

## The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the Autumn 2017 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of Autumn and Winter indoor events and outings. As I compile this newsletter, skeins of pinkfooted geese are starting to fly over our area in ever increasing numbers, a sure sign that Autumn is on its way!

In this newsletter Valerie has her leader's report and details of our participation in the Glasson Dock Summer Fair, plus an article on her experiences of residential volunteering at the RSPB Mull of Galloway Reserve. David, our new local group treasurer and membership secretary, introduces himself and we have an article from Liz on her wonderful wildlife garden in Ingleton, plus an article from John on changes in bird populations locally.

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](mailto:kenharrison_1@yahoo.co.uk) no later than 30 March 2018.

*Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor*

### Leader's Report

We are now in the transition from summer to autumn, with nights drawing in and leaves turning colour. A lot of trees seem to be well laden with fruit or berries which should provide a good source of food for the birds and other wildlife and help to set them up for the winter. I hope you will all be keeping your bird feeders well stocked to help the birds through the winter which is fast approaching. The seasons seem to come around so quickly.

Thank you to all who have supported our indoor and outdoor meetings this year and also a thank you to members and friends who give time to plan and lead our walks. Our outings in the late spring and summer started in April, when we accompanied Bryan York on a walk over the limestone grassland and woodland of Hutton Roof. In May, Graham Thomas lead a visit to the mixed habitat around the picturesque village of White Coppice. In June a trip to the Croasdale valley, an upland area of Bowland, was lead by myself and Liz Neale and in September we visited the salt marsh along the Ribble Estuary at Hesketh Out Marsh. In June we were joined by members of the Friends of Bowland group and in May and August on our two evening visits to Leighton Moss by members of the RSPB South Lakes Local Group.

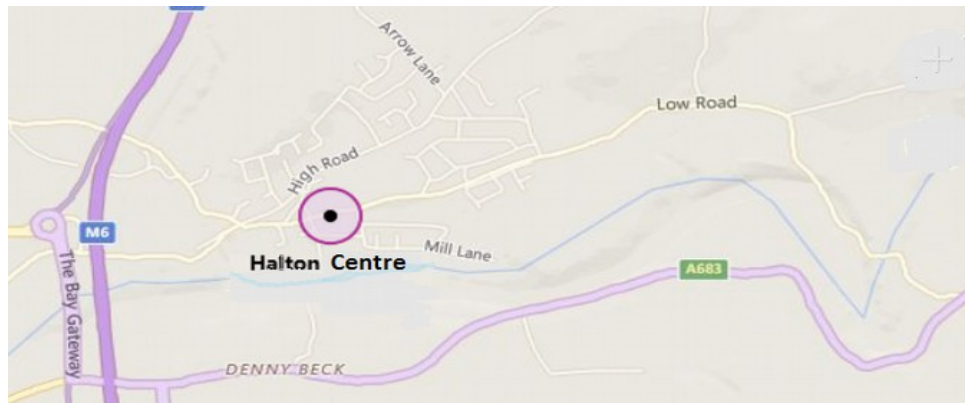
Our final spring indoor meeting in April was a talk about the development of the farm, the garden, and the conservation area at Cobble Hey by Edwina Miller, and in September we started our autumn indoor meetings with a presentation by Ken Harrison about his trip to the Falkland Islands, illustrated by superb photos of the iconic birds to be found there. Our autumn season of indoor talks will continue in November when our talk will tell the story of the creation of Brockholes nature reserve and its success in attracting the many species that now inhabit the reserve. These will be the last meetings at the Civic Hall in Carnforth.

For 2018 our indoor meetings will move to the Centre @ Halton. We hope this will become a favourite venue. There is good parking, it is close to the M6 motorway junction and easily accessible from Lancaster and surrounding districts. The meeting room, although on the first floor, can be accessed by a ramp from the outside as well as by the indoor stairs. The

original hall has been modernised and extended with the addition of areas for recreation and sports on the surrounding land. There is a coffee shop on site, open in the afternoon and all day in school holidays. We will be holding meetings there on the 3rd Wednesday of the month with afternoon meetings in February, March, October and November, evening meetings in April, May and August. The September meeting will be at Leighton Moss and will include our AGM.

