

The Birders' Bulletin #5 - from Croydon RSPB Group (early-August 2009)

1. Bookings are now being taken for our next Coach Excursion:-

Saturday, 14th November : Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Glos.

The coach departs from outside Fairfield Halls, Park Lane, Croydon at 8:00 am. The fare is £14-00 per person. There will be an entry charge to the reserve for non-members of the WWT. Book now with Sheila Mason (8777 9370) or John Parish (8681 7475) to ensure the viability of the trip (40+ participants are needed).

A visit to WWT's flagship reserve where we can expect to see a wide range of ducks, geese and swans, probably including **Mandarin Duck**, **White-fronted Goose** and **Bewick's Swan**, and possibly **Bean Goose** or even **Lesser White-fronted Goose** (all seen during previous visits). Wildfowl are by no means the only birds present and we're likely to see **Peregrine**, **Kingfisher** and **Water Rail**, while past visits have yielded **Merlin**, **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker**, **Water Pipit** and much else besides. Then there is the extensive collection of wildfowl from around the world to study (useful for honing i.d. skills before a foreign trip) as well as many good hides (some heated!) and excellent refreshment facilities to enjoy. You may even find time to buy a few xmas cards or gifts - yes, it will be that season already! Altogether a trip you cannot afford to miss!

2. Please note that these other Field Trips with the Croydon RSPB Group are coming up soon:-

Saturday, 8th August : Titchfield Haven, Hants

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). This Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust reserve sits right beside the Solent where it spans the mouth of the River Meon. Various wetland habitats, including reedbeds, scrapes and meadows can be viewed from the six hides. The site is a regular resting point for terns and we'll be hoping for views of **Roseate** and **Black Terns** as on previous visits. Return wader migration will be well underway and the likes of **Wood** and **Curlew Sandpiper** can be expected. **Hobbies** should be overhead, **Bearded Tits** will no doubt be present in the reedbeds and **Wheatears** and other passerines may be found out in the fields. Something scarcer is always possible - we've seen both **Spotted Crake** and **Pectoral Sandpiper** here in the past. **Common Eider** and **Common Scoter** are often seen out on the Solent from the beach past the reserve. The Haven is also excellent for dragonflies.

Tuesday, 18th August : Oare Marshes, Kent

(Meet at Sparrows Den car park at 09:15 am. Check details with Terry or Linda Osborn - 8679 2405). This Kent Wildlife Trust Reserve on the North Kent Marshes (fronting the Swale) is a favourite with many because of the unusual tameness often shown by the waders present here. These are likely to include **Avocet**, **Ruff**, many, many **Black-tailed Godwits**, **Whimbrel**, **Curlew**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Little Stint** and **Green Sandpiper**. **Garganey** and **Ruddy Duck** are possible among a wide good range of wildfowl and **Water Rail** will almost certainly be present in the reedbeds, along with **Bearded Tit**. **Kingfisher** and **Sand Martin** are also regular. **Little Tern** is often present over the Swale and by scanning the grazing marshes round about, with their scattering of bushes and occasional old buildings, we have a good chance of finding **Marsh Harrier**, **Hobby**, **Little Owl** and **Turtle Dove**. Noisy **Marsh Frogs** will certainly be present in the reserve's wet ditches and we may well spot a **Grass Snake** or two hunting them.

Sunday, 23rd August : Elmley Marshes RSPB, Kent

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). Leave the hustle and bustle of 21st century Britain far behind out on the grazing marshes of the Isle of Sheppey! We'll park the cars a mile or so from the nearest public road at Kingshill Farm, then walk another long mile on a track across the marshes to reach the first of three hides overlooking some muddy scrapes, then further on again to two more hides, both on the seawall and commanding extensive views across the Swale to 'mainland' Kent. Breeding **Little** and **Long-eared Owls** can often be found near the farm, then **Hobby** and good numbers of **Marsh Harriers** are almost guaranteed during the walk down to the hides. **Yellow Wagtails** can also be plentiful around the cattle and **Whinchat**, **Wheatear** and **Stonechat** are probable. Searching through waders on the scrapes, or the foreshore of the Swale, depending on the state of the tide, we can expect to find something a little scarcer, like **Little Stint**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Spotted Redshank** or **Wood Sandpiper**, amongst many commoner species. **Little Terns** or even an **Osprey** may be present over the Swale and **Common Seals** are regular out on the sandbars there. This reserve is another excellent location for dragonflies and damselflies.

