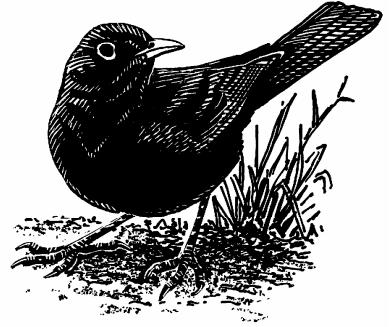




EXETER AND DISTRICT LOCAL GROUP



The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

NEWSLETTER No 139

SPRING 2010

a million voices for nature

EDITORIAL

As I write this there is still snow on the ground with more forecast tomorrow and events being cancelled from all directions. It's just not worth risking life, limb and property if it's not essential.

Luckily before it all started I got in quite a lot of bird food but it is going down fast as I am putting down about three times as much as usual. Well nothing else can move on my drive so the birds might as well have it to themselves. There are so many blackbirds about – I had 24 on the ground together yesterday morning which were, needless to say, spending a lot of their time scrapping rather than just agreeing a truce and getting on with eating! I easily resisted the urge to go into the kitchen and roll out pastry!

I've also had loads of goldfinches and the other usual candidates but no greenfinches! Is this just me or have others noticed a lack of them?

Talking of garden birds it is the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch over the weekend of 30-31 January and with more than the usual birds coming into the garden why not make this the year to try it if you

aren't already involved. It's great fun and you can read all about it later on.

Also during the winter cold whilst we all know how important it is to feed birds, it seems that we haven't talked in detail about feeding for a long time so there is an article about this as well. I do hope you enjoy it.

I have had some articles sent to me over the last quarter which is just great – for me it is those unexpected little bits that make it interesting. It may well be that this spell of snow will have sparked some interesting observations – do let me know.

The deadline for the next issue is **11th April 2010** please.

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NOTES AND NEWS

GROUP LEADER'S REPORT

It seems that I make a habit in my report of talking about the weather, but perhaps as I am typing this with the ground white and snow falling again it is not surprising. Although I have not been able to go out birding too much for the past week or so there have definite compensations in that the birds are coming to me! I have now had a resident fieldfare for more than a week. He has taken over the crab apple tree as his personal larder and no blackbirds are allowed near it. I am also getting frequent visits from bullfinches and goldcrests, both of which are a real treat.

Reflecting on the Group activities over the past year we have had some excellent speakers and enjoyed some good field trips. The visit to Blackhole in the Axe Valley and the Brownsea Island trip are particularly memorable for me.

In December we had a mini avocet cruise for our WEX members and although it rained for the whole trip the 40 cruisers thoroughly enjoyed the event and I hope that we can arrange further events this year. If we can encourage the youngsters to take an active interest in birds and their habitat it will help to ensure the healthy future of the Society.

Recently many of our Group members together with other volunteers were given Long Service Awards by the Society and I add our thanks for the hard work they have all done for many years. Among the recipients included were: Pat Thompson, Val Palmer, Marilyn Steel and Chris Steel 15 years; John Allan, Carolyn Channing, Liz Saunders, Richard Swinbank, Stella Beavan and Sue Collins 5 years' service. To any one I have overlooked and to those in Devon away from our Local Group I apologise and send our congratulations and thanks. I am sure that we all have a special memory of birding during 2009. I find that I cannot decide

between two particular sightings. In April in Andalucia, we saw 100+ griffon vultures on a carcass, fantastic, and then a few weeks ago whilst in Norfolk I saw cranes both on the ground and in flight and can't wait to see them established on the Somerset Levels so that we can enjoy the spectacle more often.

Finally we send very best wishes to Juliet Simms who gave birth to a baby boy on Friday 8th January. I wish you all a belated but sincere a Happy and Good Birding New Year.

CHRISTMAS FAYRE 2009

The weather could have been better on 21 November, and this may well have affected the attendance at our Fayre. Just over a hundred people came through the door and we took £472.88. If you were amongst that number, thank you very much for making the effort to come.

Thanks are also due to anyone who donated goods to sell. All the stalls seemed to have a good selection of items and I understand that the home-made produce stall was particularly well supplied this time.

Last, but by no means least, thanks to our loyal band of helpers who set up and run the stalls – where would we be without them?

To those of you who think that fayres are not 'your thing', may I point out that they are an important source of income for the Group, and anything that you can do in future to support them would be most welcome. Also, on the morning, they are really quite enjoyable!

Val Palmer

BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH

The Big Garden Birdwatch has been running for 30 years and is giving really good information now. All you have to do is to count the maximum number of birds (not flying over) seen at any one time during a period of one hour. You can do it anywhere you like – but why not get a nice hot drink and sit down at home looking out of the window.

You can of course increase your chances of a good count by setting up feeders in advance so the birds get used to coming to them (don't forget to keep them filled up all winter) and putting feed out on the ground for those who prefer it. Try to put it in the open so cats have nowhere to hide nearby.

You can pre-register which will allow you a discount on feeders and bird food and all the details are on the RSPB web site:

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/>

This site also has counting sheets and identification sheets available for you to download.

Last year's top ten species in Devon gardens was:

House sparrow	3.79
Blackbird	2.87
Chaffinch	2.77
Blue tit	2.70
Long tailed tit	1.81
Starling	1.74
Great tit	1.59
Robin	1.51
Woodpigeon	1.45
Greenfinch	1.41

As you can see from the average numbers you may only see one or two – but it's all really valuable information. Some people will see more than usual and some less – but it will balance out. What is really important is also to tell us if you see none during your hour of watching. This survey has helped us spot the decline in house sparrows and starlings so a count of 0 is still a valuable count.

Once you have completed your count please enter the details on the web-site.

With many apologies to all who don't have computers!

