

Sussex Ornithological Society



Newsletter

Summer 2020



Editorial

By Mike Russell (Chair of Council)

As we approach mid-summer, we have all experienced such a change in every aspect of our lives. For everyone who is involved with birds one way or another, the last few months has seen our relationship change significantly with them. There is the frustration of not being able to go to our favourite places as reserves are closed and being encouraged not to drive anywhere, plus grappling with issue as to whether taking a walk with binoculars suddenly becomes non-exercise. This virus and the consequential lockdown have coincided with the spring migration, one of the most exciting times of the birding year and undoubtedly that has led to further frustration.

Another consequence is that all surveys have been suspended resulting in delay to the collection of vital data about declining and threatened species. There has also been the suspension of the walks programme that many members enjoy during the year, but there is a flipside in that many people have discovered that there are some great birds to be seen in their own area and garden. It has also been very encouraging to see many new people adding their sightings to the website sightings page.

One important event that we had to postpone was the AGM in April and there is a distinct possibility that we won't be able to hold one this year as the potential health risk posed by Covid-19 will remain for some time. Council has therefore decided to hold a "Virtual" AGM. Details of how this will run and how you can participate can be found elsewhere in his newsletter.

Photograph credits -

Front cover: Kingfisher, Warnham LNR, 28th October 2019 [Dorian Mason]

Inside front cover: Common Buzzard (top) and Red Kite, Beachy Head, March 2020 [Laurence Pitcher]

Throughout this pandemic, so many people are involved in not just keeping the society ticking over but actually moving forward as much as we can and I would like to thank my fellow Council members and the members of the Scientific and the Membership & Publicity Committees for making sure that society can continue to function effectively.

There are so many others too, ensuring that the website, social media platforms and newsletter continue to provide up-to-date information to members, putting together the bird report, organising future events that may or may not be able to take place and the collation and input of data to ensure that our scientific data remains current.

Over the years, many people have dedicated themselves to the Society by taking on important roles as honorary officers and in other capacities. In this editorial, please join me and the Chair of the Scientific Committee, Mark Mallalieu, in giving a special thank you to three people who have just stepped down after being members of that committee for many years. Dr Barrie Watson served for more than forty years, surely a record for serving on any of the Society's committees. Alan Perry and John Hobson both served for twenty years. All have filled several other positions in the past and we owe them a great debt of gratitude. Barrie is one of our two Vice-Presidents; Alan is our President, a member of Council and he continues to run the Wealden Heaths Breeding Birds Survey; and John continues to do valuable work helping edit the annual Bird Report, writing species accounts and collating records of scarce species. So happily, all are continuing their long and close association with the Society.

We can only hope that before too long this difficult period will finally come to the end so we can get back to enjoying the wonderful birds that there are in the county and continue to play our part in ensuring there is a place for birds in Sussex.



SOS Photography Competition – Entries now welcome!

The SOS is now accepting entries for its new bird photography competition!

We are looking for beautiful photographs capturing Sussex's wonderful birds, taken during the year 2020. The competition is open to everyone, not just members of the SOS.

There are two prize categories. The Overall **SOS Sussex Bird Photographer** is open to everyone, of all ages. The **Young SOS Sussex Bird Photographer** is open to participants of all ages up to the age of 18 as at 31st December 2020. Those under the age of 16 must obtain permission from a parent or guardian to enter. If your entry is chosen as a prize winner, you will be asked to provide proof that you are 18 or under.

Prizes on offer for both categories, and three runners up in each category, include camera shop tokens plus a free year's membership of the Society. The winning photographs and runners-up will be featured in the SOS Bird Report for the year 2020 (published towards the end of the year following the competition, in November 2021), as well as on our website, and at Society events.

You can now submit your entry to and request further information from the following email address: sos.photo.competition@gmail.com.

You can enter up to a maximum of 5 images – those eligible for consideration for the Young SOS Bird Photographer will be automatically entered in both categories. All entries must be in digital format only, as JPEG files of the best quality available, with a minimum resolution of 300dpi, and a minimum file size of 4 MB. Images must be uncropped, in either landscape or portrait format, with minimum editing, such as for exposure, contrast and sharpness. For the full rules of entry, and terms and conditions, please visit the SOS website or contact the email address above.

The closing date for entries is 31st January 2021. Good luck!

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2020

Council has decided that holding a normal AGM in 2020 could create health risks, given the COVID-19 pandemic, and that these risks can be avoided by having a 'virtual' AGM.

We will therefore hold an online AGM using Zoom, a widely used application. This will take place on **Saturday 18th July** and members are invited to attend. Full details of how to participate will be sent later.

We recognise that some members may find it difficult or impossible to join the AGM in this way and also that an online meeting will be easier to run successfully if as much as possible is dealt with ahead of the event. We have therefore made the following arrangements.

(1) The papers for the AGM are available on the SOS website. These comprise the Summary of Activities, Trustees' Report and Financial Statement. These papers were also sent to you with the last Newsletter.

(2) A voting form for the AGM is enclosed with this Newsletter. If you do not intend to join the online meeting, please fill in your voting choices and return it as indicated on the form (you may wish to wait until you have seen any questions raised as per (4) below). If you plan to attend the online meeting you should vote then instead – see (6) below.

(3) Subsequent communications about the AGM after this Newsletter announcement will be via the SOS website and email, so please write now to Chris Davis, the Hon Secretary at 27, Salisbury Road, Seaford BN25 2BD if you have no access to the internet and wish to receive further communications by post. Please only choose this option if really essential.

(4) If you have any questions about this process or the agenda please write to the Hon Secretary at the above address or email at secretary@sos.org.uk. A reply will be sent to you as soon as possible. Any questions and replies that are material to the agenda will be posted

on the website for other members to see as if you had raised them at a normal AGM.

(5) Any such questions should be sent by **Friday 26th June**. The full set of questions and replies will be posted to anyone who has no internet access by **Friday 3rd July**.

(6) All completed voting forms should be sent to The Hon Secretary by **Friday 10th July**. As stated at (2) above, if you plan to attend the meeting, you should vote then.

(7) The AGM itself will take place at 2.00pm on **Saturday 18th July**. Further details will be posted on the SOS website giving the precise arrangements for joining and participating. You will be asked to confirm in advance if you plan to attend and provide an email address, again to simplify the arrangements on the day and ensure that you can actually join.

