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Tonbridge Local RSPB Group

newsletter

SPRING 2019

Welcome to the Spring edition of Tonbridge Local RSPB Group's newsletter. We've got news from local reserves, some remarkable facts about eggs and a challenging cryptic crossword for you to enjoy.

Letter from the Leader

Dear supporters,

This spring newsletter goes out in email and hard copy form to around the 320 people who have asked to receive it. So thank you for subscribing!

By the time you read this perhaps some of the Brexit fog may have cleared. If or when it happens (who knows?) the many European regulations protecting the environment will have to be replaced, needing a lot of parliamentary time to work through, and there'll be an awkward gap in the interim. Fortunately, the RSPB will be watching this complex area very closely. You may be asked to help remind our Government of the commitments it has made!

Whatever the impact of Brexit, the crises of species loss and climate change continue unabated. It's certain that the debate has pushed these issues to the back of the queue for attention. Fortunately there is some good news, and the RSPB's and others' campaigning and development work have produced some notable successes in 2018. The developer of Lodge Hill has decided to scale back its plans, leaving the SSSI and its nightingales undisturbed. Wallasea Island, Europe's largest coastal wetland restoration project, continues to produce excellent results, hosting 88 pairs of avocets and 46 pairs of Mediterranean gulls. And last year we had the largest number of breeding Eurasian crane pairs in the UK for decades: 54 pairs produced 25 chicks.

Now on to local group matters. I am sad to report that Geoff Mason died in December. He had served on the committee, stepped in as temporary treasurer at short notice, and together with his wife, Liz, organised our very successful quiz night - the biggest single local group fundraiser in the south-east - for several years. He also became adept at assembling the projection screen, no mean achievement. We are missing him greatly.



We're very grateful to Liz for continuing to make arrangements for the 2019 quiz.

Are you a Facebook user? Most local groups now have a Facebook page, allowing them to reach a broader audience. In fact, our group does have a Facebook account, but we need someone to run it. Support from the RSPB is available. I'd love to hear from you if you might be interested. Of course, if you'd like to help the group in any other way - whether with the quiz, our other regular activities, or a new idea of your own - we'd love to hear from you.

Last year we had a new event for us, a dawn chorus walk at Tudeley Woods. This year we are having another new one, an evening river trip from Tonbridge castle (now fully booked). Many thanks to Lesley for organising these, along with the very successful summer evening trip to Broadwater Warren, our interesting programme of talks, and, of course, this newsletter.

Finally, I'm writing this on the Big Garden Birdwatch weekend. I'm sure most of you feed your garden birds consistently, but this weekend is a useful reminder to keep the feeders stocked. I wonder, do our garden birds notice a difference in the run-up to the Birdwatch?

Best wishes,

Martin



Pictured: stalwart of the Big Garden Birdwatch, the robin.

Credit: Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

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

News

Minsmere under threat

The proposed construction of the Sizewell C power station on the Suffolk coast by EDF Energy could jeopardise the future of the RSPB's flagship reserve, Minsmere.

With a public consultation running until late March, the RSPB is asking EDF for reassurances that wildlife will be safeguarded. There are concerns that, as well as the long term changes the development could trigger, the massive construction project will itself have a negative impact on the area.

For more information and to register your own concerns, visit the loveminsmere.org website.

Forty and still counting

The RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch celebrated its 40th birthday in January. Around half a million people are believed to have taken part this year and, at the time of writing, counts are still being analysed. Over the years, the snapshot survey has highlighted the decline of some once common garden visitors such as song thrushes and greenfinches while detecting more positive upward trends for goldfinches and long-tailed tits.

Quiz night approaches

It's not long now until this year's quiz night on April 13. It'll be the last one with Alan Dane as quiz master. Tickets cost £15 per person, including supper. Please contact quiz organiser, Liz Mason, on 01732 350732 if you'd like to reserve a place. Also, if you have anything you think might be suitable for the raffle, please give Liz a call.

Wildlife sightings at Broadwater

A family of kestrels has been a regular fixture at Broadwater Warren nature reserve, prompting speculation that the species may have bred on the site in 2018. Also of note have been several sightings of raven, while flocks of crossbills, linnets, tits and thrushes have provided further entertainment for visitors.

As you read this newsletter, the woodlarks should be warming up their voices ready for the new breeding season. Calm, sunny days are best for hearing their distinctive song so watch the weather forecast before planning a visit.

