

The RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter

Welcome to the Spring 2018 RSPB Lancaster Local Group Newsletter. We hope that you will join us over the coming months for our programme of Spring and Summer events and outings. As I compile this newsletter, spring migrants including sand martins, swallows and chiffchaffs are starting to arrive in our area in ever increasing numbers, bitterns are booming at Leighton Moss and marsh harriers are displaying, avocets are back on the Eric Morecambe pools, all a sure sign that Spring is on its way!

In this newsletter Valerie has her leader's report. David, our treasurer has an appeal for used postage stamps to support the RSPB Albatross Appeal. John gives us an update on declines in breeding waders locally and Liz gives us news from her garden in Ingleton.

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 2018.

Ken Harrison – Newsletter Editor

Leader's Report

This is our spring newsletter and it is only now beginning to feel that spring has at last arrived. What a month March has been up to now with snow and gale force winds, but luckily we managed to hold our February meetings before the snow arrived and the March ones after it departed, (departed for good I hope, at least until next winter).

Thank you to those who have supported our indoor and outdoor meetings. The last 2 indoor meetings for 2017 were at the civic hall at Carnforth with a talk on Owls of the World in October and the creation of Brockholes nature reserve in November. We are holding our meetings for 2018 at our new venue at Halton, except for the September meeting which will be at Leighton Moss and will include our AGM. Our meetings at Halton have started well with good attendance. We had a talk by David Talbot in February on the endemic birds of islands in the southern hemisphere and by Barrie Cooper in March about the wildlife of Japan.

Our outdoor meeting in October was to a favourite location of Sunderland Point, and was very well attended, then we finished 2017 with our now annual visit to Teal Bay in December followed by refreshments at the home of Chris and Bill Ashby. The outdoor meetings to start this year were unfortunately affected by the weather. In February our walk along the banks of the Lune from Lancaster Quay followed some very wet weather with not a good forecast for the day. However 8 of us braved the cold and damp to set off with Michael Gardner as leader. Although there was a lot of water and mud around we managed to get back without getting wet and saw a good number of birds on Freeman's Pool and other wetland areas but the hedgerows and fields weren't very productive. The meeting in March at Brown Robin nature reserve also had a bad weather forecast which included snow and strong winds. The target bird was the hawfinch, which we hoped to spot sitting in the top of the trees, which being leafless at this time of year could give us good views, but we were disappointed. I guess the birds must have heard the forecast and decided the strong winds would be too much to cope with, as did some of our group members. However 6 of us set off, ever hopeful, with the honorary warden Tony Saunders

leading the way, some of the party enjoying the fact that this was their first visit to the reserve. After the walk around the reserve we decided not to continue down to the bay as the wind would also cut down the chance of good sightings there. So after a brew in the woodland workshop, we returned to the car park. This was well timed as the snow started to fall just as we arrived back at home.

Our spring indoor meetings at Halton continue with a talk on Badgers in April by Phil Dykes, a volunteer for the Lancashire Wildlife Trust and their representative on badger issues. In May we welcome Paul Waterhouse, a reserves officer for the Cumbria Wildlife Trust, with a talk on Foulshaw Moss and the ospreys. These are both evening talks starting at 7.30pm.

Our visits for April vary slightly from the usual format. On the 22 April the venue is the extensive wildlife garden of Liz and Roger Neale at Westhouse near Ingleton. The garden is a mixture of wild and garden plants; they are avid collectors. It is a haven for birds and other wildlife and we are hoping plenty of warblers will be around. Liz wrote an article about the garden in our autumn newsletter and gives us an update in this newsletter. You are invited to drop in between 11.00am and 4.00pm and spend time in the garden and surrounding area.

On 30 April we are having a sea watch on the coast by Heysham nature reserve. There is a high tide of 9.5 m at 12.27pm. As this is migration time and on the migration path of several species, we are hoping to see birds not normally in our area. We will meet at 8.30am in the car park of the reserve to share cars and go to the harbour or Heysham Head depending on the type of day.

Our summer outings follow our more usual format with visits to Littledale in May, Hodbarrow in June and Hay Bridge in July. The August meeting is a mixture, as we start indoors with a talk by a bat expert, followed by a walk down to the river with bat detectors. Then we will be into our autumn season of monthly indoor and outdoor meetings. We are looking forward to seeing many of you at our meetings in 2018.

