

The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the April 2016 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. I hope you are all doing your bit to give nature a home and have birds breeding in your nest boxes and have other nature in your garden. Did you take part in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch this year? My sightings included a superb “charm” of goldfinches and a male blackcap (which was a regular in my garden for a few weeks this winter). I have put up more nest boxes this year and cleaned out the old ones. Great tits have been investigating one of my nest boxes and frogs have filled my pond with frogspawn again this year! We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of spring and summer outings, including our talk on “Giving Nature a Home” by Les Chandler on 21 April.

In this newsletter we have news from our Group Leader, Valerie Hall, and Michael keeps us up to date with his Secretary's report. We have our usual update from Leighton Moss before Annabel takes up new responsibilities in the Lancaster office. John gives us details of his wonderful recent visit to see the geese and other birds of Islay.

If you would like to contribute a short article, or have any interesting wildlife news from your local patch, please email your contribution for the next RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter to kenharrison_1@yahoo.co.uk no later than 30 September 2016.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Secretary's Report Spring 2016

Since our last newsletter, members have enjoyed two outdoor meetings in the early New Year, notably Knott End and Pilling on 13 January and Marshside, Southport on 10 February; at the latter event, we saw the various wildfowl and waders that frequent the Ribble Estuary each winter. Indoors at Over Kellet on 17 February, Michael Carrier told us about his many years of involvement in ornithology and described the work that he did in the Solway Firth and what is perhaps the remotest part of the British Isles - the archipelago of St Kilda.

On 12 March we met at the end of Lancaster Quay and enjoyed a pleasant day's birding along the Lune coastal path. Between Freeman's Pool and Stodday Lane we saw over fifty species that day, with good sightings of the many birds that were occupying the nearby flooded farmland.

I'm sorry to say that our indoor meeting at Hala on 17 March was poorly attended, nevertheless, those who did come along enjoyed an excellent and informative talk by Edmund and Tanya Hoare, who told us about their many years of work studying the common swift - a bird whose numbers have been in decline in recent years.

I hope to meet you on the Borrowdale walk on Saturday 9 April. This delightful valley that lies west of the Lune Gorge near Tebay can offer good sightings of woodland and upland birds. That morning we shall meet at 10.30 am in the car parking area.

Our final indoor meeting this spring is at the Hest Bank Memorial Hall on 21 April and is about how we might fulfil the RSPB's objective of "Giving Nature a Home". This talk will be given by Les Chandler, the former RSPB Northern Region Youth Officer. Moving on to the month of May, we have planned a visit to the Cobble Hey Farm and Gardens in the Forest of Bowland, where conservation work has been undertaken in conjunction with the RSPB. This occasion is a little different from our usual outdoor meetings, as it is planned to include not only a guided walk, but refreshments and an interactive session for children. Booking is essential for this event and if you are interested you should contact our RSPB Lancaster Local Group Leader, Valerie Hall (tel: 01524 241606) for further details. Incidentally, all our members who have internet access should by now be receiving by email monthly information about "what's on" from our Membership Secretary, Jennifer Rae.

May I remind you again that if the weather forecast is poor for the day of any outdoor events, then you should contact me the day before on 01524 65211 to find out if that meeting is going ahead.

Finally, we would be eager to hear from you if you have any suggestions or ideas for future outdoor meetings, and especially if you would be willing to lead any of these walks - remember you don't have to be an expert to help us out!

Michael Gardner - Local Group Secretary

Notes from Valerie Hall, RSPB Lancaster Local Group Leader

Dear group members,

It is well over a year now since I attended my first RSPB Lancaster Local Group meeting, and it has been a busy and very interesting time. I was interviewed in January 2015 by Carol Tresadern, the RSPB Local Groups Officer for Northern England, and put forward as a new leader for the group, and formally elected at the AGM in September.

Since the last leader sadly passed away, Michael has been doing a sterling job as the contact for the RSPB, as well as carrying out his duties as the secretary. So I am pleased to be able to relieve him of this extra work now.

I attended a 2 day workshop for new local group leaders in November at the RSPB headquarters at The Lodge, Sandy, in Bedfordshire. We were given information about our role representing the RSPB as leaders of a local group. Also guidance on dealing with the paperwork we would receive and lots of ideas and inspiration to take back to our groups. There were 12 new leaders attending from all parts of the country and it was good to talk to other leaders and share information about our groups. Some groups get involved in lots of activities in addition to organising talks and walks and others concentrate on meetings either outdoor or indoor or both. We had speakers on a variety of topics as well as interactive and discussion sessions. We were treated to a guided walk around the reserve and heard about the work being done to improve the heathland area and to help the breeding population of natterjack toads. We even caught a glimpse of a muntjac deer in the woods. The house that forms the main part of the headquarters dates back to 1870 and is quite an impressive building, surrounded by beautiful gardens. The former gatehouse by the main road entrance is now the RSPB shop, but looks like a Swiss cottage. To bring us back to the 21st century we saw the foundations being built near the house for a wind turbine to provide "green" energy. During the day we were able to get to know each other and so enjoyed a relaxed get together at the hotel on the Saturday evening at a meal with Alan Murray, head of the volunteering department and Ivan

Nethercoat, a learning and development manager, both based at The Lodge, and leaders of the workshop. We also met other members of staff over the 2 days, which gave us the opportunity to put faces to names only known through entries on paperwork. It was a very interesting event to attend and I hope the experience will be of help to me over my time as leader of this group.

