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## THE RSPB LANCASTER LOCAL GROUP NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Autumn 2011 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. We hope you have enjoyed your wildlife watching over the summer period and that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of autumn and winter outings and talks.

In this newsletter we have an article from Michael Gardner on Foula, showing his affection for the remote Scottish Islands. I have just returned from a trip to Fair Isle and Shetland, but my article is from even further north, as I enjoyed a fantastic trip to Spitsbergen in July. We also have our usual news from Leighton Moss, with good news about avocets, marsh harriers and otters.

If you would like to contribute a short article, or have any interesting wildlife news from your local patch, please email your contribution for the next RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter to [kenharrison\\_1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kenharrison_1@yahoo.co.uk) no later than March 30<sup>th</sup> 2012.

*Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor*

### ***Programme Notes October 2011***

During the past year, members have enjoyed outdoor meetings at a number of diverse locations. Highlights included: during March, a walk along the Dunsop Valley, where we had good views of woodland birds, some raptors, and just beyond the head of the valley, the now famous(?) eagle owl. During the following month we travelled to RSPB Geltsdale. Later in the spring we had a minibus trip to the RSPB Old Moor Reserve in South Yorkshire, where we were led by Robin Horner. At this meeting we were appreciative of Robin's knowledge and his descriptions about what we saw that day.

A walk on June 11<sup>th</sup> entitled "Locations around Leighton Moss" was organised in conjunction with the Silverdale and Arnsdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and formed part of their walking festival that was being held that month. This day was particularly enjoyable and instructive, incorporating, apart from birds, several other aspects of the natural history within the areas that surround Leighton Moss. Our two "Members' Evenings", held in May and August, led by John Wilson and centered around Leighton Moss, are now a regular and traditional feature of our programme. At our recent AGM a lady remarked to me how much she had enjoyed these two events (these are planned again for 2012).

Of our indoor meetings, the ever popular film show by Gordon Yates took place on March 4<sup>th</sup>. This year, Gordon's film took us to Svalbard in the high arctic and to the western isles of Scotland. Other speakers during the course of the year included David Mower with a talk about our garden birds, and more recently, Robin Horner, who at the AGM, described the co-ordinated approach that the RSPB takes in its work within North West England.

Coming up this autumn we have an outing to Parkgate, Dee Estuary, on October 28<sup>th</sup>, and two more indoor meetings: a talk by Ken Smith about woodpeckers on October 31<sup>st</sup> (this is a joint meeting with LDBWS), on November 9<sup>th</sup> David Morris speaks about farming and birds, and the year ends with outdoor meetings to Marshside on November 27<sup>th</sup> and Hest Bank and Heysham Harbour on December 4<sup>th</sup>.

Special mention has to be made of our Secondhand Book Fair to be held over the weekend of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of November in the Education Centre at Leighton Moss. *This latter event is a valuable*

*fund raiser for the RSPB* - your donations of unwanted books (no magazines please) are still most welcome and can be left at Leighton Moss reception.

We are hoping to send future newsletters by email where possible. This would save on postage and printing costs and you would also have colour photos! Response so far has been poor, so if you would like to receive newsletters by email and help more of your Local Group subscription go towards supporting the RSPB, please contact Jennifer Rae on [jennifer.rae68@btinternet.com](mailto:jennifer.rae68@btinternet.com)

As you may be aware, there have been some changes to the composition of your Local Group Committee. Our Chairman and Group Leader, John Bateman, has now resigned owing to continuing ill-health after several years in this post. Likewise, Sue Anderton relinquished her post as Group Treasurer after almost twenty years. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to express our thanks for their loyal service and wish them all the best for the future. With John's departure we are now advertising the post of Local Group Leader. Similarly, I would like to repeat my appeal for new recruits to our Committee. I am sure that within our midst we have individuals with organising skills. It is only by recruiting new Committee members i.e. those willing to take on administrative tasks (and none of these tasks are particularly onerous) that we will be able to secure a long-term future for *your* RSPB Local Group.

*Michael Gardner - Local Group Secretary*

### ***A Message from our Local Group Leader***

I would like through the media of this local newsletter to thank all members, committee members of the local group and officers of the RSPB North West Regional Office and express my appreciation for the picture of the Avocets presented to me on my retirement as leader of the group. It is with deep regret that I have relinquished the post and my association over many years with the local group.

May I wish the group all success in the coming year and may it continue the work of the RSPB in this, our local area. All the best to you all.

