

The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the Spring 2021 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. In this newsletter we have details from Lizzy of the exciting Lancaster Swifts project – please get involved if you can! Kevin has a fascinating article on the construction of pied flycatcher nests. We have an article on Spring Migration by John, followed by a poem on the same topic from Jennifer. Thoughts of lockdown include how Stephen has enjoyed his garden during lockdown, a note from Anne and a photo from Martin of a garden visitor. Alan tells us about Sunderland Point and Graham takes us on another walk.

As I put this newsletter together we are now just over 12 months into the Covid-19 pandemic and while hopefully many of you will have had at least your first vaccination against the virus, it looks as though some form of restrictions may be in place for some time to come. I hope you, your family and friends have managed to stay safe and virus free and that nature has provided a respite in these troubled times.

However, signs of spring are evident everywhere, with butterflies emerging, bitterns booming and marsh harriers nesting at Leighton Moss. I cannot recall hearing so many chiffchaffs singing as this year – they seem to be everywhere!

Many thanks to all our contributors. I hope you enjoy our latest newsletter.

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 rsplancaster@gmail.com no later than 30 September 2021.

I hope you all keep well and stay safe over the coming months and that by the time of our next newsletter we will be able to resume local group meetings.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Committee Update

Our local group is in urgent need of the following to join our committee -

- Group Leader
- Indoor Meetings Organiser
- Outdoor Meetings Secretary

If are interested in any of these roles, or know someone who may be, further details can be obtained by searching for “RSPB volunteer opportunities” and then from the RSPB website, search for “Lancaster”. Our RSPB Local Groups Officer, Alasdair McKee, can also provide more information and is the person to contact if you are interested! (email: Alasdair.McKee@rspb.org.uk)

If the above posts are not filled at our next AGM, it is doubtful that the local group can continue for much longer!

Leighton Moss

At the start of April, RSPB Leighton Moss has the following message on its website:-

In line with Government guidance on essential, daily exercise outdoors, our car park, trails and toilets are open. Our café is open for takeaway refreshments. Our visitor centre, hides and shop are closed. We urge you to follow the legislation around non-essential travel and please visit your most local nature reserves and green spaces only. Please observe current guidelines on social distancing, face coverings, group sizes, hygiene and follow all signage on-site.

The shop opened on 12 April and hides are due to open no earlier than 17 May, but please check the RSPB Leighton Moss website or Facebook page for current information.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/leighton-moss/>

Lancaster Swifts

Unfortunately, UK swift populations have declined by 53% between 1995 and 2016. Whilst reasons for this decline are still not fully understood, the loss of nesting sites and lower insect numbers are thought to play a large part. But the good news; the RSPB has been working with local communities across the UK to create Swift City projects to help these iconic birds.

Whilst the main aim of the Lancaster Swifts project is to gather information about swift populations, nest sites and to raise awareness of the efforts that can be made to preserve and create nest sites, it will heavily rely on the involvement of the Lancaster community. Already this project has seen a partnership form with the wonderful Lancaster and District Men's Sheds (LADS), who are building swift boxes for Lancaster Swifts. Some of the materials used have also been generously donated by local timber merchants Haldane Fisher. We hope to establish more local networks like these but so far, we are delighted to see how the Lancaster community is already very keen to get involved!

Lancaster Swifts aims to bring more than just conservation benefits. Swift projects are perfect to encourage people to engage with nature right on their doorstep, as swifts are very much an urban species. Particularly after a difficult year due to Covid-19, the project will offer people a chance to feel connected and be a part of something that can create new life and help protect a species. People of all different backgrounds can come together to champion nature and as restrictions lift, it will also offer a social aspect. Lancaster Swifts embodies the RSPB's programme to Save Nature Through People and at the same time it will promote peoples' wellbeing through nature.

If you would like to be a volunteer and be a part of this project, or you think you may have a collaboration opportunity to offer, then we would love to hear from you. Please email Lancaster.Swifts@rspb.org.uk. In the month of April, we will be offering online swift survey training as well as many other opportunities to get involved. We are truly excited to see how Lancaster Swifts will develop and grow over the coming years and the positive impact it could have for our local swifts.

