

Highlights of Marylebone Birdwatching Society Season 2012-13

Indoor Meetings

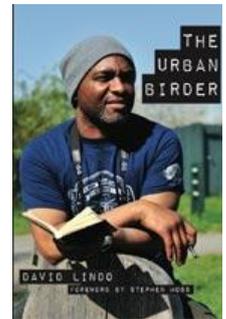
The 2012-13 season started with our annual Dreda Farrell Memorial Lecture when Chris Collins took us to the Russian Far East. Later in the season Barrie Mason invited us to explore the wildlife and landscapes of East Anglia. We also had a fascinating talk about flight and feathers from Brian Nobbs who used illustrations of aircraft as well as birds to explain different flight techniques. And many of us had not heard such detail on the formation of feathers, their care and purpose and especially how their colours are created.



Chris Collins had already thrilled us with his exciting adventures searching for (and finding) previously uncharted nests of the endangered spoon-billed sandpiper. Our final talk of the season was by Dr Paul Donald, Principal Conservation Scientist in the RSPB's International Research Team. Following a first half on the "4 horsemen of the Apocalypse" for endangered species, we heard about the success stories of birds rescued from the brink of extinction.

The pre-AGM talk was from Dave Lawrence and Tommy Root who talked about their conservation work in Camden's Local Nature Reserves and our two remaining talks encouraged us to "look up" and "listen".

The Urban Birder, David Lindo, gave us an inspiring talk about the amazing birds we can see in our urban environment – not only in our parks and gardens but perched on tower blocks or flying overhead. And we had an excellent workshop on birdsong with David Darrell-Lambert also advising us to start by getting to know the familiar birds of our parks and gardens.



In addition to interesting well-illustrated talks at our Indoor Meetings, we provide Fairtrade refreshments at the interval and you can book for coach outings, buy raffle tickets (prizes often bird-related), read about MBS and other birding activities, occasionally buy Fairtrade snacks, wildlife cards or books, Hampstead Heath calendars... all in a pleasant venue and with a friendly group of people.

We announced last year that Helen Newnham had, after 7 years, handed over the organisation of the talks to Sue Campbell. Unfortunately Sue had to resign quite early in the season and Helen nobly picked up the reins once more. We are now pleased to welcome Gaye Henson who has taken over from Helen and finalised the programme for the 2013-14 season.

Coach Outings

After initial teething problems we settled with our new coach company and our seven coach trips took us to Hampshire, Kent, Suffolk and West Sussex. Our first Coach Outing of the season at the end of September was to the new site of Pennington Marshes, Hampshire. The general consensus was "What a wonderful day" – the walk, the weather, the scenery and the birds including turnstones on the boats at Keyhaven, little egrets, greenshank, masses of wigeon, stonechat and, for two people, Dartford warbler!



The vagaries of the weather probably affected numbers booking on coaches last season and certainly made some of our trips memorable. Our outing to Pulborough Brooks in late November was WET but the reserve offers excellent facilities for viewing birds from within hides or indeed the cafe! Several lucky people saw bullfinch and lesser spotted woodpecker but for many of us the highlight was the mass of beautiful pintail.

It was our trip to Langstone Harbour in January 2013 which was quite outstanding! Just sixteen brave (or foolish) birders had boarded the coach for this trip. We disembarked reluctantly into icy rain. We were however greeted by a rock pipit and saw goldeneye, grebes, mergansers and Brent geese as we walked towards the Ship Inn. Normally we'd have eaten our packed lunches outside and just gone into the pub for a drink but Andrew persuaded them to let the sixteen dripping walkers in. They set up a long table for us on the Upper Deck where we could eat our own food though many of the party took the opportunity of warming up with some pub grub. After lunch we felt able to brave the elements again and eventually sheltered under some trees to watch the tide recede and waders fly in. Flocks of dunlin were the most noticeable but we also saw grey plover and curlew. We had been told we'd be leaving from near the pub at 4pm but we were all back on the coach for 3.20. It apparently hadn't rained at all in London!



It was COLD for our trip to Rye Harbour in February. Indeed it snowed quite heavily at one point on the journey though fortunately we also saw some sunshine. Bird highlights included great white egret, marsh harrier, red-breasted merganser, avocet, grey plover and fieldfare. And we had a warm welcome at the Avocet Gallery & Tea Room at the end of our visit.



6th April many people were apparently put off by the recent cold weather and snow from joining the coach outing to Dungeness for SPRING visitors! But the 23 who bravely set off were well-rewarded by an afternoon of glorious sunshine as well as some amazing birds. At the Observatory we saw black redstart and wheatear near the houses and looking skywards at the raucous gulls we saw a WHITE STORK being chased off by them.



For the first time on an MBS trip, we stopped at the ARC pits for an hour where mating goldeneye provided a lunchtime spectacle. At the RSPB reserve we had many good views of marsh harrier and a peregrine falcon flew by quite close. We also saw a great white egret and a raven. We heard Cetti's warbler and some heard chiffchaff. Perhaps not the usual abundance of spring birds and certainly no first swallow but some exciting birds and SUNSHINE!



The weather was better for our last two outings. Our annual trip to Minsmere early May scored highest in a season hampered by the weather with 39 people on the coach and a group bird list of 87. Highlights included male garganey, marsh harrier, peregrine, avocet, greenshank, marsh tit, brambling, singing warblers and for a few ferruginous duck, whimbrel and stone curlew.

