

The Birders' Bulletin #6 - from Croydon RSPB Group (Late Sept 2009)

1. Bookings are 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 £15-00 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 that we do not incur a loss. (More than 20 seats are still available at the time of writing).

During this visit to WWT's flagship reserve established by Sir Peter Scott 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 have been found during previous visits). Not only wildfowl are present, of course, and **Peregrine**, **Kingfisher** and **Water Rail** are likely, while past visits have yielded **Merlin**, **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker**, **Water Pipit** and much else besides. When not viewing the 'wild side' from the roomy hides (some heated!), there is the vast captive collection of wildfowl from around the world to study (very useful for honing i.d. skills before a foreign trip) and excellent refreshment facilities to enjoy. You may even find time to buy a few xmas cards or gifts - yes, it will be close to that season already! Altogether a trip you cannot afford to miss!

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2. More Field Trips with the Croydon RSPB Group are coming up soon:-

Sunday, 4th October, 2009 : Grain & Cliffe Pools RSPB, Kent.

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). First, we'll visit the conjunction of Thames and Medway estuaries at Grain, hoping for a variety of **gulls**, late **terns** and **skuas** out over the water, waders on the muddy foreshore and (if the wind is right) passerine migrants in the scrub behind the seawall. Later on, we'll move across to the opposite (west) side of the Isle of Grain to the RSPB's fairly recently-acquired reserve at Cliffe Pools, still a work in progress (with the help of some funds from the Croydon Group), but certainly no longer the bikers' and fly-tippers' paradise and mud-patch of old! **Ducks**, **grebes** (maybe the scarcer ones!) and more waders are certain on the lagoons, desirable passerines such as **Corn Bunting** and **Yellowhammer** likely around the scrub between them, and any of **Merlin**, **Hen Harrier**, **Short-eared** and **Barn Owls** very possible on the adjacent grazing marshes - that could by now have been disappearing under the runways of London (Cliffe) Airport! **Ring Ouzel**, our day's target bird could be found at either site.

Sunday, 18th October, 2009 : Dungeness RSPB, Kent.

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with Ed Owen - 8686 4549). The Dungeness area has enough birding sites to fill a weekend (at least) - but we'll be doing the best we can in a day! The Old Lighthouse is a favourite starting point (with **Wheatear** and, hopefully, **Black Redstart** nearby) for a short walk to the shingle beach and the 'Patch' (where warm water wells up from the power-station cooling system). Gulls are attracted to the latter in large numbers and have included **Little** and **Mediterranean Gulls** on previous visits. A variety of **auks**, **divers**, **Gannets**, **sea-ducks** and possibly **skuas** will doubtless be passing just offshore. However, we'll soon have to head off a mile or so inland to the RSPB Reserve, which has grown considerably in recent years. A tour round the half-dozen hides gives views over various abandoned gravel pits (for **gulls**, **ducks** and **grebes** - often the scarcer ones) and the walks between offer views over reedbeds (for **Bearded Tit**, **Bittern** and **Cetti's Warbler**) and farmland (for **partridges**, **geese** and **waders**). In reality, almost anything could turn up!

Tuesday, 20th October, 2009 : Pulborough Brooks RSPB, West Sussex.

(Meet at venue at 10:15 am. Check details with Terry or Linda Osborn - 8679 2405). This is what our party (consisting of John & Allie Parish (leaders), Chris & Mary Barnett, Eileen Ledger, Sheila Mason, Maisie Niblett, Ken Pulley, Bev & Yvonne Sale and Ernest Thomason) saw when visiting on a sunny Sunday in October 1999:-

Little grebe, cormorant, grey heron, mute swan, greylag goose, Canada goose, wigeon, gadwall, teal, mallard, pintail, shoveler, pochard, tufted duck, sparrowhawk, kestrel, pheasant, moorhen, coot, lapwing, snipe, curlew, black-headed gull, common gull, herring gull, stock dove, woodpigeon, collared dove, short-eared owl, green woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, skylark, pied wagtail, wren, dunnoek, robin, blackbird, song thrush, redwing, Cetti's warbler (h), chiffchaff, long-tailed tit, blue tit, great tit, jay, magpie, jackdaw, rook, carrion crow, starling, chaffinch, greenfinch, linnet, bullfinch, yellowhammer, corn bunting (56 species).