Full details of all our indoor and outdoor meetings can be found on our website at www.rspb.org.uk/groups/lancaster

Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader

Committee Update

As reported in the autumn newsletter, David Mann took over as membership secretary in September and was due to take over as treasurer from Andrew in January when our membership subscriptions were due. However this was delayed until our February meeting due to the expected change of bank. So David is now both membership secretary and treasurer and Andrew is staying on as a general committee member.

We are now collecting stamps in support of the RSPB albatross appeal and Jan Brook agreed to take on the role of correlating this, but due to personal problems is unable to do so at present. So David is helping with this until Jan is back in place.

David is also a pin badge officer and we will have a box of these at our meetings. Please have a browse through the pin badges available, but if there is a particular one you would like, David may be able to get it for you. There are now badges for flowers, mammals, insects and fish as well as birds.

We also have volunteers who help at our meetings. Michael Gardner is leading 2 walks in this year's programme and is happy to help at indoor meetings if needed. Roger Neale assists with the refreshments and Carol Mann collects the entrance donations. If anyone is interested in becoming a volunteer but not a committee member we would be grateful for any help, especially to put out chairs and stack them away at meetings and to help Anne with selling raffle tickets.

We are still in need of someone to take over the role of secretary, to take minutes at committee meetings and help with correspondence. At present Ken has agreed to take the minutes for a year along with his 2 other committee roles, but the end of the year is fast approaching!!! This is not an onerous role, most of it can be done at home except for attendance at committee meetings and these are only 4 a year. We can give lots of assistance to settle into the role so we are hoping someone will be willing to give this a try.

Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader

Long Service Awards

At our November meeting at Carnforth I was pleased to present Andrew Cornall with his swift certificate and pin badge for 5 years voluntary service for the RSPB. Andrew has been a committee member since 2011, serving as our treasurer.

Carol Tresadern, the RSPB regional officer for the north of England, attended our meeting at Halton in February and presented a number of awards.

Andrew Cornall received an illustrated book about sea birds to mark his retirement as treasurer and Michael Gardner received an illustrated book about birds of prey to mark his retirement as secretary.

Anne Clark was presented with an osprey certificate and pin badge for 20 years voluntary service for the RSPB. Anne has been a volunteer at the regional office in Lancaster, a pin badge officer and is now a member of our committee.

I received a swift certificate and pin badge for 5 years voluntary service for the RSPB. I am involved in residential volunteering and am a member of our committee.

Valerie Hall – Local Group Leader

Notes from a Rural Garden in Winter

This winter the weather has been much colder than the last few years and continued to be very wet, keeping the ground sodden everywhere. Then we have had very low temperatures during the second half of January, bringing sleet and snow and frozen conditions that continued on and off into March. Parties of tits have daily visited the feeding areas, sometimes several times a day, including a party of 6 to 8 long-tailed tits who must roost somewhere nearby, as they are often seen on the fat feeders, their favourite food, just before dusk. Since the cold weather settled in I have observed some interesting visitors flying between trees and bushes while approaching the feeding area opposite our front door. A jay cautiously made its way to the silver birch, stopping several times to look about before proceeding further. Then I noticed another one, perhaps a pair then; they were very shy but quite persistent and eventually approached a large peanut feeder hanging from an ivy-clad whitebeam that gave them cover while they fed.

One delightful resident since the autumn has been a tree-creeper, or maybe two, as I often hear the shrill contact call. It quietly moves from tree to tree low down on trunks and then

upwards and along branches of our mostly moss-covered trees, discovering small invertebrates along the way. When observed, it continues, intent on its activity, with no sign of anxiety or alarm, its tawny back blending well on darker bark while the white belly shines out like a blob of snow.

Our goldfinches deserted us until March but a pair of bullfinches became regular visitors when the cold weather set in and they particularly enjoy the niger seeds and the sunflower hearts on the hanging trays when they feel braver to approach nearer the house. They are also shy visitors and disappear quickly if disturbed and the plaintive single call can often be the only sign that they are still around somewhere.