Slowing the flow at Fore Wood

At the beginning of December, the RSPB's Weald Reserves team joined forces with the Sussex Flow Initiative to install a series of 'leaky dams' along the main ghyll running through the Fore Wood reserve near Crowhurst in East Sussex. Constructed using fallen branches and woody-debris already in the ghyll, and faggot-bundles made using wood harvested from RSPB reserves Broadwater Warren and Tudeley Woods, the dams are positioned so they interfere only slightly, if at all, with normal flow, often sitting above the base of the stream channel. After heavy rainfall, the dams should slow excess flow and force water out of the channel and onto the low banks creating a mini-floodplain.

The performance of the dams will be monitored to gauge their effectiveness in reducing flooding further downstream.

Annual coach outing

Minsmere is the destination for the Tonbridge group's annual coach outing on Saturday May 11 this year. It's a busy time for wildlife so there should be plenty to see and hear including marsh harriers over the reedbeds and a wide variety of warblers in song, not to mention avocets, bearded tits, bitterns, the list goes on! The cost of a seat on the coach is £25. You'll need a valid RSPB membership card for free access to the reserve, otherwise an entrance fee applies. Departure time from Tonbridge is 7:30am with return expected by 6:30pm. To reserve your place, contact Doreen Dixon, (doreendixon@talktalk.net or tel: 01892 832130), the sooner the better please.

Better late than never!

As we heard at our January nature talk, some of the more interesting regular winter visitors to Dungeness have been held back by the relatively mild winter weather. But when the icy blast came, it brought with it a drake smew. Also of note were two whooper swans, cattle egrets which have been in the area since the autumn, jack snipe, glaucous and Caspian gulls, raven, merlin and curlew. Shy species such as water rail and bittern became more visible during the cold snap as their need to find food overcame their desire to stay out of sight.

Geoff Mason (1947-2018) - a tribute by Mike Hall

I am very honoured to have been asked to write a tribute to Geoff in our Tonbridge local RSPB group newsletter. As most readers of the newsletter live in the Tonbridge area, there will be some who have reflected on a fact which has often occurred to me. Our town is relatively small, but with many and varied facilities for engaging in leisure activities, it is also the bed-rock for an active community.

I first met Geoff at an RSPB meeting, where he struck me immediately as someone who would, unasked but gladly, 'roll up his sleeves' and get on with what needed to be done at that time. He continued to do that until his untimely death in December. He was prominent at RSPB meetings, getting St Philip's ready for those meetings, both as to seating and equipment, not least our unique projector screen. Erecting this was often the way that Geoff and the team entertained the visiting speaker, before they took their turn at centre stage!

Soon after that, Geoff and I met at birding evening classes in Hildenborough, and next it was through joining a walking group. Newcomers to the small gathering rapidly became friends, and together we would walk ten miles or so, twice each month, Geoff frequently taking his turn in leading a route that he had thoroughly researched.

Moving on to yet more local activities, we would often meet at the Tonbridge Oast Theatre (for both of us, most certainly the dark side of the footlights!) where Geoff and Liz would regularly attend performances, with Geoff supporting Liz in her volunteering activities. Many would know Geoff also



by way of participation in regular local quiz evenings and other activities such as cricket. There may be more!

Members and associates of RSPB will know Geoff best from his time as Treasurer of our RSPB group, but principally, again in partnership with his wife Liz, and quiz master and member Alan Dane, as organiser of our annual and highly successful quiz evening, which has given RSPB Tonbridge our largest source of income for several years past. We owe Geoff and Liz a massive 'thank you' for giving us so many enjoyable, and highly rewarding, evenings.

It was through the walking which I mentioned previously, that I really got to know Geoff with the opportunity to walk and talk. Geoff was always game for a laugh, often wickedly, but the range of topics on which he could, and would, hold his own, in often deep conversation, were many and varied.

Born in Zimbabwe, Geoff's university education was in Northern Ireland, where he also met, and fell in love with, trainee nurse Liz. He qualified as an accountant, and worked largely in London, holding senior office in BT.

He was a devoted family man, son Niall and daughter Kirsten completing the family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them all at this time.

Geoff, we will miss you, especially your big smile. Occasionally this was seen at times when you called on your sardonic humour! However, we feel that you will still be with us, in spirit.