It will be interesting to see if and how things may have changed!

Saturday, 24th October, 2009 : Pegwell Bay & Grove Ferry, Kent. [Please note the date change from Saturday, 31st October]

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with Roger Tarran - 8660 2664).

Pegwell Bay lies immediately south of Ramsgate. The Country Park there holds quite an extensive area of bushes and commands an uninterrupted view out over saltmarsh to a beach of mud and sand at the point of entry of the River Stour into the sea. The tide will be receding fast at the time of our visit (it goes out well over a mile!) and we can expect vast numbers of waders to be feeding (though views of some will become increasingly distant). **Eider** and **Red-breasted Merganser** commonly enter the river mouth and we have seen both **Short-eared Owl** and **Hen Harrier** hunting over the marsh. Last time we visited, **Firecrests** were found in the bushes.

Grove Ferry lies about 10 miles to the west (on our route home) and is an access point to the renowned Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve. An elevated viewing ramp here gives great views over scrapes and extensive reedbeds. We can expect to see more than a dozen **Marsh Harriers**, one or two **Hen Harriers** and, if we are lucky, a **Bittern**, all flying in to roost amongst the reeds. **Bearded Tits**, **Cetti's Warblers**, winter **thrushes** and **Water Rail** (probably voice only) should be encountered and the day often ends with the awesome sight of massive **Starling** flocks whirling back and forth against a golden sky.

Tuesday, 17th November, 2009 : Bedgebury Pinetum, Kent.

(Meet at Sparrows Den car park at 09:15 am. Check details with Terry or Linda Osborn - 8679 2405).

The Pinetum has a wonderful collection of conifers to admire but, for the birdwatcher, a visit there is mainly about getting to grips with the large numbers of finches that come in during a winter afternoon to prepare for roosting - many **Chaffinches** and **Greenfinches**, of course, and also smaller numbers of **Goldfinches**, **Siskins**, **Redpolls** and **Bullfinches**. Some years **Crossbills** and **Bramblings** are numerous, too. However, the great prize that we'll particularly be looking for is **Hawfinch**, a few of which are regular. Non-finch possibilities are **Mandarin Duck** (on the pond) and **Firecrest** and flocks of **Redwing** and **Fieldfare** often pass overhead, with some dropping down into the pines. Last year, we stumbled upon a **Woodcock** - in the car park!

Saturday, 28th November, 2009 : North Foreland & Reculver, Kent.

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at 08:00 am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). At North Foreland (well, Cliftonville, actually - but it doesn't have quite the same ring to it!) we'll walk the tops of the low cliffs, peering over periodically to check the foreshore below for waders, our main targets being **Sanderling** on the sandy bits and **Purple Sandpipers** on any rocky sections. We would be very fortunate indeed if last year's **Long-eared Owl** were to show up again! We'll also be scanning the sea, looking for **Eider**, **Scoters**, **Divers** and **Auks**. Some of these may be on the surface, but mainly they will be flying past. The collection of merchant ships at anchor hereabouts is interesting in its own right, but also provides plenty of reference points for us to get one another onto any sightings. For the afternoon, we'll drive back along the North Kent coast for about a dozen miles, heading for the prominent twins towers of the ruined St Mary's Church right on the sea edge at Reculver. From the seawall to the west, we'll be able to view the sea, shingle beach, flat arable fields and ditches inland and the series of small pools around the oyster farm. There's a wide range of possibilities here, from **Gannet** to **Marsh** or **Hen Harrier** and **Merlin** to **Snow Bunting**!

Saturday, 12th December, 2009 : Bawl Water, East Sussex & Bedgebury Pinetum, Kent.