Mike Russell
Chair of Council, Sussex Ornithological Society

VOLUNTEERS URGENTLY REQUIRED!

The Society still needs people to come forward to fill a number of key roles, as current volunteers retire from their positions after serving 5 years.

Right now, we need someone to fill the post of Hon. Secretary. Looking ahead to 2021, the positions of Recorder, Bird Report Editor and Press & Publicity Officer all fall vacant. If you are willing to volunteer for one of these jobs, please contact Chris Davis – secretary@sos.org.uk.

Iris Simpson

By Tony Marr

It was with great sadness that I heard of the death on 14th March 2020 of Iris Simpson in a residential home in Horsham. Her husband of 65 years, Alf, had died a little under four months earlier. A tribute by John Trowell describing Alf's enormous contribution to the work of the society had just appeared in the society's Spring 2020 Newsletter.

There can be little doubt that Alf's death hit Iris so hard that she didn't have the will to carry on. John's warm words reveal a couple who were inseparable and who would normally be mentioned together in one breath. As John stated, Alf was the society's Conservation Officer for many years, while for some of the same period Iris was the Honorary Secretary.

The Honorary Secretary occupies a pivotal role in any society of volunteers such as our own. Finding the right people, at the right time, to fill particular niches, was (and perhaps still is) a perennial problem, and we sailed very close to the wind at times. Iris stepped forward at one such moment in the society's history and plugged a rapidly widening gap.

Iris was the SOS's fourth secretary, from 1978 to 1982, and she very quickly made her presence known. Her day job was as a top secretary in the headquarters of the Chubb national security organisation, and she was quickly able to bring her professional training and business experience into play for the society. In her five years at the helm she inspired, directed, ordered and organised us into a state of high efficiency. She set high standards and expected them to be met.

The success of our annual conferences owes much to Iris, who organised the first one which was held in 1978, the year in which she became secretary. A glance at the programme for the 41st conference held in January this year shows that it still follows the same style of

organisation and attracts the best speakers from around the country.

Iris retired in 1982 under the five-year term of office rule introduced in 1977 for council members or officers (with no return for at least one year). The purpose was to avoid members from becoming stale and to allow a regular introduction of new members. The departure of Iris as one of the first to have to go was regarded by some as like shooting ourselves in both feet, but in her inimitable fashion she departed leaving all her papers and files in perfect order, allowing her successor to walk straight into this demanding high profile job.

Iris did not rest, however, as she joined Alf in his work for the-then Sussex Naturalists Trust as described by John Trowell in his tribute to Alf in the Spring 2020 Newsletter. Both maintained their links with the SOS, and it was only a matter of time before we tempted Iris back on to the Council as Newsletter Editor. She was ideally suited to this job, and maintained the high standards achieved by a long line of editors which has continued to this day. She survived the pressure for eleven years from 1988 to 1998 and was appointed a Vice President in 2001 for her work for the society.

Alf and Iris were a formidable duo, working tirelessly and loyally for the wildlife of Sussex, whose joint energy and determination on behalf of the society will probably never be equalled.

New Year Bird Race 2020

I'm very pleased to report one of our best years in both participation and money raised. Over 50 members in 17 teams took part, and the total raised for bird conservation in Sussex was £3,277.65 (£2645.32 in donations & sponsorship, plus £632.33 in Gift Aid). Grateful thanks to all who took part, to those who gave donations or sponsorship, and to our Treasurer, Ted Merrikin, for diligently claiming all the gift aid. Just hope we are able to race again in 2021 – fingers crossed!

Val Bentley (Bird Race Co-ordinator)

MICHAEL HOLLINGS

Sadly, the society has also to record the passing of another of its founder members, Dr Michael Hollings. Tony Marr writes:

I first met Michael Hollings through the Shoreham Ornithological Society in the mid 1950s. Michael was a scientist working at the Glasshouse Crops Research Institute in Littlehampton and was to become the Deputy Director for the 200+ staff who worked there. We enjoyed a lifelong birdwatching friendship which lasted for over sixty years until his death in December 2019 at the grand age of 96. He met his second wife Olwen at the Institute, where she also worked. She died in April 2014.

In the 1950s and 1960s we were among the small number of birdwatchers along the mid-Sussex coast where a new generation was emerging, and the idea of forming a county ornithological society began to circulate. This was prompted by what was perceived to be an undue concentration on rare birds and migration in the privately published Sussex Bird Report. No work was being done to survey the breeding birds of the county, particularly in censusing species such as Stone-curlew, Woodlark, Dartford Warbler and Cirl Bunting.

The formation of the Sussex Naturalists Trust in 1961 acted as another spur to the need for prompt action. Michael was very much a moving force in anticipating what was needed to effect this major change in the 1960s, involving many meetings at his home in Worthing, lubricated with his excellent homemade wine. The society took off quickly in 1962, helped and guided by Michael's calm authority and enviable professionalism, and we never looked back.

Michael Hollings will be remembered as a real gentleman, who treated everyone he met with unfailing courtesy and tact. He served in all for ten years as the society's first Vice President and Chairman of Council, for which we will be forever grateful.

The Swifts are back!

By David Campbell (SOS Swifts Champion)

That birds can be enjoyed anywhere - one of the fundamental joys of the hobby - is particularly precious now. Even if we can't get around, birds still come to us, and none does so as deliberately as the Swift. For countless generations, Swifts have returned each May from southern Africa to nest agreeably in our eaves, but every year birds are coming back to find their nest sites blocked off by modern renovations. New builds are just as uninviting, unless fitted with Swift bricks, and this failure to consider our most incredible and loyal housemates has played a big part in the species' 57% decline in the period 1995-2016.



As with any bird, the first step in reversing the decline is monitoring: collecting records to understand the population. Fortunately, as the Swift is one of the very few species which has become an urban specialist, even if the current restrictions continue, we can still marvel at them from our back door. And we can still collect valuable data to inform conservation at both a local and national level.

Please keep a record of Swifts you see at home and while shopping or exercising and report your observations on BirdTrack. In particular, make special note of any low-flying parties, 'bangers' (birds brushing against potential nest sites as they fly past to check occupancy) and, of course, active nest sites. For these sightings, a six-figure grid reference and an address are very helpful, and such behaviour indicative of breeding nearby can also be reported using RSPB Swift Mapper, through their website or app. It can easily be found on Google and on your phone's app store. Your records will truly help put us on the front foot when everything's back to normal. If you have any questions, or ideas on action for Swifts this summer, please get in touch with me by emailing swifts@sos.org.uk.