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!

Previous newsletter

The mystery bird featured in the Puzzle in the Spring 2018 newsletter was a tree pipit.

Next newsletter

Many thanks to everyone who wrote contributions for this newsletter and helped with the production process. The deadline for the Autumn issue, which will include the programme of events for the new season, is June 15, 2019. Please contact the editor, Lesley Ribbens, if you'd like to write a piece or create a puzzle. Or if you'd prefer someone else to do the writing, there's an offer on page 5 which you might be interested in.

To continue receiving newsletters, please respond to the request on page 8. Thank you.

Birding from beginner to novice

Tom Gordon explains how his early interest in birds has developed into a love of birdwatching.

I have always taken a passing interest in bird watching and wildlife generally. As is the case for many birders, my interest was sparked by relatives during childhood. My parents would point out birds whilst taking a post-lunch walk on Sunday afternoons. One particular memory is of great-crested grebes on Bewl Water; I recall as a boy considering them so elegant and exotic with their triangular heads. My granny also had a lovely selection of garden birds visiting her well-stocked bird feeder a few metres from her back door in St Leonards.



The great-crested grebe is an ideal species to spark an interest in birds and other wildlife.

Credit: Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

In Spring 2016 I casually started to wonder how many different birds I actually knew. I decided to start to record the birds I saw. There was no real science to this, but I promised myself that I would only record birds I could positively identify. This immediately exposed my rather limited knowledge. I knew a thrush when I saw one but was it song or mistle? I realised that a 'seagull' did not count and as for those LBJs, I hadn't a clue! In order to record what I was seeing I would need to be much better informed.

So over Christmas of 2016 I decided that in 2017 I would record more accurately the species I saw and become better informed about my observations. I read a number of articles and books about the importance of recording and observing details and even drawing a sketch or two. So, armed with my

new notebook and trusty old Mitchell Beazley field guide, I started to record the birds I saw to inform myself about the ones I could not identify.

I have always been a collector of things, (why a man needs 30 fountain pens is anyone's guess). A mix of wildlife, collecting things and being out in the fresh air caught my enthusiasm. I started to become familiar with my local patch along the River Medway and the birds I was likely to see and hear in particular trees and areas of my regular dog walk. I also joined a morning bird walk at Sissinghurst Castle, where I joined my old friend and ranger Peter Dear who introduced me to Alan Pavey. Alan opened my ears to the benefit of identification through bird song and his knowledge of bird song blew me away!

Over the course of 2017, I managed to 'collect' 117 different species. A modest count by many standards, I know, but for me it is the love of bird identification and watching birds more closely that has captured my imagination. I have learned that there is so much more to bird ID than simply spotting something. The subtleties between some species, and the need to consider sound, habitat, 'jizz' and flight fascinates me.

To broaden my interest and to find like-minded people, the RSPB was a natural step. I joined and made contact with the Tonbridge local group's Martin Ellis early in 2018. My first outing was to Dungeness in January. Under Geoff Shoebridge's guidance, I saw around 60 species in this one day—a great start. Before, I did not even know what a smew was but discovered it to be a stunning duck.

Geoff's quiet confidence and brilliant spotting ability is inspiring and I look forward to all the monthly Saturday field trips. In the company of some really lovely people, birding in the fresh air is such a great way to spend the day, even if I do have a habit of peeling off a bit early!

Over the past couple of years I have developed a real love of birdwatching. My habits have changed. My dog, Nell likes the fact that we take in our surroundings rather than yomp around a local walking circuit. I have learned to walk at a gentle pace, to observe, to listen and to soak up my surroundings.

I have also discovered that bird life pays you back for just a small amount of effort. Almost without exception, I come away from a walk with a gem or experience that lifts my spirits. Such reward is not a



new or exotic sighting (although this is always a thrill), the pay back is more subtle. It might be a close encounter with a robin who sits and sings just a few feet away, a grey wagtail who appears just where you hoped she might, or hearing a bird that was, until recently, a stranger, who then appears to confirm your ID. Such things are a delight to me and in a busy world they provide calm, soul food that I love. This is all topped off with the fact that the birds of the UK are a collection of incredible, varied and stunning creatures.