(Car trip, departing Fairfield Halls forecourt at **09:00** am. Check details with John Parish - 8681 7475). First we'll be visiting a Sussex Wildlife Trust reserve tucked away beside a remote bay on the western shoreline of the huge Bawl Water Reservoir. From the tower hide there, we'll be able to check through what is usually a sizeable gathering of **ducks** and **grebes** out on the water and also scan the shoreline of the reservoir for occasional waders. A wintering **warbler** or a **Firecrest** is often discovered in the trees and bushes surrounding the hide and a good range of farmland birds is likely on the way to and from the hide. At around midday, we'll drive over to Bedgebury Pinetum (see 17 November for details of the birding possibilities; a nice collection of Xmas trees will also be on sale).

Monthly Visits to Beddington Farmlands

A guided tour for 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.

Work is currently in progress on and around the lake and scrape in the southwestern corner of the Farm (ie where our parties have hitherto spent most of their time) to reshape these areas to their final configuration. During the next few visits, therefore, we'll be unable to enter this part of the Farm, although it will still be possible to overlook the lake. During this final quarter of the year, passage migrants will become progressively scarcer on the site and wintering birds, notably **Teal** and **Common Snipe** will be coming in. We'll also be hoping for sightings of **Jack Snipe** and **Water Pipit**, two of the scarcer specialities of the site, and the first **Bittern** record for the Farm can't be far away! A flock of **Tree Sparrows** will doubtless be around and a species list of 40 - 50 for a morning can still be anticipated.

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

Saturday, 8th August, 2009 : Titchfield Haven & Farlington Marshes. A lovely sunny summer Saturday for our party of 15 to visit the Hampshire coast. The tide was still quite low in the Solent when we arrived at Titchfield Haven enabling us to locate two **Black Terns** among the hundreds of **Common**

Terns resting on a shingly bit of the beach. Across the road in the nature reserve, a **Water Rail** was feeding in the open at the edge of the reedbed in the first hide visited and a few **Black-tailed Godwits** were roosting very close to the hide. Unfortunately, the grazing marshes further up the River Meon were extremely dry and few birds were showing. However, on and around scrapes on the far (western) side of the river we found a single **Wheatear**, at least one family of well-grown **Avocet** chicks and both **Greenshank** and **Green Sandpiper**. When a tiny, fast-moving head protruding from the water reached the bank, it proved to be part of a large **Grass Snake** and colourful fish in one of the dykes nearby were identified by Terry as **Rudd** - a new species for the Group's fish list (still in low single-figures)! A short but complicated drive northeast from Titchfield took us to Farlington Marshes where a Spotted Crake had been reported at the Lagoon. We waited there with a score of other hopefuls for about an hour and a half and, although the crake stayed hidden in the reeds, two more **Water Rails** did come out and the interest was maintained by a good selection of waders, including **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Whimbrel** and a flock of **Grey Plovers** (these last absolutely dazzling in their black-and-silver breeding garb). The day's birdlist totalled 70 species and we also recorded 10 species of butterfly.

Tuesday, 18th August, 2009 : Oare Marshes. The range of birds seen during the mid-week outing to this popular North Kent reserve was understandably fairly similar to that encountered during the Saturday visit on 25 July, though one or two changes were apparent. For instance, the **Turtle Doves** seemed to have departed, while **Snipe**, **Green Sandpiper** and, most notably, **Wood Sandpiper** had arrived. (Once again, a good number of **Ruffs** were present at Oare Marshes and, although we didn't pick it out on this occasion, these probably including the individual whose collection of coloured leg-rings and flags had attracted our attention on the previous visit. John B's investigations have confirmed that bird as being part of a study on the Ruff by the University of Groningen, Netherlands, in which over 5000 birds have been marked since 2003. This one was originally caught and ringed at Monniksburenpolder, Netherlands, on 29th March, 2008 and, after being seen at Oare for the first time on 11th July 2008, has now been recorded from the site on a further 25 occasions, although it did appear to go missing between October 2008 and July 2009. Although that sounds impressive, another individual ringed in 2005 has since been re-sighted 91 times, from sites as diverse as Cley Marshes and Blacktoft Sands in UK and others places in Norway, Sweden and back in the Netherlands).