A hidden gem: the Adur Estuary Nature Reserve

By the RSPB Voluntary wardens

Many people don't realise there is an RSPB reserve at the heart of Shoreham-by-Sea. It is called the Adur Estuary Nature Reserve and is part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It's a hidden gem. Although small, the reserve includes a variety of habitats including the tidal river Adur, salt marsh, mudflats and exposed mussel beds. It was acquired by the RSPB in 1987 after a plan to develop a marina in the area fell through.

The reserve is supported by a team of four voluntary wardens who monitor bird numbers and organise public birdwatching events, and is easily accessible by public transport. The area can be viewed from Shoreham High Street, Norfolk Bridge and the towpath behind the houseboats. (Further details at the end of this article.)

Seasonal interest

Throughout the year, a variety of waders are present including Redshank and Oystercatcher, while Whimbrel are regularly seen on spring and autumn passage. Herring Gulls are always around and in the autumn and winter months these are joined by Black-headed Gulls in large numbers and smaller numbers of Great/Lesser Black-backed and Common Gulls. Grey Heron and Little Egret are generally present and both species are known to nest further upstream.

At high tide in winter, it is possible to see good numbers of Common Snipe flushed from the salt marsh. A few Greenshank, Curlew and occasional Black-tailed Godwits are often present in the winter months, together with plenty of Turnstones. The salt marsh also attracts roosting and foraging Lapwings, although sadly numbers have declined in recent years. (At high tide these may also be seen on the nearby airfield.) Good numbers of Teal make use of the house boat channel throughout the winter.

In harsh weather conditions anything can turn up and in recent years Avocet and Goosander have caused a flurry of local interest. A special mention should go to the Kingfishers which return to the reserve in the autumn and are seen regularly until early spring. It is amazing to see these wonderful birds from

the High Street, or perching on boats viewable from the Norfolk Bridge.

Upstream of the reserve, the SSSI continues for approximately a mile and can be good for Mediterranean Gulls, Yellow-legged Gulls, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, and Dunlin, according to the time of year. Curlew Sandpiper sometimes visit briefly during migration.

Access to the reserve

Shoreham town centre is accessible by train and the reserve is within easy walking distance of the railway station. A number of bus services run through the town and there are several bus stops adjacent to the reserve. One of the best viewpoints is known as Coronation Green, right on the High Street. This is a small green space situated next to the pedestrian footbridge leading to Shoreham Beach. Birds can also be seen from the footbridge itself.

Good views of the salt marsh, particularly when the tide is rising, can be had from the A259 road bridge (Norfolk Bridge) at the western end, although you will need to tolerate the noise of traffic passing by. This is, however, the very best place from which to view the last vestiges of salt marsh on a high tide.

A further viewpoint, allowing observation of the channel running through the reserve, is further along the A259 heading west, where the towpath runs behind the houseboats. Walking along the towpath will take you on a circular walk across the footbridge and back to Coronation Green, a distance of about a mile.

If you need to drive, the best place to park is the Adur recreation ground car park on the A259. This is on the left hand side from the Worthing direction and just before the Norfolk Bridge.

This hidden gem, sandwiched between the busy High Street and houseboats, is a great example of 'urban birding' at its best, with the potential for close views of a good variety of birds. Give it a try - we're sure that you will be surprised by what you can see. And if you draw a blank, or to celebrate a satisfying visit, there's a great choice of cafes and pubs to be enjoyed, some of which give you views over the reserve.

This article was written some months ago, and public transport, cafes and pubs remain subject to Government restrictions at the time of going to press - Ed



Update from RSPB

Members will remember from previous newsletters that SOS has funded a number of projects for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and they have recently updated us on a number of these.

New rotovator at Pulborough Brooks

The staff and volunteers have found the new rotovator purchased last year with support from SOS to be of tremendous value for their work programme over the last winter. To date, the rotovator has been most beneficial for wetland birds, through the creation of muddy edges within in-field features and around pools. The creation of muddy edged areas like this allows waders, particularly newly hatched chicks, to find invertebrate food more easily, and helps to protect eggs and fledglings from predation by foxes and badgers.

The rotovator will also be essential for the creation of new wetland features that it is hoped will take place as part of a wetland enhancement project at Pulborough later this year.

Boosting woodland biodiversity

So far, RSPB staff and volunteers have managed to install one section of deer fencing at Rowlands Wood, and two sections at Broadwater Warren. The plan for 2020 was to fence two sections at Rowlands and four at Broadwater so they are currently half-way to the target at each reserve. Reserve staff are ready to complete the work as soon as possible, but at the time of writing, due to current restrictions about working in teams, the remaining fencing cannot be installed until social distancing measures have been relaxed.

Saving Turtle Doves in Sussex

There was a slight underspend on the funding that SOS provided for RSPB's work with Turtle Doves in Sussex. Turtle Dove Conservation Advisor Caroline French has put this funding to good use and purchased another 10 camera traps for use across partner sites – helping to

capture images of Turtle Doves where supplementary feeding is being carried out. In addition, the funding has helped Caroline to hire a small van to distribute seed mix to farmers.

The current restrictions are, unfortunately, going to impact Turtle Dove work this year. RSPB were unable to get the new cameras out to farmers in time but have distributed all the seed mix so at least farmers can keep providing this to returning birds. It will not be possible to make visits to partner farms but RSPB will instead be relying on monitoring data that farmers themselves can provide, and will be out to make visits as soon as restrictions are lifted. Meanwhile the cameras are safe in storage and will be put to good use in the 2021 breeding season.

Turtle Dove [RSPB photograph]



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WILD ABOUT WARNHAM

By David Bridges

Wild About Warnham - A Project for Our Times?

It seems appropriate to be writing this article at a time when we are restricted to birding from our back gardens or while out for our permitted local exercise, describing a conservation project which focuses entirely on a local patch (or parish, to be more precise) sits well with the zeitgeist of the Covid-19 era.

The Wild About Warnham project began in 2019, well before any of us had heard about Coronavirus, and it developed as a personal response to the threats posed by Climate Change, Biodiversity Loss and Plastic Pollution.

Unadventurous birding

Although I have been a birder all my life, I am an unadventurous birder. For me, trips to Pagham or Pulborough are rare events. On the few occasions when I have been inclined to twitch, I have generally followed two rules: stick to Sussex and travel by public transport or cycle/walk.