Elizabeth Goldsbrough

Pied Flycatcher Nests - a Natural Curiosity

Pied flycatchers are a delightful trans-Saharan migrant that have been breeding in nestboxes in North Lancashire since the 1960s. Arriving in mid-April, breeding in May and departing in June/July, they do not spend much time in the UK. Since 1977, along with other members of the North Lancashire Ringing Group, I have been nest-recording and ringing Pied Flycatchers in nestboxes in local upland woods (with generous permission from landowners), following the lives of individual birds in the increasing local population. In May 2014, Jean Roberts (BTO Regional Representative and ringer) asked if there was more moss than usual in the Pied Flycatcher nests that season, so I looked at the nests in my boxes and wondered.

I had no 'normal or standard' to go from, so I decided to put in more effort and look at the nests in more detail the following year, 2015, starting from the birds' first arrival and nest-building attempts. Over the following winter, I examined many books and journals, but could only find the quantitative detail I required in three studies. One small-scale examination of nests in Wales showed that mainly grass was used, and another study in Spain, that bark dominated. Dead leaves were rarely used. A brilliant study in Sweden (Stjornberg, 1974), showed a wide range of materials were used, but that grass and pine bark dominated. She also found many odd things, such as cotton threads, dog and human hair in the nests, collected from around local houses. This showed the wide variety of items the birds could gather.

So I decided to count and measure all the things I could think of about the Pied Flycatcher nest construction in 2015. After consulting Charles Deeming (of the University of Lincoln), a leading authority on nests, eggs and incubation. I found plenty of other things to consider, as well.

At the end of the breeding season (late July), all the nests in my study woods were entirely removed from the nest boxes, each put in an individual plastic bag, labelled and placed in the deep freeze for 4 days at -20 degrees C (to kill any unrequired invertebrates). Then they were air-dried on plastic trays, before finally being stored in a dry environment. Nest details were subsequently measured to obtain data of the nests (external dimensions, depth and thickness) together with the internal measurements of the cup and nest wall - a tricky, but eventually an easily do-able procedure. The nest could be carefully divided into two parts.

The outer nest (the filling material for the box) was mainly dead leaves, moss, grass and bark. The inner nest cup (the insulated site to hold the eggs and allow incubation), consisted of fine grasses, roots, bark and hair. Each part was dissected and measured separately.

The real fun then starts, separating the nest components into the various material categories and sub-categories, then weighing and measuring. This usually takes 4-6 hours (plus writing up/recording), but can be much longer if there are plenty of deer hairs! For example, dead leaves are not just any old leaves. They are habitat-specific leaves, and each tree species must be separated, counted and weighed. There are rarely less than three species per nest. Many leaves are skeletal or damaged, so handbooks have to be consulted and reference collections made to compare specimens - the same for grasses and tree bark, where venation and lenticel counts are important. In the case of mosses and ferns, taxon specialists are involved.

Eventually, all the materials sit in front of me, in plastic trays, ready for checking, counting and weighing, before finally being entered on the data sheet, job done - well, partly! One of the largest components of the nest, by weight, is dust; sieved fragments of damaged materials, chick faeces, feather sheaths, addled eggs, mummified chicks and undiscovered (by the ringer), ringed dead chicks, birds assumed to have fledged! Also,

there is the fieldwork element. The tree species within a 25m radius of each nestbox (the approximate size of a defended pied flycatcher territory), have to be identified, counted and, in the case of oaks, the trunk diameter measured to assess age (the latter also helps with another study on food availability) to assess the different types of leaf available to the birds around the nest. Do they select leaves for the nest in the same proportion as available, or travel further to find specific species? The data analysis follows with number crunching and statistical analysis to test the significance of the gathered information. Was it worth the effort? I mean for me, not the birds!



