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THE RSPB LANCASTER LOCAL GROUP NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Spring 2011 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. In this newsletter we have our usual news from Leighton Moss and also an update on the nest box schemes run by the North Lancs Ringing Group. Michael Gardner, our secretary, provides us with an interesting article on Fair Isle Bird Observatory, a place I hope to visit later this year.

Sadly, John Bateman also announces his resignation as Leader of the RSPB Lancaster local group. When I started my birdwatching back in the late 1970s, I attended a WEA course run by John Wilson and there I met John Bateman, who was also on the course. We soon became friends and I began going on regular birdwatching trips with John, the late Tom Marshall and a young David Bateson (who is now working for the RSPB on Anglesey at their South Stack reserve). John encouraged me and helped me with bird identification, in particular with the waders of Morecambe Bay. Thank you John for your help and friendship to myself, and from all those in the local group who have benefited from your experience and advice.

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! If you would like to receive newsletters by email, please contact Jennifer Rae on jennifer.rae68@btinternet.com

If you would like to contribute a short article, or have any interesting wildlife news from your local patch, please email your contribution for the next RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter to kenharrison_1@yahoo.co.uk no later than September 30th 2011.

Ken Harrison - Newsletter Editor

A Message from John Bateman, Group Leader

It is with deep regret that I have tendered my resignation as Chairman/Leader of the local RSPB group. This is due to the fact that my health does not now allow me to participate in the group's activities and that in fairness to the group I think that now is the time for another person to take over. May I express my thanks to the Committee who have supported me in the past few years and also to all the members who have taken part in the outings and meetings. I have very many happy memories of the outdoor trips that I have been privileged to lead in the past.

May I wish the group all the best for the future. If any person feels like taking on the Leadership, can they please let any committee member know.

Best Wishes to all.

J.W. Bateman - Group Leader

Programme Notes March 2011

The lengthening hours of daylight, along with the appearance of snowdrops and crocus in my garden, are for me a timely reminder that 2011 is moving on along with the promise of hopefully, warmer days ahead. This is therefore an appropriate time to remind you of some forthcoming events on our programme.

On Saturday the 19th March we are holding a meeting in the picturesque Dunsop Valley in the Forest of Bowland. On Wednesday the 27th April there is another meeting, this time at RSPB Geltsdale in Cumbria. Both these sites are good areas for sightings of breeding woodland and upland birds. On Sunday the 1st May early risers are welcome to attend the traditional dawn chorus walk held each year at Leighton Moss (please contact the Reserve beforehand to book a place on this event). A trip by minibus to RSPB Old Moor is being organised for Saturday the 7th May; this too is a pre-booked event and in this case please contact Eileen Harrison as soon as possible to secure a place. The month of May concludes with the first of two more 'traditional' and regular events - our own 'Members' Evening' on Friday the 27th May; this is centred around Leighton Moss and will be led as usual by John Wilson.

Now, some news regarding changes to the membership of your Local Group Committee. As you may have read elsewhere in this newsletter, our Group Leader and Chairman John Bateman has sadly, owing to continuing ill-health, decided to stand down. Committee member John Webb has kindly agreed to chair our meetings (in an acting capacity) until such time as a full Local Group Leader is elected.

I am pleased to report that Andrew Cornall is to succeed Sue Anderton as Local Group Treasurer. Andrew is a keen birdwatcher and a familiar face at many of our outdoor and indoor meetings. This latter appointment is especially good news, as it means that the Group can now continue to function, (as was explained at the A.G.M. last year, under the RSPB's rules a Local Members' Group cannot function without a treasurer). To both of our retiring officials, John and Sue, we send our best wishes.

Finally, may I put out a plea and ask if any members are interested in joining our Local Group Committee? If so, please contact either myself or Rachel Roberts (Rachel is the local co-ordinator for volunteers and can be contacted on 01524 581000 or by e-mail: rachel.roberts@rspb.org.uk). 'New blood' and hence new ideas are always welcome!

