

Sussex Ornithological Society



Newsletter *Summer 2017*



Sussex Ornithological Society - Registered Charity no. 256936

Welcome...!

Welcome to the summer edition of the SOS newsletter! I've not much to say in the way of comment this time, except perhaps to report that the Song Thrush I wrote about in the spring edition is still singing away, mornings, and, not infrequently, all evening as well. I am becoming so used to being regaled with his "get up, get up, get up" and "who-a-you, who-a-you" (and other specialities from a vast repertoire) that I shall miss him when he finally stops singing. Hasn't he a nest to go to?

I would like as always to thank those who have contributed to this copy, especially to Chris Barfield who has stepped in to write the "Recent Sightings" pages, to Charles Smith for his poem on Swallows, and to Rob Yarham for his article. There is a brief report on the society's AGM on page 2, and it is good to be able to say that the SOS looks forward to another year in great shape!

Have a great summer, whatever you do.

Anthony Holden

The above editorial is the personal opinion of the Editor and may not be that of the SOS as a whole

Photograph credits for this issue -

Front cover: Beeding Brooks (anon, with permission)

Inside front cover: Blackcap, Pulborough Brooks, 10th April 2017 (Gareth Hughes)

Inside back cover: photo by Ted Merrikin

Back cover: Blue Rock Thrush, Beachy Head, 6th April 2017 (George Kinnard)
Twite, Cuckmere, 10th February 2017 (Luke Dray)

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of the Society took place on Saturday, 8th April.

President Alan Perry said that during 2016 the SOS had donated over £28,000, and that the Society could be proud of what had been achieved during the year. The largest sums had been granted to support the fencing of yew trees used by Ring Ouzels at Cissbury, reedbed management at Filsham Reedbed (Hastings), heathland management at Iping and Stedham Commons, water level management to benefit waders at Amberley Wildbrooks and woodland and heathland restoration at RSPB Broadwater Warren.

In addition, some of the profits from the Birds of Sussex were being used to support two educational projects to a sum of £1,000 each; Schools for Birds – making school grounds more bird friendly; and binoculars for a Girl Guide bird resource pack.

Alan also reported that good progress is being made with the upgrade to the SOS website, and it is hoped that this can go “live” later in the summer.

Conservation Officer Chris Corrigan has been appointed Director of the RSPB in England, and has therefore stepped down from his role in SOS. Alan Perry expressed the Society’s congratulations to Chris on his promotion. Richard Cowser has agreed to “fill in” to replace Chris as Conservation Officer.

New members of Council were elected - Jonathan “Jonno” Cook, Chris Lowmass and Graeme Lyons. Jonno will be the Society’s link to RSPB, and Graeme with Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Jonno has worked at the RSPB’s South East Regional Office for 12 years, and is currently working in partnership with local councils, a Community Interest Company and the Slough Fort Preservation Trust

on an exciting project on Kent's Hoo Peninsula.

He got into birding through his school's birdwatching club. That club's trip to the Seven Sisters with the YOC was the first and last time he saw a Cirl Bunting in Sussex. They spent a lot of time watching that bird and the trip's leader gave important messages about the decline of that species in the county. Those words resonated strongly! During his teens, he was a trainee ringer with Barrie Watson and in 1979 was awarded The Prince Philip Award for Zoology by the London Zoological Society for the analysis of some of that ringing data. Jonathan regularly walks the South Downs and completes various farmland bird surveys.

Chris Lowmass has had a keen interest in birds since the age of ten. He has lived on the East Sussex Coast between Hove and Eastbourne all his life, and joined the SOS nearly 50 years ago! He has been a member ever since, apart from a short break following his marriage. He has filled a number of voluntary posts with SOS including 20 years as a WeBS counter, 18 years as a WeBS local organiser and two previous terms on Council. He is the SOS representative on the Seaford Head LNR management committee, and is currently the Chairman. He received a Stonechat Award in 2011 in recognition of his long service to the Society.

Graeme Lyons is senior ecologist for Sussex Wildlife Trust, a freelance consultant, life-long naturalist and founding member of the Pan-species Listing Movement. He has already seen and identified 5,631 species in the UK! Graeme is also the county recorder for bugs (heteroptera).

Birds are among his many areas of knowledge, but his main passion is invertebrates, particularly beetles, bugs and spiders. His interest in wildlife is wider still, with bryophytes, molluscs (but not slugs), cetaceans, fish and fungi also high on his identification ability.

Neil Greenaway, who retired from Council, was thanked by Alan Perry for his active contribution to the activities of SOS.

After a break for refreshments, Adrian Thomas gave an excellent presentation on Gardening for Wildlife entitled "Up The Garden Path". Adrian entertained and educated the audience in trying to make a small difference for wildlife in each and every garden, whatever the scale.

Bird race update - a record!

By Val Bentley

Having been a little despondent before Christmas about the number of teams who had indicated they would take part in the 2017 New Year Bird Race, things really got moving in January with several "late entries", including one team who did their race then let me know afterwards!

So not only was it the highest number of teams since I started co-ordinating the Race, but they were very determined in their pursuit of sponsorship, persuading friends and family to donate £2,525.35. Then Ted Merrikin, our Treasurer, was equally diligent in hunting down Gift Aid, so the final total raised for conservation purposes was £3,009.34. Another record during my watch!

The Society is continuing to provide donations to actively support conservation initiatives at various sites around the county. See the Annual Report and the summary of the AGM on page 3 of the newsletter for more details. So the money raised really is helping our Sussex birds!

To the 46 members who participated in the various Races and to all those who supported them – THANK YOU!

Dr. G.R. “Dick” Potts

SOS member and Grey Partridge expert Dr. G.R.Potts sadly passed away earlier this spring at the age of 78. Many members will remember his talk about Grey Partridge at the SOS Conference in 2011.

Dr. Potts, who was brought up on a farm, became fascinated by the whole farmland “ecosystem”, and saw before a lot of people that farmland birds were in trouble – and why. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, working at the Game Conservancy Trust, he realised that it was the impact on the birds’ food chain caused by the use of herbicides and pesticides on farms that was resulting in the declines of Partridge and other farmland bird populations.

