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THE RSPB LANCASTER LOCAL GROUP NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Spring 2013 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of spring and summer outings.

In this newsletter we have an article from John Wilson about keeping track of birds, plus our usual update from Annabel at Leighton Moss.

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 September 30th 2013.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Programme Notes April 2013

By the time that you read this article, winter will have (hopefully) released us from its icy grip, so enabling us to once more appreciate the bird life of our local countryside in a more agreeable climate. The first half of our 2013 programme of events offers an interesting variety of outdoor meetings. For example, in mid April you are invited to join John Wilson on an evening walk around Warton Crag with an opportunity to see roding *woodcock* * Roding is the woodcock's territorial proclamation: a low level flight accompanied by a strange croak and whistle "song", all taking place within the bird's woodland habitat as darkness descends. For those not familiar with the woodcock's habits, this event offers an interesting experience. On the 3rd May we have a more challenging birdwatching walk to the summit of Ingleborough. This day in the Yorkshire Dales offers a good chance of seeing *dotterel* and other birds of the high tops. We are again in the Pennine uplands on the 15th May when we visit Roeburndale East in the company of the RSPB's Gavin Thomas, who co-ordinates the society's stewardship scheme for waders. Similarly, a visit to Abbotts Reading Farm near Ulverston is a follow-up to the talk given to members last year by David Morris, also of the RSPB. As it will be a further six months before the next members' newsletter is sent out, it is perhaps appropriate to remind everyone that from June onwards, we welcome your book donations for our secondhand book sale that is planned for this November. As on previous occasions, your books (no magazines please), may be left at the Leighton Moss reception. Our secondhand book sale, held every other year, is for us an important fund raising event. Finally, and I make no apologies for asking again if any of you are willing to join our committee? The long term future of the RSPB Lancaster Local Group really does depend upon us recruiting "newblood". I can assure you that the work involved is none too onerous! If you are interested please contact either myself or our membership secretary, Jennifer Rae. Until next time, best wishes and successful birdwatching.

*an evening within the time span 8th to 16th April, contact John Wilson to find out which evening offers the best opportunity of seeing roding woodcock. John can be contacted on johnwilson711@btinternet.com

Michael Gardner - Local Group Secretary

News from RSPB Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserves

Wildlife Highlights

Despite the horrendous weather, not one, not two, not three, but four marsh harriers have been seen on the reserve over the winter. Although marsh harriers do overwinter in other parts of the country, it is highly unusual for them to stay here at Leighton Moss. Last winter was the first time, when a young male stayed through the winter and the following summer. This winter makes it the second year in a row that marsh harriers have been here - 2 males and 2 females. One of the males disappeared off around Christmas, but we have had the other 3 here the whole time. One of the females has been seen displaying with the male in the reedbed opposite Public hide throughout the end of March, so things are looking positive for them to stay and breed, although it remains to be seen whether our returning harriers will object!

The marsh harriers aren't the only species who seem unperturbed by the shocking weather this winter. On the 16 February our avocets returned for the breeding season - the earliest they have ever come back! This put a spanner in the works for our office sweepstake on when they would first be back, with most of us betting on dates in March or even April! Our wardens sprung into



action, installing the electric fence around the Allen pool, to keep them safe from land predators. There are around 35 that can be viewed well from Allen and Eric Morecambe hides.

(Avocet © Ken Harrison)

The avocets weren't the only ones messing up our sweepstake. When our male bittern was heard grunting for the first time on 18th February, he lost a few people a couple of quid! No one minded though, as we are all so thrilled! He was initially heard on the main reserve in his usual spot at the bottom of the causeway, but he then went a bit quiet, until he was next heard on Barrow Scout Fields*! This has caused much excitement as this new area of reedbed was created 10 years ago as a satellite site for Leighton Moss to provide breeding habitat for bitterns. Our wardens have been regularly out listening in the early hours, and after work at Leighton Moss, Barrow Scout Fields and Silverdale Moss* simultaneously, to establish whether we have more than one male, but so far, just the one has been heard. Encouragingly, we have had lots of bittern sightings on the main reserve during the day, from Lilian's, Grisedale and Public hides, so fingers crossed for some breeding.