*JW Bateman*

### ***News from RSPB Leighton Moss nature reserve***

Amongst the highlights of the summer at Leighton Moss must be our **marsh harriers**, which as well as being entertaining and spectacular to watch, were successful in producing eight young from four nests (*marsh harrier photo* © Mike Malpass). **Otters** are also up there as our 'top mammal' and have been extraordinary with sightings nearly every day, with five all together at one point! Hot on the heels would be our **red deer** however, which didn't fail to produce gasps and clicks of camera shutters when they appeared out of the reeds, often with calves in tow. As I write, the testosterone fuelled stags are starting to psych themselves up for the rut now.



We have seen good numbers of **waders** on the shore pools and **little egrets** have been in good numbers (roost size averaging about 44) and **great white egrets** were regularly sighted. **Wildfowl** numbers are starting to build up throughout late summer and early autumn too. **Avocets** managed to breed successfully this summer with nine chicks fledging, which has been lovely to see.

At the end of the summer when the water was at a low level we had regular sightings of **bitterns**, but sadly, as far as we are aware, the bitterns have not bred successfully this year.

After having such a fantastic breeding season last year, it is sad news that **bearded tit** numbers this year have significantly dropped, with only 23 young birds been ringed (as I write towards the end

of September). They have started coming out on the grit trays on the Causeway now, which as usual attracts nature lovers from far and wide.

Moth lovers have been in their element throughout July and August. We have had a great variety of moths, including a first record for Lancashire; the **Devon Carpet** (several recordings on the reserve) – this is a sure sign that climate change is bringing us some exciting new species. As far as butterflies are concerned, **small pearl-bordered and pearl-bordered fritillaries** have increased in number significantly since 2010, but **high brown fritillaries** have had a relatively average year when compared to the last decade. **Northern brown argus** numbers have soared this year (increase of over 40% compared to 2010).

We are pleased to announce that Leighton Moss now has its own **Phoenix Group** (photo below) which started in September. We hope that the group will build up and become a very active group for teenagers, so if you know anyone aged 13 to 19, please spread the word.

Jane and Mike Malpass, who are volunteers here, are continuing to enjoy presenting their own **'Wild Autumn'** radio programme on Lancaster and Morecambe's Diversity FM. So if you tune in there will be a wealth of interviews about nature at Leighton Moss and around the area. Visit [www.diversityfm.co.uk](http://www.diversityfm.co.uk) for more information.

Don't forget you can keep in touch with the latest news from Leighton Moss on our blog (visit our webpage [www.rspb.org.uk/leightonmoss](http://www.rspb.org.uk/leightonmoss) and click on the blog).

*Jen Walker*



## **Spitsbergen**

Spitsbergen, the largest island in the Svalbard archipelago, is part of Norway and is only 600 miles from the North Pole. In July this year I enjoyed a polar cruise exploring the west coast of Spitsbergen on board the Akademik Ioffe, a former polar research ship now converted for expedition cruises in the Arctic and Antarctic. Before our cruise began we had some time in Longyearbyen to explore the town and find some of the local birds, including eider, snow bunting, arctic tern, grey phalarope and ivory gull (*ivory gull photo © Ken Harrison*). We arrived at the dock to find our ship in the middle of the fjord and had to board via zodiacs (large rubber dinghies with outboard motors)! Once under way we settled into our cabins and were introduced to the staff and had our safety talk and lifeboat drill. Our days would be spent exploring the fjords and inlets of Spitsbergen, usually with two or even three zodiac cruises each day, including some landings to explore the coast.



On our second day the highlight of our zodiac cruise was a pod of white beluga whales, followed by a landing to see long tailed skuas and also a reindeer on an island near Ny Alesund. The following day we were being ferried by zodiacs for a landing at Smeerenburg, an old whaling station. As I waited on the ship a message came that a polar bear had been sighted on land about half a mile from where the zodiacs were landing, so those who had already landed had to get back on the zodiacs while the rest of us watched from the ship and waited for more zodiacs to be

launched so we could all get good views of our first polar bear! In the afternoon we visited a little auk colony at Fuglesangen. The following day produced some wonderful sights at a seabird cliff containing tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of Brunnich's guillemots, while kittiwakes were flying around our heads and black guillemots were nearby on the water. In the afternoon we visited a walrus haul-out at Torelneset. A visit to another walrus haul-out later in the trip brought close views of two Sabine's gulls.