Over the following years he was among those developing ideas for “wildlife friendly” farming, such as the use of unsprayed and wild “headlands” around fields, and it is these ideas that were put into action when he worked on the Norfolk Estate.

His work started from an interest in game conservation, and some of it was perhaps controversial from some birding angles, but it is down to Dr. Potts that visitors to the area around “The Burgh” now see good numbers of Partridges as well as other farmland bird species.



Conservation projects update

At their May meeting, SOS Council were updated on several projects for which we are providing funding.

Brighton House Sparrow Project

As reported in the last newsletter, we are providing just under £1,000 to this project to support it in the first year. The organisers are hoping to emulate the London House Sparrow project and encourage the action needed locally to halt, and, hopefully, reverse, the House Sparrows' decline. "BHsparrows" is now well up and running – interested members can look at their website for more information and details of how to get involved - www.BHsparrows.uk

Following the first year, SOS are hoping that the project can identify ways forward of ensuring that local House Sparrows colonies can prosper without long term food provision being an essential input. Graeme Lyons of SWT – also now an SOS Council member – is advising on ways of encouraging local people to manage their gardens to ensure the natural supply of invertebrates that has been shown to be vital to House Sparrows in the nesting season.

Pagham Harbour Hide

This is moving forward, and work could be carried out this autumn. However, if lottery funding is delayed, then work will also be delayed, to ensure that all works are carried out at the same time.

Waltham Brooks (SWT)

As already reported in the newsletter, SOS has supported the Sussex Wildlife Trust with a grant of £12,500 to enable habitat enhancements at Waltham Brooks which will support populations of wetland birds and flora.

The first job was to add sheep netting along the fence line which will enable sheep to graze the site (in addition to cattle). This is now complete.

Jane Willmott, Nature Reserves Officer, comments that the reserve is looking good and Great Grey Shrike were seen on the reserve over the winter. All the warblers have returned now and are in fine voice, with good numbers of Willow Warblers. She is anticipating that grazing will recommence shortly.

Senior Ecologist Graeme Lyons recently went to Waltham Brooks to carry out a very successful invertebrate survey and recorded 61 species new to the site including a fly new to West Sussex (and new to any of the Sussex Wildlife Trust reserves) - *Myopa pellucida*. Also found during the survey was the Horsetail Weevil *Grypus equiseti* which is the first record in Sussex since 1985.

Other uncommon invertebrate species were also recorded, and the next part of this project is due to be carried out in Sept 2017. This will involve mowing and baling of coarse vegetation to benefit breeding waders.

RSPB/Girl Guides “Brilliant Birds”

This project, a report on which featured in last Summer’s newsletter was launched at RSPB Pulborough Brooks in April – see photograph inside the back cover.

Eastbourne Downland sale

It is great to be able to record, that following widespread public concern, the proposed sale of a number of downland farms by Eastbourne Borough Council - see last newsletter - will not now proceed.

Nightjars

Up until very recently our knowledge of Nightjar wintering areas in Africa was quite sketchy, and knowledge of their migration routes only slightly better, but recently-published new research by British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) using tracking technology has revealed important information about both. Nightjar is a species of conservation concern in the UK, as well as being one of our “iconic” birds here in Sussex.

Between 2009 and 2015, BTO scientists, collaborating with researchers from Hasselt University and the University of Sorbonne, have been able to look at the migration routes and wintering areas of 11 adult Nightjars tagged at breeding sites in the UK, France and Belgium, using a combination of geolocators and GPS tags.

The results of their research have shown that the main wintering area for European Nightjars is located in the savannah and scrub forests to the south of the central African tropical rainforests, mainly in the southern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a similar area to that favoured by the satellite-tagged Cuckoos - remember Ash and Chester? This area looks to be key for our Nightjars, but has not previously been regarded as a wintering area for the species.

Important migration stopover sites have also been identified for the first time. They are on the boundaries of major ecological barriers which include the Mediterranean Sea, Sahara Desert and Central African rainforest. Major differences in spring and autumn migration routes were found. Autumn passage takes place on a broad front involving a fairly direct crossing of the central Saharan region, while in spring the birds take a substantially longer western route. They detour via West Africa – an additional distance of around 2000 km.

Birds span countries and continents, and research like this is vital if local societies such as ours can play their part in our corner of the big picture! More information can be found on the BTO website – www.bto.org.uk

Swallows - Tilgate Park by Charles Smith

Together by the iridescent lake
We saw swans trickle-down drink, yet today
They glory-shear the juicy June grass for
Their blue-grey young. Struck dumb by the flight of
Pentagonal swallows framed by oak tree
Bough and hedgerow, the painting within is
The cleanest thing in creation and we
Pay attention to the friendly message
And answer over brimming. Just this. With-
Out you the pigeons would not stoop down to
Suck up water. Elegant now, go to
Your glory-box, when the bearded barley
Like some fragile dominoes clattering
Shimmers and quivers in silver echoes.

A few of my favourite things

By Rob Yarham

I remember asking my father once what his favourite bird was. He thought for a moment, then replied: "My favourite bird is the one I'm looking at."

And, as I've grown older, that's true for me, too, now. Mostly.

After all, let's face it, the truth is that – however much we enjoy birds, any birds, that we see or hear – we all do have particular favourites. And many of us look forward to the spring and summer simply because of the return of so many of those favourites. On one fine evening recently, I listened to what is for me one of the most special bird songs – the soft, metallic reeling of a distant Grasshopper Warbler. (One April some years ago, I actually heard one singing from a bush in the middle of Billingshurst above the traffic noise!) As usual, I couldn't see the bird, but I sat down as dusk fell and wallowed in the pure, simple beauty of the visitor's song, and wondered if it would stay to breed this year.

We're lucky in Sussex in that, with a wide variety of habitats and coastline not far from many of us, there is always something special to see – or hear – throughout much of the year. Most species, including many rarities, pass through during the spring and autumn migrations. The marshes and Downs become home to special birds of prey in the winter. Then there are the special birds of the heathland to look for during the summer.

By the time you read this, just about all the spring and summer migrants will be in and breeding will be well under way. And I'll be searching again for two more of my favourite summering birds – the Nightjar and Hobby.