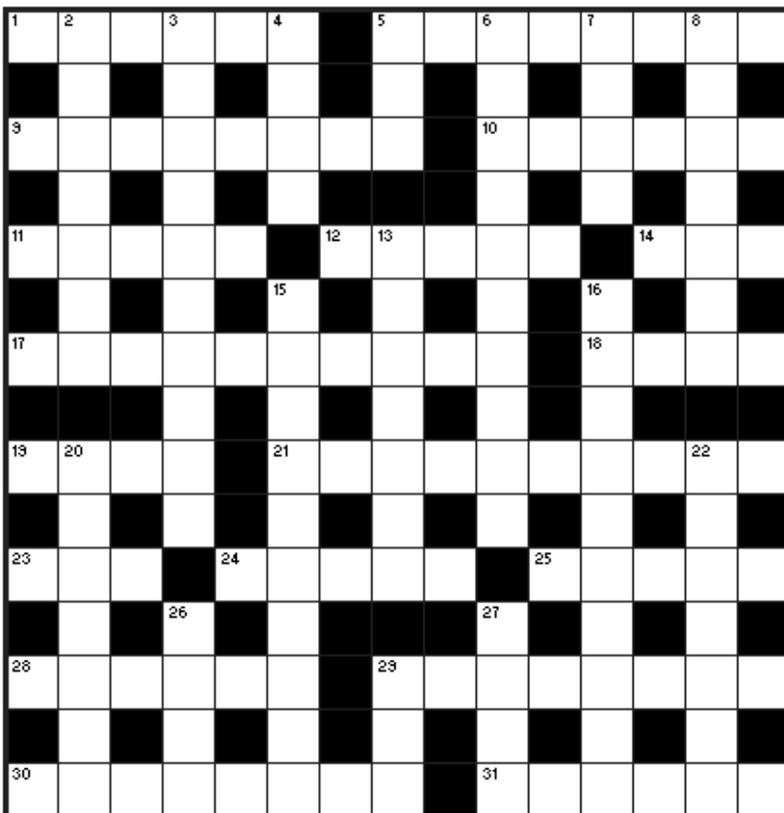
So, with two years official birdwatching under my belt, I revel in the fact that I have made the small self determined step from beginner to novice. I am delighted that I have so much more to learn, discover and enjoy.



Tom (above) has offered to write more pieces for the newsletter based on local patches. If you'd like to tell Tom about your favourite birding haunt, please get in touch with the editor, Lesley Ribbens (see back page).

Puzzle time with Riparia

Nine clues in this cryptic crossword, written in bold, give a common bird name and two give insects, not defined otherwise. It's just for fun. Answers will be in the next newsletter.



Across

- 1, 3d. **Wearing broad stripes at protest - is she French?** (6,10)
- 5. **Whisk, incorporating first of two eggs** (3-5)
- 9. Impatient to get going, winner has gin cocktail (8)
- 10. See 12
- 11. **Insert endlessly wrong way round** (5)
- 12, 10. **Inexperienced but passionate small coin collector?** (5,6)
- 14, 5d. **Can intercept** (3,3)
- 17. Sue or libel, awkwardly trying to undermine authority (10)
- 18. **Mad hare** (4)
- 19. See 22d
- 21. Position from which to oversee daily issue, or vessel after tide turned (10)
- 23. **Big easy music? Something like, lose sleep** (3)
- 24. March raggedly, creating colourful group (5)
- 25. Dog possibly back before last two out of three in tent (5)
- 28. Using some Wi-Fi as connection results in failure (6)
- 29. **He ate raw mixture** (8)
- 30. Given out: "The little monkey rated wrongly" (8)
- 31. Happen to comprise regular highs and lows (6)

Down

- 2. Realise chai made up the night before. (7)
- 3. See 1a
- 4. Welshman's platform? (4)
- 5. See 14a
- 6. Six openers to choose from? The look on your face! (10)
- 7. Sounds quiet to sit, but expect trouble if you run it (4)
- 8. Raise liquor barrel in east, downwind. (7)
- 13. After Othello returns, that is right, it's more spacious (7)
- 15. **Luther, confused, gets in small craft** (10)
- 16. **Arrange credit test** (7,3)
- 20. It's said you reign over Belgium finally: there's an element of danger (7)
- 22, 19a. **Freeze up? Touch down, fool!** (7,4)
- 26. As I argued from the start, it's big in the east (4)
- 27. A woman's got second grade flavouring (4)
- 29. Dragged off to join (3)

An 'eggcellent' beginning

Eggs shelter young birds as they develop but they are not purely functional, they are fascinating too. Tamsin Day shares some enthralling essentials of eggs

We look for the birds but the eggs are themselves works of art, worthy of admiration. There are over 10,000 different species of bird yet many of their eggs remain unknown. Whilst channel hopping one day, I caught a programme presented by David Attenborough which inspired me to write this piece.