Michael Gardner (Group Secretary)

News from RSPB Leighton Moss Nature Reserve

Wildlife: We had great success with the bearded tits again last year, with 104 juveniles ringed and 120 different birds seen on the grit trays.



This autumn we caught and ringed seven cetti's warblers. The starlings have been seen in huge numbers this winter, reaching 80-100,000 birds. They are still here in large numbers as I write at the end of February. As the majority of the reserve was frozen throughout December, we put out fish for the bitterns (bittern photograph © Brian Howson). They were seen at the feeding areas and at least three bitterns were

seen on the reserve at any one time. There has been no confirmed booming to date, but this isn't unexpected due to the harsh conditions over the winter. The same trend occurs

throughout most of the country. The first marsh harrier of the year was seen on 24th February, the earliest date ever. However, we're not sure as yet if it is one of our resident birds, or one on passage. Otters have been seen fairly regularly, which is fantastic news. The new Lancashire mammal group has set up locally and chosen Leighton Moss as a small mammal monitoring site. They are using field signs to look for field voles and harvest mice, with great success for the field vole.

Management: Throughout the winter, staff and volunteers were hard at work burning brash on Warton Crag following recent coppicing of blackthorn. This created clear areas of good nectaring habitat of violets for butterflies. The blackthorn also re-grows, providing good nesting habitat for warbler species. Scrub clearance has also been underway on the Crag to keep the rides open. Although extremely cold, the first winter reed cut finally started in the middle of December, after several weeks of high water levels preventing the work from being carried out. Also while the water levels were lower, further willow coppice work was done in the reedbed.



There has been a new strapping member of the team here lately. 'Sultan', a Belgian Ardener horse was draughted in to move timber in an 'environmentally friendly' way, which will then be used to fuel our new woodchip boiler.

We manage the woodland at Challan Hall in Silverdale and as part of the habitat management work some tree felling is required to improve the woodland. As the area is a Site of Special Scientific Interest it was decided to use horses instead of machinery to move the timber, which would have caused much more damage and

compacted the soil.

Local company 'Celtic Horse Logging' are based at Witherslack, near Grange-over-Sands and for many years have carried out forestry work in this low carbon, low impact and environmentally friendly way.

It's fantastic to see horses in our woodland extracting timber in this way. It will also be wonderful to use the wood right on our doorstep to fuel our woodchip boiler. We are extremely grateful to the Forestry Commission for funding the horselogging at Challan Hall.

The installation of this woodchip boiler now provides heat and hot water for the visitor centre from locally sourced forestry timber, where previously it relied on Liquid Petroleum Gas, which has a much bigger carbon footprint. It has been funded by Scottish Power Green Energy Trust, Big Lottery Funds 'Community Sustainable Energy Programme', Arnsdale and Silverdale AONB Sustainable Development Fund, Department of Energy and Climate Change's 'Low Carbon Building Programme' and Lancashire County Councils 'Lancashire Locals Climate Change Fund'.

To find out more about 'Celtic Horse Logging' visit: www.celtichorselogging.com

Field Teaching: The Bowland Project has been going extremely well. It's funded by the AONB and other local bodies. It involves two Leighton Moss field teachers visiting each school four times over the academic year. The aim is to raise the pupils' awareness of the natural beauty on their doorstep and to teach them about the importance of its birds and other wildlife. *Jen Walker (Visitor and Publicity Officer, RSPB Leighton Moss Nature Reserve)*

Nest Box Update

I thought I would keep members updated about the progress of the nest box schemes run by the North Lancs Ringing Group, which the RSPB Lancaster local group so kindly helped to finance.

Our target species is of course that delightful summer visitor, the pied flycatcher, which nests in the upland woodlands of the tributaries of the Lune. 2010 was a record year, with 63 occupied boxes, compared to 54 in 2009. The occupied boxes were in ten woodlands and were distributed as follows: 39 in Roeburndale, nine in woods along the Lune, ten at Hindburndale and five in Littledale. They had a very successful season, with almost all boxes producing young.