*Please note: Silverdale Moss and Barrow Scout Fields do not have any public access.

Lottery Funded Project Update

Work is now well underway for our new sensory garden in what was the rear car park of the reserve. The area will provide a fantastic home for different wildlife including butterflies, bees and birds, as well as a great area for our visitors to sit, relax, picnic and enjoy the wildlife.

We have now completed the replacement of the four hides that were funded by the Lottery money and other funders. The Tim Jackson hide was completed a year ago, followed by the Eric Morecambe and Allen hides in September, and then Grisedale hide was replaced in December just before Christmas. All of the new hides are larger, with bigger windows and better views across the reserves.

The next part of the project will be to install a sky tower, which will be a roofless platform next to Lilian's hide, offering elevated views of Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay. This work will hopefully begin later in the year.

Staff Changes

When Annabel Rushton took over from Jen Walker as the Marketing Officer last year, this left a vacancy for a new Membership Officer. This role was expertly filled by Kevin Kelly in November. Many people will have met Kevin over the summer when he was enthusiastically showing visitors red deer and other summer wildlife from Tim Jackson hide.

In January we were thrilled to be able to take on Jennifer Graham as a Membership Assistant. Jennifer is based out of Leighton Moss, but spends most of her time off-site, promoting the work of the RSPB and Leighton Moss around Lancashire, so if you see her out and about, do say hello.

The end of 2012 saw us wave a sad goodbye to our Assistant Catering Manager, Deborah Dickinson. Deborah has moved to the beautiful Isle of Mull with her husband, and we wish them all the best up there among the white-tailed eagles and otters.

We are delighted that in January, Hayley Johnson took on Deborah's role in the cafe where her roast dinners have already become legendary!

*Annabel Rushton
Marketing Officer*

Keeping Track of Birds

I first started keeping records of the birds I saw on November 5th 1946. Just a simple list of the species I saw on a walk around Warton and out to Carnforth slag tips. I had no bins at that time but I can still take you to the tree where I saw my first Treecreeper, they made such an impression.

(Treecreeper © Ken Harrison)

My recording developed as my love of bird watching increased. When I started work at Leighton Moss on May 15th 1964 I used the annotated log provided by the RSPB in which we recorded as many numbers as possible of the birds we saw. But I still kept a dairy in which I recorded more details and also



observations away from the reserve. I now have a large filing cabinet drawer stuffed full off notebooks.

Recently I wrote a short article entitled 'Where have all the Yellowhammers Gone'. I remembered seeing large numbers of Yellowhammers in the 1960's but when and how many? So out came my notebooks and I spent about two hours looking through them trying to find the best count to illustrate the numbers in those far off days. Eventually I decided on Jan 27th 1965. On that day in a short walk around Leighton and the surrounding area I recorded seeing 80 Yellowhammers, 50 Tree Sparrows and 75 Skylarks. What a wonderful sight but this was not considered anything unusual in those days.

Things certainly have changed, the last time I saw a Yellowhammer in that area was in 1998 and it was just one! Recording birds has also changed, I now use Bird Track, the national recording database developed by the BTO and finding any records is so much easier. Let me illustrate. I wanted to find the highest count of Gadwall I had made at Leighton Moss in 2012. With Bird Track it took me just 90 seconds to come up with a list of the 84 counts of Gadwall I had made. A quick run down the list and there it was - 147 on November 1st!

So if you record the birds you see in your garden or on an outing, I would recommend Bird Track to anyone. To access, go to www.birdtrack.net and you have the full instructions. You will need to register, but that's simple. You then have to select the sites you are covering, then you are ready to go. When you record a list for the first time you get a full list of all species, but this is quickly whittled down to the ones you record. You can either just record the species you see, or if you like, the numbers as well. You can record as much as you like, from the weather to the activity that birds are undertaking. I record the weather each time I go out, but only record activity when there is something special, such as 20 Whooper Swans I saw yesterday flying north. You can also enter casual records at a site, such as the other day when I saw a White Stork heading for Leighton Moss. Besides keeping your own records so efficiently and having them so readily available, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you are contributing to the monitoring of birds at the local, regional and national level. Information that is vital to conservation.

John Wilson

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

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/lancaster/>

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The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment.
Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.

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