AERIAL BATTLE OVER BUDLEIGH



The last day of an unusually mild and sunny October, almost spring like, prompting many birds to practise their songs. Not many birds were actually visible except for large numbers of gulls drifting over. Suddenly a loud "kek-kek-kek" drew our attention to a bird frantically climbing high with rapid wingbeats. It looked like a pigeon, in escape mode, and then an unmistakable silhouette of a peregrine in close pursuit. Aha! A hunt is on! A turn of the pursued bird and it was not a pigeon but another peregrine. They rocketed across the sky, turns and twists accompanied by breath taking power dives. In one dive the lower bird flipped over and they briefly touched talons. Was this a territorial dispute? Or was it perhaps a teenager being given the shove by parents tired of looking after it? Could it be a courtship display? Did they do this in October?

We were still undecided when we lost sight of the birds. One we had noticed heading into the cliff top pines so we walked down in that direction, stopping at a viewpoint that gives an excellent view of the cliffs. There we spotted one of the birds perched on a small point, the white guano flecks showing this was a favoured site. Then we realised that lower down the cliff there was the other peregrine on a kill, probably a pigeon from the spread of feathers. It was now obvious that the birds were a pair; that it had been some sort of pair bonding display and this kill was possibly a courtship gift.

Enter stage left a pair of carrion crows attracted by the kill. The crows bombed the feeding bird which flew off. But by now there were two peregrines in the air and they were not going to give in easily. For about 15 minutes the crows tried to creep up across the cliff to the kill, harassed by the peregrines in an impressive display of power dives. Several times the crows reached within a few feet of the kill, clinging to any little bulge that sheltered them from the peregrines dives. In a bold sortie one crow actually made it within a foot but was driven back. Eventually the peregrines triumphed, the crows retreated leaving the peregrines in peace and enabling us to leave our breezy viewpoint, a little chilled but thrilled after some of the best bird watching we had had for a long time. Our visitor from the midlands was doubly impressed that over a few days we had not only had this treat but also excellent views of a group of about 15 passing dolphins.

Ray and Val Lovett.

FEEDING TIPS FOR THE WINTER



With snow and freezing temperatures arriving across the UK at the beginning of January, the RSPB is appealing for people to spare a thought for the birds who need our help to survive the cold.

Finding food and ensuring they eat enough of it to build - and maintain - adequate fat supplies to store on the body and 'burn' for energy is the

greatest test for wild birds in winter.

And the food and water we provide can be the difference between life and death in many cases.

When temperatures fall below freezing, our birds struggle to find the food they need to survive the winter in healthy condition, vital for breeding in spring.

Natural food is covered in snow and ice and impossible to get to. Water birds may be forced to leave iced-over lakes and rivers. The ground becomes too hard for birds like thrushes and lapwings to probe, and natural food like berries, acorns and seeds is buried.

During cold snaps birds are more likely to come into our gardens to seek sanctuary. People can help improve birds' chances of survival through these cold periods by providing food like meal worms, fat-balls, crushed peanuts, dried fruit and seeds and grain.

They could also put out leftovers like grated cheese, porridge oats, soft fruit, unsalted bacon, cooked rice and pasta and the insides of cooked potatoes.

Water is also vital for both drinking and bathing and bird baths can be kept from freezing over using small floating items like twigs or ping pong balls.

(When it is forecast to freeze overnight I go out at dusk and empty the bird bath – much easier just to refill it next day rather than have to defrost it- Ed.)

1. Put out feed regularly, especially in severe weather. Set up a bird table and use high calorie seed mixes. This can also be used to put out kitchen scraps such as animal fats, grated cheese and porridge oats.

2. Put out hanging feeders for black sunflower seeds, sunflower hearts, sunflower-rich mixes or unsalted peanuts.

3. Ensure a supply of fresh water every day. If it is very cold use tepid water but DO NOT use any antifreeze products.

4. Put out fruit, such as apples and pears, for blackbirds, song thrushes and other members of the thrush family.

5. Food bars or fat hung up or rubbed into the bark of trees is a great help for treecreepers, goldcrests and many other species.

6. Put up nest boxes to provide roost sites for the smaller birds. They will then be used for breeding later in the year.

Leftovers from meals can also provide a welcome boost for wildlife - cake crumbs, pastry and cheese are all readily eaten by wild birds.

You may also notice a change in the behaviour of birds given the extreme conditions. You may witness a flurry of activity first thing in the morning – as birds replenish energy lost overnight - and last thing in the afternoon - to prepare for the long night ahead.

During a hard winter birds have to feed at an accelerated rate, but must also take adequate time out to rest and conserve energy. Many birds become more sociable to improve their chances of survival during cold weather. Flocking together in winter improves the chances of locating food and huddling together during the critical night-time period helps conserve body heat.

The ability to fly is also a key to survival and can lead to sudden - and dramatic - changes in the birdlife of an area. Flying to milder regions in search of areas less affected by the weather or where food is still readily available is a vital tactic.

Garden birds benefit significantly from the increased variety and quality of food that people put out in their gardens.

The RSPB Birdcare range offers a wide variety of high quality food and 100% of the profits go to wildlife conservation. See www.rspbshop.co.uk for full details, or you might like to visit the RSPB shop at Darts Farm, Topsham

More information about helping garden wildlife is available at www.rspb.org.uk

THE 100 CLUB

Congratulations to the following winners for the last months.