But if I have a special favourite bird of the summer it must be the Swift.

The first sight each year of the black curved-blade shapes careering through the sky always sets my pulse racing. I instinctively smile to see them. And their “screaming” calls always lift my spirits as I watch them soaring overhead. Like all pleasures, though, the happiness brought by Swifts is short-lived. They only stay with us a short while and will soon be on their way south again by August.

And, as we all know, Swift numbers are now in decline – there are fewer of them, and the “screaming” sound is heard less often over our towns and villages. So I ask everyone reading this, if Swifts mean as much to you as they do to me, if the first ones each year put a spring in your step, too, then please join me in doing something to help them this year.

Send in your swift sightings to the RSPB (Google: “RSPB Help us help swifts”), put up a Swift nesting box on your house or contact the SOS for more ideas on how to help these wonderful birds in Sussex at swifts@sos.org.uk.

And visit these web pages for more information on how to help Swifts:

[<http://www.sos.org.uk/swifts/index.php>]

[<http://www.swift-conservation.org>]

[<http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk>]

The copy deadline for this article was 10th May – which also happened to be World Migratory Bird Day, a global campaign to promote the plight of many of these wonderful birds that make such incredible journeys and ensure that the spring and summer are such special times for us.

It’s sometimes difficult to know where to start to protect the things we care about. So let’s do one thing today to make sure that the Swift is one favourite that keeps coming back.

Recorder's Reflections

By Mark Mallalieu

I am pleased to say that, for 2016 rarities, the work of the SOS Records Committee is complete, at least as of now. Thank you to everyone who submitted records for last year, and indeed to all who have sent in descriptions for 2017 to date.

There has been a good number of reports of migrant Wood Warblers this year, with at least nine birds in the second half of April. You may have seen one, or enjoyed some of the splendid photographs that have been posted on social media. This is now a description species in Sussex, and I'm happy to say that several of the records have already been accepted by the SOS Records Committee or are in circulation. If you see one on autumn migration or (let's hope) at a potential breeding site, do please send in a description... after you have had the thrill of watching this beautiful bird, and maybe also hearing its delightful song.

There was rather a lull in scarce birds in late winter and early spring, giving Martin Orchard-Webb (Assistant Recorder) and me a bit of a break, but the expected April and May rush occurred, with several exciting records and no doubt more to come as I write this in mid-May. Pride of place probably goes to the Blue Rock Thrush found by Al Redman at Beachy Head on 6th April. Remarkably, plumage and other features showed that this was the long-stayer from Stow-on-the-Wold in Gloucestershire, so there is speculation that it was on its way to Southern Europe, where the species breeds – and not an escaped bird as some had thought.

When not at my desk on Recorder duty, I have been searching for breeding Firecrests in central Sussex this spring. I have found most in plantations dominated by western hemlock, though other coniferous

and deciduous trees are always present, usually forming a mid-layer in the woodland. I often hear Firecrests singing in such habitat when I'm walking along tracks and am still wondering whether or not this is simply because that is where I walk. But there do genuinely seem to be fewer birds in denser stands of trees away from clearings or tracks. There is no doubt that the breeding population in the county has expanded greatly from the Avifauna estimate of at least 100 pairs. There were even four singing males in a friend's (admittedly rather large) garden in early May and I also found one in a smaller garden with exotic conifers. So, if you have a garden with conifers, you may have your own breeding Firecrests. Do report their presence via BirdTrack if you are lucky enough to find Firecrests in your garden – or anywhere else for that matter.

Keeping to the theme of under-recorded species, I am wondering just how many Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers there really are in Sussex. Before I started looking for this species in Sussex two years ago, my all-time most difficult species to find anywhere was an African species called a Striped Crake, which I used to look for in Kenya and Malawi. From what I have learnt and experienced this late winter and spring, "LSWs" can be just as cryptic. It is possible to spend many hours in areas holding this species and not detect them, even in the period when they drum.

One factor is perhaps the large size of territories. Another factor affecting the number of records could be that many of the remaining birds are on private land. Certainly, just looking at a map of central Sussex suggests that much suitable habitat would require permission to carry out what might need to be multiple searches. Persistence is needed, but sheer luck will play a part as well. Visit Ken Smith's website if you feel inspired to help search for these birds in early 2018: <http://woodpecker-network.org.uk/index.php>. Even if you do not find any, you will almost certainly find something exciting if you search in places that you do not know well. I found four singing Restarts on territories this spring, for example, well away from the better known locations.

The SOS Records Committee is holding its annual meeting in mid-July. If there are any issues you would like us to consider, do please email me at the address below. As I said in the last newsletter, I am still looking for new members of the Committee, so if you feel that you have the enthusiasm and knowledge, do please get in touch with me. Age is not a criterion and the Society would especially welcome applications from the younger generation of birders in the county.

I wish you many enjoyable days out in Sussex this summer and autumn. I hope that you have the thrill of finding something unexpected. Martin and I will be trying to keep on top of the numerous descriptions of rare birds that we look forward to receiving. I'll also be helping out with writing the 2016 Bird Report, as many of you will be, and also staring at lots of blue sky and Buzzards, hoping for the elusive Honey-buzzard, as well as ringing birds at Lancing.

Finally, I must correct an error in my contribution to the last newsletter: the Least Tern that summered in Sussex between 1983 and 1992 was at Rye Harbour, not (as I said) at Pagham Harbour. My apologies.

Mark Mallalieu
County Recorder
Recorder@sos.org.uk

Contributions to the newsletter

The Editor is always looking for articles about Sussex birding for the newsletter. It would be really good to have more contributions from members! The copy date for the Autumn issue is 10th August. Please send your written copy or photographs (they need to be good high-res pictures) to newsletter@sos.org.uk.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - drawing by John Davies

Out walking with some birds as well

Kings Barn Lane & Beeding Brooks by Anthony Holden

This is a pleasant couple of hours walking plus birding, during which you should see a variety of bird species – common ones for the most part but something unusual cannot be completely discounted. It starts and finishes at Steyning Church, which is close to town centre facilities, pay and display car parking and the hourly number 2 bus route from Shoreham Station. The walk crosses several stiles, and can be wet in winter.