In June we visited Stodmarsh where we had good views of marsh harrier. Some people saw bearded tit, turtle dove and bittern and nightingale and cuckoo were heard. We saw fewer than usual hobby and terns but large numbers of swifts and swallows.

In addition to our seven coach trips, Andrew Peel organised and led last season's new venture: the first June afternoon and evening minibus trip to Thursley and Hankley Commons in Surrey with a supper break in between the two. Highlights included good views of hobby and woodlark, redstart, stonechat and curlew calling and displaying. Nightjars were sadly not seen at Hankley Common but were heard.

Local Outings

Like the Coach Outings, these field trips, where we meet at a station in or around London, were variously affected by rain, snow, cold, wind and mud though we did also have some sunshine and good birds.

For our first Local Outing in September about 20 members turned out, with plenty of cars to meet train travellers at Tring station. It was a lovely day, sunny but not too hot. After a good start with two red kites, two ravens and three common buzzards putting on an aerial show, it was rather quiet on bird front. But there were also common darters, butterflies such as speckled wood, a hare and a frog.

There were only 6 people on the trip to Oare Marshes in October. The weather forecast had been bad but there was just one brief shower and it was pleasantly warm. Among the 56 bird species seen were water rail, little egret, stonechat, wheatear and Cetti's warbler.

Highlights at Two Tree island in November included Brent geese, avocet, knot, stonechat and hares.

At Stocker's Lake in January we had good views of goldeneye and a male goosander. We were also pleased to see the small birds – tits and finches, nuthatch, siskins, goldcrest and house sparrow – and we kept noticing "another great spotted woodpecker".

At Rainham Marshes in February the 58 bird species included corn bunting, rock pipit, marsh harrier, large flocks of lapwing, golden plover and dunlin, snipe, pintail and barn owl.

Rye Meads in March was notable for the icy cold weather but we were fortunate in seeing the green sandpiper which had been reported in the week the moment we entered the first hide. Other highlights included a group of snipe, dunlin, several little grebe, a reed bunting perched unusually high in a tree, hearing Cetti's warbler and for two of us a glimpse of a kingfisher.

The Spring sunshine had again turned to rain for our April Local Outing and the paths and fields round Canons Farm, Banstead, were muddy! Fortunately the drizzle didn't start til after we'd had lunch and we got back to Kingswood Station before the heavy rain set in. The recce 10 days earlier had been carried out in snow and it had been hoped we'd now get the warblers, hirundines and other spring visitors which were reportedly being sighted here and all round the greater London area. No ring ouzel or woodlark or chiffchaffs and willow warblers for us... but we were pleased to see yellowhammer and hear the wonderful song of the skylark.



In addition to our annual pre-Christmas Saturday morning walk in Regent's Park, we were able to benefit from the expertise of the Royal Park's former Wildlife Officer, Tony Duckett, for two guided walks mid-May. The Sunday 8am walk did better in terms of weather and birds – they saw grey and pied wagtails, common terns, and reed warbler. Their highlight was a little owl perched high in a tree. But the Friday evening group were also delighted to be shown round the different habitats in the Park and hear Tony's tales of developments in the management of its wildlife and changes in bird populations. And the MBS got a mention in Regent's Park Birds blogspot of 12th May.

On the Saturday of that same weekend 8 people went on the Local outing to Paxton Pits. Tits, finches and warblers were seen and cuckoo was heard but the highlight was the good number of nightingales seen as well as heard.

The 2012-13 season's programme ended with our annual Friday evening stroll on Hampstead Heath. John Rogers led twenty of us – including a couple who had seen the event posted on Facebook the day before! In a change from our usual route, we started with woodlands where we heard a song thrush singing magnificently and managed to spot a chiffchaff. We saw a family of whitethroat in Priors Field and ended up at Hampstead No 1 Pond for a good selection of water birds including a very elegant female Mandarin and a rather scruffy male in eclipse.



Tuesday walks on Hampstead Heath

The Tuesday walks have continued to be popular, enjoyed not only for the birds we see and hear but also for the pleasure of being out on the Heath, as well as the friendliness of the group. We end up squashed around tables enjoying lunch and a good chat at Kenwood café. This year we have again benefited from several (human) visitors from abroad.



This winter was remarkable for the number of ducks on Highgate no 1 Pond, with dozens of wigeon and gadwall crowded on the water. Spring and summer on the ponds bring terns and breeding swans. A pair at the Bird Sanctuary hatched seven young, of which six survived. Sadly the nesting great crested grebes on the Men's Pond don't appear to have been successful this year and we've missed our regular kingfisher. The only ones recorded on our Tuesday walks were a New Year's Day treat. Two were spotted on the Ladies' Bathing Pond early in the year, apparently fighting, but nothing in recent months.



Coal tit and nuthatch are often seen outside the summer months at the bird feeders, with great spotted woodpeckers and, in the winter, siskin, less frequent visitors. For a couple of weeks we had excellent views of a solitary redwing by the path near the start of the walk. Spring produced the usual warblers, with the woodland and scrub noisy with blackcap, chiffchaff and the occasional willow warbler, and whitethroat were seen at several locations in Parliament Hill and Kenwood. But the more regular sights of commoner birds, such as flocks of long-tailed tits, and kestrels circling above never fail to delight us.

More detailed reports may be found on our website www.birdsmbs.org.uk

And there's a large selection of photos on www.flickr.com/photos/mbsbirds/sets

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