For the last 30-plus years, I have lived in Warnham, a village in the north west of West Sussex, just outside Horsham. This is where I do most of my birdwatching.

As you might imagine, here in the Low Weald, there are not too many bird-watching moments to set pulses racing. My patch is not an ornithological hotspot. However, getting to know this area quite well, and seeking out its special birds, has brought its compensations. The thrill of watching displaying Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers or finding a family group of Willow Tits, would excite most Sussex birders. More recently, Red Kites and Ravens have arrived, the latter now a breeding species. Regular rumours and vague reports of Goshawk sightings by locals are intriguing. Sadly, though, my 30-plus years of Warnham birding has allowed me to bear witness to the desperate decline of many once-common species, especially the farmland birds.

Do something, anything

Faced with these declines, I was faced with two options. Do I carry on watching and recording the local wildlife 'to extinction', or should I try to do something, anything, to help reverse these declines? I was realistic enough to realise that on my own there was nothing I could do that would make a significant difference. However, I began to wonder whether I could mobilise local support for a Parish-wide conservation project.

I pitched some ideas to Warnham Parish Council, and these were received with a warm and enthusiastic response. We agreed that initially Wild About Warnham (WAW) would focus on some specific and, hopefully, achievable goals. This would allow us to assess how much interest and support there might be among locals for expanding and developing the project.

Building on the butterflies

I already had some good local contacts because for more than ten years, as a volunteer, I have been informally managing two fields on the edge of the village for butterflies. Over this period 34 species of butterfly have been recorded at the Tilletts Lane Butterfly Fields, including Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Purple Emperor and Brown Hairstreak. However, I was noticing increasing numbers of birds also taking advantage of the habitat management we were carrying out for butterflies. In 2008 the fields were largely devoid of birds, by 2019, in contrast to many other parts of Warnham, large numbers of breeding birds were evident, including Common Whitethroat, Garden Warbler and Yellowhammer, and two or three singing Nightingales. This was encouraging! However, extending the project from a '20-acre butterfly project' to something that might reach across the whole parish would be, and is, a real challenge.

What is Wild About Warnham

Warnham is a pleasant and predominantly rural Parish and yet, in common with much UK countryside, biodiversity loss is happening here at an alarming rate.

The Wild About Warnham project aims to raise awareness of environmental issues behind these losses and suggest ways in which everyone in the parish could take action to reverse biodiversity loss and help prevent further environmental damage at a local (parish) level.

So far, activities have been rather disrupted and delayed by the Covid-19 crisis

but at the start of 2020 we carried out a scheme to get people planting Alder Buckthorn whips in their gardens to attract Brimstone butterflies by providing the foodplant for their caterpillars. Other plans already underway include improving habitat on parts of the Village Green and in the Churchyard; a 'One Square Metre' challenge to encourage people to create areas of wildflower mini-meadow in their gardens; tree and hedge planting on public and private land; free advice visits to encourage more wildlife-friendly gardening and the provision of factsheets and information via the Warnham Parish Council website where special WAW pages have been created and more details about the project can be found <https://warnham.org.uk/wild-about-warnham/>

During the current restrictions a large number of bird nest boxes and bat boxes have been constructed by volunteers. Apart from the usual tit and Robin boxes, we have boxes for Swifts and Treecreepers, and a terrace for House Sparrows, all ready to go up for the 2021 nesting season! Sadly, a programme of guided walks including Dawn Chorus events and a Nightingale Evening had to be cancelled this year but will be rescheduled in 2021.

Swift Action

The Swift was selected for special attention through the project, as this iconic summer visitor has been struggling locally for some years after a big colony was lost when a key nest site on a large, former farmhouse was blocked up by workmen carrying out roofing repairs. Initially, effort will be focused on identifying nest sites, prior to working with property owners to ensure existing sites are maintained and, where appropriate, nest boxes are installed nearby so colonies might grow. The help of any SOS members who live in or close to Warnham, or who visit the area, would be most welcome, especially with the initial survey work.

I am working with landowners and a tenant farmer on the biggest local estate to identify further opportunities for habitat management and enhancement, and to create effective links between existing patches of good habitat.

In this article I have only been able to give a flavour of the scope of the project, and with time I do hope it will grow and encompass other species and activities. If you would like more information or would like to get involved, please contact me by email butterfly0@btinternet.com or follow the project on Twitter @WildWarnham

Favourite birds - by David H.Howey

I recently came across the results of a survey in which 200,000 people were asked to name their favourite bird. When all the votes had been counted they resulted in the following top ten:

(1) Robin, (2) Barn Owl, (3) Blackbird, (4) Wren, (5) Red Kite, (6) Kingfisher, (7) Mute Swan, (8) Blue Tit, (9) Hen Harrier and (10) Puffin.

The fact that the Robin came out on top was no surprise and the inclusion of common garden species such as Blackbird, Wren and Blue Tit was perhaps predictable. But there was no top ten place for other garden favourites such as Goldfinch and Song Thrush. However, to see Barn Owl in second spot was a pleasant surprise and would definitely feature in my list of favourite birds.

Less predictable were the inclusion of Red Kite and Hen Harrier in the top ten. Red Kites have certainly spread during this century and are a common sight for anyone travelling along the M40. However, they are still not resident in many parts of the country or even in all parts of Sussex. To see Hen Harrier in the top ten was a real surprise – they are wonderful birds to watch but the opportunities to do so are dwindling rapidly.

The only seabird on the list was everyone's favourite the Puffin but you have to travel some way from Sussex to see one and actually recording one in the county is a rare event.

So, what are SOS members' favourite Sussex birds? By 'Sussex birds' I'm confining it to species which regularly breed in Sussex. By that token I'm afraid that historic records of species such as Bee-eater don't count and neither does Black-winged Stilt. Although I'm the one setting the rules by doing so I've had to discount one of my own favourites, the Gannet, which of course has never nested in Sussex.

Let me know your three favourite Sussex birds by e-mailing their names to favouritebirds@sos.org.uk. Put them in order of preference and the first bird on your list will be awarded three points, the second two points and one point for the third bird on your list. When all the entries have been sorted and the scores calculated we'll publish the results in the Newsletter.