[Sunday, 6th September : Pagham Harbour, W.Sussex](#)

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). Generally reckoned to be one of the best birding sites on the south coast, this Local Nature Reserve is managed by West Sussex County Council. We usually start our day by the information centre near Sidlesham, check the nearby Ferry Pool and then walk down the edge of the 'harbour' (really tidal mudflats) to the spinneys and beach at Church Norton. Autumn migration will be in full swing at this time : the numerous waders refuelling are bound to include some scarcities while passage landbirds often include **Osprey** and other raptors. The scrubby gorse bushes close to the beach seem to be a favourite stopping place for **Wrynecks**, the churchyard is good for **Common Redstarts**, and we have seen **Pied** and **Spotted Flycatchers** together along the edge of the pony field behind the beach. **Black Tern** could appear over the sea or the harbour. In fact, almost anything can turn up, witness my experience during a random visit on 14th August 1997 when a **Spotted Crake** near Sidlesham was followed an hour later by a mega-rare **Lesser Sand Plover** at Church Norton!

[Visits to Beddington Farmlands](#)

A guided tour for Croydon RSPB members around the local birding hotspot at Beddington Farm is arranged for one Sunday morning each month. These are led by either Terry Osborn or John Parish, both of whom are keyholders to the farm. Contact Terry (8679 2405) or John (8681 7475) if you wish to know the dates and entry arrangements. However, you should be aware that the farm is an active landfill, recycling and sewage treatment site and, although our visits take place on Sundays when no work is in progress, there are some potential hazards to health and safety. Participants must be aware and agree in advance to accept the hazards at their own risk. During August and September, passage migrants (especially waders) visit the site. Currently, up to 30 **Green Sandpipers** and a few **Common Sandpipers** are being seen daily. A juvenile **Peregrine** is also visiting the site regularly and giving great views. Many of the breeding **Tree Sparrows** and their offspring will certainly be encountered by visitors and a species list of 40 - 50 for a morning is the norm.

3. Reports of recent Field Trips with the Croydon RSPB Group.

Tuesday, 16th June : [Weir Wood Reservoir & Ashdown Forest.](#) In perfect weather, the mid-week group enjoyed a very successful day, visiting four sites on or near Ashdown Forest and in the process finding just about all of the area's special birds (night birds excepted). Our itinerary took in [Weir Wood Reservoir](#) (where we saw **Great Crested Grebes** (c.50), **Mandarin Ducks** (c.6), **Kingfishers** (2), **Common Terns** (2 pairs), **Reed Bunting** and **Fallow Deer**), [Ashdown Forest Centre](#) (**Tree Pipit**, **Stonechats** and **Spotted Flycatcher**, as well as **Heath Spotted** and **Heath Fragrant Orchids**), [Old Lodge SWT Reserve](#) (**Hobby**,

Cuckoo, Woodlark, Redstart (3 breeding pairs) and **Crossbill**) and Gill's Lap (**Dartford Warbler, Redpoll** and **Yellowhammer**). During the course of the day we also found time to identify five species of moth - **Mother Shipton, Straw Dot, Common Heath, Clouded Buff** and **Grass Wave**. The bird list for the day totalled 56 species.