The Halton Centre is on Low Road, post code LA2 6NB and grid reference SD 511650, details also shown on the map.

We hope to see many of you at our meetings in 2018. Our programme includes presentations on a variety of interesting subjects and our outings will take us on visits to locations in Lancashire, the South Lakes and the Yorkshire Dales.



Full details of all our indoor and outdoor meetings can be found on our website at [www.rspb.org.uk/groups/lancaster](http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/lancaster)

*Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader*

## Committee Update

During this last year we have had 3 new members join the committee and we welcome Jan Brook, David Mann and Maureen Booth. Sadly we say goodbye to Michael Gardner and Jennifer Rae who retired at the AGM in September. We thank them for their hard work for the group over a number of years. Michael has been the local group secretary for seven years and also acted as the main contact for the RSPB when there was no leader in position. Jennifer was the membership secretary for ten years, keeping membership and subscription information in order, posting or emailing programmes and newsletters and also collating the programme details ready for printing. We will miss you both and wish you well for the future.

David Mann has taken over as membership secretary from the AGM and will combine this role with the treasurer's role in January, as Andrew Cornall will be leaving the committee in December. We are grateful to Andrew for the many years he has served as our treasurer. This meant that the group could continue as a local support group for the RSPB, as these groups cannot operate without a treasurer. We are still in need of a group secretary who can take the minutes at committee meetings and help with correspondence. Ken, our website and newsletter editor, has offered to take the meeting minutes for this year to allow time to find a new secretary, so this is an appeal to our membership for help to fill this role. Please speak to me or any committee member if you would consider this.

*Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader*

## Long Service Award for Alan Smith

Congratulations to Alan Smith who has been awarded the Puffin long service award in gratitude for his volunteering work for the RSPB. Alan is on your local group committee and also volunteers at Leighton Moss and was presented with a Puffin pin badge and a certificate for 10 years service at our AGM. Well done Alan!



Alan Smith with his Award © Valerie Hall

## Lancaster Local Group at Glasson Dock Summer Fair



Glasson Summer Fair © Valerie Hall

This year the RSPB Lancaster Local Group joined the RSPB regional events team at the Thurnham Glasson primary school summer fair on the green at Glasson Dock.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> July we attended the school's summer fair and were blessed with a beautiful sunny day. In order to promote our group to the local community, we took along our table top display loaded with posters about our forthcoming events, as well as prints of birds, butterflies, dragonflies and information on the RSPB's Wild Challenge and the schools outreach sessions.

We joined Sophie King from the events team in the RSPB gazebo, which was set up with displays and information about the work of the RSPB. We were able to chat to lots of people about our group activities and hand out copies of our programme, as well as giving information about the role of local groups and the RSPB in general. We were also able to chat about wildlife to the children who came to try our activities of making a dragonfly or colouring a mask. The fair was well attended by locals and visitors and the school raised close to £1,000 for new equipment.

*Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader*

## Residential Volunteering at RSPB Mull of Galloway Reserve

In May I returned to the Mull of Galloway for a third time to spend two weeks of residential volunteering at this RSPB reserve. The Mull is the most southerly tip of Scotland. It is at the southern end of the peninsula known as the Rhinns of Galloway, with the mouth of Loch Ryan at the northern end and Stranraer situated at the head of the loch. The RSPB visitor centre on the reserve is leased from a community trust run by local volunteers who bought the land from the lighthouse board. The lighthouse is still in operation, but controlled remotely. The community run visits to the top of the lighthouse up 152 steps and also a visitor centre with a shop and exhibition area. The old cottages which used to house the lighthouse keepers have now been made into holiday cottages and are let by the trust. There is also a coffee shop on the edge of the reserve run by the wife of a local farmer.