September

£5:

- 84 CS and MS Steel
- 61 Mr R Saxon
- 6 Miss S Bowers
- 33 Mrs J Townsend
- 22 Mrs PM Robins

October

- £50: 78 Mr RA and Miss H Beer
- £30: 42 Mrs Iris White
- £15: 69 Miss C M Lewis
- £10: 43 Dr and Mrs Preist
- £5: 91 Mr JK and Mrs VM Swain
- 35 Mrs A and Mr G Jago
- 25 Mr P Fogg
- 73 Mr and Mrs B Callaway
- 50 Mr A Hancock

November

£5:

- 21 Mr J Norton
- 23 Mr & Mrs W G Voaden
- 28 Mr & Mrs Collett
- 96 Cathy Pelican
- 99 Miss T V Cave

REMAINING RSPB AVOCET CRUISES



The wildlife cruises continue through to March 2010, giving people the chance to see these beautiful birds, with their startling black and white plumage, at close quarters.

For many of us, despite being in the very depths of winter, the avocet cruises are regarded as a highlight in the year. And it's great to get out there on the estuary watching these birds at first hand.'

The Exe estuary is internationally important as an over-wintering site for an estimated 20,000 wading birds. Apart from avocets, upwards of forty other bird species from far and wide have been seen, including black-tailed godwits from Iceland, dark-bellied brent geese from Siberia and waders from Scandinavia.

All profits from the Avocet cruises go towards RSPB conservation projects. Early booking is advised, as the trips are extremely popular. To book tickets call the RSPB south west regional office on 01392 432691. For details, including times and departure points visit

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/datewithnature/sites/avocet/index.asp>

Mini-cruises leaving from Trouts Boatyard, Topsham and lasting 1-1.5hrs. Adults £10, under 16s £4

Sunday 31 January	2.00pm
Friday 26 February	10.30am

Full cruises leaving from Starcross Jetty or Exmouth Docks and lasting 3-4hrs. Adults £14, under 16s £6

Sx	Saturday 30 January	1.00pm
Sx	Sunday 31 January	2.00pm
Sx	Sunday 14 February	1.00pm
Ex	Monday 15 February	1.30pm
Sx	Saturday 27 February	11.30am
Ex	Sunday 28 February	12.30pm

CAR SHARING ARRANGEMENTS FOR FIELD TRIPS

We meet at the Clyst St Mary car park (grid reference SX972911).

To reach the Clyst St Mary car park from junction 30 of the M5 (Sandy Gate roundabout), take the A379 towards Exmouth and Sidmouth. At the first roundabout (after crossing the River Clyst), turn left into Clyst St Mary, left again and follow the road the signs to the car park. We meet (normally) at 8.30am.

VOLUNTEER & FARMER ALLIANCE, SOUTH WEST ENGLAND

It has been brilliant that in 2009, 68 volunteers helped us survey 66 farms across the southwest under the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance scheme. These volunteers contribute their knowledge of birds and nature and the project wouldn't happen without them. These fantastic people found some fascinating results last spring. We had our first Cornish Cirl Buntings ever recorded by the scheme, and four farms with Red Kites. Truly brilliant! Our target for 2010 is to survey at least 80 farms, so if you would like to help, do get in touch!

Felicity Clarke

HOW GREEN IS YOUR PET?

As birdwatchers and nature lovers we are all concerned about threats to the environment. Some threats are more obvious than others, rainforest destruction and coal powered power stations for example. Some may be less obvious though. I thought people might be interested in the results of some research into the ecological footprint of pets, described in a recent New Scientist (24th October 2009). It appears that the footprint of a medium sized dog can be twice as large as that for a 4.6 litre Toyota Land Cruiser, and even worse for a large dog. The main cause is the meat content of commercial dog foods which needs a large amount of land, energy, fertilizer and water to produce. Calculations indicated that just counting the dogs in the 10 largest dog owning countries the combined footprint was 5 times the area of New Zealand; with a further one and a half New Zealands for the cats.



The ecological impact though is not limited to food. Research published in Mammal Review showed that every year the UK's 7.7 million cats (most of whom seem to live within a hundred yards of my garden) kill more than 188 million wild animals, not counting those injured or undetected. That's 25 per cat on average. Even this is an underestimate as it does not take into account losses caused by disturbance of feeding and breeding- could you eat your lunch in peace surrounded by prowling tigers? Even walking the dog has an impact. Research from Australia showed that birdlife in areas frequented by dogs, even on a lead, had 35% less diversity and 41% fewer birds than comparable areas with no dogs. Dogs off lead cause even more problems especially on areas like our heaths. Ongoing studies in the UK indicate that dogs are contributing to the decline in Nightjars.

What could you do as a pet owner?

Some things are fairly simple.

Keep your cat indoors at night.

Your neighbours may appreciate having fewer droppings in their gardens, especially as these carry parasites. When you take your dog out for a walk, avoid sensitive areas, such as the mudflats where waders feed, or the commons. If you do take a dog into such areas at least keep it

on a lead. Do pick up after your dog especially on the heaths as the droppings damage the vegetation. For pet food avoid meaty options; if possible use more scraps. Go for a vegetarian pet! When choosing a new pet consider the environmental affect of your choice, would a hamster be a better choice for the kids than a Great Dane?

One suggestion that has been made is that the most environmentally sound choice would be a chicken or a rabbit - provided you eat them!

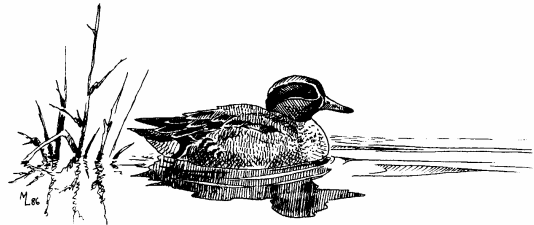


RESERVE NEWS

Exe Estuary

The major engineering works completed earlier in the year have brought excellent bird numbers to Exminster Marshes with all the new wet features brimming with water and spilling out nicely into the fields. Areas at Powderham, Matford and Exminster are all showing immediate benefits with numbers of both waders and wildfowl already reaching good numbers, which in previous years have been more typical further into the winter, during the months of January and February. However it is not only birds that are enjoying the new wet features, but an excellent view of an otter early December, using one of the ditches and one of the new culverts was a real treat.