Start by walking down the lane that runs along the east side of the churchyard, then follow a public footpath directly to the right which almost immediately turns left. Continue ahead through a small housing estate, and ascend some steps to the A283 Steyning By-pass. Cross with extreme care and pick up the path on the other side. It drops down via some very uneven steps and continues along a fenced way past an electricity station, eventually turning right across a stream and ahead across a field which sometimes contains a pair of Stonechats.

The path exits into Kings Barn Lane over a high stile. Immediately to the right is the sewage plant, which attracts wintering Chiffchaffs (including Siberian birds on several occasions). Having visited the sewage works, continue north along Kings Barn Lane, then very soon bear right into Wyckham Lane where the metalled road ends. This is the Downs Link cycle track, and you now follow it for a mile or so across some intensively farmed country with few birds to see, although there are often House Sparrows by some of the cottages. Eventually you turn right at the top of a rise where the track runs downhill towards the Adur.

The Downs Link joins the trackbed of the old Shoreham to Horsham railway line where there is a left turn, and carries on to Stretham Bridge, where the original railway bridge is still in situ. This section up to the bridge often holds wintering thrushes, and attracts Chiffchaffs and warblers in summer.

After crossing the bridge, pausing to scan over the meadows to the north, turn right across a stile and follow the east bank of the Adur for some distance, past some scrubby reed beds, again good for summer visitors, then a field containing some odd clanking things, which I think are vents for a landfill site. Check the pylons in the valley for perched raptors – Kestrels usually, but I have seen a Peregrine. Shortly after a stile, a footpath sign points you to bear left down the bank, and across Beeding Brooks. This path can be difficult to follow, but if you can pick up a gate and stile some way ahead that is where to head for. After that stile, the path is more distinct, and you cross more stiles before arriving into a lane.

The path across the Brooks is good for wintering Short-eared and Barn Owls, as well as Yellowhammers and such in the summer months. Kestrels often hunt here also. After wet weather this path should not be attempted without wellies – it can be very wet indeed. In these conditions you can stay on the river bank and pick up the walk at the next bridge, but this does miss out one of the best areas for birds.

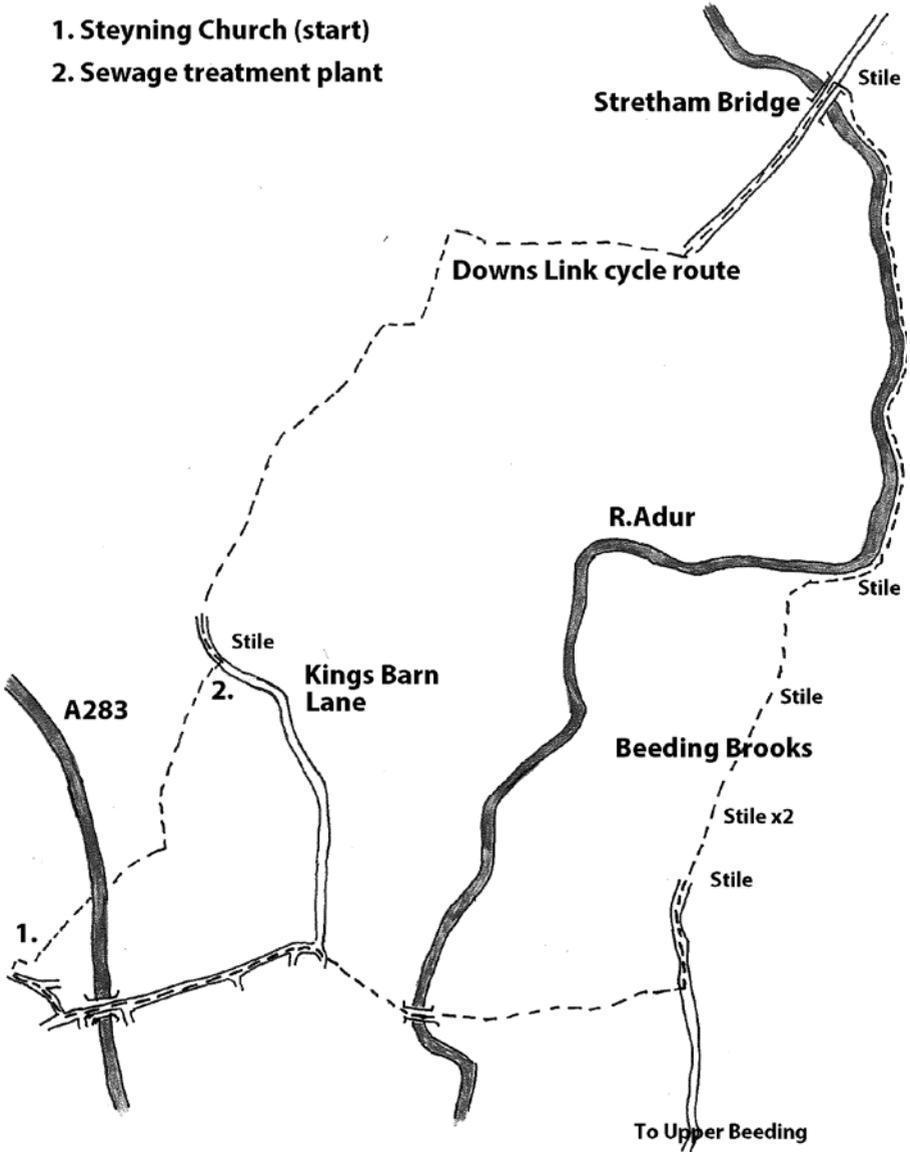
Carry on along the lane, checking the reeds for Moorhen and possibly Water Rail. Just past a house, turn right through a gate, and follow the clear path ahead across a meadow, then a narrow plank bridge. The path is clear but narrow as it traverses an area of wet scrub where Blackcaps and Common Whitethroats may be found. Kingfishers also can sometimes be encountered hereabouts.

Soon, you come out into the open and ahead is a modern bridge across the Adur. Head for this, cross it – there will be plenty of dog-walkers here – and follow the path ahead on the other side until it comes out into Kings Barn Lane. Bear left along the lane, past houses now, and follow it back into Steyning to arrive at the Church.