I have met a number of group members over this last year and hope to get to know many more at our meetings in 2016, as I hope we have put together a programme of interest to everyone.

Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader

New Events for 2016 suitable for all ages, including accompanied children

Our programme for 2016 is now underway and we have been lucky with the weather this year as both the outdoor meetings in January and February went ahead, unlike last year. We welcome everyone to our meetings, whether an expert or a beginner at identifying birds. Meetings are open to all whether or not a member of the RSPB or the local group. I have enjoyed some interesting talks at our indoor meetings and have benefitted from the help I have been given to identify birds at our outdoor meetings, especially when other members share a better view through their telescopes.

We have included 2 extra indoor and outdoor meetings this year that are suitable for families. On 21 April, during the school holidays, we have a meeting at Hest Bank Memorial Hall at 2.00 pm, looking at how we can give nature a home. There will be presentations about gardening to help nature, showing how to create homes, suitable habitats and what to plant to encourage wildlife to flourish, or take up residence in your garden or outdoor space. We will have activities and games for young and old, also a quiz, a raffle and guess the name of the otter.

On Sunday 15 May we have a meeting at Cobble Hey Farm, near Garstang. The farm has worked with the RSPB on conservation to enhance the environment for birds and wildlife on their land. We will have a presentation about the farm, there will be an interactive session for the children, and we will be taken on a guided walk. There will be opportunities to visit the hide on the Lapwing Trail where we are hoping to see these birds with their chicks, to walk on the trails on and off the farm, to view farm animals and possibly to feed the lambs, to wander round the gardens and maybe buy a plant to take home. Booking is needed for this event as the fee of £5 per adult and £10 for families includes a drink with a scone or biscuit. As we are going as a group booking, we do not then need to pay the usual entry fee. Contact me on 01524 241606 or at a meeting to book or for further information.

At these extra events we hope to welcome all ages, including children when accompanied by an adult. There will be something to interest everyone. In the Autumn there will be 2 more meetings in a similar vein, more details in the next newsletter.

I hope many of you will join us on our outings and will enjoy the programme we have put together for 2016. I wish everybody good birding in the next year.

Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader

Islay – Island of Geese and Much Much More

Mid-March saw a rather uneventful dash through Glasgow, along Loch Lomond over the wonderfully named Rest and Be Thankful pass, along Loch Fynne to spend a night at Lochgilphead before going to Kennacraig to board the Islay Ferry for my eleventh visit to Islay. All bar one has been in winter. Birding started next morning at Lochgilphead with a wonderful flock of 40 whooper swans and 20 wigeon grazing on the grass right next to the main bus stop. Then to Kennacraig where birding starts before you board – great northern and red-throated divers and black guillemot close by the boat, and, as we sailed on a wonderfully calm day, several more divers - mainly great northern, along with many eiders, and mergansers and distant views of Greenland whitefronted geese, all against the wonderfully rugged scenery of Jura. It was hard to be tempted down for a quick meal, then it was back to birding as we sailed up the narrow channel between Islay and Jura, where I added puffin, shag and guillemot. Then to Islay. The island has two claims to fame, probably the largest goose population in Britain and the highest density of distilleries anywhere in the world - eight in all.

Most goose watching at home is well, rather a wild goose chase tracking down the flocks. Not on Islay, they are everywhere! We passed several flocks of Greenland whitefronts on



the journey to Bridgend, then the wonderful sight and sound of thousands of barnacle geese on the shores of Loch Indaal. You know I love to see the barnacles at Caerlaverock WWT, but they look so much better on Islay. I think it is the wilder setting that makes all the difference. A quick stop along the shore on our journey to our cottage at Kilchoman on the west of the island produced an adult glaucous gull and 12 dark-bellied brent geese.

Barnacle geese on Islay © Ken Harrison

Next day I got up early and almost the first bird I heard was the wonderful calling of choughs and I soon found four on the top of the old ruined church, showing off their bright red curved bill and feet. I love their call and their wonderfully buoyant flight - so easy to separate from jackdaws in flight. Their calls though were almost drowned out at times by the constant calls of 2-3,000 barnacle geese and several hundred Greenland whitefronts. What intrigued me though was the starlings in full song imitating chough and especially buzzards, a change from the curlew that they imitate at home. They couldn't quite get the chough call right though.