The rush clearance undertaken at the end of the summer has also meant that many areas are now



far more attractive to wigeon and teal, together with a good number of godwits, which reached over 1,200 in late November. Plans for the production of briquettes out of the cut rush are still in the pipeline, with the bales to be taken to Norfolk where the work will be trialled. Once proved successful, the briquetting machine will be brought on site and the briquettes produced to avoid unnecessary transport costs.

The work with the young people in the local area has continued and visits to Topsham Primary School are going well. The children are continuing to build their international relations as they develop their links with children in Iceland through the godwit project. In addition to this work, we have been looking at improving the school grounds for birds. The children have now started to feed the birds with a view to undertaking the Big School Bird watch in January. On the subject of food, the youngsters have been growing on native berry bearing bushes and teasels, both for the cleared area at the back of Bowling Green Hide and for their school grounds. They have formed a bird club complete with newsletter, badge and membership card, to which their membership is now growing.

Improvement to visitor facilities around the sites have been underway, a new viewing platform has been installed on the canal path over looking Exminster Marshes and new signs have been put up at Bowling Green, with the clearance at the back

of the hide going well. A submission for improving facilities has been made to The Great Outdoors Revival Project run by Bovril. All these will be subject to planning permission, but the project being successful will partly depend on public votes, so if you have a spare moment before 28th February go to www.bovril.co.uk and vote for project SWOT000284.

One of our volunteers has managed to gain funding from the Vodafone 'Make a Difference Programme' to work here on the reserve for 2 months. Their objective is to build up a resource pack about the reserve and local area. They will then recruit volunteers from the local communities to use this information to go out and talk to visitors about the importance of this area, not only for wildlife, but also for cultural history and heritage, in an attempt to reach a wider audience.

A number of events have been put together for the coming spring and summer, ranging from Dawn Choruses to Sunday afternoon general wildlife walks. We are also going to trial a couple of evening walks at Darts Farm, building on the success of the Saturday weekly walk currently held. The walks around Exminster will include light refreshments at the Turf Pub, which it is hoped will make them more appealing to a wider audience. After a very good meeting with The Turf, the landlord and lady are very keen to work with the RSPB, and this is something we are planning to make the most of during the coming season.

RSPB PROJECTS

The Great Crane Project.

A recent opinion poll asked a wide cross section of over 400 members of the public in Somerset what they thought about the crane project. A massive 95% said that they would like to see these birds back in Somerset and an equally impressive 93% said they thought that Somerset's wetland landscape was an asset to the county. All good news! Work has begun to build a crane project website which hopefully will be up and running by May or June, and some landscape vision artwork has been commissioned from Richard Allen - wildlife artist. This will be used on the website, and also used in an advisory capacity to show what can be done through High Level Stewardship options to benefit the cranes and associated wetland species such as snipe, water rails, and breeding duck species. It is now also only a matter of weeks until we have to travel to Brandenburg in Germany to gather the first batches of eggs that are bound for a future in Somerset. Exciting times!

Damon Bridge.

LOOKING BACK

Monday 12th October Stover Country Park,

On a bright morning at Stover Country Park some 16 members found a lot of interest. On the feeders, where one is at tree height, we saw Blue, Great, Coal and Marsh Tits together with several finches and a Nuthatch. On the lake were a family of Great Crested Grebes, the juveniles still just with the 'humbug' pattern on their feathers. There were good views of several Jays, a family of Long-tailed Tits and a female bullfinch. One or two dragonflies enjoyed the sun as did all of those who had joined the walk.



Roger Tucker

13 October Rural birds in Britain and Nepal

After we had finished the formal business of the AGM, we had not just one but two talks by RSPB members of staff. The first was by Felicity Clarke, regional coordinator of the Volunteer and Farm Alliance. The V&FA has now been going for 10 years, having been started in the Midlands in 1999. It offers free bird surveys to farmers all over the UK, and offers advice to help them take positive action for wildlife. Volunteer surveyors visit the farm early in the Spring to meet the farmer and see the land, and three or four times between April and June they walk all the field boundaries and note down all bird species.

Felicity gave us figures to show how drastically the breeding populations of some of our farmland birds have declined: from 1970 to 2004 Corn Buntings declined by 89% and Tree Sparrows by 94%. Even Starlings have declined by 72%. It's not all doom and gloom though - the advice given helps farmers join the higher level stewardship scheme, which

gives them financial support for making farms more wildlife friendly.

In the South West, the VF&A has surveyed 550 farms (1.3% of the total, 1.7% of the farmed land) - though each one is normally surveyed only for one year. The most widespread birds are Blackbird and Chaffinch, found on 100% of all farms. Of the 15



farms surveyed in Devon this year, all had Song Thrushes but none had either Lapwing or Yellow Wagtail - we need more of those wet meadows.

The second speaker, Deborah Deveny, was Felicity's predecessor with the V&FA, but has now moved on to the Cirl Bunting Project. However for her talk, Deborah took us further afield to Lumbini, in Nepal. Nepal can be divided into three zones: the high mountains, the hills (which would count as mountains in Britain) and the Terai - the flat lowlands. Lumbini is in the Terai, close to the border with India.

The RSPB works with Bird Conservation Nepal, to help with conservation and education. Deborah spent 3 weeks in Lumbini - which is one of 27 "Important Bird Areas" in Nepal, 12 of which have no protection at all. The Lumbini area was formerly known for its tall grassland, but very few areas remain. There are also important wetland areas.

The key bird in the area is the Sarus Crane - Deborah saw 72 of the estimated 200 birds in the area. She also showed us pictures of many of the other species, including owls, lapwings and Stone Curlew.