We regard the egg as the perfect shape. The shape we have in mind is true of the chicken egg but other eggs come in so many different shapes and sizes. I'm reminded of an old joke from The Good Life television series: "The Oo-ah bird is so called as it lays square eggs!"

Why is the egg incubated outside the bird's body? The bird's body temperature reaches 40 degrees C, too high for the embryo to survive.

The egg is the chick's life support system. The yolk feeds the chick, the white protects the embryo as it grows and the shell provides the outer protection. A swan lays its eggs in a variety of places, for example reed beds which may flood. The egg has a waterproof layer for added protection but it is not just against water, it provides the first line of defence against bacteria getting inside and the white then provides the second line of defence.

The shell needs calcium. Some eggs obtain calcium from the bird's bones but the tit for example eats lots and lots of snail shell to provide the calcium it needs. Without calcium the shell would be thin or would not be there at all.

Not all birds produce the egg as soon as the mating ends. The albatross stores the sperm for up to two months. She needs enough food to develop the yolk, once ready then the egg is fertilised. Some call it the 'honeymoon period' yet she travels alone.

Which end arrives first? A German scientist poked a pencil up the bottoms of tame chickens to mark the egg and discovered the egg turns before it arrives, blunt end first, but this is not the same for all birds. Why not? There is no answer yet.

And weight? A goldcrest weighs no more than a teaspoon of sugar yet each of its eight eggs weighs 16 per cent of its body weight. And how does the mother keep her eggs warm? She has hot legs, unlike any other bird so that she can warm her eggs.

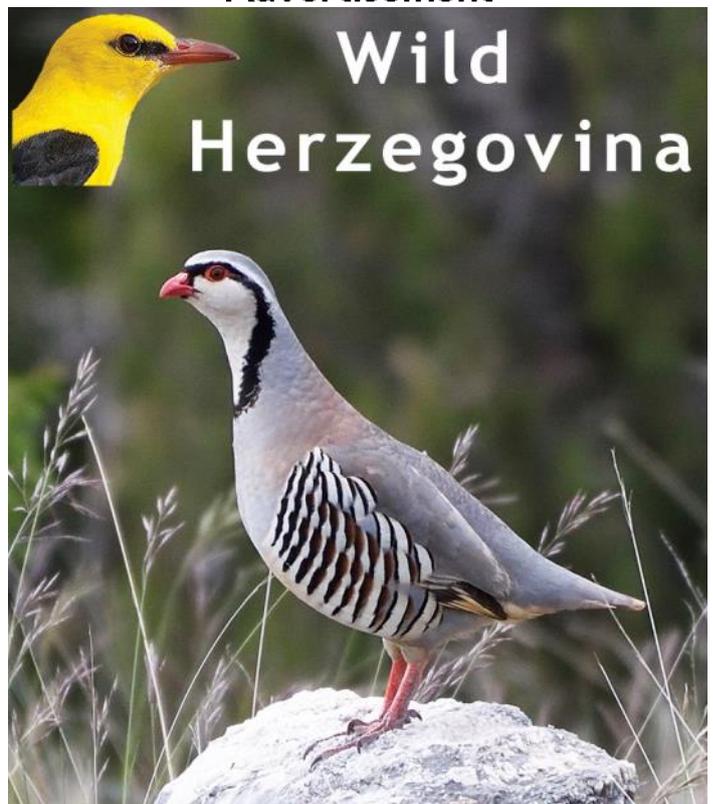
The tits are clever. They control incubation so the chicks are born when food is plentiful. On cold days they allow the egg development to slow down, on warm days they will do more to help development. In doing so they can ensure there is enough food for the chicks when they arrive. The caterpillar larvae they feed on last two weeks which makes timing crucial.

