

Chairman's Report Season 12-13 for 2014 AGM

As usual, we had a full year, with many wonderful trips and interesting sightings, weekly walks on the Heath, and a programme of monthly Friday talks.

Thanks for the talks go not only to Sue Campbell but especially to Helen Newnham, who very kindly returned to organising them again when Sue had to resign. Our wholehearted thanks also go to Gaye Henson, who took over at the end of the season, allowing Helen to retire for the second time!

Our talks took us from Camden via East Anglia to the distant far east of Russia. We enjoyed a fascinating talk on feathers and how birds fly, and another about song, when we were encouraged to start learning bird sounds by listening out in the garden and local parks. A talk on the urban environment amazed us by showing just how many birds you can see in our green spaces.

Our first coach outing of the season in September to Pennington Marshes, a new site for us, was a resounding success, with wonderful weather, scenery and birds, though sadly only two people saw the Dartford Warbler.

The following cold wet winter then a cold wet spring put some people off, so numbers for coach trips were lower than anticipated. Hides, cafes and pubs were all popular. Nevertheless the hardy souls who did venture out were rewarded with some memorable sightings. In the icy rain of Langstone Harbour we saw goldeneye and mergansers, and despite snow at Rye Harbour we saw marsh harrier, red-breasted merganser and avocet. At last in April we experienced an afternoon of sunshine at Dungeness, and from the Observatory we were amazed to see a white stork being chased off by gulls. We also visited the ARC gravel pits for the first time.

Numbers recovered for our May trip to Minsmere, with 39 people attending; it is always a popular venue. The group total was a good 87 species. Our final outing was to Stodmarsh, where the relatively few hobbies and terns were disappointing, but there were plenty of swifts and swallows.

We are most grateful to Andrew Peel not only for leading these walks, but also for organising a new venture for us, a wonderful afternoon and evening minibus trip to Thursley and Hankley Commons. Although we didn't see nightjar, we did hear their extraordinary churring sound, and another highlight was woodlark.

Local outings started very well with a trip to Tring, where we saw kites, ravens and common buzzards. Some of the later trips were affected by the same inclement weather which had deterred members from joining our coach outings. Nevertheless we scored 58 species at Rainham Marshes in February, including corn bunting, marsh harrier, barn owl, pintail and large flocks of waders. At Paxton Pits we heard cuckoos, and at Rye Meads the song of a Cetti's warbler. It seems not long ago that Cetti's were very rare, and it is such a pleasure to hear their loud and unmistakeable song in so many wetlands today.

We visited Regent's Park before Christmas and we were also very fortunate to be conducted round the Park again twice in May by none other than local expert Tony Duckett, who also talked about the management of the Park. Our end-of-season walk was as usual to Hampstead Heath; a highlight was seeing one of the several pairs of whitethroat which bred in Prior's Field.

Our two weekend venues during the year will sadly be our last, unless and until someone can be found to replace our stalwart organiser Barbara Luke, who finally retired. The winter being as it was, I expect many members were glad they hadn't signed up to the January trip to Devon, but those hardy souls who did go enjoyed seeing merlin, firecrest and cirl bunting, and achieved a total count of 95 species. The May trip to Lancashire was so popular that a second weekend was kindly arranged by Toni Menezes. Highlights included spotted flycatcher, dipper, red grouse, eider duck and a goosander with ducklings.

I would again like to thank Barbara for organising these wonderful weekends for so many years. They were very popular, and often overbooked, and it is such a pity that they are no more, so if anyone feels up to organising them, or helping to do so, please do come forward. Barbara says it isn't a difficult task, as much of the work, such as hiring the minibus, is done by the local leaders or hotel managers.

The Tuesday walks continue to be popular, even though it was not generally a very good year for enjoying birdlife. But then this is but part of the reason for coming along. It is a friendly group and, apart from chatting, it is always a pleasure to see the Heath through the changing seasons. We missed our usual kingfisher, the first year in perhaps 15 that none bred on the Heath, despite a new nesting bank for them being built by the Viaduct Pond. We hope for better luck in 2014. Winter was in fact the best season for birds, with so many gadwall and wigeon on Highgate no 1 that the pond seemed overcrowded. It was the unusually prolific growth of aquatic vegetation that probably attracted so many ducks to this shallow pond. Meg Game has increased the speed of walking, though it is still slow, so that we now have a wider range of routes from the Parliament Hill café to our lunch at Kenwood.

Marion Hill deserves our heartfelt thanks for the incredible amount of time she has devoted to publicity. We now receive monthly emails from her containing news and notices, and she has set up and runs Facebook and Twitter accounts for the MBS, which really helps to promote the Society and our activities. Thanks also need to go to Nick, our secretary, Lynette for organising the local outings, and to all the other members of the Committee and leaders of the walks not already mentioned.

At the end of reading this report, Malcolm Wroe, added that he was pleased to note that we ended the 2012-13 season with 118 members. A renewal on the day of the 2014 AGM took current membership for the 2013-14 season to 110.