Saturday, 20th June : Weir Wood Reservoir & Ashdown Forest. After the rich returns of the daytime visit to the area only four days earlier, this evening session at Weir Wood Reservoir came as rather an anti-climax. The reservoir wasn't too bad - the **Mandarin Duck** numbers had gone up a bit and, although no Kingfishers showed, we did have the bonus of a **Little Ringed Plover**. But then sessions at the Forest Centre (just two juvenile **Stonechats** seen) and Gill's Lap (two **Redpolls** seen and a **Tawny Owl** heard) were decidedly quiet, while the approach walk across the Old Airfield produced only a few phrases of scratchy **Dartford Warbler** song as the light began to fade. The overcast, still and balmy conditions seemed to us very promising for a decent showing by our two crepuscular target species but, although we waited out amongst the gorse and heather with lots of midges for company until it had become almost pitch dark, only those among us with the sharpest hearing were able to confirm the presence of a **Woodcock** (just a single squeek detected) and of a **Nightjar** (the briefest burst of distant churring heard). Of course, there had been some pleasing aspects to the evening, notably the good numbers of **Song Thrushes** and **Willow Warblers** heard in song and the dozens of **Swifts** whirling around high overhead at various times. Surprisingly, our bird list for the evening reached 49, though 11 of these were heard only.

Saturday, 4th July : Thursley Common. Unfortunately, I missed this trip, along with many others, and only five people participated. I am indebted to Ed for providing details. Although the total number of bird species was rather limited, as anticipated at this quiet time of the year, there were some noteworthy sightings, including two **Buzzards**, a **Hobby, Kestrel, Tufted Duck, Lapwing, Cuckoo**, a pair of **Woodlarks, Skylark, Stonechat, Redstart, Reed Bunting** and **Linnet**. There was plenty of interest in the dragonfly and damselfly populations, too, with **Emperor, Black-tailed** and **Keeled Skimmers, Brown Hawker**, and **Azure** and **Small Red Damselflies** among those identified. Butterflies found included **Silver-washed Fritillary** and **Purple Hairstreak**.

(It appears that gorse and heather re-growth is still rather sparse at Thursley following the disastrous fire a few years back but while this probably contributed in part to the failure of the party to find any Dartford Warblers, it seems from recent survey information that the population of this species may have been reduced by up to 90 per cent on Berkshire, Surrey and Sussex commons by the brief spell of severely cold weather we experienced back in February of this year).

Tuesday, 14th July : Rye Harbour LNR, Kent. I missed this outing too but by all reports the group enjoyed excellent weather for their visit to the seaside and amassed a bird list in excess of 60 species during the course of the day, plus a lively **stoat** and a good selection of butterflies.

Saturday, 25th July : Oare Marshes, Kent. More good weather favoured our party of 15 visiting this popular Kent Wildlife Trust reserve beside the Swale. Although the eastern scrape here doesn't look that large, a morning walk around it always results in lunch being taken late! As usual at this season, a huge number of **Black-tailed Godwits** were roosting on this scrape (over 700 as estimated by one regular local observer!), together with **Avocets, Greenshanks, Golden Plovers, Dunlins, Curlew Sandpipers** (our declared target species for the day - and still in breeding garb) and **Ruffs**. (As last year, one of the latter was carrying an assortment of flags and rings on its legs. Last year's bird was tracked down by John B as having been ringed in Friesland, Netherlands, in May 2005 - this year's bird is probably of similar origin). **Bearded Tits**, a **Sedge Warbler** and plentiful **Reed Buntings** were also encountered in the reeds and the squeals of **Water Rail** heard often, though the birds stayed out of sight. **Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Hobby** and **Kestrel** were all noted in flight and **Grey Partridges** and **Turtle Doves** (both increasingly scarce species) were located in nearby fields. The west scrape at Oare has now become rather overgrown

and a visit there yielded little. A post-lunch walk westwards along the Swale seawall took us among masses of butterflies, with **Painted Ladies** and **Gatekeepers** especially numerous, and a **Short-tailed Field Vole** scuttled around our feet at one point (a new mammal species for the group). A **Yellow Wagtail** (a male - 'just like a canary!') was found eventually and near to it on the water's edge a flock of at least 10 **Common Sandpipers** was gathered, a little unusual as this is not generally thought of as a notably sociable wader. We ended the day with a healthy bird list of 68 species.