Pied Flycatcher Nest © Kevin Briggs

The nests come from four sub-habitats present in the main Pedunculate oak woodland habitat of the area - oak, alder, birch or birch/oak dominated areas. Each sub-habitat around a nestbox contained between 4 and 6 species of tree, and the birds took whichever was the most abundant, easiest to manoeuvre and as large as possible. They want to fill up the box quickly, from the most abundant and available source, so they can get on with the real job of building the nest cup in the most advantageous position inside the box. The average nest cup weighed 7.3g (30% of the total nest mass), compared to the outer nest mean weight of 17.3g. The mean proportions of materials in the nest were moss 36.7%, leaves 33.4% and grass 10.8%, so the first question was answered. In 2015, the average nest was one third moss. Now I had a benchmark for future years, if I wished to continue the process.

The dominant moss species identified in the nest was *Hypnum andoii* (a common species found on tree boles), but 6 other species were identified in smaller amounts. So why was this moss species selected? What special features or qualities did it possess to make it the birds' species of choice? More to find out!

Bark fibres from honeysuckle were found in 75% of the nests, oak in 46% and birch in 67%. The honeysuckle bark is selected because it can be torn off in long, thin strands, excellent for nest construction, but it occurs infrequently, so birds were travelling much longer distances (energetically expensive), to get this material. Oak bark is the "blast" (dead phloem material) found on old oak branches when the dead surface bark falls off, so

is abundant in most of these woodland sub-habitats. Birch is a good, springy, curly bark, not easily removed from the tree and also the tree needs to be of a certain age, so the bird will require effort and knowledge to obtain this bark type. The same applies for the few individuals that use Scots' pine bark. So bark types in nests can vary with the birds' skill and knowledge of the habitat.

The nest cup is constructed with fine roots, often grass, but predominantly the thin black rhizomorphs (roots) of moss species, which are very difficult to identify to type. These are long, fine and supple, usually forming a supporting layer in most nest cups. The outermost lining (closest to the eggs), is often roe deer hair (60% of nests) and, when present, can range from 5 to 578 individual hairs, providing a significant insulatory layer. Wool, which can entangle and damage adult and juvenile birds, occurred in 20% of nests. The diameter of an average nest cup was 6.5cm, with a mean depth of 3.4cm. The majority (44%) of the nest cups were placed in the darkest corner of the nestbox, farthest away from the nest entrance, better protection from predators, but more effort needed for feeding the chicks, so a compromise for the parents - another question to answer.

Lancashire nests were lighter than the Welsh and Spanish nests (by 5g), but there was significantly more moss, bark and hair in nests constructed locally and less grass, leaves, twigs and feathers than the other nests from Wales and Spain.

The consequences of the differences in nest composition is unclear, but animal materials have better insulatory properties than plant-derived materials, and the reasons why will be investigated further. Differences in nest construction by the pied flycatchers can be observed across many hundreds of kilometres, as demonstrated here between nests in northern England, Wales and Spain; also shown, on a smaller scale (less than 3-4km), by local birds in the four sub-habitats. The pied flycatchers show plasticity in being able to use a variety of materials to create the same structure and it would be interesting to understand why geographically-separated populations use different nesting materials - a topic for more investigation.

Other interesting facts to come from the study show that one-year-old females start nest-building 1.5 days earlier than older females, their nests containing more moss and taking two days longer (in total 11.8 days) to build. The younger females' nest cup is 1.8g lighter, on average, than older females' and the total nest 5.1g lighter than more experienced females'. None of these figures are, as yet, significant, but with more years' results, this may show that experience has an impact on building a good nest. Also, nests constructed by various aged females in April, are heavier (and contain more moss), than nests built in May, but as yet, not significantly confirmed.

By deconstructing 40-60 nests each year, there will be much more to discover, or will add more significant data to some of these last observations. Also, why don't pied flycatchers line their nests with feathers, like other hole-nesters, such as redstarts and blue tits? I have yet to find a feather-lined pied flycatcher's nest. The whole report on the pied flycatchers' nests can be found in *Bird Study* 2016 (Volume 63, Number 4, pp516-524) if you are interested.

