of the few areas where they are thriving could be lost under bricks and concrete, threatening the UK’s nightingale population as well as the strength of protection Sites of Special Scientific Interest should receive.”

Stephen Trotter, Director, The Wildlife Trusts England, says: “Lodge Hill is an important test of whether the Government is committed to its stated aim of leaving the natural environment in a better state than this generation inherited it. We should be celebrating and protecting sites of international wildlife importance like Lodge Hill - not building on them.”

Home to thousands of species, SSSIs are officially recognised as among the best places for wildlife in the UK, and are legally protected to safeguard us from losing these invaluable natural places. This level of protection should ensure the area is preserved as a home for wildlife today and for future generations.

There are just 4,000 SSSIs in England, and only Lodge Hill has been designated specifically for its nightingale population. The Government’s National Planning Policy sets out that land that has been designated a SSSI can only be developed if all other options for potential developments have been exhausted. It is not clear that Medway Council has fully explored every alternative or option to allocating Lodge Hill for development, and the fact that Lodge Hill is a SSSI is not obvious in the Council’s consultation document.

Martin Harper the RSPB’s director of conservation added: “Lodge Hill was declared a SSSI by the Government because it is the best place for nightingales in the UK, a species that, in England, has declined by around 90 per cent in the last half century leaving less and less to bring their beautiful song to the English countryside. The destruction of Lodge Hill would be one of the largest ever losses of a protected wildlife site in Britain.”
It is deeply concerning that Medway Council is still considering Lodge Hill as a suitable location for thousands of new houses. Although not made clear in the draft consultation document, Lodge Hill is a haven for wildlife and, importantly, is nationally recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). That legal protection means that development should only be a last resort. A decision to go ahead with this area being earmarked for housing would set a dangerous precedent for the nation’s other protected sites.”

The potential loss of Lodge Hill and what this may mean for other SSSIs has brought together conservation groups from across Kent and the UK.

Watch out, there’s a mouse about

Carol Goulden recalls a delightful encounter with a small furry friend

When I was up at the crack of dawn recently, I spent some time watching the back garden as I drank my morning cups of tea. What I first thought was a small brown bird scurrying along the leaning trunk of our pear tree turned out to be a very busy mouse. The mouse kept running up the trunk, and even up the two vertical supports propping up the tree, to pluck young conference pear leaves and take them back down to a stash of leaves in the corner of a flower bed. Occasionally, it disappeared into the hedge, hopping across from the tree trunk, before returning to its business of leaf gathering. After harvesting a pile of leaves, the mouse descended to its larder and proceeded to eat some of the young leaves.

When I checked the next day, all the leaves had disappeared, presumably eaten later in the day or in the night.

Having watched for some while, I was curious to find out what sort of mouse it was and why it behaved like this. Referring to an old reference book on British mammals, I identified it as a wood mouse with its sandy brown coat, white underneath, large ears and a long tail. The description of the wood mouse’s behaviour fitted perfectly:

The wood mouse is very agile and often climbs. It occurs in a variety of wooded habitats and often enters houses. Although mostly vegetarian, often using an old bird’s nest as a feeding platform, it also eats grubs and other invertebrates.


The last part of this description made me wonder if each time that the mouse disappeared into the Leylandii hedge, it was using an old bird’s nest as a feeding platform to get grubs and other invertebrates as a “starter” to the main meal of leaves. We had seen many birds use that part of the hedge for nesting in the past, so an old bird’s nest would be available to the mouse.

Carol Goulden
May 2016

I too have encountered a wood mouse providing entertainment just outside my window. On one particular day I saw it climb up a dog rose to harvest the hips. It would pick a couple of hips and drop them onto the deck below before selecting a final hip to carry back down to the ground in its mouth. It duly stashed the fruit out of sight before repeating its mission up the rose bush — Ed.

Pictured: Wood mouse
Credit: Chris Shields (rspb-images.com)
Armchair birdwatching

Doreen Dixon doesn’t just count birds when she’s out and about, she ticks stars of the big (and small) screen too...

My total number of birds seen during 2016 reached 185 UK species. The tally included pictures of UK birds shown at our indoor meetings and those seen on television. My main sources of TV ticks are the various ‘seasonal’ watch programmes on the BBC, ie, Springwatch and its winter and autumn equivalents, and Countryfile.

It is great seeing birds that normally one does not see or, indeed, that we have previously seen on field trips over the years but not for some time. These include the black redstart and whinchat which we used to see on field trips but haven’t lately, perhaps due to their populations shifting or habitat loss. Manx shearwater, wryneck, cirl bunting and honey buzzard were ‘new’ birds to me, ones I had not seen in real life on our field trips.

For our December outing we went to Sheppey where, on a previous visit about three years ago, we had seen a small flock of snow bunting. Sure enough, they did not disappoint this time, and we were able to watch them at very close quarters, without the need for binoculars. Another bird I caught up with in 2016 was the stonechat which had been absent from my list for a couple of years, despite my annual visits to Dungeness where it can often be found.

My own count for birds seen in the wild during 2016 was 121, some way short of the 605 species on the official British List according to the British Ornithologists’ Union (December 2016) and down on previous years as I missed a couple of field trips!

Egrets in north Tonbridge

Little egrets have been spotted in north Tonbridge using a waterway flowing through a residential area. Reports have come from Pen stream which runs behind houses in Willow Lea, alongside Streamside, and around Hugh Christie school before eventually flowing into the River Medway.

The birds are relative newcomers to the UK having first bred in 1996 in Dorset. The RSPB’s Northward Hill reserve in north Kent has a population of around 50 breeding pairs of this unmistakeable small, white heron.