Recorder's Reflections

By Mark Mallalieu (Recorder)

With the restrictions imposed by the Government, I had expected a reduction in the number of scarce birds reported, but I reckoned without the largest or second largest ever spring influx of Hoopoes into Sussex. The number to beat is 28 in spring 1968, I believe. By my count there have been at least 24 as I write this, though I am still asking (pleading now!) for evidence for those at West Chiltington on 9th April, Seaford on 17th April and Ferring on at least 28th April. If you know the finders do please encourage them to supply photos or a sketch, just so we can ensure that all records can be logged. Actually, I'd love to have any photos and of course new reports of Hoopoes in Sussex this year. Keep them coming! Let us hope that a pair has stayed to breed and does so successfully.

The consequences of Covid-19 in Britain and globally have been appalling, yet so many inspirational stories have come out of the crisis. These put the hobby of birdwatching into some perspective, but a love of nature has surely helped thousands of us to cope with the difficulties. And from a conservation perspective, I am sure that many SOS members know their local "patches" better than they did. I was certainly surprised to find breeding Lesser Whitethroats and migrant Whinchat and Wheatear a mile from my suburban house in Haywards Heath. Many of you will have made your own discoveries. Indeed, a remarkable number of you have found Nightingales on your daily exercise walks. A genuine increase, or just a change in our behaviour?

It is unfortunate that nearly all bird survey work has stopped. However, the SOS Scientific Committee has recently reviewed our survey plans that there will be lots of interesting work to volunteer for once the conditions allow.

You can do survey work almost anywhere. I spent two years from 2012 in a compound in central Kabul, Afghanistan under very strict rules of movement. When I started, I thought that I would not be able to watch birds at all and did not even pack binoculars. But I was able to record and ring a remarkable range of species, especially migrants, including 16

species of warblers, mostly vagrants in Britain, and even three endangered species of vultures. I published a paper when I came home. Let me know if you would like to read about lockdown Afghanistan style.

Mark Mallalieu - Recorder@sos.org.uk

WEEKEND HIGH TIDE TIMES
June to September 2020

June					
13	05.19	17.53	14	06.17	18.51
20	11.30	23.44	21	12.10	-
27	03.58	16.37	28	04.56	17.38
July					
4	11.29	23.48	5	12.18	-
11	03.54	16.23	12	04.36	17.05
18	10.18	22.37	19	11.06	23.22
25	02.58	15.30	26	03.45	16.18
August					
1	10.27	22.50	2	11.22	23.40
8	02.48	15.10	9	03.16	15.37
15	08.54	21.20	16	09.54	22.15
22	01.59	14.28	23	02.42	15.11
29	09.16	21.45	30	10.23	22.43
September					
5	01.51	14.09	6	02.15	14.30
12	07.05	19.43	13	08.28	20.56
19	00.58	13.25	20	01.41	14.06

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)

Conservation update

By Richard Cowser (Conservation Officer)

Our ability to get out and about may still be restricted but the planning process hasn't slowed down. Horsham District Council have just published their draft Local Plan indicating that they may have to build over 25,000 more houses between 2019 and 2036, and we are expecting Brighton & Hove and Hastings to published new draft Local Plans soon. There is no slowdown in the drive to develop ever more of Sussex as the government strives to make good the shortfall in the country's housing supply.

Our role in commenting on these Local Plans is not to try and challenge the numbers of new homes being planned, but to try and ensure that they are built in places where they will do the least harm to birds. And we do that by using the records you send us of what birds are where.

This is the time of year when the records you make can be of particular value – provided you add breeding evidence to your records. Evidence that a location is used by breeding birds, especially if it is a Red listed or Amber listed species, is particularly useful when objecting to development proposals. And records that use the pinpoint facility on BirdTrack to show a six-figure grid reference are also far more useful than those which just come with a one-kilometre 4-figure grid reference. I'm afraid that records which only have a tetrad grid reference, or polygon records of sites crossing tetrad boundaries – which come to us with a 10km grid reference – usually have too imprecise grid references to be able to be effectively used in objecting to planning developments.

While trying to stop development occurring in places that would be particularly harmful for birds we are also doing other work to try and protect Sussex's birds, and as David Campbell has written in his report in this newsletter, your records over the next few weeks can really help us protect Swifts.

One piece of work that has come to fruition is that Sussex has its first Local Wildlife Site (LWS) that has been designated solely because of its importance for birds. It's at Goring Gap (between Worthing and

Littlehampton), where no less than 106 species have been recorded as using the site during the last 10 years. In getting it designated as an LWS the crucial evidence we were able to provide were six-figure grid reference records that unequivocally showed that the site had been “used” by each of the 106 species. (Used - as distinct from the bird flying over, or being seen from the shore flying by out at sea). To summarise Goring Gap’s importance for birds: this is a 63ha site, approximately one 6000th the size of Sussex. We have in the last 10 years recorded it being used by more than 25% of the bird species ever recorded in the county.

Thank you to all those who contributed the records that made this possible.

Pomarine Skuas - the Right Time but the Wrong Place!

By David H. Howey

Many of you will have read Alan Parker’s comment on the SOS Recent Sightings page in which he noted that when Pomarine Skuas were reported further west and heading his way he probably wouldn’t see them at Fairlight. I share Alan’s frustration.

Each April and May good numbers of Pom Skuas are recorded at Selsey Bill, Splash Point and Beachy Head but I see very few here at Telscombe Cliffs. A look at a map of the Sussex coast and it becomes clear why this should be.

When birds pass Selsey Bill the next headland they see is Beachy Head. If they head directly for Beachy rather than following the coastline they will be six or seven kilometres offshore when they pass Telscombe Cliffs. Similarly, when the birds have cleared Beachy Head the next land jutting out into the Channel is Dungeness. Birds making a beeline for Dungeness will pass Fairlight some four or five kilometres offshore.

Not all migrants pass through The Solent. Instead, some pass to the south of the Isle of Wight which is even worse. When that happens and the birds fly towards Beachy Head they will be so far out to sea when they pass Telscombe Cliffs they won’t even be visible as distant dots in the telescope!

Recent sightings

February

I think the less said about the weather this month, the better. A relentless onslaught of named storms (Ciara and Dennis) brought in a constant barrage of rain and gale-force winds. Days on either side of the storms were still dominated by the dreaded prevailing winds.