This has led to another 6 years of hobby-time study, working on different bird species and has involved a range of collaborations with other enthusiasts around the UK. I have attended two Conferences, meeting nest experts from around the world, sharing experiences and gathering ideas. Recently, I have been devising interesting (to me, perhaps not the birds) and novel experiments to discover how, why, where and when pied flycatchers collect and use nesting materials. It is fascinating.

I must thank Jean Roberts for the nudge in the right direction.

Kevin Briggs

Spring Migration

Spring is a most exciting time for birding, watching out for the first early arrivals in March followed by the flood of song from warblers throughout April is a great joy. For me the first singing willow warbler means that spring is really here. One never knows what may turn up during this period of arrival of birds from their wintering areas.

Many species of what we usually consider resident birds are on the move also. This is well illustrated by the ringing data assembled locally by the North Lancs Ringing Group. Siskin and lesser redpoll are good examples. We have ringed both throughout the years producing a total of 3579 siskin and 3375 lesser redpoll. In both species around 45% of the total catch has been in spring as they pass through our area and visit garden feeding stations. Where do they come from and where are they going? Our ringing shows they winter mainly in the south of England and into France. The breeding area of the passage siskin is mainly in the Highland region of Scotland, with 34 reports from that area and on to Norway and Sweden. Lesser redpoll have a similar wintering area, but the breeding areas are mainly southern Scotland, with a few into the Highlands and one in Norway.

My interest in bird migration was first sparked in 1957, when I was being trained to ring birds by John Barnes, a teacher from Arnside. We ringed a brood of six swallows on our farm at Warton, 192 days later one was found 9500 kms south in the Transvaal South Africa! John told me of another swallow he had ringed in Bentham, it was found still alive 10 years and six months later in Cape Province South Africa. Truly amazing, how do they do it? Flying that colossal distance when just a few months old and making the same journey there and back 10 times and of course getting fuelled as they move.

Humans sometime find it difficult to navigate even short distances. The best mistake I can remember was one day when I was bird watching at Sunderland Point. A car stopped and the driver asked "Is this was the way to Blackpool?"

Of course, birds also take the wrong direction at times, such as the ringed-necked duck, a North American bird, which turned up at Leighton and Pine Lake this winter, when it should have been in south and central America with its mates. When I hear of very unexpected rarities such as this I always remember the words of Gareth Thomas of RSPB Research "Rare birds are the village idiots of the bird world". True I suppose, for the ring-necked duck to find a mate it has to fly back to America, which it might possibly do. But of course rare birds give a great deal of pleasure and excitement to many people.

Bird migration is incredible. The species I have studied most is reed warbler, which winters in West Africa. It weighs ca 11 grams. When only 2-3 months old it knows instinctively that it must migrate to Africa to survive the winter. Our ringing returns show that its parents have already left, so no guidance there, yet it knows to provide for the journey by feeding avidly and storing fuel in the form of fat. Then one evening at dusk in August or early September it sets off for Africa on the first leg of its almost 3000 miles journey to West Africa. The first leg takes it to the south coast, the next to SW France and so on in nightly hops, feeding up and re-fuelling during stops, which can be several days, its major obstacle is the Sahara desert. It takes 4-6 weeks to make the journey to its winter quarters. Early next spring it makes the return journey, not just to any reedbed in Europe, but to the exact place where it was born, navigating with pin point accuracy and remember it is still not a year old!

John Wilson

Spring migration

*Warm weather has brought them,
Breached sea wall spate and northerly winds
Hold them here: Black-tailed godwits,
Limosa limosa.*

*Seventeen hundred birds or so,
Feeding steadily in fields flooded like rice paddies; or
Sleeping still, serried to receive the rising sun,
Summer feathers flaming.*

*Skittish birds call incessantly,
A constant clamour of squittering and squettering
Amplified as some fall to sparring;
With tails fanned wide,
They crouch like cats, facing off,
Then thrust bills, locking in
Ungainly swordsmanship.*

*A scattering lift and wheel away
Pale underwings winking,
Till as one they bank and turn,
White wing stripes caught in undulating flow.*

Jennifer Woodward



Black-tailed Godwit © Ken Harrison

Local Group Members' Thoughts from Lockdown

Escaping Covid in a Winter Garden

Through the depths of winter and the weeks of lockdown, my wife and I have spent more time than usual sitting, all warm, in comfy chairs just waiting and watching what's going on in the garden. Our home has evolved into a centrally heated hide, with a kettle and a kitchen. We feel we're just so lucky to have a big garden with a variety of mini-habitats, and we've greatly enjoyed watching it all through the front and back windows. The main feature at the front is a big herbaceous bed on an upward slope, with bushes and lost little corners amongst limestone rocks at one end, and a big yew tree at the other. There's some hedging and more rocky, stoney areas around and about.