The chatty, smart tree sparrows also frequent this area, and come daily to feed on a red millet feeder hanging near an ivy-covered old wall. They perch, hidden in the ivy and in a golden holly tree opposite, before popping out to feed and then popping back into cover again in quick succession. This will be a good tactic to avoid being caught, in particular by the sparrowhawks that patrol our garden feeding areas very frequently. Both male and female are seen making surprise attacks, not always successful.



Tree Sparrow © Richard Cousens

Our tawny owls were active and vocal during the autumn but are now fairly quiet and I am hoping they may nest in the sycamore tree like last year. But we had another thrilling sight when arriving home late evening after being away over the New Year. A startled barn owl flew out of our big barn doorway as Roger, my husband, entered. We later noticed and picked up a large dark owl pellet, probably dropped while it was perched on a beam above our back door which is entered through the barn. My wellies, left nearby, were covered in owl poo and we found two more pellets dropped there during January. We did also hear some strange shrieking noises, quite different from the tawny owl calls during this period and our neighbouring farmer has seen a barn owl this winter in one of his old barns across the fields from our house. However, we have not seen them since the very cold wintry weather set in.

Despite the severe weather conditions the mistle thrush set up song in early February and the song thrush not long afterwards, so nature continues apace and takes advantage of a short respite to prepare for the coming spring season.

Liz Neale, Bank House, Westhouse

The Decline of Breeding Waders Locally

I am sure that long term regular bird watchers will have noticed a marked decline in breeding waders such as lapwing, snipe, curlew and ringed plover in many areas especially over the past 20 years. A good example of this is the River Lune gravel beds and adjacent fields. The river from Skerton to Kirkby Lonsdale has been surveyed by members of the Lancaster & District Birdwatching Society for many years, and the declines make disturbing reading. Lapwing are down from 91 to 29 pairs, oystercatcher from 227 pairs in the 1980s to 80 in 2016. Redshank and curlew have declined by 50% in the last four years to 29 and 5. Little ringed plover is the one bright spot, increasing to 17 pairs recently. The declines though are not restricted to the Lune. On the RSPB Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay reserve, counts by reserve staff over the past 10 years have seen Lapwing decline from 100 to 24 pairs. Oystercatcher from 58 to 26 and ringed plover from 14 to just one. Redshank though have remained stable at ca.50-55 pairs.

There are still healthy populations on the Bowland hill farms. A survey by RSPB volunteers of 32 Bowland farms in 2016 found 151 pairs of curlew, 277 lapwing pairs, 75 oystercatcher, 24 redshank and 47 snipe pairs. Figures are not available for past years, but regular visitors suggest there has been only a small decline.



Lapwing © Ken Harrison

What is behind these declines? Changes in farming practices are probably the main cause of the declines on the Lune flood plain. A change from hay meadows to ever more frequent cutting for silage completely destroys any chance of producing young, not only for waders, but also other ground nesters such as meadow pipit, skylark and yellow wagtail. Land drainage has also made former wet areas dry and so not suitable. The decline of gravel areas on the river has not helped the oystercatcher population and increasing numbers of carrion crow has proved a major problem for all species. By contrast, the mainly sheep grazed fields in Bowland provide ideal conditions. Many farmers receive a grant to manage their fields for breeding waders, cutting the rush tussocks at the right time and providing the right grazing pressure. Predators are also controlled by game keepers. The importance of this type of management was shown last spring. A previously cut and grazed large field had been one of the best fields for waders. Due to a change in tenancy, no grazing or cutting was undertaken for a year and the numbers of waders slumped to almost nothing.

On the Reserve, disturbance by dog walkers in the ringed plover breeding area is a major problem, despite notices asking them to cooperate. On the area where they breed the RSPB has only certain rights and does not own the land. Disturbance allows predators to move in. On the salt marsh area, predation of both eggs and small young by an increasing population of carrion crows and foxes is the major problem, leading to low wader productivity. The habitat has also changed. Twenty five years ago, removal of turf for lawns was carried out on a large scale, providing bare areas which were favoured by lapwing, these have now grassed over and the salt marsh grass has become more dense, favouring redshank which nest in the tussocks.