Please refer to the sketch map, and the walk can be followed on OS Explorer map 122.

Sketch map for Beeding Brooks walk

- 1. Steyning Church (start)
- 2. Sewage treatment plant



Recent sightings

By Chris Barfield

When you submit a sighting of a species shown in bold type to the Society it needs to be accompanied by a description for consideration by SOSRC. The inclusion of a sighting here does not mean that a record has been accepted. Full lists of “description species” and forms can be downloaded from the SOS website.

February

Many of January's good birds seemed in no hurry to move on, but cold weather at the beginning of the month and Atlantic weather systems at the end brought in a few more interesting new arrivals and some dramatic offshore movements.

The five **Tundra Bean Geese** at Pulborough Brooks were gone by the 3rd, but Bewick's Swans in the Arun Valley lingered until at least the 26th, with several sightings from passing trains. The ringtail Hen Harrier at The Burgh was reported all month, and the Crawley **Rose-coloured Starling** (present since late November) was also still attracting many visitors, and by the end of the month was well into its moult into adult plumage and starting to sing! The Long-tailed Ducks at West Rise Marsh and Ivy Lake and the Scaup at the latter site also stayed well into February. There were reckoned to be three Great Grey Shrikes on Ashdown Forest, but the long-staying Waltham Brooks bird was easier to see, with almost daily reports into March. The **Serin** at Newhaven Tidemills, present since December, was just as popular, last seen on the 26th.

But Cuckmere Haven was 'the place to be', as one observer put it. The nine Barnacle Geese and up to 30 White-fronted Geese from January were joined on the 1st by four Cackling Geese of the form *minima*, plus five Cackling x Barnacle hybrids, all probably best described as 'of uncertain origin'! Last month's **Glaucous Gulls** were still turning up in the gull roost there and **Caspian Gulls** were regular visitors too, with

four identified on the 20th. But the star bird was a **Twite** found along the riverbank on the 4th and staying until at least the 24th. Now very uncommon in Sussex, this was the first record since 2010 and its long stay was much appreciated. A Whimbrel, another scarce winter visitor in East Sussex, was also there for two weeks.

Seawatching was producing plenty of interest too. On the 2nd, Splash Point had an incredible morning, with 425 Gannets, nearly 2000 auks and 365 Red-throated Divers past, all in the space of two hours. These totals were echoed at Selsey Bill, with 600 Gannets on the 2nd and a massive 1700 Razorbills on the 5th. A Puffin on the 4th, a **Glaucous Gull** on the 6th and an **Iceland Gull** on the 11th added to the excitement at Selsey, and there were regularly up to six Great Northern Divers offshore there. The same or another **Iceland Gull** was at Goring on the 5th, and another **Glaucous Gull** was seen briefly at St. Leonards on the 12th.

Further inland, January's Waxwings in Crawley and Crowborough seemed to have moved on, but seven turned up in Bexhill on the 4th, delighting many right until the end of the month. Another small party arrived in Hove, and small groups were also seen briefly at Shoreham and Burgess Hill, plus several flyover sightings across the county. On the 17th another group was discovered at Wakehurst Place, much to the enjoyment of those who feel less comfortable about birding in urban streets! Egyptian Geese also seemed to be all over the place, including groups of four at Widewater and Iford.

The favoured area for Hawfinches in West Dean Woods produced a maximum of ten on the 5th plus ten Bramblings, and two Snow Buntings made regular appearances at East Head, with a Dartford Warbler also there. Cold weather in the second week brought reports of gatherings of Pied Wagtails, with a roost of 200 in central Brighton and an incredible 100 in a back garden in Bishopstone. On the 15th, one observer scored a double with his first ever Bittern, one at Ivy Lake and another at Birdham Marina, and on the same day the regulars at Splash Point witnessed another huge auk passage, with over 4000

going east in just three hours, mostly Guillemots.

The second half of the month brought milder weather but some strong winds. Two Black Redstarts at Telscombe Cliffs on the 16th and a very early Wheatear at East Chiltington the next day were the first hint of spring passage, and a flock of 80 Avocets at Paghham Harbour on the 21st (one of the largest groups ever recorded in the county) was also an indication of birds on the move. A count of 280 Great Crested Grebes off Bexhill on the 18th was an interesting side dish for the Waxwing-watchers, and the next day a **Red-necked Grebe** was found on Brooklands Lake, Worthing. Sadly it was obviously in distress, an unsuccessful attempt was made to rescue it, and its fate is not known. At the end of the month 20 White-fronted Geese on Horse Eye Level had a **Tundra Bean Goose** with them.

March

February's mild weather and southerly winds continued into early March, bringing in the first migrants. Seawatching was still producing some good bird counts, with 730 Brent Geese and 296 Pintails past Splash Point on the 3rd, and on the following day Rye Harbour had an early Swallow. Five Bewick's Swans at Henfield Levels on the 2nd were most likely part of the Arun valley herd on the way back to breeding grounds, and Avocets were on the move again too, with an estimated total of 120 on the Selsey peninsula on the 5th. The wintering Hen Harrier at The Burgh was joined by a second bird on the 6th, when a **Crane** flew south over Hardham. On the 9th a Wheatear at Beachy Head was the first of the spring there, and more unusually a Ring Ouzel flew over the A27 at Shoreham in front of the observer's car!

But some of the long-staying winter birds were still reluctant to move on. The Scaup at Ivy Lake (now in adult plumage) lingered until at least the 5th, the Long-tailed Duck there was seen until the 11th, and the Crawley **Rose-coloured Starling** was reported until at least the 21st, nearly a four-month stay! Waxwings often remain well into March, and the group of nine at Wakehurst delighted many observers until the 18th, and two at Hove also attracted many admirers and were last

seen on the 24th. The Waltham Brooks Great Grey Shrike was joined by a second bird on the 2nd, another was at Southerham SWT reserve on the 13th, and one was still on Ashdown Forest into April. Purple Sandpipers also often linger quite late, and ten seen at Newhaven on the 19th would probably have included migrants passing through.