The backdrop is a view of fields with lambs bouncing around in spring. Through the winter there are flocks of corvids, gulls and lapwing feeding and flying about with a buzzard roaming above. Occasionally, flocks of geese head for the estuary. But they are all too far away to for us to engage with. So we focus on the garden.

At the back, the land slopes away downhill from the house below a big, wide patio with lots of flower pots scattered around. There are wide herbaceous areas below the patio and around the pond, with a lawn going down to a huge area of tangled brambles climbing up and over. I've enjoyed pushing the stronger leads into the less dense areas, encouraging it all to get thicker and bigger. Below the garage on the other side, there is another herbaceous area, with years of raspberries and nettles running wild and rampant beyond. There's space enough around and about for log piles, climbing ivy and other wild zones.

Behind the brambles, the land falls away to a beck and there are established trees. Down here we have the opportunity to plant wildlife friendly trees and shrubs, and try to get a big thick hedge established. For visiting birds, there are three tiers for them as they move downwards, nearer to the feeder stands at the bottom of the lawn and up on the patio. Each little flock flies in to the high tree tops, moving lower to the smaller ones and the garage roof, and then down to the fences and bushes. We call the big window at the back the Breakfast Window. It overlooks all these mini habitats, and breakfast takes a long time.

The herbaceous areas are a mix: some have been dug over and planted out, while others have been left wild. With all these we have followed the advice of Jenny Steel in the BTO's *Bird Table* magazine: *the best way to help overwintering wildlife is just to leave everything alone in the autumn, undisturbed and uncut*. It's neatly summed up by the mantra MESS IS GOOD!

Spending more time than usual simply looking out has shown us birds and behaviour we've rarely seen in the garden before. A goldcrest popped up in the yew at the front, the first for five years. We have stopped looking past the dunnocks, and started to watch them more carefully as they searched around for food between the pots on the patio and in the messy areas. I'm ashamed to say that I'd never really noticed the delicate patterns and colouring that emerged on their backs as the weeks passed and the search for mates began. Another feature we have spent time on, was learning the differences between the male and female robins. We also see the sparrowhawks more often, and have noticed how the male and female seemed to hunt in different ways, swooping into the garden from different directions. The female sits on a particular branch above the beck, keeping an eye on who's at the nearby feeders. I also had the surreal experience of reading that reed buntings often visited gardens, looking up and thinking, "We've never had one in any of our gardens" - and then seeing a male down on the bramble patch! How often have we missed such things? We hardly ever see the tawny owl that calls right through the winter

As the nights closed in and the elder and hawthorn berries were finished back in November, I raked up piles of leaves from beside the road and over in the churchyard.

Carrying them home I emptied the bins below and around the big yew at the front. Soon the blackbirds were kicking them all around, looking for insects and all sorts to eat. As the natural food diminished, I began to supplement what was left by scattering left over goobly bits from the kitchen, and suety nibbles and sprinkles all around the leaves. The blackbirds were soon joined by the robins and dunnocks. But the female blackbird has spent the winter making sure the others didn't stay long. She also chased away the male blackbirds. So we found ourselves going anthropomorphic, and called it Mrs B's kitchen. (Do you have names like this for different parts of your garden?!)

There remained plenty for the blackbirds, robins and dunnocks to find in the messy herbaceous areas, underneath the brambles, and below the feeders. They were joined by squabbling woodpigeons, and a wren - or was it two? We've only seen two together twice all winter. In December, a handsome male pheasant arrived with two females, and they have been daily visitors, searching for food ever since. There are also grey squirrels and the occasional rabbits. We've not seen the stoat this year - though we've been looking all the time. There are field voles - or are they bank voles? They move so fast it's hard to get a clear view of their features. Inevitably, a huge, fit feral cat stalks through from time to time.