Four Scaup at Combe Haven were the only noteworthy birds to continue their stay into February. Sadly, the unusual over-wintering summer migrants had moved on – these being the Swallow at Firle and Ring Ouzel at Cuckmere Haven (though the latter made a re-appearance towards the end of the month). Of local interest only, a drake Pochard remained all month on Brooklands Lake (Worthing). Despite the drab weather, there were signs of spring looming as Goshawks started to display at their various haunts within mid-Sussex. A Common Crossbill was at Sherwood Rough (Arundel) on the 1st. Five Long-tailed Ducks were on (or nearby) Scotney Gravel Pits on the 2nd and continued their stay throughout the month. A total of 17 Sandwich Terns lingered off Selsey Bill from the 2nd, but numbers declined to single figures for the rest of the month.

On the 3rd, the Arun Valley yielded two White-fronted Geese at Pulborough Brooks, and the three Bewick's Swans at Burpham rose to six on the 5th; despite the small increase in number, this wintering population is still worryingly low. A smart Long-tailed Duck at Rye Harbour on the 3rd continued this species' fine form in the county this winter. Action continued at Pulborough RSPB with 13 Woodlarks on the 4th, while down on the brooks a Hen Harrier was showing up on a daily basis. Also on the 4th, a Black Redstart was in Bognor Regis, and newly-found Siberian Chiffchaffs were to be seen at Iford Brooks and Rye Harbour.

With calm weather finally entering Sussex airspace from the 5th, a nice array of winter species were to be found. Another Black Redstart at Brighton kicked things off; over in the east the flock of 40 White-fronted Geese had been re-found at Pett Level (where a smart drake Goosander was also on show) while the Goosander duo were also still residing at Cuckmere Haven. A Spotted Redshank at Rye Harbour and the usual Merlin were also noteworthy sightings. Over in the west, both Common Sandpipers and Green Sandpipers

were to be found at Shripney Lane (Bognor Regis), and a Hen Harrier was again in the Cissbury Ring area. Last, but not least, a drake Goosander flew over Fishbourne Creek (where the Long-tailed Duck was still in situ).

On the 6th, a pair of Tree Sparrows were located at East Guldeford. It was all rather quiet until a Spoonbill was found at Pulborough Brooks on the 9th, where it was also seen the next day. The arrival of the first of many transatlantic depressions ensured that most sane birders were reserving their energy supplies for the arrival of spring. This resulted in only sporadic sightings, and sadly very few storm-driven birds were to be found seeking shelter on inland water bodies. A Knepp-released White Stork in the Combe Valley on the 16th was grounded due to the high winds. The same could also be said for a drake Red-breasted Merganser at Princes Park (Eastbourne) on the also on the 16th; an unusual location for this species. Up to five Red-breasted Mergansers (increasing to seven on the 21st) were at the typical location of Widewater Lagoon (Lancing) on the 17th, and continuing with the 'sawbill' theme, a pair of Goosanders flew over Bewl Water. The Bittern at Drayton Gravel Pits (Chichester) was being seen on brief occasions. Also, on the Selsey peninsula, a Spoonbill was seen dropping into one of the pools at Medmerry RSPB on the 22nd, and further east a Yellow-legged Gull was at Goring Gap.

Newhaven Tide Mills kept many birders happy during the dull days, as a pair of Short-eared Owls and a Barn Owl were often showing well in the afternoons. Close by, a Great Northern Diver was frequently being sighted in Newhaven Harbour. On the 26th, the reappearance of the Ring Ouzel at Cuckmere Haven was very welcome and a Pale-bellied Brent Goose was discovered at Pulborough Brooks. Slightly more exciting was the discovery of an early arriving Garganey on the brooks there. Nearby, a Goshawk flew over Chanctonbury Ring.

The last day of February was marked by a small arrival of Chiffchaffs on Beachy Head; the six Bewick's Swans were seen to be still residing in the Arun Valley. But the best was saved until last, with a **Puffin** flying west past Selsey Bill that perhaps saved the month for the dedicated seawatchers there.

March

The continuous wet and wild weather continued for a week into March, though thankfully things then calmed down until the end of the month.

Despite a few cold snaps mid-month from the unwelcome, but subsiding, northerly winds, it all started to feel marginally spring like by the last week of March. However there was an even bigger factor that was going to reduce sightings significantly. The spread of coronavirus had got to such an extent that movement restrictions were enforced from the 24th March and therefore restricted the activities of many birders... just in time for spring!

The drake Garganey at Pulborough Brooks (Pale-bellied Brent Goose and three White-fronted Geese also) were the most noteworthy stayovers into March, though the four Scaup were still present at Combe Haven on the 6th. Other species holding on were the Great Northern Diver in Newhaven Harbour, and the Short-eared Owl nearby at Tide Mills. The Hen Harriers in the Arun Valley were also showing regularly between Amberley and Pulborough. Pett Levels held onto the flock of White-fronted Geese, totalling 23 birds mid-way through the month.

On the 3rd, three Hawfinches were in Arundel Park, while the 4th provided an adult **Caspian Gull** in Cuckmere Haven; the long-staying pair of Goosanders were again seen there, together with a good number of Scandinavian Rock Pipits – though mid-March is when the colours start to show on these birds.

A superb count of 285 Sanderlings was made at Littlehampton on the 6th – perhaps a pre-spring gathering? A **Caspian Gull** in Shoreham Harbour on the 7th was one of very few in West Sussex during this first-winter period. A Great Northern Diver flying past Hove on this day was also a good sighting, though the first Willow Warbler of the spring is always a promising sign as one was singing at Arlington Reservoir.

A rare find (and especially so in March) was a **Tundra Bean Goose** on Pevensey Levels on the 8th (two Great White Egrets also present here), a day that also saw a Spoonbill and Great White Egret on Iford Levels. It also transpired that a Common Whitethroat had over-wintered in Haywards Heath, with an individual frequenting a garden for a couple of weeks up to the 8th. The 10th produced a single White-fronted Goose at Arundel WWT, and the next day a possible Garganey was offshore at Church Norton, with 23 Cattle Egrets nearby north of Pagham Harbour. Proceedings soon turned spring-like, as on the 12th the first small arrival of Wheatears for the spring materialised – an individual at Rye Harbour and two birds at Goring Gap. Four hundred Meadow Pipits also arrived in off the sea at Selsey Bill, a species that is normally the first to arrive in good numbers.