Deborah told us about some of the problems affecting conservation in Lumbini, not least conflicts with other land users. There has also been significant loss and mismanagement of wetlands. The country has suffered from political instability over recent years. While she was there, Deborah spent some time helping to educate the local children, showing them birds through her telescope. She worked with the local people to show them how to survey birds better and help them with their conservation work.

It is good to see that the RSPB is working to improve conservation not only here in the UK, but also around the world via Birdlife International. The two talks made for a very interesting evening.

Richard Swinbank

**Black Hole Marsh,
Sunday 18th October 2009**

Eleven of us met up at Colyford Memorial Hall, looking forward to visiting Black Hole Marsh - a new nature reserve recently established by East Devon District Council. We were hoping to be met by one of the Countryside Service rangers but we didn't have our planned guide. Fortunately Ian Waite, one of the leading local birders, had joined us and was able to lead us to Black Hole Marsh. So we set off down Popes Lane and across the road into Colyford Common nature reserve. One thing that struck us was the number of Blackbirds; it seemed to be a day when they were all on the move from their summer home to their winter quarters. There were plenty of other finches and tits feasting on the berries in the hedgerows.

Ian took us round the back of the reserve, across a stream (we didn't get TOO wet), and past the Axe Estuary Ringing Group's hut. We paused for a Great Spotted Woodpecker, and quick flyby by a pair of Kingfishers, before going through a gate into Black Hole Marsh. It isn't so long since Black Hole Marsh was just a soggy field, but diggers have been used to reshape the land with remarkable precision. Now it is a saline lagoon with a range of islands, some covered with shingle and some with grass. One central island is where a hide will be built next year, and there are other islands arrayed around it. In late August there had been quite a few waders using the marsh, since the water level was low and there were a good number of flies for them to feed on. But now there were just a couple of Green Sandpipers, along with some wagtails and egrets. There were quite a few more birds in the adjacent fields and hedges, including Meadow Pipits, Reed Buntings and a Stonechat. David Walters, editor of the "Axe Valley Birds" newsletter joined us. I think he thought we were the Crewkerne RSPB group - also in the area, coincidentally, that day. David stayed a while and told us a bit more about the marsh, and led us along towards the far corner of the marsh before going off in search of the Crewkerne group.

By then, Fraser Rush, of the EDDC countryside service had caught up with us, and started to explain to us all about how the marsh is managed. The main area of the marsh is a saline lagoon, which is mostly quite shallow, to suit waders. The water level is managed by a large rotary tide gate that we inspected. It consists of a wheel, upon which is mounted a float, a counterweight and a plate that blocks off or opens up access to a large pipe as the tide varies. When the tide is low, water can flow out through a flap into the River Axe from the marsh (or from the adjacent surface water drain). The lowest level of water in the lagoon is set with an adjustable weir. Near high tide, the float lifts, the wheel rotates and water flows into the pipe, topping up the water level in the marsh. But at very high tide, the pipe is blocked again, to avoid the marsh flooding. Apparently, this system was funded by the Environment Agency (and not the East Devon council taxpayers), to enable them to evaluate its operation. By letting a controlled

amount of water through at high tide it reduces the amount of water that embankments have to hold, avoiding having to spend so much money on rebuilding coastal defences.

Fraser told us that the plan is to build a second hide at that corner of the marsh, which will give excellent views over the Axe estuary as well as the lagoon. I'm hoping to arrange another field trip to the area early next autumn, when we will be able to see how the reserve has developed. The morning passed all too quickly, so we had to finish before we had a chance to look round Colyford Common (though a few of us delayed our lunch and went to visit the hide and viewing platform). I'd like to thank Fraser

Rush, Ian Waite and David Walters for all their help.

Richard Swinbank

**Thursday 29 October
2009**

**Sharing the Secrets –
James Chubb**



The combined meeting with Devon Birds at Sidmouth on 29 October proved most interesting. For those members who had been on the walk to Black Hole Marsh and Colyford Common on the Axe estuary only 10 days before it was an added bonus.

James Chubb and his colleague Kate Tobin, both from East Devon District Council, gave an illustrated talk on the wild life along this stretch of the river. This was punctuated by a history of the development of river and the reserves together with the proposals for the further future development. Black Hole Marsh is a work in progress and not yet open to the public, but with the completion of the screening and the construction of the hides over the next year or so, it will provide an excellent addition to Colyford Common and Seaton Marshes. This will result in fresh water, brackish and salt water areas to entice all types of water birds, even perhaps to breed.

Our thanks to James and Kate for a most informative evening.

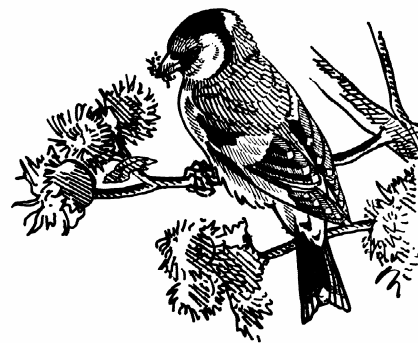
Roger Tucker

**Otter Estuary,
Sunday 1st November**

The morning walk to the Otter estuary was something to remember. The gale force wind at the start was unbelievable, with lashing rain. I had trouble getting out of the car door and I thought "what have I let myself in for, surely the birds would have more brains than me". Especially as when I got down to the car park only to find one other person besides myself it was diehard Richard, our intrepid leader, with his new waterproof walking boots, and did he need them!

8

Within 30 minutes the rain stopped the cloud started to lift - they say it's nice weather for ducks. Well it surely was and many more birds besides, with the blue flash of a kingfisher that we almost missed. As the weather cheered up Diane, who lives in Budleigh, joined us and we were on our way. The highlight of the day was a flock of about twenty truly colourful goldfinches flitting from tree to tree. We made our final way back to the seafront, with the wind in our hair - well Richard's anyway - and the sea spray in our faces, it was time for the journey home for a well earned hot cup of tea. It had been a highly productive morning's walk, 3 hours and 41 identified species.