While the default colour for an egg is white, many pigments contribute to the variations in colour, which may help with camouflage, prevent overheating or provide defence against murderers. The cuckoo removes an egg and plants its own egg. For disguise, the egg is a similar colour to the eggs of its host. The reed warbler, for example, will remove one that is not the same as its own. Yet new research also shows some birds are evolving their own patterns to fight back!

How does the chick hatch out of the protective shell? The embryo absorbs the calcium as it develops and when the chick is ready, it pecks its



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way out of the shell. As it absorbs the calcium, the shell gets weaker. When ready, the youngster develops a calcium end to its beak, the egg tooth, which allows it to peck its way out.

Egg collecting is, thankfully, illegal now, but study of existing collections has allowed us to monitor the effect of things such as acid rain or DDT by making comparisons. Without the collections we would not know all we do today. Of course, it is hoped that we can use



knowledge to make a positive difference. I hope I have not misrepresented any of the facts but there is always Google or Wikipedia but for me there is nothing better than coming across the real thing, maybe finding an abandoned nest and just enjoying nature's beauty.

Pictured: part of an illegal egg collection seized from a collector.
Cred it: Andy Hay (rspsb-images.com)

Programme for the remainder of the season

March 2019

- Weds 20** *Nature talk* Mick White — British wildlife through the seasons.
Sat 23 & Weds 27 *Nature walks* Cliffe Pools RSPB reserve.

April 2019

- Sat 13** *Quiz night* Hadlow College. See page 2 for booking details.
Weds 17 *Nature talk* Rick and Elis Simpson—Wader Quest, support for shore birds around the world.
Sat 24 & Weds 27 *Nature walks* Leybourne Lakes country park.

May 2019

- Sun 5** *Nature walk* Dawn chorus at Tudeley Woods. Meet 4:45am. Book with Lesley Ribbens
Sat 11 *Nature walk* Coach outing to Minsmere RSPB reserve. See page 2 for booking details.
Weds 15 *Special event* Evening boat trip, River Medway, Tonbridge. Fully booked.
Sat 18 & Weds 22 *Nature walks* Stodmarsh NNR

June 2019

- Sat 15 & Weds 19** *Nature walks* Old Lodge, Ashdown Forest.

Indoor meetings are held at St Philip's Church, Salisbury Road, Tonbridge, TN10 4PA and begin at 7:30pm. 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 Geoff Shoebridge (Saturdays, g.shoebridge@btinternet.com, 01732 771464) or, for Wednesday visits and 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 nature walk.

If you would like to take a turn at leading a nature walk, please talk to either Geoff or Doreen. Extra volunteers with good bird ID skills are always welcome. Sharing your knowledge and helping others to appreciate nature can be very rewarding.

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.

Spotlight on the brambling



Male brambling in winter plumage.
Credit: Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

This winter was a good one for seeing bramblings in the UK. But the numbers recorded here were a mere drop in the ocean compared with the ‘mega flock’ reported in Slovenia, a country more than half covered with forest. As many as 5 million birds are estimated to have gathered, which must be phenomenal to see and experience but impossible to count with any great accuracy!

Bramblings’ main food in winter is usually tree seeds, often beech or hornbeam. Usually, they spread out across the forests of central and eastern Europe, with relatively small numbers reaching Britain and Ireland. Unusual weather this year meant that more than a metre of snow covered their food supplies in their usual wintering grounds and they ‘irrupted’ south beyond the Alps to escape. Slovenia remained relatively snow-free. The first bramblings to arrive found plenty of food and, as bramblings tend to draw in more bramblings, so the number grew.

The species favours a large flock for the ‘safety in numbers’ protection provided from predators such as sparrowhawks, buzzards and owls. It is also thought that they exchange information so a bird that has fed poorly one day may notice a well fed group arrive, roost and leave with them in search of food the following day.

The brambling is similar in size and shape to a chaffinch, with which it often associates.

Committee and volunteers

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Treasurer: Tamsin Day, daytda@aol.com, 07764 894622

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Newsletter editor / Programme secretary: Lesley Ribbens, 116 Higham Lane, Tonbridge, TN10 4BW, Lar123@virginmedia.com, 07989 476652

Membership secretary: Doreen Dixon

Website editor: Sarah Ingle

Newsletter distribution: Gabrielle Sutcliffe

Quiz night organiser: Liz Mason

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for all readers

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If we don’t hear from you we won’t be able to keep your name and address in our records.



Mallard duckling
Credit: Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)