Spring finally sprung into action from the 14th as the winds turned to just east of south. A Little Ringed Plover at Medmerry was a sign of things to come. The winds initiated the first push of Brent Geese - commencing their migration with 750 passing Splash Point. However, a further 3000 Brent Geese migrated past Beachy Head the following morning (with seven Garganey also mixed into one of the flocks of Brent), while Selsey Bill logged the first Manx Shearwaters, with eight seen shearing in the moderate south-westerly winds. Other notable additions to the spring arrivals on the 15th were a Swallow flying north at East Preston, a Sand Martin over Pulborough Brooks (with a further three at Waltham Brooks), and a **Glossy Ibis** at Rye Harbour. If this wasn't enough to get the juices flowing, the 16th produced a mass arrival of Wheatears. Many sites in West Sussex recorded numbers into double figures; Selsey Bill alone notching up 15 individuals. Smaller numbers of Wheatears were found at many eastern sites during the day. Also, two **Common Cranes** were tracked from Pett Levels to Beachy Head, and three Garganey arrived at Pagham Harbour and stayed for many days. A Little Ringed Plover at Climping was also a good local record. On the 17th a pair of Garganey flew past Splash Point, but in contrast from the previous day, very few, if any, Wheatears arrived on our shores.

The 18th saw the only 'white-winged gull' of the year thus far when a fine juvenile **Iceland Gull** appeared in the fields at Birling Gap – its stay however was short-lived. The 19th saw two adult Little Gulls grace Pulborough Brooks, whilst the next day a drake Common Scoter at Weir Wood Reservoir was a surprise inland find. The 21st saw yet more Garganey turn up, with a pair on Chichester Gravel Pits and another pair in the Cuckmere Valley. The latter site saw a big increase in Garganey on the 22nd with a group of six, and three Slavonian Grebes were off Fairlight Cliffs. A Little Gull at Weir Wood Reservoir on the 23rd was overshadowed by a good passage of this species the following day when 52 flew past Splash Point (Seaford), and the year's first Arctic Skua and Common Tern here were also making the most of the south-easterly wind. Also on the 24th, four Black-necked Grebes at Arlington Reservoir was an increase of three from the previous day, and two Slavonian Grebes were off Elmer Rocks. A pair of Little Ringed Plovers on a flooded field at Hardham was also a great local record.

The 25th produced a migrating group of four Spoonbills that were first spotted off Elmer Rocks, and then seen past Worthing, Shoreham, Peacehaven and Eastbourne. A **Serin** also flew over Worthing, though the skies were more alive with raptors over the following days. Red Kites were the main feature

along the coastline, and with birders restricted to their gardens due to the virus restrictions, many sightings were received. With eyes to the skies, it was a perfect time for the first Osprey of the spring flying over East Preston on the 26th, with one the following day over Chichester Gravel Pits. Chaffinches were also on the move with a high count of 735 flying east over Hastings. Back to the raptors, the highlight during this phase was a **Black Kite** first spotted over Cuckmere Haven on the 27th, then seen a short while later over Seaford. A Cattle Egret was again at Arundel, while just north of Brighton a male Hen Harrier was seen briefly.

On the 29th a Hobby appeared at Steyning and the 30th produced two Ospreys, with individuals over Petworth and Littlehampton respectively, but by far the largest raptor of the day was a juvenile **White-tailed Eagle** seen at Piddinghamoe. It was feeding on afterbirth for a short period before departing high to the north – this was very likely a Dutch individual from their re-introduction scheme, although southern England had seen a significant increase in eagle sightings during the past few days. The last day of the month featured the first Yellow Wagtail over Littlehampton Golf Course, and another large movement of Chaffinches was occurring over Hastings where 871 were logged flying east.

April

The restrictions that lasted all of April certainly had an effect on the number of species being seen; however, there was daily coverage at the majority of the well-known sites within the county, either by dedicated patch workers, or those who work or live on or close to such reserves. A couple of observers are lucky enough to have properties that also look out over the sea, or at least within a reasonable walking distance, and hence, included within this month's sightings are many seawatching sightings.

With many observers restricted to their gardens, there was a noticeable increase in raptor sightings, especially of Ospreys in the first couple of weeks of the month. However, the enjoyment of many was to visit their local area daily, and this yielded many interesting sightings for those that in the past may have neglected what was just round the corner.

This was one of the driest Aprils on record, and in Sussex, rain fell on only a couple of days towards the end of the month. The anticyclonic conditions did little to ground any incoming passerine migrants, and this month was one of the worst for coastal patch workers hoping to see a 'fall' – in clear weather

our regular summer migrants that migrate at night tend to continue their northbound migration, whereas in dull weather these migrants would be 'grounded' along the coastline. Also, light winds from unfavourable directions meant that seawatching was mostly unproductive throughout, with only two or three days when significant movement was noted. Weather in the southern half of Europe was far from ideal too, and reports of thousands of birds perishing on their migration into, and through Greece, would have also influenced the numbers.

With boredom setting in, many birders turned their attention to the increasingly popular activity of nocturnal migration ("nocmig") sound recording. This relatively new concept has revealed some exciting discoveries in the past, and this month was no exception, though identifying the mysterious nocturnal calls of even the common birds was to pose a challenge.

There were some positives for this month though; there were a minimum of 20 **Hoopoes** sighted across Sussex (the presumption being the majority were different individuals) – the second highest April record for this 'exotic' species.

The month got off to a continental feel with a **Serin** at Bishopstone and a Great White Egret at Pulborough Brooks on the 1st. The 2nd produced the first of many Ospreys, this individual over Storrington, and strangely a Hawfinch was on a garden bird table in Bognor Regis. The 3rd saw a Spoonbill head east over Ovingdean, a Great White Egret west over Patching, and the county's first Cuckoo heard near Barcombe. The influx of **Hoopoes** began on the 4th, with an individual in a Goring garden. Also, on the 4th, a Tree Pipit flew over Cuckmere Haven where the overwintering Ring Ouzel was still present, though the next day a freshly arrived Ring Ouzel was found, with one also close by on Seaford Head. Several nocturnal sound recording sessions across the county (and country) were producing flocks of migrating Common Scoters, no doubt taking advantage of the calm nights during the peak of their migration; saving time and energy by migrating overland at night instead of flying the long coastal route during daylight hours. Most rigs caught up with the inland passage of Common Scoters throughout the first few weeks of April, a call that not many knew of before this month.