When the weather began to get really cold and there was snow and ice, I looked out my recipe for bird pudding. It's in one of my favourite bird books*, now a falling apart paperback that I bought more than fifty years ago. Basically, it's sugar melted in water, with melted suet stirred in. Then I add mixed dried fruit, broken nuts, seeds, and all sorts of gobbly bits and bobs - as much as I can press in. Once the pudding is set I cut it and shape it to fit into a feeder hanging on the patio, and into another one from the stand at the bottom of the garden. Sometimes, the old ways are still the best ...

The long-tailed tits are the highlight of breakfast, with their bright colouring and tails at every angle. They come to the bird pudding in groups of 4 or 6, but sometimes up into double figures, feeding just ten feet from where we're sitting looking down at them, quite entranced. The pudding also draws in the shyer great-spotted woodpecker from the nearby wood to the feeder stand at the bottom. He hangs on in various positions from below the feeder, jabbing with that ferocious beak. He'll feed for up to five minutes at a time. The coal, blue and great tits are regulars, and it was the goldcrest's choice of food. The birds move to the bushes either side of the patio between visits, to eat what they've got, or to rest. The starlings don't seem to share the info at their roost, as only two or three of them ever come.

The most spectacular visitors to the pudding feeders are the jackdaws. They get into all sorts of contorted positions, and are sometimes helped by horizontal sticks going through the middle of the slabs of pudding. I tie them to the feeder frames to help the small birds stand while feeding. There can be not just one jackdaw on a feeder at any one time, but two. They seem to allow each other two or three good pecks before another one waiting above flies down, displacing the ones that are feeding.

Winter brings different behaviours too. Two of the blackbirds have developed a 'helicoptering' hovering technique to get some bird pudding. They rise up from below, and succeed in hovering for a few flaps, long enough to grab a beakful before dropping back to the ground to eat it. The females seem better at this than the males. We've never seen this before, or read about it.

The pair of nuthatch and the finches all stick to the sunflower seeds, and we've had another winter of the goldfinches ignoring the nyger seeds, but they have found time to get seeds from the woody stalks and old flower heads that have been left around the messy areas.

All winter, even into March, we have watched them on the teasel heads, bobbing in the wind. One of the dunnocks has learnt to supplement its habitual ground feeding approach, by flying up to one particular seed feeder to get seeds directly. It's always the same feeder. I've seen research into nuthatches with identifiable rings, showing that many different individuals come to a specific garden. It's not, as it may seem, always the same ones. There are dozens of jackdaws in the local flocks and around the church tower, and we'd love to know how many different individuals actually come to get the bird pudding and the seeds. How many tits and finches come? Is it always the same three goldfinches we wonder?



Nuthatch © Ken Harrison

In February the woodpigeons, dunnocks, robins and blackbirds all started their arguing and confrontations, chasing rivals all around as they started to focus on territory and pairing up. Individuals would try to feed on the ground in one of the messy areas, only for a rival to sweep in and chase it off. It was hard to tell who was with whom, and it proved difficult to pick out features on the more dominant ones so we could identify them when they were alone. The blackbird that emerged as the Alpha Male has a striking yellow eyering and a yellow, going towards orange, beak that appears almost luminous. This colouring became more striking as February turned into March. The yellows and the greens, and the blacks and the reds on the goldfinch and the siskin, and on the occasional visiting greenfinch, all began almost to glow as they became brighter. The salmon pink on the male bullfinch and the black/grey and the palest of pinks on the female looked so smart and tidy.