Richard Winfield

**10th November 2009
Ground-Rollers & Asities in Madagascar
John Gale.**

An almost full house was there to hear and see this wonderful wild bird artist.

John has been working as a bird artist for the last 16 years; his first project was painting the Birds of Mount Kinabalu, Borneo. In 1992 he won 'Bird illustrator of the year' (British Birds). He has illustrated a number of field guides including the 'Field Guide to the Birds of East Africa', a project which took five and half years to complete. In 2002 John won 'Bird Artist of the year' (Birdwatch). He has just finished a project illustrating birds of the Thai-Malay Peninsular, and is now currently working on 'Handbook to the Birds Madagascar'. During the last seven years John has concentrated on Oil Paintings, based on the theme of fragile and endangered Environments, visiting the Forests of South-East Asia, Madagascar and the Southern Ocean and Antarctica. His next painting project is the Falkland Islands. John also works part time as a Veterinary Surgeon in Exeter, Devon, where he lives with Fay, Tom and James.

Madagascar is of course best known for Lemurs. It is a very poor country, with very little wildlife as most of the infrastructure has been destroyed. 44% of the country is thorn or rain forest with small reserves; but even this is slowly being lost through logging, felling and burning. After all this is said, there are 135 species of bird here.

A lot of these birds are related to the birds of India and Asia.

Although it has a lot of snakes, none of them are poisonous.

Humpback Whales also come to give birth in the seas around the island.

He talked about his visit to the Eastern rain forests, staying with the local people in their high altitude homes, so on this part of the trip it was not too hot.

The South and West of the island are very hot and dry, so it is best to get up at 4-4.30am to start the day before it gets too hot. In this part of the island are the Thorn forests which have colonies of Weaver birds in the Baobab trees.

In places around the island, the forests come right down to the sea, or fringe the beaches making it appear to be the idyllic tropical paradise.

The rarest bird on Madagascar is the Serpent Eagle; it does not fly, but scratches around the forest floor looking for lizards and other small things to eat. It nests in the tree ferns of the forests.

John finished his talk by explaining about the sketches and photos he does at the time, and uses later to base his paintings and illustrations on.



28th November 2009

Isley Marsh and Fremington Quay,

We assembled at the old power station. It was pouring on the way, but when I arrived it was dry, and eventually we managed to have some sun.!

There were not a lot of birds around, so we had to work for our 60 or so species. In fact looking at my old records that is about par for the course, and we saw most the usual suspects but a few different ones. There were a lot of male Blackbirds around, both on the Marshes and round Fremington, but Fremington managed to produce some Redwings and Mistle Thrushes. Not as many Robins as normal, one on a gate another in a fence, and a couple on the ground, but quite a few Dunnocks. There were several clouds of Lapwings flapping overhead, but not nearly as many as one would have expected to see a few years ago. On the sandbank was a Peregrine, which to begin with was back to us, and to me looked like a Crow, but when it flew up the bank, and faced us, you could really see its colouring. It did rather unsettle the Curlews by hanging around. We did rather spread out at this point, and the back few saw some Spoonbills flying over, sadly they did not shout loud enough for us to hear, and the rest of us missed them, and they never reappeared.

On the shore line we saw a lot of Curlews, and a few Bar-tailed Godwits. There were several Redshanks, and for once one could admire their red

legs. The light was good at times and one could really see their fine markings. Also near the old pier there was a mix of birds including Skylarks, Linnets, Meadow and Rock Pipits all very well camouflaged and very difficult to identify. Further on there was a bank on which there was a row of Curlew facing the river and on another bank were the Lapwings and a few Golden Plovers. Nearby were some very difficult to see Snipe. Luckily for us there was a white rubbish plastic bottle near them, so it was easy to describe where they were. On the shoreline there were some Turnstones, lovely smart birds, which love turning stones and generally pecking around looking for bugs small marine molluscs, sandhoppers and the like. They are white, chestnut and black, quite distinctive. They are found in the area, particularly near Dawlish and Exmouth, and often hide under the bank, which means that they are not able to be seen by us watchers. They are winter visitors, spending the summer in Greenland and Iceland and Northern Europe.

The little pond on the other side of the path was very quiet. For ages we could not see anything on it, then a Little Grebe or Dabchick, then two Moorhen were seen behind a Willow tree and a Water Rail was heard. We got some good views of those other smart bird, the Reed Bunting. Unfortunately it was the females that were sighted and they are rather boring and dull!

At Fremington we saw a Slavonian Grebe, which is slightly bigger than the Dabchick but smaller than the other grebes. It has a straight bill, and chestnut at the side of its head which is more obvious in the summer. It is a winter visitor and breeds in Iceland and northern Europe. We also has good views of Treecreepers. On the way back I went to see if the local Owl was visible, it wasn't and some of the others saw a mixed flock of tits near the restaurant, so as ever having not seen them, and only a Blue Tit before, I went hunting, not a bird in sight or sound, so, by that time it was raining, I trudged back to the car, and there they were in the carpark.!



Ann Crawford

Tuesday 1 December

'Everything you ever needed to know about birds but were afraid to ask' - Stephen Moss

This was a most enjoyable evening. Stephen Moss is an excellent speaker both knowledgeable & personable. The talk began with a few light hearted anecdotes & an informal & amusing quiz about the largest & smallest bird in Britain/in the world, & also about song, territory, flight & flightless birds such as the ostrich.

Another interesting discussion was about the ivory-billed woodpecker, was it really extinct or were recent sightings to be believed?