Mull of Galloway Visitor Centre & Steps to the Fog Horn © Valerie Hall

The RSPB is responsible for the management of the land on the reserve and this is organised by the regional office.

The Mull of Galloway attracts visitors with a wide range of interests due to the varying types of attractions there. It is marketed as a "visitor experience" in a leaflet produced by the trust which combines information on all areas, including the RSPB visitor centre. Coach parties arrive where most passengers just want to visit the coffee shop; families arrive with children who want to climb the lighthouse; birdwatchers, walkers and people interested in nature arrive singly or in groups, and day trippers arrive by car or bike. The RSPB visitor centre is there to tell people about the birds, plants, animals and insects that can be found on the Mull and what can be seen on that particular day. As visitors come to the Mull for many different reasons it is earmarked as a good site for recruitment and for spreading knowledge about the work of the RSPB to non members.

The visitor centre is situated in an old building that was used by the workmen who built the lighthouse. Inside there are two screens showing live pictures of birds nesting on the cliffs and chairs round a TV where people can rest and view a film about the Mull. On the walls and around the room are displays giving information about the reserve and the birds that can be seen. There is a full size model of a gannet, which always amazes people and low tables and chairs for children so they can colour pictures and make a dragonfly.

The reserve has cliffs on 3 sides and is an example of maritime heath kept as it used to be, the difference in the land is markedly obvious when looking over the wall on the fourth side at the sheep grazed fields beyond. The fog horn, accessed by a long set of steep

steps is the best place to view the birds nesting on the cliffs, which are mostly kittiwakes, guillemots and razorbills, while shags and fulmars can be viewed from a platform near the lighthouse. Gannets nest on an island called Big Scare Rock, 6 miles out to sea and can be viewed from telescopes in the visitor centre. Puffins and black guillemots pass by on the sea, while at times when the tidal race brings food to the surface, seals and harbour porpoises can be seen feeding. On the heath there are meadow pipits and linnets, along with other ground nesting birds and roe deer can be seen with young, while hares sometimes appear, but there are no rabbits on the reserve. The Isle of Man and Ireland can be seen with good views into Belfast harbour on a clear day. The weather can be quite varied, a sea mist will come down to blot everything out, or a strong wind will blow. On other days it can be clear and calm with beautiful views on all sides.

The centre is open from April to October and is run by two RSPB staff members. One is based mainly on the reserve and leads a guided walk each week, the other also works in the local community organising events. School visits are arranged jointly with the trust so pupils visit both the RSPB and the lighthouse centres. There have been different staff members each time I have volunteered. As the job is on a seven month contract, if they wish to return, staff have to apply again in the spring, so this often causes the changes. My work on the reserve has been mainly in the visitor centre, greeting people, giving information about the reserve and helping with queries. There are plenty of reference books to consult if I'm not sure of the answer to any questions. I was also sent out around the reserve to record plants, butterflies, check on the nesting birds and engage with visitors. Other duties included cleaning around the centre, litter picking and tidying the area around the foghorn. The majority of visitors that I met came from Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Lakes, but also there were people from the south of England, Scotland, France, Germany, Holland and even the USA.

Accommodation for volunteers is in a cottage in the village of Drummore, five miles from the reserve down a narrow winding lane. Drummore is a small quiet village with two long beaches separated by a harbour. There is no charge for the accommodation and volunteers are required to cater for themselves. It is best to take a good supply of food as there is only a small shop in the village, but there are places to eat if you don't want to cook. I arrived on a Saturday and was given the Sunday free to settle in. On two of my visits the middle weekend was also free time, but for my other visit I had a day in the first week and a day in the second week as free time, due to being needed to cover the middle weekend. The nearest petrol station is about 20 miles away, so I filled up at Newton Stewart on my way there to make sure I had enough petrol for the week and topped up at Stranraer when I went shopping on my free day. It is a scenic drive to Stranraer along the coast road and this is the nearest place to find a supermarket. When not working, there are plenty of things to do, whether on foot from the village, or by car, to explore the beaches, rocky coasts, small villages, open gardens, ancient buildings and other visitor attractions.