RSPB Albatross Stamp Appeal

Each year 100,000 albatrosses are caught by fishing hooks and drowned, but solutions exist, and you can help enormously simply by donating the used stamps you receive throughout the year, and by putting them into our special collecting box that will be at all our indoor meetings.

It is important that you leave a margin of at least a quarter of an inch around each stamp, and it would save a lot of time if you could sort them into UK and foreign lots.

All the stamps are sold to dealers and specialist auction houses, so if you, and your friends, have stamp collections and albums that you no longer need, please give them to me and they will be sent to the Save the Albatross Appeal.

Yes, it really is a matter of saving the albatross. 15 of the 22 species of albatross are in danger of extinction because of the ways that people catch fish. They are killed by very long fishing lines, called 'longlines' that are used by fishermen who hunt tuna and other fish. The lines are up to 80 miles long with thousands of hooks on each line. The birds are attracted to the bait on the hooks, then they are dragged under the water and drowned.

Black-browed albatross
© Ken Harrison



The Albatross Task Force is helping by showing fishing crews how to stop albatrosses from being killed by weighting the lines to make them sink below the surface so that the birds can't see them, and also to have bright streamers fluttering above the water to frighten the birds off.

And it's working! The number of albatrosses killed by long-lines near South Africa has dropped by 99 per cent and six countries have agreed to a new set of rules about how they fish, including the UK Government, as the UK owns islands and looks after the seas in some places where albatrosses live. Funding is needed to maintain the work of the Albatross Task Force and donating used stamps may only seem to be a small thing to do, but it really can make a difference in protecting these magnificent birds. Will you help?

PS. Try to persuade your friends and work colleagues to give you their used stamps, and remember it is all the year, not just at Christmas.

David Mann
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Photo credit: Kingfisher "Yes" image by Andy Astbury/Fotolia



Let's keep in touch on your terms



"Saying yes will keep you in touch with everything you love about the RSPB's work and our cause"

RSPB Chief Executive Mike Clarke

The RSPB has a fantastic track record of achieving amazing results for nature. And we couldn't do this without the tremendous support given and actions taken by our members and supporters. This includes you, our fantastic Local Group members. Together, we do great things for nature.

Now we're asking our members and supporters to "Say Yes to the RSPB" and opt in to hearing from us on their terms. It's about them having more control over their relationship with us. It's about strengthening our connection.

We need existing members and supporters to opt in before May 2018 (when new rules come into effect) and give their express permission for us to contact them. If they don't, we won't be able to keep in touch directly about our work and developments, about getting involved, and about supporting the RSPB in other ways – for example, through volunteering, supporting an appeal, or taking part in an activity or campaign. We will be able only to contact those people about their membership and/or in their existing role as a volunteer.

As a member of a Local Group, your support is invaluable to the RSPB. We'd love you to "Say Yes" and tell us how you want to hear from us in the future. Were we unable to contact you or ask for your help when nature needs it, our ability to work for nature would be greatly diminished.

If you're an RSPB member and receive winter's Nature's Home, make sure you read the letter from Mike and make your opt-in choices online, via our dedicated phone line or by filling in and returning the paper form. If you've already made your choices, thanks very much.

If you aren't a member, as an active supporter you can make your opt-in choices now. Go to **rspb.org.uk/yes** or call **0300 777 2610** (open Monday-Friday, 9am-8pm, calls charged at standard rate). Please also help us by encouraging family and friends who are RSPB members or supporters to make their choices too.

The passion and commitment of our members and supporters keeps the RSPB going in our work for nature. Saying "Yes" will keep us strong. And please do the same for all those other nature conservation charities you might support. We need to stay together to help save nature. Thank you!

Say Yes and RSPB Lancaster Local Group

The RSPB “Say Yes” campaign started in October 2017 in response to the new data protection regulations that will come into force on 25 May 2018. The new data protection regulations will also affect how we contact our group members when we send out information and monthly reminders of events, so we are looking into this. We will be amending our membership form to comply with the new regulations, but at the present time we are waiting for details of our new bank account so that the new sort code and account number will be included for completing a standing order mandate. We hope this will be ready to be included in the autumn newsletter when we send out membership renewal notices. Members who now pay by standing order will need to note our new bank details to pass on to their banks ready for their payment in January 2019.



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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The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity:
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