Zodiac cruises along the edge of the ice and visits to glaciers produced more good birds such as Arctic skuas and glaucous gulls, while fulmars and kittiwakes followed the ship on several days. However, the end of our trip was getting close and we wanted to see more polar bears, so our expedition leader "Dutch" produced his "lucky polar bear socks"! The following morning a few of us were up on deck for a pre-breakfast birdwatch when a mother polar bear with two cubs was spotted on a distant headland. After a very quick breakfast, we were off in the zodiacs to get closer views of the polar bear family. We then had a cruise to Monaco glacier, where we witnessed



thousands of terns and gulls taking part in a "feeding frenzy". The afternoon landing brought us a pair of red throated divers on a nest and a purple sandpiper. However, our landing was cut short by the sighting of a large male polar bear (*polar bear photo © Ken Harrison*) about half a mile from our zodiacs, so it was another emergency evacuation as we got into the zodiacs before the polar bear made its way to where we had been earlier. We then cruised just off shore, following the polar bear as it walked along the coastline,

giving us fantastic views - Dutch's lucky polar bear socks had worked their magic! Our final day on board involved pushing our way through sea ice, which blocked the entrance to Isfjorden, the fjord we had to negotiate to get back to Longyearbyen.

I will be giving a slide show to the Local Group on Wednesday February 8<sup>th</sup> 2012 at 2.15pm in Over Kellet Village Hall and hope that you will join me to experience some of the magic of Spitsbergen.  
*Ken Harrison*

## ***Foula***

The island of Foula, lying some twenty four miles west of the Shetland mainland, is one of the remotest inhabited communities in the British Isles, with a population of about forty people. Foula was the subject of an excellent illustrated talk given by Peter Mawby at our AGM a couple of years ago, and it was this presentation that whetted my appetite to see this island, its people and wildlife for myself.

As a regular visitor to Shetland I had often viewed Foula from a distance and at sunset, when the island is silhouetted on the western horizon, when with a little imagination it can resemble the outline of some giant ocean liner. However, the island is small; just three miles in length by two and a half miles in width. Crofts are situated on the narrow eastern coastal strip with an expanse of peat moorland rising steeply to Foula's peaks - all of these have fascinating names of Norse origin. Da Noup is the most southerly peak and divided from the others - Da Sneug, Da Kame and Soberlie by the glacial valley of Da Daal. The aforementioned Da Kame, has at its back a sheer drop of some 1,233 feet and competes with Conachair on St Kilda as the highest sheer seacliff in



the British Isles. On the north eastern corner of the island is one of Shetland's best known rock features, the impressive Gaad Stack (*Gaad Stack photo © Michael Gardner*), with its three pillars towering some 130 feet above the sea.

Foula's seacliffs boast a full complement of seabirds – puffins, razorbills, shags, guillemots, fulmars and kittiwakes. The highest seacliffs, which are home to most colonies, are on Foula's western side. However, this wild western coast is really only accessible by negotiating a dark and dank rock fault known as Da Sneck, at almost 100 feet deep it cuts down towards the sea at the western end of Da Daal. The way down, so I was told, is treacherous and should not be attempted unless one was in the company of an experienced guide. For my part, needless to say, I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and so I chose to view the cliff nesting birds from elsewhere on Foula's coastline.

The most noticeable bird species during the breeding season is the great skua or "bonxie" as it is referred to in Shetland. These birds appear to breed throughout the island's interior, and they will not hesitate to dive-bomb if one enters a territory, and furthermore, one has to be extremely careful



when walking across the moor so as not to tread on their nests or chicks (*bonxie chick photo © Michael Gardner*). Those bonxies not holding a territory tend to congregate on the Mill Loch, a small pool located directly beneath Hamnafield Hill. Here, the birds attend to their daily ablutions and greet each other with wheezy grunting calls. The arctic skua or "skootie aalin" (as it is called in Shetland) is a somewhat scarcer denizen of the moorland areas, and like the bonxie, it is as equally protective of its eggs and young. The wetter boggy areas of Foula are the favoured haunts of snipe and dunlin, the "chipping" calls

and tail "drumming" of the former are familiar sounds that carry across the blanket bog, especially during the early hours of the morning. Foula can also claim an impressive list of bird sightings, admittedly some are extremely rare visitors: red-headed bunting, chestnut bunting, red-breasted flycatcher, gyrfalcon, American robin, storm petrel and Leach's petrel to name just a few.

Likewise, the island's high cliffs are good vantage points, if one is lucky, for viewing passing schools of killer whales and porpoises.

Foula's tiny harbour - Ham Voe, offers excellent views of Atlantic seals; these inquisitive mammals, will, if one sits patiently and quietly, swim very close to you and then suddenly dive beneath the surface. However, the highlight of my visit was to see and hear the red-throated diver – a bird that inhabits several of the island's small moorland pools. Their eerie wailing and guttural cries, for me, epitomise wild and remote places such as Foula.

*Michael Gardner*

*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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