Migration was mentioned, in particular our wintering blackcap population was believed to come from Germany, whilst our summer breeding birds had probably returned from wintering in Africa.

Stephen told us about his fascinating work with the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol & the many programmes he had been involved with - including Autumn Watch.

We also heard about some of the well known wildlife experts & presenters he has worked with. He has a high regard for Bill Oddie & told us about the series they had made together.

Altogether an excellent evening

Liz Saunders

Bowling Green Marsh, 10 December 2009

A small group of us met in the car park along Holman Way in Topsham. Although it was a cold morning the sun was shining which bode well after being informed by Fred that he had recorded 51 days of rain prior to today! Welcome sunshine indeed.

The car park provided a range of garden birds including a solitary Redwing and a singing Song Thrush. A look across the estuary in front of the old fish market showed a snipe resting and a pair of Avocets; the odd Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and some Greylag Geese. Further down on the Goat Walk, where a rising tide was more obvious, Brent Geese were paddling about. In the distance on a disappearing sand bank hundreds, if not thousands of waders were busy feeding, too far away for studying and against a bright sun, but including Dunlin, Curlew, Godwit and Knot.

On the viewing platform Grey Plover showed well on the mud opposite and a Common Sandpiper was working the mud in the corner almost under our feet. In the distance a Merganser was feeding.

A view from the hide at Bowling Green Marsh revealed lots of water across the marsh and the birds were not resting or feeding in their allotted areas. How inconvenient! Nevertheless there was plenty to see. A male Pochard showed well towards the back of the water and further behind a couple of Reed Buntings were working the reeds. Other ducks included Wigeon, Pintail, Tufted and Teal. One Greenshank was roosting way to the left of the pond.

Here was an opportunity to pick out the Bar-tailed Godwits from the Black-tailed; with their backs turned to us, their bills tucked away and their legs invisible in the grass, the only identification possible was the difference of the feathers on their backs. The Black-tailed have greyish backs whereas the Bar-tailed have black feathers interspersed with white streaks. With the sun on their backs this

difference is highlighted. In full view the bills of the Bar-tailed are slightly upturned and they have shorter legs, but with about the same size body.

Here we ended the morning and, unusually, not a hawk or buzzard to be seen!

Lyndon Savage.



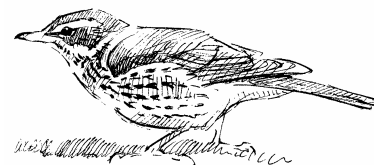
Topsham - River Exe, 9th January 2010

On Saturday 9th January, we had planned to go up to Chew Valley Lake. But, I'm sure you'll remember the snow that we had earlier that week. I thought that it might be difficult to drive up there and along the lanes around the lake that day. I rang round the people who I thought were most likely to go - two had been snowed in, so couldn't come at all, and Lyndon suggested that we walk up the River Exe at Topsham, since he had seen good numbers of birds on the river a day or two earlier. So, a few of us met as planned at Clyst St Mary, but instead of driving up to Somerset, we just drove just a couple of miles to Topsham. Apologies if there was anyone who did drive all the way to Chew Valley Lake.

It was a cold, crisp, sunny morning - so it looked a lot nicer than it felt in the stiff breeze. Even around the Topsham recreation ground, we started to see quite a few birds: Greenfinch and Goldfinch and Long-tailed Tit in the trees, Fieldfare and a Reed Bunting flying over. Along the river, there were good numbers of Black-headed Gull, with some Herring Gull, and a few Common Gull. As we walked up the side of the river, we had really good views of a couple of Redwing in the reeds(!), Lapwing, Redshank, Dunlin and a Curlew.

Approaching the motorway bridge we had really good views of a pair of Great Spotted Woodpecker in a tree in someone's garden. Looking upriver, there was a cluster of birds feeding together in the mud, many Teal, a good number of Black-tailed Godwit, Mallard, Common Sandpiper and Snipe right out in the open. There seem to be Snipe all over the place this winter; I guess it's the cold weather. Further upriver, there was a smart male Goldeneye and two pairs of Little Grebe.

Then we followed the path as it left the river and cut behind a reedbed. After a bend in the river, we were back on the river bank looking across to the sewage works. Down on the mud, we had a couple of Grey Wagtails and some pipits, as well as a good selection of gulls on the river. On the walk back, we



kept our eyes peeled for the Spotted Sandpiper that has been seen on that stretch of river. We thought we had it at one point, but it turned out to be just a Common Sandpiper.

To finish off the morning, we drove the short distance to Bowling Green Marsh, to see what was there. It was practically deserted - solid ice, with a few Lapwing scattered around the grass. Not much on the snow-covered fields along the lane either. There was a little more to be seen from the viewing platform, including Shelduck on the river and some

waders - including a distant flock of Avocet. On one of the fields across the river Clyst there was a flock of (mainly) Brent Geese; we searched through it for the recently reported Red-breasted Goose, but drew a blank. On the way back to the cars, we had a lucky female Bullfinch. All in all, a very successful morning, with about 50 species seen.

Richard Swinbank

GROUP CONTACTS

Leader Roger Tucker 01392 860518
Secretary Jane Spencer 01392 823540
Newsletter Stella Beavan 01363 881360
Treasurer Chris Steele 01392 258786

Membership Liz Saunders 01392 832080

Web site address www.exeter-rspb.org.uk

LOOKING FORWARD

For outdoor meetings, weatherproof clothing and waterproof footwear are recommended

Wed 20th - Sun 24th January Weekend away in Norfolk

A long weekend birdwatching on the north Norfolk coast - perhaps England's premier region for birds. We will be based at the Briarfields Hotel in Titchwell, and travelling to nearby birdwatching sites by car. For further information and to book your place, contact Richard Swinbank (01404 813666).