There are lots of residential volunteering opportunities advertised on the RSPB website. The work required at some reserves involves help with land management, but at others the work is similar to what I did at Mull of Galloway. It is a great way to get involved in the work of a reserve, understanding what makes it special and getting to know the people who work there, helping to provide a place where nature can flourish. I always enjoy the time spent at the Mull and am eager to return again next year.

*Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader*

## Changes in Bird Populations Locally

Read any issue of Nature's Home or BTO newsletter and quite a lot of space is given over to detailing the decline of several species. Understandable of course, for these are the species that need research to find out why and then how we can halt and reverse their decline. Locally, there have been some losses and declines - yellow wagtail and yellowhammer, both once common breeding birds, but now only 1 or 2 pairs can be found on the edge of our area. Bitterns, which used to number up to 10 to 12 booming males, have now disappeared from Leighton Moss as a breeding species. Lapwing, curlew and snipe have disappeared from many areas, due mainly to intensive agriculture and predation, but they remain in good numbers in a few areas. But there has over my lifetime of bird watching in the area been some notable colonisations and population increases. Nuthatch, once a rare visitor, is now a common woodland and garden bird. Marsh harriers first bred in 1987 and my most exciting birdwatching moment was finding breeding bearded tits in 1973, both unthinkable colonists when the reserve started in 1964. Gadwall and tufted duck, once only winter visitors, now breed regularly. Most dramatic in recent years has been little egret. In the first 25 years of the reserve (1964-1988), there were only three sightings, but last year there were four roosts in our area and in October last year we recorded a peak total of 453! They are breeding at two sites, with a total of at least 20 pairs this year. Judging by recent sightings of up to ten, great white egret might follow soon.



Little Egret © Ken Harrison

Several other species have increased. Over the first 25 years of the reserve there were only seven sightings of raven, now you see or hear them on almost every visit, a reflection of the numbers now breeding, with almost every disused quarry in the area hosting a pair. Buzzards and peregrines have had a similar increase. Although willow warblers have remained stable, chiffchaff and blackcap have increased, but garden warblers have declined. Is this due to changes in the breeding habitat or the wintering area? I am sure if you feed birds in your garden you will have noticed the increase in goldfinch. When I started birdwatching, it was a great thrill to see a small charm of goldfinch, this year I estimated a flock feeding on thistles on Silverdale Moss at 250. Coal tits have also increased as a garden bird so much so that at our ringing feeding station at Teddy Heights near Storth last year it was the commonest tit species. Our ringing returns suggest that the majority of them are from the breeding areas in the Lakeland conifer plantations.

Wintering and passage birds have changed. The peak count of black-tailed godwit over the first 25 years of the reserve was just 14. In 2016 the peak was 1,780! Apparently they are expanding as a breeder in Iceland where our birds are drawn from. By contrast, snipe have declined. In the early years at Leighton, between 400-600 were regular in autumn and winter. Now 20 to 30 are the most you will see.

This is just a snapshot of the changes in populations that have occurred, there are many others both large and small. I get a great deal of pleasure out of watching and recording bird numbers and studying the changes and the possible reasons for these changes. Perhaps the most debatable and in many ways most interesting, is the effect of climate change. Is this behind the amazing increase in little egrets moving in from the south?