Pictured: little egret, artwork.
Credit: Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

Classified ads

If you have something you’d like to advertise in the newsletter, such as optical equipment to sell or a holiday property to let, please contact Don Douch to discuss (tel: 01732 366660, email: dondouch@yahoo.co.uk). Thank you!

Crossword solution

Answers for the crossword published in the Autumn 2016 newsletter are as follows:
Across: 1 Little stint; 6 Oil; 8 Atentions; 9 Spin; 11 Stonechat; 13 Encrypt; 14 Rerun; 15 Grebe; 16 see 20d; 19 Excel; 20 Cartoon; 22 Spoonbill; 23 Teal; 24 Crested tit; 26 Eve; 27 Empty gossip
Down: 1 Liaising; 2 Titmouse; 3 Long-eared owl; 4 Smithereens; 5 Inn; 6 Osprey; 7 Linnet; 10 Michelangelo; 12 Tenaciously; 17 Radiates; 18 Table top; 20, 16a Cattle egret; 21 Rebate; 25 Rip

Well done to everyone who completed the puzzle!
Programme for the remainder of the season

March 2017
Weds 15  Nature talk  Barry Wright—Alaska.
Sat 18 & Weds 22  Nature walks  Cliffe Pools RSPB reserve.

April 2017
Sat 8  Quiz night  Hadlow College. Fully booked; thank you for your support.
Sat 22 & Weds 26  Nature walks  Rye Harbour (please note this is a change to the original programme).

May 2017
Sat 13 & Weds 17  Nature walks  Stodmarsh and Grove Ferry
Sat 20  Nature walk  Coach outing to Pulborough Brooks RSPB reserve. See page 2 for details.

June 2017
Sat 17 & Weds 21  Nature walks  Old Lodge Sussex Wildlife Trust reserve, Ashdown Forest.

June/July 2017
A nightjar walk will run in late June/early July but an exact date is yet to be decided. Please let Carol Goulden know if you are interested (see below).

Indoor meetings are held at St Philip’s Church, Salisbury Road, Tonbridge, TN10 4PA and begin at 7:30 pm. Admission charges for RSPB members are £3.50 or, for pensioners and under 16s, £2.50. Non-members are charged £4.50. Valid membership cards should be shown please. Refreshments are available during the interval.

Details of meeting places and transport arrangements for the nature walks are available from Carol Goulden (07867 970512) or, for the coach trip only, Doreen Dixon (01892 832130 or email: doreendixon@talktalk.net). Remember to bring membership cards (where relevant), appropriate clothing for the weather, binoculars and a packed lunch. There is a minimum £2 per person donation to the RSPB for each trip.

Our nature walks are a great way to learn more about birds and other wildlife and perhaps see some new species. For example, the recent visit to Dungeness on Wednesday January 25 achieved a list of 50 species including little egret, great white egret, marsh harrier, merlin, water rail, smew and Cetti’s warbler, while the group that visited on the previous Saturday enjoyed superb views of bearded tits and a drake ring-necked duck.

Next newsletter

Many thanks to everyone who helped with the making of this issue of the newsletter. Contributions are always gratefully received so if you have something you would like to share, perhaps a notable sighting, tales of birding on foreign shores, memories of birdwatching in ‘the good old days’ or a puzzle, or maybe you’ve taken a photo that you’re particularly proud of, the deadline is June 15, 2017. Please contact the editor, Lesley Ribbens (see back page).

Data Protection Statement

The Tonbridge Local RSPB Group would like to keep your details to send you further information about group activities and the work of the RSPB. If you want to amend or update your details or you do not want us to use them in the way stated, please contact a member of the committee.
Puzzle time with Riparia

Ten clues in this cryptic crossword give a common bird name, not defined otherwise. It’s just for fun. Answers will be in the next newsletter.

Across
1. See 24d
3. Kiss beyond trees - blunder right away (10)
9. Left strung up in the air? (3,4)
12. Nibbled in the library? (7)
13. The cranium is the essence of the matter (8)
14. Panic! Get out of water, Rory! (6)
15. Loved utter transformation (6,4)
19. Make drunk with wild excitation (10)
22. See 17d
23. Choir's performance has energy - red hot (8)
26. Plait in a strange way (7)
27. Please - it's badly glued in (7)
29. Heard the examiner intended to bring old or new books (9)
30. Night in France? I'll go first, they're northern folk (5)

Down
1. Take out of grosser income (5)
2. One might be steamin' or smokin', for example (3)
4. Never load badly, would be carrying too much (9)
5. Obligation for tea after one that came out (4)
6. Journalist, containing stride, got away with partner (6)
7. Got it out of thickest relative (7)
8. Left complaint (3,6)
10. About Edward going up - put off (5)
11. At home - well, take a breather (6)
15. After tea I look up above mine (4,5)
16. Lion visit moved musician (9)
17, 22a. Besieged? Be quiet - nothing on right! (6,6)
18. Sufficient reason for extensive garden (7)
19. Helped Prospero pick up signals, I heard (5)
21. Prosecutor gets to the bottom of rogue church centre where gambling allowed (6)
24, 1a. Sounds ideal for massive kebab (5,4)
25. Lose, resort to kind of gin (4)
28. Ancient vessel could hold milk if church provided (3)

Committee and volunteers

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Newsletter distribution

Thank you for choosing to receive your copy of the newsletter by email. This saves money and allows the group to donate more funds to the RSPB for vital conservation work.

If your email address changes, please contact Martin Ellis, rspb@ellismp.plus.com, with your updated details.

Pictured: sedge warbler singing, one of the many species likely to be seen by those going on the coach trip to Pulborough Brooks RSPB reserve.
Book your place today – see page 2 for details.
Credit Line: Chris Gomersall (rsbp-images.com)