Sunday 7th February Dawlish Warren

A morning field trip to see wintering birds on the Warren, culminating with views of wintering waders from the hide as the tide comes in. Meet in car park (north end, near nature reserve, SX981786) at 9.00 am. Car park charge. Toilets near car park.

Tuesday 9th February 2010 'Reserves for the 21st Century' by Simon Stennet

A talk detailing what's happening on our South West RSPB reserves, now and in the future! As the RSPB's South West Regional Reserves Manager, Simon covers Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. 7.30pm URC Hall Southernhay, Exeter Refreshments, raffle, RSPB sales goods, produce, bird food sales. Admission:- Members £3. Non-members £4

Tuesday 23rd February Broadsands

A morning field meeting, hoping to see grebes and divers if the weather is favourable, as well as winter migrants and the local Cirl Buntings.

Meet at Broadsands car park (SX892572) at 10.00 am.

Car park charge but possible free parking in the road.

Toilets on the sea front.

Saturday 6th March Ham Wall and Westhay

An all-day visit to the Somerset levels for ducks (possibly including Goosander) and birds of woodlands and reed beds - including a Marsh Harrier if we're lucky.

Meet at Clyst St Mary at 8.30am or Ashcott Corner (ST448396) at 9.45am.

Bring packed lunch.

No toilets.

Tuesday 9th March 'British Owls- Their Natural History & Conservation Chris Sperring MBE

Chris Sperring is a professional wildlife Conservationist working for the Hawk & Owl Trust, as well as an experienced Naturalist, Wildlife Photographer & Broadcaster. He received an MBE for services to to Nature Conservation, He will share his wealth of knowledge & experience of all Britain's magnificent Owls with us.

7.30pm URC Hall Southernhay, Exeter Refreshments, raffle, RSPB sales goods, produce, bird food sales.

Admission:- Members £3. Non-members £4

Sunday 14th March Seaton Tramway

The scheduled trip last November had to be cancelled because of stormy weather, so we have scheduled this extra trip as a replacement. For a couple of hours we will take a guided ride along the Seaton tramway, pausing to view the birds of Seaton Marshes and the River Axe.

Must be pre-booked – limited places available.

Please book through Richard Swinbank, at a group meeting or by post. To book by post, we will need the following: your name; number of people; full telephone number (in case of queries, or emergencies); cheque for £11 per person, payable to "RSPB Exeter Group"; and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please mail bookings to: Richard Swinbank, 9 Broad Oak Close, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, EX11 1XW, by 14th February.

Meet 08.45am at Seaton tram terminus (SY247900). Further details will be provided when your booking is confirmed.

Sunday 21st March

Labrador Bay

Labrador Bay reserve, a good place to see Cirl Buntings, was recently acquired by the RSPB. Nigel Newitt, who has been working on the Cirl Bunting project for ten years, will show us around this morning and tell us about conservation work being done on the reserve. Note that the site is very steep, and can be muddy.

Meet 8.30 am at Clyst St Mary or 9.15 am at Labrador Bay Car Park (SX931704, on the B3199 a mile or so south of Shaldon)

Car park charge.

Saturday 10th April

Prawle

A scenic walk around the Prawle Point area, with some steep sections. We hope to see some spring migrants as well as the local Cirl Buntings.

Meet 8.30 am at Clyst St Mary car park (SX972911) or East Prawle village car park (SX781362) at 10.00 am.

Cafe and toilets by village green.

Bring and carry packed lunch.

Tuesday 13th April 2010

Slimbridge - Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.

Bill Francis

Slimbridge is the birthplace of modern conservation & home to an astonishing array of wildlife including the world's largest collection of swans, geese & ducks, it is the vision of naturalist & artist Sir Peter Scott.

Bill is a fellow of the RSPB & a volunteer at Slimbridge, leading walks & giving talks to groups. He will include some interesting facts about the history of the reserve, but will mainly focus on the wildfowl, swans & rare birds seen on the reserve.

7.30pm URC Hall Southernhay, Exeter
Refreshments, raffle, RSPB sales goods, produce, bird food sales.

Admission:- Members £3. Non-members £4

Friday 23rd April

Otterhead

A new venue for the group. We will take a morning walk through the woodland and alongside the lakes at the head of the Otter valley.

Meet 10.00 am at Otterhead lakes car park (ST224141), near Otterford just off the B3170.

No toilets.

Saturday 8th May

Spring Fayre and Plant Sale

St Margaret's Church, Topsham. 10am - 12 noon. Donations very welcome, if unable to bring on the day please contact Val Palmer tel 01392 271791 or Pam Hancock tel 01884 839987.

Saturday 8th May

Church Farm

Andrew Cooper has produced many BBC natural history programmes, and is a popular speaker at our indoor meetings. Today we will be making a morning visit to his farm, near Newton Abbot. Andrew will take us on a walk around the farm and introduce us to the amazing history and wildlife of the valley.

Meet 9.30am at Church Farm, Hacombe (SX899700) - limited parking.

Must be pre-booked - limited places available.

For this visit, we are asking for a donation (no set amount) that will be split between RSPB and Devon Wildlife Trust (of which Andrew Cooper is the chairman). To book your place, please send the following: your name; number of people; full telephone number (in case of queries, or emergencies); cheque for your donation, payable to "RSPB Exeter Group"; and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please mail bookings to: Richard Swinbank, 9 Broad Oak Close, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, EX11 1XW, by 10th April.

Further details will be provided when your booking is confirmed.

Sunday 23rd May

Warren House Inn and Challacombe

Full day meeting, with a circular walk to Challacombe, for moorland birds including Wheatear and Whinchat.

Meet at Clyst St Mary at 8.30 am, or King's Oven car park (SX 676811, on the B3212 just north-east of Warren House Inn) at 9.30am.

Bring and carry packed lunch.

No toilets.