

## Marylebone Birdwatching Society: review of September 2015 – June 2016 season

### Indoor Meetings

Talks organiser, Gaye Henson, had to do some quick thinking twice during the 2015-16 season when one speaker cancelled the day the MBS programmes were landing on people's doormats and another late the night before the event. Waders were replaced with gulls in a very interesting talk by Steve Piotrowski about why Big Gulls Need Friends. In April, it was too late to find a substitute speaker but Gaye had acquired some films for just such an occasion and we were all delighted with the RSPB film on Cranes.

Our 2015-16 season opened Friday 18th September 2015 with The Dreda Farrell Memorial Lecture. This talk was FREE thanks to a legacy left by founding member Dreda Farrell. The talk on House Sparrows with particular reference to London, advertised in the Ham & High and the Camden New Journal as well as to MBS members and friends via the printed programme and electronically, attracted an eager audience of nearly 40 people. Helen Baker, President of the London Natural History Society gave a very clear presentation of serious research into the complex causes for the decline of House Sparrows especially in our cities and gave us some ideas of how we can help provide food, shelter and nest sites.

Florin Feneru talked to us of his passion for City Parrots and, on a dreary damp Friday evening, 26 of us were treated to the bright colours of African birds as Richard Pople whisked us off to the Gambia, Morocco, Kenya, Zambia and Ethiopia. Tom Mason illustrated his development and philosophy as a wildlife photographer with his amazing photos. We gained some insight into the hours, days, months if not years and the cold, mud and water endured to get the photo he'd envisaged. And we were impressed by his concern and passion for the wildlife he portrays.



In lieu of the May Indoor Meeting, a dozen MBS members met for a fascinating guided walk in Highgate Wood with Team Leader Rebecca Harrison. We learnt about the history of the woods and saw the sites of ancient earthworks and Roman kilns. Rebecca also told us a huge amount about the trees and how they have been managed over the centuries. We even got to do some tree hugging! We saw current nesting sites of great spotted woodpeckers and kestrel and where tawny owls have nested in the past.

### Coach Outings

Last season's change to a single pick up and set down point by Euston Station seems to have worked well despite our sometimes having to play "hunt the Anderson coach" while other coaches or police vans blocked "our" bay. We did promise a review of the new arrangement so please let us know your views and we will discuss the issue at the AGM in January. However, those who have been on the coach trips - about 35 people per trip on average and including some who lost a convenient stop close to home - seem to have appreciated getting to reserves earlier as well as getting home more quickly.



We had 8 coach trips over the 2015-16 season taking us on our annual visits to Pulborough Brooks, Dungeness and Minsmere RSPB Reserves as well as to Pagham Harbour, Keyhaven Marshes, Rye Harbour, Thursley Common and Titchwell.



Our first Coach Outing of the season was to **Pagham Harbour**. We were unable to stop on route – we used to go to Guildford Cathedral but they don't open til later. We actually reached the reserve just after 10am and, those who wished, were able to use the drinks machine in the visitor centre. Highlights included prolonged views of two Short-eared Owls as well as Little Owl and Pintail.

Highlights at **Pulborough Brooks** included Dartford Warbler, Peregrine, Red Kite, Pintail and winter thrushes.

30<sup>th</sup> January we had our first Coach Outing to **Titchwell** North Norfolk in 16 years! Though some of us have been to the reserve more recently with other groups or on weekend trips, our last coach trip was in October 2000. All our earlier visits were September/October apart from our first in February 1986 – 30 years ago!!

It was a long journey! And it was bitterly cold – though not as cold at the sea as we'd expected from the walk down. But we had some good birds, including Brambling on the feeders and Barn Owl. And the scenery was spectacular.



Our Coach Outing end February was to **Keyhaven Marshes** on the Hampshire coast. We were beginning to think we might have lost our way again as we struggled through the market at Lyndhurst but, with a combination of satnavs and phone apps we reached the Amenity Car Park around 11am.