In March here, we get beyond the early bulbs to what are, for us, the real signs of the rapidly advancing spring. The herons are flying back and forth to their little heronry at the top of the village. The song thrush, dunnock, blackbird and robin are all singing more and more. The pond is waking up, with insects and snails moving around, tadpoles emerging, and the plants beginning to grow again. Blackbirds are starting to gather nesting material. The tits are inspecting the nestboxes. Soon I find I need to fill the feeders with seed less often as birds start to move away, searching out their own territories. The curlew and the oystercatcher are flying up from the Lune Valley, over the gardens and the churchyard here, to the moors above, calling all the time, as they look to establish their own territories. Down by the beck the wild garlic leaves are growing fast.

Soon the chiffchaff, the willow warbler and the blackcap will be back. Many of the birds around the garden will have survived another long, cold, frosty, icy, windy winter. While for us, the garden has been a haven, away from the unrelenting chaos and sense of doom out there. It's brought us peace and calm, and the excitement of discovering new things for ourselves and not being shown them by experts, or slow-motion cameras on TV.

And now, it's time to focus on BIBBBs gardening - that is sowing and planting to attract Butterflies, Insects, Bees, Bats and Birds. I do like the re-seeding ones. After a year or two, teasels pop up all over the place, and the bees and insects love the purple flowers. But perennials are best. Once established, they go on growing and growing, and create even *more* mess each autumn.

* Tony Soper (1968), *The Bird Table Book*, Pan: London

Stephen Young

A Garden Visitor During Lockdown in Lancaster



Juvenile Sparrowhawk © Martin Elson

More Thoughts from Lockdown

I have lived at my present address for nearly 47 years! Since lockdown we have had a hedgehog stay in the garden for 3 weeks and a pied and a grey wagtail visit us quite regularly during the past few months! I have explored Lancaster and its surroundings and been pleasantly surprised at how much woodland there is, particularly above the Ridge estate which is very close to Williamson Park. I think I will find it challenging to becoming normal again!

Best wishes, Anne

Anne Clark

Sunderland Point

Sunderland Point is a small village on the north west coast of Lancashire that lies six miles south of Morecambe, we are situated to the southerly extremes of the huge Morecambe Bay complex on the River Lune estuary, the village is accessed via a tidal causeway, much the same as Lindisfarne (or Holy Island) in Northumberland.

The River Lune starts its life way up in the Cumbrian fells, indeed as many of you who have travelled the M6 motorway will have noted, a bridge that you cross in the Tebay Gorge is signed "The Lune" and you also cross over the Lune as the M6 passes through Lancaster, our nearest city that the Lune winds its way through towards the estuary.

We are a SSSI, RAMSAR and SPA designated and recognised conservation area, although greatly troubled with unruly dog walkers/owners.

The Lune being tidal twice a day with its vast mudflats, sandbanks and inter tidal marsh areas, attracts vast numbers of wading birds, especially during the winter months to feed on the riches on offer within these areas.

One of the main winter spectacles is a wader roost that gathers on the inter tidal marsh area to the west of Sunderland Point, its official name is the Middleton wader roost, it is one of the BTO WeBS count areas, Knots gather in their thousands, indeed going back to January 2011 I met with Garry Sharples who does the count for the Middleton wader roost, having done my count in a separate area earlier, there was an enormous gathering of knot, I mentioned to Garry that I have 23,500 to which Garry replied I have 24,000, of course I was very disappointed to have missed counting the 500! This is a record that still stands, numbers dropped away in the following years, but 2019 saw an increase in numbers and my recent visits to the roost in March 2021 has shown another definite increase (I estimated 15,000) over preceding years which I find very encouraging. During March we always have an increase in numbers over the rest of the winter months

(discounting January 2011), as they are working their way slowly northwards on the start of their migration. Together with knot the roost comprises of dunlin, grey plover, redshank, curlew, oystercatcher, black-tailed godwit and bar-tailed godwit, cormorant, gulls, shelduck, little egret and wigeon, with common snipe in the area of rushes. All these species total a very impressive number indeed and is a fine example of why the Morecambe Bay complex is of international importance.



Waders in Flight © Alan Smith

Two species that we have over-wintering in large numbers are golden plover and lapwing, neither of which play a significant part in adding to the wader roost numbers. Golden plover can be seen on the sand banks to the east of Sunderland Point, with over a thousand birds. On a sunny winters day you don't require binoculars to identify the wonderful golden colour of their plumage, they very often share the company of the lapwing, which visit us in numbers in excess of 3,000, a very large percentage I guess will be visitors from Europe. Both species can also be found on inland pasture fields enjoying a diet of worms.