*John Wilson*

## Notes from a Rural Garden Situated in the East of OS Square SD67

Starting with two small paddocks, with only drystone walls round one and an old hedgeline round the other and upland fields around, our garden has evolved over a period of 40 years into a sheltered site with mature trees and bushes and a good mixture of wild and cultivated hardy plants. We have introduced plants that provide colour, nectar and fruits throughout the year and have encouraged wild plants (with some control!) to intermingle, thus developing a semi-natural atmosphere. The bird life in particular has increased from only a few species at the beginning, such as house sparrows and blackbirds, to over 30 species now recorded at some time through the year. The last ten years have been the most exciting and we have been more consistently observant and sent records to the BTO Garden Birdwatch scheme as well. We have had a good representation of common woodland species including great spotted woodpeckers, coal tits and long-tailed tits. Goldcrests are heard rather than seen frequently, especially in winter, and recently nuthatches. Goldfinches are regular visitors and sometimes nest in our apple trees. Tree sparrows have been regular visitors to our feeding station and with advice we have a red millet-only feeder for them, which they love and feeding groups are regularly seen. They are very noisy and chattering groups sit in sheltered places before approaching the feeders. We became aware of the beautiful song of the blackcap one spring a few years ago and one has visited regularly since then.



Great Spotted Woodpecker © Ken Harrison

We have 3 very mature sycamore trees on the outside of our NW boundary, probably planted as a wind break when the house was built. We had heard tawny owls calling around us for several years and were very surprised and delighted to spot young owls sitting in the lower branches one year. We thought they may be using a natural hole in one of the trees, which is now confirmed. Since then they have raised young often, some years more obvious than others. This year, 2017, we have had good sightings of them. During March the male was returning to a mature birch tree each morning opposite the sycamores. He preened his feathers, often very wet and ruffled, and then proceeded to walk along a branch to the end, where he could climb into a mature conifer alongside. He roosted here while the female was on the nest and called across to her whenever there was some activity in the garden nearby. Of course the resident blackbirds had noticed him well before, and had been making such a commotion, more especially when the owls were active. We should have realised earlier what that may have meant! The male became more and more obvious and stayed on the branch for longer before retiring to his roost, being very protective towards the chicks once they had hatched. We thought the leaves on the trees were later developing this year which enabled us to have amazing views of the adults and then were delighted by the emergence of two young ones, after hearing their distant plaintive calls for a while beforehand. They continued to move about the branches of the sycamores and called continuously every evening to be fed through April, until they finally took wing to follow the parents while hunting. We sometimes could hear them calling to the parents for several weeks in the surrounding countryside as well as in our garden. The blackbirds were at last calmer and could concentrate on rearing their young !

## News from Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserve

October 2017

Even with a decidedly damp summer proceeding into Autumn at Leighton Moss the wildlife has not disappointed us. Now that the breeding season is well and truly over, some species have left whilst others continue to arrive; here are a few highlights since the last issue.

This year was a bumper year for breeding Cetti's warbler with 8 pairs on the reserve. Visitors were treated to excellent views of these usually skulky, yet very vocal, reedbed stars. Six grasshopper warblers held territories too, reeling their unique locust like 'song' from the causeway and down at the shore pool hides.



Little Grebe © Ken Harrison

Sedge warblers on the reserve were fairly numerous this year compared with reed warblers and Barrow Scout held several pairs of sedge warbler in addition to the main reserve. Reed buntings on Barrow Scout nested in good numbers, whilst at Silverdale Moss, little grebes made the most of the dykes, being vocal and numerous even when sightings on the main reserve were infrequent. Post-breeding, many have since dispersed with several appearing at Lillian's Hide.

Marsh harriers successfully raised seven young from two nests on the reserve. This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> year since they first bred at Leighton Moss in 1987. As this year's young became increasingly independent, visitors observed them sunbathing, learning to hunt and taking practice flights. With at least 11 marsh harriers, two males, two females and the seven young, the ducks and waders must have been decidedly nervous during the height of summer, as these large raptors cruised over the heads of visitors along the causeway hunting.