Blue tit and great tit numbers were a little down on 2009 following the cold 2009/2010 winter, but they did extremely well, helped no doubt by the dry, relatively warm spring. Other species using the boxes in small numbers included nuthatch, marsh tit, coal tit and redstart.

These upland woods are obviously very good for breeding birds, with a good supply of caterpillars at the right time of year. Our ringing of the nestling blue tits has shown that they move out of the woods, probably in late autumn, as five of the birds we ringed as nestlings have been reported from feeding stations in Lancaster and surrounding villages during the winter. So, not only have members helped with the provision of nest boxes, but I am sure that birds from these woodlands have been helped to survive the even colder 2010/2011 winter by the food you provide in your gardens.

John Wilson

Fair Isle and its Bird Observatory

Lying midway between Orkney and Shetland, Fair Isle is one of Britain's most isolated island communities. Yet, despite the isolation, this is a thriving community within a setting of croft-lands, heather moorland and imposing sea-cliffs.

However, some sixty-five years ago, Fair Islanders had less cause for optimism. Since the war, conditions had changed greatly for them and it was becoming increasingly difficult to make a decent living from traditional methods of crofting. Many of the younger islanders had thoughts of leaving Fair Isle for better amenities on the mainland, so the likelihood of an evacuation (a fate that had befallen the inhabitants of St Kilda some fifteen years earlier) seemed possible.



The purchase of the island by George Waterston in 1948 proved to be a turning point that was to secure Fair Isle's long term future. Waterston, an Edinburgh stationer, was a keen ornithologist who had visited the island in the 1930's. During his war service, George Waterston was taken as a prisoner of war, and it was during this period of incarceration that he, and fellow prisoner Ian Pitman, laid plans to establish, once the war was over, a bird observatory on Fair Isle (Fair Isle had

long been recognised as a `staging post` for migrating birds). So it was that, during the spring of 1948 the Fair Isle Bird Observatory was established, initially occupying several former Royal Navy huts at the island`s North Haven. These huts were replaced by a purpose built structure in 1969 and that in turn by the present building last year.

On arrival at the present Observatory, the eye is drawn to the view across South Haven to the Sheep Craig - a massive and steeply sloping four hundred and thirty foot high stack of sandstone. Up to and during the first half of the twentieth century, the almost inaccessible summit of Sheep Craig provided eleven acres of rich grazing and, using a combination of ropes and chains, men would haul themselves and their sheep up to its summit.

Of course, a stay at the Observatory during the spring or summer offers the visitor a chance to see a fascinating variety of migrants. Each morning one is invited to accompany the warden on the daily `trap round` whereby birds caught in the several Heligoland traps are retrieved and brought back to the Observatory to be ringed and have their `vital statistics` recorded. During the 2007 season, some two hundred and five species were recorded and amazingly, that included two new species for the island – Terek Sandpiper and Surf Scoter. Likewise, spring migration highlights included an influx of Redpolls, Black-throated Thrush, Black-headed Bunting, Lesser Grey Shrike, River Warbler and Paddyfield Warbler. Fair Isle has of course its own

regular breeding birds – the feisty Great Skuas or `Bonxies`, and the equally feisty Arctic Skuas – whose yodelling cries are a familiar sound on the heather moor that forms the northern half of the island. Just off the island`s north-west coast there is a thriving Gannet colony and on most of the cliff ledges are nesting Fulmars. On a warm summer evening it is a most pleasant experience to sit on the headlands of Bunness or Roskillie and enjoy close-quarter views of the puffins as they return to their burrows, or if you are lucky, accompany the Observatory staff to see them netting and ringing the birds – tasks that are part of an annual survey.



Now owned by the National Trust for Scotland, Fair Isle has enjoyed many improvements to its infrastructure in recent years – a new Community Hall, improved harbour facilities at North Haven, an aero-generator, and since the 1970`s a regular air service. Much of Fair Isle`s success is attributable to the Bird Observatory – an institution that has become an important part of the island economy. I am sure that George Waterston would have been proud of these achievements.

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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