So, every day choughs were one of my first birds, with up to six around the cottage and 14 together at another site. Perhaps the most satisfying sight was the number of great northern divers we saw, some at close range and just starting to get summer plumage. Stonechats had apparently just arrived and were present in many areas. We visited the three RSPB reserves, where we were the only bird watchers on site, quite a change to

Leighton! Birds of prey were great, with buzzards everywhere, several hen harriers and 2 sightings of golden eagle. One of these was probably the best view I have ever had, as it swept across the moorland only ca 50 metres below us. The RSPB Reserve of The Oa produced 62 Twite, they all lined up on a fence to be counted! A visit to the woodlands at the south of the island produced a drumming great spotted woodpecker - my first for the island they have just started to colonise. The softer south coast with its three distilleries is so attractive with many secret inlets frequented by seals and otters, along with red and fallow deer.

Another day we walked in the mature woods at Bridgend to add several woodland species to our list. But it is quite a change from home, for here you are straining to listen for the calls of long-tailed tits and blue tits above the calls of many thousands of barnacle geese on the adjoining fields. It also takes a bit of getting used to the fact that there has been under ten sightings of magpie on the island over the past 20 years, while rock doves greatly outnumber woodpigeons and collared doves!

One day we made the 5 minute ferry trip to Jura, quite a contrast to Islay - the only geese we saw were dark-bellied brent geese. Red deer were common, while eiders and great northern divers graced the shore.

I am always sorry to leave Islay. I really understand why Gordon Yates visits about four times a year! Its abundant wildfowl, divers, choughs, raptors and finches make it such a wonderful place.

John Wilson

News from Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay nature reserve

March 2016

Wildlife update

There's an old saying that says "From January to June, the bittern will boom." Well it isn't quite as reliable as that, but we are very excited to have heard the first booming of the season! It was first heard at around lunchtime yesterday (23 February) by one of our Live Interpretation volunteers, and then again early this morning by our Site Manager.

Bittern at Leighton Moss © Ken Harrison

When they start in spring, it takes male bitterns time to "tune up", so they don't begin booming right away. They make strange noises (which I think sound a bit like a cat coughing up a hairball!) to warm up before



they reach their full boom, often days or weeks later. A full boom sounds like the noise you would create if you blew over the top of an empty glass bottle. It is the “song” of male bitterns in spring to attract the ladies and to establish their territory. Bitterns are an incredibly shy bird, that skulk in the reedbeds often unseen. Booming is a way of telling how many males you have in a given reedbed, and is useful to approximate populations.

We only have the one booming male bittern here at Leighton Moss, although for the last few years we have heard a second boomer on one of our satellite reedbeds - Barrow Scout Fields. There were once lots of bitterns throughout Britain, as their preferred home is reedbed, which was also common around the country. Bitterns were so numerous in fact that they appear on the feast menus of medieval banquets. They were often called “butterbump” as they have a thick layer of fat which means they are self-basting when cooked!

However, over the centuries, reedbed has largely been lost through drainage for agriculture and development. With the decline of reedbeds, came the demise of bitterns. The low point came in 1997, when there were only 11 booming males left in the entire country. They were almost wiped out.

Thankfully, the RSPB is supported by 1.1 million marvelous members. With these funds we have been able to restore and create new reedbeds around the country, in places like our Ham Wall nature reserve in Somerset. Other conservation organisations have done this too. Together we have been able to bring the bittern back from the brink and there are now over 100 booming males around the country.

Here at Leighton Moss, they are not doing as well as in other parts of the country and we think this is down to the age of the reedbed here. Leighton Moss was formed when agricultural fields were flooded during the First World War, so the reedbed is around 100 years old. Our wardens and volunteers put a lot of ongoing effort into managing the reedbed for bitterns and other special wildlife, such as reed cutting and willow scrub removal, but in the last few years we have introduced some larger scale measures. If you read my blog regularly you will be aware of the water level management, mud pumping and vegetation cutting that has been taking place in the last few years to hopefully improve and enhance the reedbed for bitterns once more. The fact that this male has started to boom at this time is a great sign!

To keep up to date with all the latest events, sightings and our important conservation work on the reserve visit www.rspb.org.uk/leightonmoss

Staffing update

This will be my last newsletter update for a while as I am going to be moving on from Leighton Moss temporarily. I am excited to be seconded into the role of RSPB Communications Manager in the North West. It is a maternity cover, so it will be for 6-12 months. I will still be coming to Leighton Moss once a month though and of course as a visitor to do some wildlife watching on my days off!

Annabel Rushton – Leighton Moss Visitor Experience Manager

Award for 25 years RSPB voluntary service

Eileen Harrison has been a volunteer for the RSPB for 25 years and a long serving member of the RSPB Lancaster Local Group committee.

Many of you will know about the role she played in organising outdoor meetings and coach trips for the group. Eileen also helped raise a large amount of money for the local group with her help organising and staffing our booksale weekends at Leighton Moss over the years.

The committee sadly accepted her resignation from the committee at the AGM in September 2015.

In recognition of the work she has done for the group over the years we were pleased to present her with a gift of a painting by local artist Doris Cairns. The RSPB had also sent a certificate and a sterling silver pin badge of an avocet to mark her 25 years service. A small group of us gathered in the Leighton Moss garden on 4 November 2015 to present the certificate, pin badge and painting to her. Eileen was accompanied by her son.



This photo shows Eileen and the artist, Doris Cairns, with the painting.

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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