



Marylebone Birdwatching Society

Chairman's Report for the 2011-2012 season

The Autumn 2011 to Summer 2012 season was a full one, with an excellent programme of talks and outings, two weekends away, and weekly Hampstead Heath walks.

Indoor meetings

We enjoyed some wonderful lectures. Our first talk of the season from Ralph and Brenda Todd was about their world travels to see ten out of the eleven species of Crane. In October Brian Nobbs discussed how birds find their food, and November's talk was 'The wildlife of Northern France' by Ray Croucher.

Our first talk of 2012 was at last year's AGM when Meg Game gave a lecture on the ecology and management of the Heath. In February Ed Drewitt talked about urban dwelling peregrines, and we heard how analysis of bones below nests yields information on birds migrating through London which become prey to the peregrine, such as whimbrel, woodcock and snipe.

In March there was a return visit from Dominic Couzens, who several members knew from his evening classes on birdwatching. He gave us a fascinating talk on migration. In April, Richard Eden presented a wonderful talk entitled 'A Birding Safari to the Phillipines'. Our May meeting was held at Camley Street Natural Park, near St Pancras station. We walked round this two acre site and heard about the London Wildlife Trust's work at this reserve. Our final meeting of the Spring and summer season was an evening stroll around Hampstead Heath.

We heartily thank Helen Newnham for organising the indoor meetings. She had signalled her intention to give up, but very generously agreed to continue for the short term while a replacement is found. Sue Campbell was a great help for a while, but unfortunately pressure of work and study meant that she was unable to continue. I would also like to thank Jean Clarke for the catering.

Coach trips

There were six coach trips this year.

Our first was to Sandwich and Pegwell Bay. Sightings included flocks of oystercatcher, dunlin, curlew, grey plover, bar-tailed godwit, curlew sandpiper, sanderling and, appropriately given the location, a couple of sandwich terns. In November we visited Pulborough Brooks. We are always guaranteed a good view of a peregrine falcon and we were not disappointed, as one was seen bathing in the gravel pits and another in a tree feasting on a teal it we saw it catch.

The weather was still mild in January when we visited Elmley Marshes in Kent, where we were treated to spectacular close views of a marsh harrier hunting. At the end of March we made our annual trip to Dungeness, where the highlight was the spoonbill spooning in front of the visitor centre.

In May we visited Minsmere. The scrapes had previously flooded with all the wet weather, but luckily the water had receded by then. Some of us watched a pair of bitterns in flight, and there were also many glimpses of bearded tits. A few lucky members saw stone curlews. Our June coach trip was to the New Forest, and was very enjoyable despite being hampered by strong winds.

Our thanks go to Andrew Peel for organising and leading all our coach trips.

Local Outings

For our local trips we visited Rainham Marshes, Brent Reservoir, Blue House Farm, Amwell, Regents Park, Two Tree Island, Stockers Lake, Banstead Common, Paxton Pits and the Lea Valley at Cheshunt.

The first outing was to Rainham Marshes. In November a dozen people went on a trip to Blue House Farm in Essex; 48 species were seen. We visited Amwell Gravel Pits at the beginning of December. Our annual visit to Stockers Lake was at the beginning of February. The highlight was the large group of wildfowl that had congregated in the only unfrozen body of water just outside of the café, allowing us exceptionally close views of goldeneye, red-crested pochard and wigeon .

The trip to Oare Marshes in Kent in April brought spring sunshine that was tempered by a cold north wind. Highlights here were singing skylarks, a pair of pintails, avocets and black-tailed godwits, many going into breeding plumage. We visited Paxton Pits in May on the first warm sunny day after weeks of rain. It was a superb day for warblers, and we spotted garden warbler, blackcap, whitethroat, reed warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff. We listened to the nightingales and managed several glimpses of them skulking in the vegetation. Some saw turtle dove cooing away on a dead tree.

The visit to Cheshunt, Lea Valley in June started off with the tail end of the strong winds from the previous day, but as the day wore on it calmed down and the sun came out. The skies were awash with swallows, swifts and house martins, and a hobby was also spotted.

We are indebted to Lynette Small for organising these outings, and to all the individual members who led them.

Weekends away

Our long weekends away in the 2011/12 season took us to Norfolk in November and to Portland at the end of April.

Our leader in Norfolk, Stuart White of the Bird ID Company, was new to us. On the Saturday we visited Strumpshaw Fen, where we were treated to views of marsh harrier, a ring-tail hen harrier, and a bittern in flight. At Stubbs Mill that evening the common cranes disappointingly did not arrive until it was almost too dark to see them, but while waiting we had excellent views of barn owl and a short-eared owl, as well as up to thirty marsh harriers, a hen harrier and, for most of the group, a merlin. Highlights of the rest of the weekend included about 2,000 golden plover, a group of about twenty bearded tits feeding on a track and an arctic skua, which remained sitting on the dunes at Cley long enough for everyone to get a good look at it.

It doesn't always rain when we visit The Heights Hotel at Portland, but we do seem to attract more than our fair share of bad weather there. This time we actually retreated to the hotel for several hours on the Sunday in the face of driving rain and strong winds. But we enjoyed the weekend.

During our short visit we had superb views of gannets flying close inshore, guillemots on the water below, and swallows, swifts and wheatears being buffeted as much as we were.

We are greatly indebted to Barbara Luke for arranging these weekends for us.

Heath Walks

The Tuesday walks continued to be well attended. We have benefitted from the leader's good knowledge of the Heath, and routes are varied as far as possible consistent with arriving at Kenwood by soon after 12 for lunch and a natter. The most remarkable event of the 2011/12 season was undoubtedly the bittern which took up residence early in the New Year. It usually roosted behind the Bird Sanctuary, but in the daytime set out methodically to explore all the Highgate chain of ponds, even including the Men's pond, where not a single reed grows. Apparently not finding a reed bed of sufficient size or quality, it disappeared after about a fortnight.

Our thanks are due to Meg Game for leading these walks.

Trees Dedicated in Memory of Esther Wells

The Society has dedicated two trees in the new Heartwood Forest in memory of Esther Wells, who died in 2011. Esther played a leading role in founding MBS 31 years ago and was the Society's Secretary for nine years. She remained an active member of the Society until 2005.

Publicity and Communications

At the start of our 30th Anniversary Season the Society was featured in the Belsize Residents Association newsletter and the Heath and Hampstead Society newsletter. We also got a regular page on the HampsteadHeath.net website and our indoor meetings and Hampstead Heath walks are listed on LoveCamden.

Marion continued to send out monthly newsletters by email to MBS members and friends, along with the monthly poster, which is also sent to local press, libraries and organisations and to fellow natural history groups around London. She created a page for us on Facebook, a Twitter account, and a Flickr site for our photos.

We are very grateful to Marion for her hard work in publicising the society and its events and keeping in touch with members.

I should also like to thank Annie for acting as secretary; we wish her well in her move to the West Country. Others not mentioned above who have also generously given their time to the Society are Alix Mullineaux, who continues to represent the Society on the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee, Alanna Wilson, our membership secretary, our treasurer Judy Powell, all the other members of the Committee, and our auditor Richard Campbell.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2011-12 season, our 30th anniversary year, was quite as varied and successful as usual, and I feel that our founder members would be proud to see that the Society that they set up is continuing to thrive.