The 11th saw the first real flush of early migrants, with a Garganey and a Little Gull at Pulborough Brooks and a Sand Martin at Widewater, and the next day the first Little Ringed Plovers arrived at Sidlesham Ferry Pool. Black Redstarts were popping up all along the coast, including four at Telscombe on the 13th and several reports from urban back gardens. Possible Siberian Chiffchaffs were noted at Steyning, Coldwaltham and West Rise Marsh, where the Long-tailed Duck was still in residence. Also on the 13th, an early Willow Warbler was at Camber, a Black-necked Grebe was off Worthing and two Short-eared Owls hunted over Horse Eye Level. The long-staying Spotted Redshank at Newhaven Tide Mills was still around on the 17th, but a group of six at Chidham on the 15th starting to come into breeding plumage must have been the highlight of the day for the lucky observer!

Cuckoo arrival dates have been getting earlier over the years, but one heard at Crowhurst on the 16th and another reliable report from Selsey on the same day would be the earliest Sussex records since 1936! The next day the first Redstarts were back on Ashdown Forest (again an early date), and Arlington Reservoir attracted an interesting trio of birds - a stunning male Smew (the first 'white nun' in Sussex for some years), an Avocet and a Black-necked Grebe. A **Cattle Egret** arrived at Horse Eye Level on the 19th for a seven-day visit, and the **Great White Egret** at Arundel WWT, present since January, was seen in the area until the 23rd - big enough to be spotted from nearby downland! The Selsey Bill seawatchers recorded over 500 incoming Meadow Pipits on the 20th (with a Merlin in pursuit, no great surprise!) and amazingly another 700 on the 24th. They were also rewarded with the first Osprey of the year on the 21st and seven Manx Shearwaters the next day.

Egyptian Geese were still turning up everywhere, with eight at both

Pevensy Levels on the 10th and Weir Wood on the 14th, six at Knepp on the 21st, and a pair already with 11 goslings in Crawley. A Wryneck in a Lindfield garden on the 24th would be the earliest since 1990, and the next day a Yellow Wagtail was at Newick sewage works and a **Crane** flew east at Worthing. At Castle Water a Bittern was booming on the 23rd and ten Bearded Tits were seen there.

At the end of the month Weir Wood Reservoir enjoyed some good birds, with one or two Ospreys stopping off for a few days, a male Goldeneye, a Little Ringed Plover and two Sandwich Terns (unusual this far inland). Rye Harbour had its first Sedge Warbler on the 25th and two Spoonbills going east the following day, when a male Garganey was at Arundel WWT (with another in the Combe Valley on the 28th). Splash Point logged some more good bird counts, with 61 Little Gulls past on the 28th and 22 Velvet Scoters on the 30th, and the Cuckmere had another good day on the 29th, with a **Cattle Egret**, a Black-winged Stilt and single **Glaucous** and **Caspian Gulls**.

April

Long-stayers, one-day wonders and some good seawatching made April an exciting but frustrating month! The first week saw several reports of Willow Warblers, an encouraging sign for this declining summer visitor, the Hen Harrier at The Burgh remained until the 14th, and the Long-tailed Duck at West Rise Marsh seemed to be taking up permanent residency, reported right until the end of the month, an incredible five-month stay. Twelve Egyptian Geese at Staplefield on the 2nd must also be some kind of record, and last month's **Cattle Egret** in the Cuckmere stayed until the 14th.

But on the morning of the 6th, the news broke of a **BLUE ROCKTHRUSH** at Beachy Head, the first record for Sussex. It showed superbly to those who got to see it during the day and was still there at dusk, but after a clear night and a favourable wind, those who gathered at dawn the next day were disappointed. A fantastic new record for Sussex, it looked to be the same bird which had been in Stow-on-the-Wold (Gloucestershire) since late December.

A Grasshopper Warbler was heard on Seaford Head on the 8th, and the next day the seawatchers at Splash Point had a dramatic morning, with over 800 Common and 26 Velvet Scoters, 13 Arctic and a Great Skua, 80 Little Gulls, 800 Brent Geese and 600 Sandwich Terns.

A flurry of smart male Ring Ouzels turned up on the coast and Downs in the second half of the month, including a well-watched bird at Waltham Brooks. On the 12th an **Alpine Swift** was seen briefly at Littlehampton, the first in Sussex for a couple of years, and on the 14th A **Black Kite**, another typical spring vagrant, was reported over Petworth, and the first House Martins returned to their nest sites in Rodmell, a week earlier than usual. Over the Easter weekend, Pulborough Brooks and Beachy Head both hosted a Pied Flycatcher, and three Wheatears were seen on the runway at Gatwick Airport, apparently a regular spring site!

On the 16th there were two **Water Pipits** and a Garganey at West Rise Marsh, with a **Cattle Egret** there the next day. On the 17th a summer-plumaged **Red-necked Grebe** was a surprise one-day visitor to Arlington Reservoir, and a **Roseate Tern** went past Selsey Bill, where several Eiders and Great Northern Divers were still lingering offshore. The same day a probable 'Channel Wagtail' (a hybrid between Yellow and Blue-headed Wagtail) was seen at Pagham North Wall.

The 18th saw the first sightings of Swifts (another bird whose arrival dates are getting earlier), and a **Wood Warbler** at Hastings, the first of several along the coast during the month and a good bird to see these days. The next day news came in of a male **Bluethroat** of the white-spotted race near Woods Mill, the first in Sussex for a couple of years, but despite much searching it could not be found again. On the 20th birders at Medmerry had a good day, with two **Purple Herons**, a Spoonbill and a **Water Pipit**, and the next day saw a surprise Hoopoe at Church Norton.

A brisk onshore wind on the 23rd brought a trickle of Pomarine Skuas during the afternoon, with at least 22 along the coast, no doubt much appreciated by those not so keen on the traditional early morning

seawatch! The same day a massive 528 Mediterranean Gulls passed Splash Point, and there were reports of small flocks passing east across the county around the same time, even well inland.