4. Beddington's Wandering Tree Sparrows (a reminder).

(No apologies for repeating this message from Bulletin #4; young Tree Sparrows raised at Beddington Farmlands this year will begin to disperse any time now and we would like our keen observers to keep an eye open for them!)

Most recipients of this Bulletin will be aware of the importance of the Tree Sparrow breeding colony at Beddington Farm - one of the largest, if not *the* largest, in Britain, with 133 breeding pairs producing close to 1000 offspring in 2007. However you may not know that many of these Sparrows disappear from the Farm each winter before showing up again in spring to reclaim places in the nest boxes. Very few Tree Sparrows are seen in local areas off the Farm during the winter months (or, at least, very few are reported), so where the absent birds actually go is a mystery - it's possible they may move a considerable distance away in their search for suitable food sources. During next winter, Terry Osborn and I intend to join forces with fellow birders using the network of RSPB members' groups across southeast England in an attempt to locate these missing Beddington Tree Sparrows. However, we also need to keep a watch closer to home to try to ensure that nothing is being overlooked and therefore we would like to invite readers of this Bulletin to assist us in our quest during the coming winter (that is from August onwards) by simply keeping an eye open for Tree Sparrows and also by investigating any mixed finch and sparrow flocks that they find or hear about to determine whether these might contain Tree Sparrows. If Tree Sparrows are found, it would be very helpful if you could try to ascertain whether any are carrying metal rings on their legs, as this would probably indicate a Beddington origin. And then, of course, be sure to keep either Terry (t.osborn059@btinternet.com) or me informed about your findings. Terry and I guide parties of RSPB members around Beddington Farm on one Sunday morning each month so, if you would like to see the Tree Sparrows at their breeding site (and many other good birds besides), contact Terry or me for the dates of these visits.

Many thanks.

Wildlife Sites in Croydon.

Park Hill Park. Although its main entrance (from Fairfield Road, opposite the Law Courts) lies only two or three hundred metres from Fairfield Halls, Park Hill Park can be surprisingly rewarding for birdwatchers. Occupying a length of about 600 metres beside the eastern edge of the main railway line and up to about 200 metres in width, the park's main habitat of closely-mown 'lawn', scattered with flowerbeds, and interrupted by a cluster of tennis and basketball courts and a small childrens playground, does not appear too promising at first glance. However, variety is provided by numerous mature trees around the boundary (even a small 'spinney' near the huge castellated Victorian water-tower), patches of fairly dense shrubbery in places (especially towards the southern - Coombe Road - entrance), a walled herb-garden (good for insects) near the maintenance buildings and some large, mature, private gardens lining much of the eastern boundary. I have been carrying out a monthly bird count around the park for some 10 years now and during that time have recorded 55 species there. Sparrowhawk, Stock Dove,

Collared Dove, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Whitethroat, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit and Nuthatch are amongst the species known to have bred. A damp patch of grassland under trees near the playground attracts Redwings during the winter (a flock up to about 60 strong often lingers on into March). These are sometimes accompanied by Chaffinches and on two occasions Bramblings have also been found. Another 'speciality' of the site is Firecrest, either wintering or on passage; this tiny warbler, far more striking than its close relative, the Goldcrest, has been seen on six occasions over the years and has no doubt been tucked away in the shrubberies or adjacent gardens at many other times too. The likes of Grey Wagtails might join the Mistle Thrushes and Starlings out on the short grass during less disturbed periods and Peregrines can stray overhead at any time. Perhaps my most unusual sighting in the park has been Goosander - a pair flew overhead during my very first survey visit in 1999!
(Note: There are toilets here - and they are usually open!)

Invitation : Why not tell people about your favourite wildlife site in Croydon? Please send me your contributions for future Bulletins.

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6th August, 2009.