Marsh Harrier at Leighton Moss © David Mower



Ospreys, particularly when the young in the nest at Foulshaw Moss were growing quickly, hunted over the reserve daily for several weeks in July. Watching them from Causeway Hide as they hovered before taking a plunge dive and carrying a fish off in its talons amazed visitors lucky enough to witness them fishing successfully. The great crested grebe pair at Causeway had one stripy youngster, with the family often encountered on the Causeway Pool until late summer.



Several rare visitors have caused a stir this summer following a flying visit by a Caspian tern, the largest tern in the world, on the 21 June. Single sightings of a wood sandpiper during late spring and again during early summer is another particularly nice record of a scarce migrant dropping in to visit the reserve. It was sighted from Lillian's Hide, Grisedale and Tim Jackson Hides.

As the season progressed sand martins roosting on the reserve built up to wonderful numbers during late evenings. The numbers of swifts, swallows, house and sand martins feeding over the pools are one of the most spectacular highlights of summer. With such a bounty, the occasional bird of prey such as hobbies, reported on a handful of occasions from Causeway Hide, dropped by during early autumn. Similarly, a handful of merlin reports hunting over the saltmarsh and more regular reports of peregrines after the growing flocks of redshank added excitement to the changing seasons repertoire during September.

Finally, a purple heron has made a name for itself since it arrived on 18 August. It seems every birder in Lancashire has made a special trip to see this very rare heron in their own county. As word spread, tribes of scope-brandishing visitors arrived and jostled for space to see it skulking the pool edges for food. Typically breeding in the Mediterranean and wintering in Africa, this juvenile, blown off course by the weather, has settled in to its favoured haunt at Grisedale, where it remained reliable for weeks. It has been hunting well and roosting with the egrets in the trees towards the far north of the reserve. As of writing the juvenile purple heron is still here. The last report of one at Leighton Moss was in 1996. It joins cattle egret, great egret and of course the now familiar little egret as one of the latest herons to add to the growing wildlife arrivals finding a home, albeit temporarily, at Leighton Moss. We can only speculate on when it might leave. Will it set a new record as the first ever purple heron to winter in Britain?



Purple Heron at Leighton Moss © Ken Harrison

*Steven Williams - Visitor Experience Intern, Leighton Moss*

## New Local Group Treasurer & Membership Secretary, David Mann, Introduces Himself

Ever since my infant teacher took me for nature walks around Ingleton, birds have always been a fascination for me, and given me countless hours of pleasure and inspiration. My involvement with the RSPB began in the 1940s when, as a member of the Junior Bird Recorders Club, I took part in the Beached Bird Survey, followed in later years as a volunteer in Operation Osprey; Group Leader; seasonal work running a school information centre at Marsden Cliffs and Information Officer at Bempton Cliffs; helping in species protection schemes (Golden Eagle & Peregrine Falcon); then, in more recent years, Pin Badge Organiser in West Cornwall and helping with the Chough Project. When I returned to Ingleton in 2013, having worked as a Superintendent with the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, I was anticipating a quiet time of birdwatching in the Dales and at my favourite RSPB Reserve, Leighton Moss, together with my weekly Garden Birdwatch Survey for the British Trust for Ornithology.

However, I have always enjoyed being part of the RSPB family so I couldn't resist an invitation to be involved with the RSPB Lancaster Local Members Group, so here I am, combining the roles of Membership Secretary and Treasurer.

Good communications are at the heart of any successful organisation, so I shall do my best to keep in touch in all the usual ways – newsletters, emails, correspondence, and the telephone, as well as meeting at our talks, especially at our excellent new venue at Halton. All our meetings, indoor and outdoor, are intended to enthuse and inform, so do come along and bring a friend or two!

I do have a confession – I am not yet computer proficient, so please 'bear with'! If you have any queries please get in touch. I have a card that reads: 'To err is human; to foul things up completely requires a computer', but I can't blame it all the time!

Amongst all the changes over the years, one thing remains the same, and in fact it is more important than ever – 'Give Nature a Home', so let's do all we can to make that happen.

With best wishes & kind regards, David.

*David Mann*

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*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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