The last week saw another run of spring rarities, but frustratingly most were again only brief sightings. On the 24th a **Spotted Crake** was glimpsed in a ditch near Fulking, and two Black-winged Stilts were spotted on the Adur at Shoreham before flying off. The next day another **Bluethroat** turned up at Cuckmere Haven, this time a female, but it could not be found again, and on the 26th a **Kentish Plover** at Newhaven Tide Mills and a possible Tawny Pipit at Sidlesham Ferry Pool also didn't hang around. A **Red-rumped Swallow** at Arlington Reservoir on the 27th was slightly more obliging, staying until the following day, with an Osprey there for a few days and a possible Siberian Chiffchaff singing. On the same day another **Black Kite** was reported over Ashdown Forest, a **Crane** flew over Bewl Water and a Wryneck was seen in Bexhill.

On the 29th the wind strengthened and swung round to the south, resulting in some excellent seawatching over the bank holiday weekend. Maximum day totals at Splash Point (where there was a marathon 14-hour watch on the 29th) included 42 Arctic Skuas, 58 Little Terns, 32 Little Gulls, 25 Velvet Scoters, 857 Bar-tailed Godwits and a **Balearic Shearwater**. A total of 53 Pomarine Skuas passed Birling Gap on the Sunday, and Selsey Bill had similar numbers, including day counts of 37 Great Skuas and 11 Black Terns, plus a heavy passage of Gannets, Commic terns and scoters. The last day of the month saw the first Hobbies arrive, a Wryneck was seen at West Rise Marsh, and Spoonbills were seen briefly at Cuckmere Haven and Rustington.

Field outings reports

11th February – Dungeness

Nine hardy members joined Derek Barber and Mike Scott-Ham on 11th February for the annual late winter SOS trip to Dungeness. With frequent but not heavy wintry showers it was never going to be warm but at least it wasn't too windy. Lots of Red-throated Divers were offshore along with large numbers of Guillemots, Cormorants and a few Gannets. An adult Mediterranean Gull flew by, a couple of Kittiwakes were around and a couple of Common Scoter flew by at a distance.

Highlights at the patch included two Iceland Gulls (appropriate weather!) and a slight covering of snow was on the beach and elsewhere. ARC was very quiet with only a couple of Goldeneye and a Great White Egret which landed in front of Hanson Hide about 5 minutes after the group had left it. Several Tree Sparrows were feeding at Boulderwall Farm and a quick wander up the road found the Slavonian Grebe on New Diggings. The smart male Ring-necked Duck was showing well at Cook's Pool.

Derek found a nice group of 5 Scaup which seemed to have just dropped in, but the Long-eared Owls weren't obviously on show. At one of the hides some precise information allowed the group to go back and find one of the Long-eared Owls well tucked in out of the cold weather. No wonder it hadn't been found earlier! A very smart male Goldeneye was right in front of a hide but for the first time ever on the trip it proved impossible to find a Smew, although one was around the reserve. All the while Marsh Harriers were quartering the reserve and a few participants managed a distant Merlin. Quality rather than quantity with only 67 species but the weather could have been worse...

26th February - Dell Quay

Sixteen members met Bernie Forbes in the lane at Dell Quay, the early morning rain having just cleared leaving a blustery mild morning with the occasional light shower and glimpses of sunshine. For the first part of the walk the group set off along the harbour south towards Salterns Copse finding a few common birds such as Greenfinch, Goldfinch and a few Meadow Pipits plus singing Skylark. On the morning high tide two Goldeneye and the usual Great-crested and Little Grebes were found out in the channel.

Most of the ducks and waders were roosting out of the wind on the western shore where three Greenshank could be made out, with a large flock of Redshank, seven Grey Herons and five Little Egrets. At the reed bed at the Marina at least one squealing Water Rail was heard; also a singing Cetti's Warbler, all remaining well hidden. In the field behind the copse a large feeding flock of Curlew was not easy to see although perhaps 60 birds had been seen to drop in earlier. After lunch the party re-assembled at Dell Quay where another 4 roosting Greenshank were found.

Walking north to Fishbourne Creek, plenty of duck were seen feeding; good numbers of Wigeon and smaller numbers of Teal and Pintail. Plenty of gulls were found with Black-headed, Common and Herring being fairly numerous. In addition, a small flock of Black-tailed Godwits flew over the channel. A few Mediterranean Gulls gave good scope views. Around the edge of the harbour a Jack Snipe was in its usual place with all the group managing flight views. A Grey Wagtail showed briefly along the shoreline and a few Yellowhammers were in a thick hedgerow.

Despite a search around the horse paddock the rest of the Yellowhammer flock could not be located. In the Apuldram car park a Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard and a Goldcrest seen. It was perhaps not the best day's birding as many of the birds were a little distant, with only a single raptor seen (Common Buzzard) and no Rock Pipits in their usual spot. Nevertheless an enjoyable walk.

12th March 2017 Rackham & The Burgh

23 members met at Rackham Wood for the annual stroll led by Bernie Forbes on a mild spring morning. Throughout the day light rain was encountered which was no more than being a nuisance rather than a real problem although it did restrict visibility over the Brooks. Several Chiffchaffs were singing with at least three Treecreepers actually seen. Overhead a Red Kite was frequently seen as were Common Buzzards.

Scanning out on the brooks a female Marsh Harrier was found sitting by a ditch giving distant scope views. Little wildfowl remained with just a few Teal although well compensated for by the huge herds of Fallow Deer.

In the woods a Goldcrest was heard singing and decent views of a Firecrest were had plus whistling Nuthatch. A couple of yaffling Green Woodpeckers as well as two Great Spotted Woodpeckers were active. From the RSPB high view point overlooking the brooks, the Great White Egret was found with a Little Egret feeding close by. Although in the distance and in gloomy conditions, the sheer greater size and the yellowish bill of the former was evident. It was surmised that this was the same bird that has been overwintering in the Arun Valley.

Relocating to Canada Barn at The Burgh for the afternoon the group walked to the new Dew Pond, having close views of several Yellowhammers and a couple of confiding Corn Buntings. Good views were had of Grey Partridge with several pairs noted. At the dew pond at least six Brown Hares were active in pairs with four Ravens in the area. A ringtail Hen Harrier was briefly located flying over a distant ridge with most noting the white rump, but frustratingly it quickly disappeared without further sightings! It flushed a group of Fieldfares and small flocks of Goldfinches and Linnets were also noted. A good sign of spring was the displaying Lapwings and singing Skylarks. On the walk back, around 10 Corn Buntings gave good views in the hedgerow. A Barn Owl was seen flying over the track near the cars. It briefly sat up in a tree before melting away. On the drive back to North Stoke a sizeable flock of 30 Yellowhammers was feeding in adjacent fields.