Sunday, 23rd August, 2009 : Elmley Marshes RSPB. More sunshine for our 15 participants visiting the Isle of Sheppey. A pair of **Hobbies**, **Common Buzzard**, a close-range but well-concealed **Long-eared Owl**, **Little Owl**, two or three **Wheatears** visiting rabbit burrows, lots of **Yellow Wagtails** and, best of all, a second-summer male **Montagu's Harrier** were all seen around or from the farm, while **Reed Warblers** and **Reed Buntings**, plentiful and constantly-visible **Marsh Harriers**, a **Stoat** and many butterflies (of which eleven species were recorded in the day) kept the walks to the hides and back interesting. Two **Little Ringed Plovers**, three **Common Sandpipers**, at least four **Green Sandpipers**, **Greenshank**, several **Avocets**, a fly-by **Whimbrel** and a family party of **Whinchats** were encountered from the hides around the scrape, although the Swale Hide was disappointing, with just a couple of **Great Crested Grebes** and three or four **Common Seals** during lunch. A successful day, producing a bird-list of 66 species, made even more satisfying by word reaching us regularly of tumbling wickets as our lads trounced those wretched Aussies to seize back the Ashes!

Sunday, 6th September, 2009 : Pagham Harbour. This local nature reserve on the Sussex coast is always popular and on yet another warm and sunny day our twelve participants found themselves sharing the site with at least two other RSPB parties. Not that it mattered - there's plenty of room and we were able to swap information. 70 species for the day, but nothing really earth-shattering. One of the day's highlights was watching a big juvenile **Peregrine** (probably one of this year's brood from Chichester Cathedral) proving that she had already developed good hunting skills with some swift and ultimately successful passes over the harbour, scattering waders and ducks in all directions. The ducks included a few **Pintail** and a larger number of **Wigeon** already back for the winter. Two parties of **Whinchats**, each four or five strong, were a treat as we passed the fields, then while eating our sandwiches on the beach, several distant **Gannets** and a passing **Common Scoter** added some extra flavour. Back in the carpark we

encountered a minor plague of **Hawthorn Shield-Bugs**. Finally, a number of **Common Buzzard** sightings during the day culminated with views of a spiral of four individuals as drove away for home.

Tuesday, 15th September, 2009 : Gillingham Riverside Park. The 'Barbecue Summer' that had been favouring our outings since Spring had to end sometime - and today was the day! Peering out across the mouth of the Medway into heavy pulses of rain driven by a fresh northeasterly wasn't great fun. However, as the tide went out, we did find a bit of shelter (shared with a **Wheatear**) in the lee of bushes out on the Horrid Hill peninsula allowing us to set up scopes and watch the waders returning to feed on the newly exposed expanse of mud - **Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Redshank** and **Turnstone** were all there. One or two **Swallows** struggled by overhead and when we did take a peek into the wind we noticed a flock of a hundred or two **Wigeon** out on the river. Later on, a look around a sheltered little pond produced several **warblers**, including a **Lesser Whitethroat**, and one or two bush-climbing **Moorhens**. Then, when the rain came on in real earnest, we finally gave up and headed for the café.

Saturday, 19th September, 2009 : Beachy Head. The signs seemed favourable for a bumper crop of passage migrants being in store for the 10-strong party travelling down from Croydon to the Sussex coast - persistent north-easterly winds for the previous week, low cloud and mist enveloping high ground *en route*, and we were heading for one of the south-east's most renowned migrant hot-spots. However, by the time we made it to Whitbread Hollow, the sun was blazing down from a cloudless sky and, other than a continual passage of hirundines overhead, there was barely a migrant bird to be seen throughout the morning, though two Ed and John B did notice a **Yellow-legged Gull** on the sea. After sandwiches had been consumed on a grassy bank near Shooter's Bottom, we wondered whether a walk around the bushes there would be worth the effort - but fortunately we went for it! Parties of **Wheatears** and **Stonechats** were the first sign that we had made the right decision, then **Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps** and both **Common** and **Lesser Whitethroats** appeared, and then - a new bird for the Group! - an **Icterine Warbler**, moving from one bush top to another for about five minutes before vanishing for good, in spite of prolonged efforts to relocate it. But we did find a female **Redstart** and also an incredibly smart little male **Sparrowhawk** in the process and also spotted a real oddity - a pure white albino **Swallow** flying over. Finally moving on to Birling Gap, we noted up to nine **Little Egrets** on the foreshore below the Seven Sisters and a group of at least four **Whinchats** around bushes nearby. We ended with 44 birds on our list for the day as well as a butterfly list of eleven. Amazingly, the most numerous species on the latter was **Clouded Yellow**, of which we had seen about 30!