A success story in increasing numbers over the last few years to this area is that of the godwit, I counted in excess of 3,500 black-tailed godwits on the wader roost during February 2021, my highest ever sighting and indeed as I write this article on the 7 March 2021 we have several hundred roosting and feeding on the mudflats near the house, looking fine as they adopt the chestnut red breeding plumage, a little further away are 800 bar-tailed godwits roosting, all to be disturbed shortly with the flood tide.

Another winter spectacular are the large number of pinkfooted geese that arrive to our area from Iceland, they congregate mainly in an area known as the Fylde, geographically and for ease of recognition it is a vast area to the east of Blackpool and to the south of the Lune estuary. Numbers are around the 30,000 mark and because there is such a large gathering they can be seen flying in the local area in large skeins, searching out areas for foraging, then in late afternoon you can hear them, before seeing when they are returning to their roost sight. It is quite magical to hear them calling when flying over on a lovely moon lit evening.



Waders feeding on the tideline, Sunderland Point © Alan Smith

During mid-spring time the winter visitors start to depart, it is another time of wonderment, when for instance you will awaken one morning and there is not a single wigeon to be seen anywhere, all gone, who told everybody to leave as one? They are all heading for the Norwegian and Russian arctic regions to begin a new cycle of that particular species, just exactly the same with lapwing, all gone as one big unit, although hopefully a goodly percentage will be heading to the high moors and fells of the Forest Of Bowland and nearby areas to breed. Curlews, of which we can have close to a 1,000 overwintering, leave in a more relaxed manner, with some none breeders staying here throughout summer, again leaving to breed in the higher moorland areas.

In my younger days when there was a lot of ploughing taking place for cereal and green crops. I would be riding on the tractor with our next door neighbour, Harry the farmer, and lapwings would be nesting on the area to be ploughed, Harry would stop, the tractor make a scrape in the newly ploughed area and place the eggs within, then next time around you would find the lapwing sitting quite contentedly in her new location. This would happen a few times in the one field being ploughed. I think the older methods of farming, which were possibly more caring and showed more compassion, were a great benefit to the likes of lapwing and curlew, an area where much more could be done to help our breeding waders.

(This article has also been submitted to Wader Quest for publication.
<https://www.waderquest.net>)

Alan Smith

Longton - Ribble Way - River Ribble - Marsh Lane

Thursday 12 November 2020, 10.30 to 14.00, Fine Sunny, 5 miles

Parked at the Dolphin Public House and walked north through Clay Pigeon shoot, then continued north on the Ribble Way all the way to the Ribble, passing to the west of Westlands farm. Lots of birds flying up and down the river, including Canada goose and wigeon. At one point saw about 5 meadow pipits flying around and perched on a wire fence. There was another bird with them. This was darker and slightly bigger. Maybe a female corn bunting. It had the bunting facial pattern. Several ravens flew over, all going towards the River Douglas and flying south. Had lunch, before retracing steps as far as Pilot's Cottage, where we walked along the embankment back to the pub. This direct route was just over 2 miles and it took us 75 minutes.



Boundary Hedge – Ribble © Graham Thomas

Species seen or heard (h = heard only; f = female):

Whooper swan 10+, pinkfooted goose 50+, Canada goose 200+, wigeon 200+, little egret 1, common buzzard 1, kestrel, lapwing 200+, curlew h, black-headed gull 10+, herring gull 10+, lesser black-backed gull 10+, great black-backed gull 3, common gull 1, wood pigeon 30+, collared dove 2, carrion crow 10+, magpie 2, jackdaw 5+, raven 8, blue tit h, great tit, starling 200+, wren h, robin, blackbird, fieldfare 30+, house sparrow 5+, tree sparrow 2, meadow pipit 5+, goldfinch 2, chaffinch 2, corn bunting 1f?, brown hare

Graham Thomas

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