25th March 2017 Newhaven Tide Mills

This walk around Tide Mills led by Neil Greenaway and Phil Luffingham proved to be a very enjoyable one, with 16 participants. The day was sunny and bright, but unfortunately rather windy (East North East). Thirty-four species were seen including Greenfinch, Linnet, singing Skylark, and three pairs of Stonechats. Three Great Crested Grebes were seen off-shore, and a Red Kite was observed distantly. Mill Creek Pond yielded 30 plus Redshank, together with Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Two male and one female Wheatear were also found during the walk.

30th April 2017 Selsey Sea-watch

Ten hardy members joined Andrew House at Selsey Bill for this event, undeterred by the strong and chilly easterly winds, and were rewarded with a good selection of species, including some very close skuas and terns. Highlights included one Pomarine Skua, a dozen Arctic Skuas, two Velvet Scoters and four Little Gulls. 100 plus Common Scoters were seen, together with an Eider and a couple of Great Northern Divers. There was a constant passage of Little, Common and Sandwich Terns. Several flocks of Bar-tailed Godwit and Whimbrel were seen, as were a Fulmar and many Gannets. There were four Sanderlings on the beach. The party gave up late morning as passage slowed, with a unanimous decision not to venture to Church Norton in the conditions, but everybody went home having had good views of some interesting species.

These reports are edited versions of the posts on the SOS website by the leaders, with thanks to the original posters.

Mid-week walks

July, August and September 2017

Thursday 6th July: Dungeness and local area: Meet at the Old Lighthouse car park at 9am. 189/TR088168. All day, bring lunch. Commence with a short sea watch and check of the power station area before moving onto RSPB reserve. Bring RSPB membership card or pay – Adults £4, Student £3. Leader Richard Lowe.

Wednesday 30th August: Thorney Island area: Meet at junction of Thorney Road and Thornham Lane at 9am (197/SU757049). Half day. Linear walk including footpath across fields to overlook the Emsworth and Prinsted Channels and the Great Deep. Please park respectfully in the area because of limited car parking. Leader Richard Senior.

Thursday 21st September: Chantry Hill area (Kithurst Hill and Springhead Hill). Meet at Chantry Hill car park at 9.30am. 197/GR087119 which is off the A283 Washington to Storrington road two miles from the Washington roundabout and accessed via Chantry Lane on the left. Half day. A circular walk on footpaths across downland fields. Leader Bernie Forbes.

Weekend high tide times

June					
17	05.04	17.37	18	06.03	18.40
24	12.08	-	25	00.30	12.57
July					
1	05.31	18.02	2	06.29	19.02
8	11.45	23.59	9	00.00	12.23
15	03.48	16.15	16	04.36	17.07
22	11.03	23.26	23	11.55	-
29	04.03	16.28	30	04.49	17.16
August					
5	10.40	22.59	6	11.23	23.39
12	02.44	15.07	13	03.26	15.51
19	09.55	22.23	20	10.54	23.17
26	02.47	15.08	27	03.25	15.46
September					
2	09.17	21.41	3	10.12	22.32
9	01.43	14.04	10	02.23	14.44

Times are for Shoreham Harbour, but are only a few minutes different across the whole county. Copyright and/or database rights apply; reproduced by permission of Her Majesty's Stationery Office and the UK Hydrographic Office (www.ukho.gov.uk).

Disclaimer: Times shown are believed to be as accurate as possible but are not for navigational use and no responsibility can be accepted by the editor or the SOS for any injury or loss incurred in their use. Software provided by Belfield Software (www.tideplotter.co.uk)

SUBMISSION OF RECORDS

Please note that inclusion of sightings in the newsletter does not imply that a record has been confirmed, accepted, or even submitted. Records should still be sent to the Recorder in the usual way. Records of species in shown in **bold print** in the Recent Sightings pages must be accompanied by a full description. Description forms can be downloaded from the SOS website.

SOS Contacts

President: Alan Perry

Chair of Council: Sue Walsh, 15 Lower Market Street, Hove, BN3 1AT. 01273 329972.

Secretary: Chris Davis, 27 Salisbury Road, Seaford, BN25 2BD, 01323 891267. secretary@sos.org.uk

Recorder: Mark Mallalieu, 29 Cobbetts Mead, Haywards Heath, RH16 3TQ, 07736 788077. recorder@sos.org.uk

Treasurer: Ted Merrikin, Blessings, Barns Farm Lane, Storrington, RH20 4AH, 01903 745166. treasurer@sos.org.uk

Newsletter Editor: Anthony Holden, 9 Gatewaycke Terrace, Tanyard Lane, Steyning, BN44 3RL, 01903 810492. newsletter@sos.org.uk

Conservation Officer:
Position vacant
conservation@sos.org.uk

BTO Regional Organiser:
Dr Helen Crabtree, 01444 441687.
hcrabtree@gmail.com

Outings Organiser: Dr Mark Wright
01435 873576. outings@sos.org.uk

Surveys and Projects Officer: Dr Richard Black, 4 The Poplars, Keymer, Hassocks, BN6 8PZ, 01273 844324. surveys@sos.org.uk

Membership Secretary:

John Trowell, 'Lorrimer', Main Road, Icklesham, Winchelsea, TN36 4BS, 01424 813722.
membership@sos.org.uk

Press & Public Relations Officer:
Robert Yarham. press@sos.org.uk

Webmaster: Chris Brown.
webmaster@sos.org.uk

Swifts Champion: vacant

Website Sightings Manager:
Paul James. sightings@sos.org.uk

Address for computer records:
data@sos.org.uk

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Our own Ted Merrikin (left of picture) and Chris Corrigan (centre) with representatives of the RSPB and Girl Guides at the launch of the Brilliant Birds project at Pulborough Brooks in April. The project was funded in part from the SOS Avifauna Fund.