4. Beddington's Wandering Tree Sparrows.

Young Tree Sparrows raised at Beddington Farmlands this year are now dispersing and we would like our keen observers to keep an eye open for them anywhere within, say, 20 km of Beddington!

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 (though the number has fallen a little since). You may not be aware, however, that many of these Sparrows disappear from the Farm each winter before showing up again (in much diminished numbers) 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. Terry Osborn and I have contacted other local RSPB groups covering areas adjacent to our own seeking their assistance in tracking down these missing Beddington Tree Sparrows during the coming winter. 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 the winter (that is from now 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.

Many thanks.

5. Old Pals.

The annual Birdfair at Rutland Water is always a great place for unscheduled meetings with old friends and this year was no different. Among the many leaders, local guides and fellow participants from bygone bird tours that we bumped into, there were a few one-time regulars on our own excursions. The biggest surprise was finding Ted (Weston) and Keith (Neale) there. While Keith (a former fellow outing leader) still meets up with us for one or two trips each year, Allie and I hadn't seen Ted since he moved down to Wiltshire, at least ten years past. All of his old friends will be glad to hear that the witticisms were still flowing as freely as ever! Then, together with Sheila and George, we joined James and Doreen (Main) in Stamford on one of the evenings and caught up with their latest news - needless to say, they have already become heavily involved with their local Scottish Ornithological Club in East Lothian. We also ran into Ros (Sim) - few may now remember her joining our trips quite regularly for quite a while before moving to the Bromley outfit.

5. Wildlife Sites in Croydon.

Ed Owen remembers a few:-

Although not strictly in Croydon but bordering it I always remember some very happy times spent at Sydenham Hill Wood nature reserve during the mid-nineties. At the time I was living in Thornton Heath and would make a point of getting up early at weekends (and in any spare time come to think of it) to visit this "oasis" in the middle of all the hustle and bustle. It's a fairly hilly plot of land and heavily wooded with a mixture of deciduous trees interspersed with Yew. I remember delights such as **Tawny Owl**, **Blackcaps** (male and female feeding their young in a low growing bush), **Yellow Wagtail**, **Tree Sparrow**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Treecreeper**, **Nuthatch**, **Kestrel** and a lovely little pond - home to various insects, including damselfly, and amphibians, including **newts**. Part of the land had been taken over from the old railway line that used to run from the high level Crystal Palace station to London Bridge via Nunhead. There is a tunnel, which was just being blocked off in those days so access was possible at times, and the long tunnel was home to various species of bats. At the end of a hard days "slog" recording nature I was quite happy to trudge my way to the Dulwich Woodhouse for a well deserved pint or three!

Other favourite sites remembered include South Norwood Country Park – then still very much in its infancy - and one particular year when we had the **Great Grey Shrike**, and also on a particularly splendid autumn morning seeing a **Kingfisher** eyeing up its breakfast swimming in the concrete culvert by Elmers End Road. And, oh yes, those glorious evenings spent with my mate watching at least three species of bat coming out of their roosts in the Scots Pines by the lake to feed. One other place just up the road from

where I lived in Thornton Heath is the Lawns, formerly the Beulah Spa Gardens. Not renowned for its outstanding bird varieties but a lovely haven for chilling out – I remember quite vividly the beautiful colours on a family of **Long Tailed Tits** foraging for food on a low growing Holly bush.

Oh happy days...

Ed.

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

John Parish

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28th September, 2009.