Our leader, Andrew reported:

Keyhaven was sunny, with a cool breeze. The tide was in and straightway group members found good birds amongst the boats: at least 3 Mergansers, a lone Long-tailed Duck and a small flock of Brent Geese. We kept encountering Rock Pipits on the shore then a distant pair of Eider on a spit. On the saltmarsh there were Curlew, Grey and Ringed Plovers, Redshank, Dunlin, a large flock of Knot and a smaller one of Bar-tailed Godwit. Nearing our lunch stop we found a

Spoonbill on the saltmarsh. The lagoon had Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Shelduck, Wigeon, and single Lapwing & Avocet. Small groups of Skylarks flew over. After lunch we had a close female Merganser, a small group of Turnstone under our feet and large flocks of Brent Geese (500 or so) flying about. We then found a Long-billed Dowitcher roosting at the back of a lagoon. On the return walk a Marsh Harrier drifted over us and we found a Water Pipit nearby on the shore. We rewarded ourselves with a quick drink in the pub at day's end.

Marion added: I didn't get to see the Long-tailed Duck and had left the main party by the time they saw the Dowitcher but, on the return walk with a small party, we saw a Snipe. As for Spoonbills! Most of my white birds turned out to be Little Egrets. Even scope views of identified birds appeared just to be hunched mounds of white feathers. But when I left the main party, I went up to higher ground and was fortunate to meet 2 of our party - with telescope – looking down at 3 white blobs and, at last, I had a good view of 2 Spoonbills face on as they gave a rare wave of their bills.

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016, seeing the flood of last minute enquiries via Facebook and ProjectDirt as well as the usual channels, we'd booked a larger coach for our **Dungeness** trip. On arrival at the Lighthouse, we were a bit worried seeing a gutted Light Railway Café surrounded by the fencing of a building site. Fortunately, alternative arrangements had been made to provide facilities and catering for the miniature railway.



Our leader, Andrew, summed up our day:

Dungeness - a full coach, many new faces and a sunny day. On the sea a porpoise, then a flock of 8 Black-necked Grebes on the water. At the Patch hundreds of Common, Black Headed and Herring Gulls, flocks of Brent Geese flying past, over the sea; next 2 Peregrines hunting over the power station. The Observatory was very quiet, although some saw a Firecrest. At the ARC pits there were Goldeneye, Shelduck, Shoveler, Gadwall, several Cetti's Warbler heard and a distant Sparrowhawk spotted. Many of the group crossed the road to see the Tree Sparrows at the house by the entrance to the RSPB Reserve before getting back on the coach for the short ride to the Visitor Centre. Just before we reached our destination, many of us saw a stoat. At the Reserve highlights included a lone Swallow, Buzzard overhead, a flying Lapwing and a calling Chiffchaff. At Dengie Marsh Little Egret, then, from the viewpoint, Bearded Tit, a Marsh Harrier on the ground, and a Tundra Bean Goose. Some people also saw Smew near the reserve entrance.



At the end of April, we enjoyed a mostly sunny day at **Rye Harbour**. We first went to the viewing platform at Castle Water where we saw Reed and Sedge Warblers, Common and Lesser Whitethroat and House Martins, 3 Marsh Harriers, 2 Buzzards, 2 Sparrowhawks, a Cuckoo, several Kestrels and a Hobby! On the reserve we added waders and gulls, Sandwich and Common Terns and we even heard a Nightingale singing. It did turn rainy towards the end of the day but some of us were safely in the Avocet Gallery and Tearoom enjoying tea/coffee and cake during the worst shower.

21<sup>st</sup> May, we had our annual trip to **Minsmere**. It was quite warm and sunny but very windy! Many of us nevertheless spotted some Bearded Tits outside Island Mere Hide. Many people had good views of Bittern. Other highlights included March Harrier and Hobby, Avocet, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Common and Little Tern and Kittiwake.

Our last Coach Outing of the season was 18<sup>th</sup> June when a group of just 24 went to **Thursley Common**. The weather was too dull for the dragonflies and damselflies for which the National Nature Reserve is famous but, as Marion wrote in her 30 Days Wild blog: it was great to be able to spend 5 hours in the wild in good company and with lovely scenery and quality birds – these included Woodlark, Dartford Warbler, Stonechat, Tree Pipit and Common Redstart.



## Local Outings

We visited **Rainham Marshes** twice during the 2015-16 season – as planned in September and, as train travel was proving problematic, in lieu of the planned trip to Oare Marshes. In September 13 people enjoyed their visit to Rainham in beautifully sunny weather. The highlight for many was a low-flying Hobby catching a dragonfly. A flock of about 40 Starlings delighted with a communal bath in one shallow



pond and the sky was full of hirundines. There were also seals on the shoreline. Other birds in the 40 listed included Whinchat, Barn Owl, Sparrowhawk and Marsh Harrier.

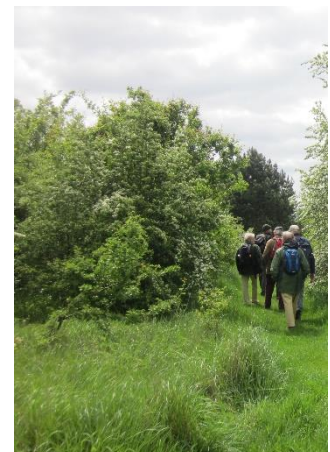
In January, diverted from Oare Marshes, 23 of us had a good day at the more accessible Rainham Marshes. The weather was bitterly cold and there were many patches of frozen water but the sunshine and scenery were superb. Highlights were Dartford Warbler and no fewer than 3 Short-eared Owls – perched and flying.

Highlights at **Blue House Farm** in October included samphire in bloom, 7 Brent Geese on the river and four avocets flying up the river with the sun catching their wings.

17 people gathered for the Local Outing to **Stockers Lake** on a cold but sunny day in November. Our leader, John, drove to the car park with couple of people but most of the group walked the 10mins from station and were rewarded by seeing Siskins on the first tree we came to by the lake. Highlights included Treecreeper, Red Crested Pochard and, for some who'd had lunch in a more sheltered hide, an excellent view of Water Rail.

Highlights at **Two Tree Island** in February included a weasel, a Kingfisher and some spectacular flocks of flying waders. In March 20 people went to **Tring Reservoirs** on a very cold day with a bitter wind. We started from the car park at Startops and walked round all 3 reservoirs of that complex - Startopend, Tringford & Marsworth - then a very short foray up the canal and back to the car park / Bluebells Tea Rooms to eat our lunches. Then on to Wilstone, finishing about 3.30pm. At Wilstone the star bird was a splendid Goldeneye drake with the female also spotted. Other highlights included 2 Ravens, Grey Wagtail, Buzzard, Red Kite and a large colony of House Sparrows. At **Paxton Pits** in April, 3 Nightingales were heard and one highlight was seeing, in a glade by the River Ouse, a pair of Blackcaps, a Reed Bunting and a Long Tailed Tit all in the same willow bush.

Our May Local Outing was to **Fairlop Waters**. 11 of us enjoyed a sunny walk in the Nature Reserve part of this country park in the London Borough of Redbridge. Grass and trees provided a variety of fresh greens as a backdrop to brilliant white blossom. Birds were perhaps more heard than seen but we did identify Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Blackcap. We were amused to see large huddles of gosling – Greylag and Canada Geese – and were amazed at the number of Swift flying over the lake. Chairman Steve's identification of a Hobby was challenged when it appeared to hover. But we soon had excellent views of a Kestrel pouncing on prey then, chased off by a speeding golf buggy, taking to the sky and hovering. Steve's Hobby was definitely not a Kestrel. As we approached the Golf Club House, I checked out 2 black-headed white birds on the end of a jetty on the lake. They were indeed Common Terns.



9 people enjoyed a sunny day at **Amwell Quarry** in June. Highlights included a Grey Wagtail at the start of the walk; good views of Reed Bunting, Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler; ducklings and Egyptian goslings; and Little Ringed Plover. And they were able to seek ID help from the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust which happened to be running an afternoon on the dragonfly board walk.



Having joined the Tuesday walks on Hampstead Heath most weeks for over a year, Joyce Huggins had realised that a number of MBS members were unfamiliar with her local patch in **Stoke Newington**. She offered to lead a Friday daytime walk showing some of the green areas of that part of Hackney. And so a group of us met for a very interesting walk which included Clissold Park, Abney Park Cemetery, Springfield Park and Walthamstow Marshes.

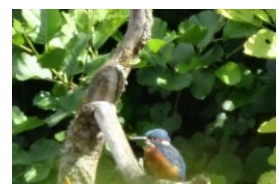
### **Hampstead Heath**

Our weekly Tuesday Heath walks have possibly been dominated by the ponds project over the last year - gaping holes, mounds of earth, diverted paths and heavy machinery. But the birds are still there and it's been interesting to watch developments especially with our leader Meg Game able to explain the mitigating ecological improvements with ponds being desilted and extra reed beds.



Photo taken on our Friday evening walk in June. You may just be able to see the Cormorant on the corner of the floating platform which was to be used in the desilting of the Viaduct pond.

People often ask if we see any special birds on the Heath. What's special about our weekly walks is seeing the regular water and woodland birds with extra thrushes, ducks and gulls over winter and the return of summer visitors. And then, once in a while, we get excellent views of the Kingfisher or spot a Red Kite flying over and, in April this year, alerted by a phone call, we turned off the planned route to find 3 Wheatears as well as a Mistle Thrush and a well-camouflaged Green Woodpecker. As with the birds so with people, we get the regulars, ask after absent friends, greet annual migrants from other parts of the world and welcome newcomers. Notable visitors over the last year have been two students who made a film for their journalism course and a New Zealander who'd emailed in advance of her trip to England and enjoyed a particularly sunny walk with Kingfisher.



Our Tuesday walks set off 10am from Parliament Hill Staff Yard and we always start by following the Highgate Ponds as far as the bird feeders before taking various routes to Kenwood for 12 noon. This season we also had two Sunday morning Heath walks jointly with the London Natural History Society starting from Hampstead Heath Station and the Hampstead Ponds. 44 species were noted on the March walk and they had excellent views of 2 Kingfishers. The MBS season ended with the annual evening stroll in June, also starting from Hampstead Heath Station, when a dozen people helped one another identify the songs of Blackcap, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Wren, Chiffchaff and Song Thrush.



All Heath walks lead to the Bird Sanctuary Pond. Left 18/10/15 Sunday morning walk with the LNHS and right 29/12/15 Tuesday morning walk between Christmas and New Year.

### Communications

Details of MBS activities are advertised on our website [www.birdsmbs.org.uk](http://www.birdsmbs.org.uk) and shared via Facebook, Twitter, LoveCamden, ProjectDirt and a monthly E-news. Over the year we've also shared news of RSPB Central London Local Group and London Natural History Society events, wildlife art and photographic exhibitions at the Mall Galleries, crowdfunding for the publication of Matt Maran's Hampstead Heath book and wildlife events and sightings around London and the reserves we visit on our outings. For those less attached to their computer screens, posters with MBS events regularly appear in Belsize Park, at Acton Central Station and a few other locations and some of the extra news is displayed at our Indoor Meetings or shared on Heath walks but online and email information sharing is now an easier and quicker way to reach more people. You should be able to view BirdsMBS Facebook and Twitter pages even if you don't have accounts but, if you can, please like, follow and share our posts and tweets. The more you engage with BirdsMBS online – as well as in the field – the more people we can reach.

The first meeting of the Marylebone Birdwatching Society took place on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1981. While we hope you'll agree that we've continued to provide an interesting and varied programme of talks and outings and maintained our reputation as a friendly group, there have been many changes and developments over our first 35 years, notably as a result of advances in technology. And now, thanks largely to our new Membership Secretary Stefanie Turton, we are taking an extra step into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, introducing – by popular demand – the option of increased use of online communications and payment. But, fear not, we will still distribute printed programmes, accept cheques and continue to communicate by post, phone and, of course, in person at our indoor meetings and on our outings.



Marion Hill, MBS Committee (Publicity)  
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