The 5th produced an enormous movement of Little Gulls past Splash Point (Seaford) with 487 logged making use of the long-awaited south-easterly winds. Other highlights on this productive seawatch were six Scaup and the

first Arctic Terns of the year. A **Puffin** also flew past Telscombe Cliffs. Over in the west the first Little Terns had also arrived at their (hopefully) breeding grounds at Church Norton. On the 6th a **Serin** flew over Climping and two Cattle Egrets were at the mouth of the River Arun. The first Common Whitethroats and Nightingales were now arriving, although other expected migrants were slow to return; hirundines and Willow Warblers were especially hard to come by, perhaps a result of the inclement weather in southern Europe during this time. By the end of the month it was apparent that this had been a very poor April for Willow Warblers, and other common migrants in general. A **Hoopoe** at Fairlight on the 8th was another garden bird. Later that evening, the nocturnal sound recording came up trumps at Pulborough Brooks, where a male **Spotted Crane** was heard 'singing'; however, there were no further sounds from this bird that night, but certainly this was an exciting occurrence of this very scarce county bird. Another **Hoopoe** at Cooden Beach on the 9th showed well for one lucky observer, with yet another at West Chiltington. Also on the 9th there was a beautiful male Pied Flycatcher at Birdham.

A male **Serin** flew through Cow Gap, Beachy Head on the 10th, and nearby a staggering count of 15 **Water Pipits** was made at West Rise Marsh, with ten of these birds seen flying off high to the south-east and presumably bound for the continent. Nine Crossbills over Fairlight was also the start of a small movement for this species. The 11th produced a brief **Hoopoe** sighting at Arlington Reservoir, the first Whinchat at Medmerry RPSB, a Short-eared Owl in off the sea at Southwick and lastly a Spoonbill over East Preston. At an interesting time of year for migrating wildfowl, it is surprising that a Ruddy Shelduck at Pulborough Brooks triggered little interest, though being up the valley from Arundel WWT certainly doesn't help matters, though it would certainly be interesting to know the origins of these birds. On the 15th, news from Dorset paid dividends in alerting observers at Splash Point to an eastbound Pomarine Skua that was then seen past there a few hours later. A single Cattle Egret at Rye Harbour on this day is also noteworthy due to the fact this species is still a relatively scarce affair in the east of the county.

On the 16th, an adult **Iceland Gull** off Shoreham was a typical April sighting, and this bird was also later seen flying past Splash Point. The fourth **Serin** this month flew over Southwick and a male Pied Flycatcher was in a garden at Bracklesham. A **Red-rumped Swallow** at Piddinghoe Pond on the 17th was a typical record for the county, and a few hours later a **Hoopoe** was also seen here and may have remained for a few days after. Two Swifts over Bevendean

were the county's first for the year, and a lovely summer-plumaged Cattle Egret was in the Cuckmere Valley. A Black Tern was at Weir Wood Reservoir on the 19th and the next day a **Hoopoe** was at Newhaven Tide Mills, while the first returning Turtle Dove was spotted at Selsey Bill. Staying in the Selsey area, perhaps the highlight of the month was seen by one lucky observer on the 23rd when an adult **White-winged Black Tern** flew past not too far offshore, some half a mile to the west of the 'bill'. Sadly, for those seawatching further east, the bird did not pass, and was strangely not seen again, presumably having flown back out to sea. Six Pomarine Skuas flew past Splash Point and two Pied Flycatchers were in the Combe Valley.

On the 24th, a steady trickle of Pomarine Skuas were now on show for those lucky enough to be near the sea, with three off Selsey Bill and ten off Ovingdean. Another Turtle Dove was at Church Norton providing hope that there may be some positive news for this species in Sussex this year. That evening, another 'nocmig' session produced a Stone-curlew flying over a garden in Ovingdean. Again, at Ovingdean, on the 25th a **Hoopoe** flew west, and another was at Kingston near Lewes. A flock of eight Pomarine Skuas flew past Birling Gap on the 26th, this proving to be the largest flock of this enigmatic seabird this month. An adult male **Red-footed Falcon** was reported on Pevensey Levels on the 27th. Also on the 27th, a Great White Egret was seen flying distantly off Medmerry RPSB, but the best heron of all was on the 29th when an adult **Purple Heron** flew south at Arlington Reservoir. A Long-eared Owl was another excellent sighting as one flew in off the sea at Shoreham, and another six Pomarine Skuas flew past Ovingdean. The last day of the month saw an immature Spoonbill gracing Pulborough Brooks, where two Garganey also spent the day.

This report was compiled by Matt Eade

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 **bold print** must be accompanied by a full description. Description forms can be downloaded from the SOS website.

A better way to count?

By Chris Bird and Hew Prendergast

A huge flock of Jackdaws wheeling above the Buckhurst estate at Withyham on 10th January 2020 makes no obvious connection with the Laboratory for Computational Longitudinal Neuroimaging at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But that's what happened, thanks to CB spotting a post made by HP on the SOS Recent Sightings page on 11th January in which the latter wrote, after noting the large numbers of Ravens (up to 39): "Buckhurst also hosts an astonishing number of Jackdaws; I estimated ca 1800 a few days ago but now need to work out how to count tiny specks in some photos I took - perhaps by somehow applying grid-lines to jpegs. Any hints?"

The camera used was a Panasonic Lumix with its standard lens (so, nothing special at all) and the birds were about 300m away to the west viewed against a background of clouds alone. On a PC HP blew up the series of jpegs, cropped the best of them to remove its bird-empty edges, and then converted them to pdfs. Zooming 400% into the pdf and using the drawing functions (lines and dots) allowed the picture to be subdivided into small blocks, each of whose darkish, usually horizontal dashes representing birds could then be counted, albeit painstakingly, over about 30 minutes. This brought up a total of 2,248 birds.

For some time CB had been experimenting with an automatic dot counting programme, DotCount, developed at MIT and available at <http://reuter.mit.edu/software/dotcount/> (the files need to be unzipped but not installed). On the Recent Sightings page on 26 January he showed its application to a count of a flock (648 dots/birds) of Linnets. But how did DotCount deal with the Jackdaws?

The program works by thresholding an image into black and white regions and then counting the number of dots. This works well if the birds are dark against a relatively uniform light background. If there

are other features in the image, they may need to be cropped out or erased. If, as in the case of the Jackdaws, the birds are photographed against a dramatic sky, where some regions of cloud are as dark as the faintest birds, then these dark regions either need to be cropped or the whole image can be “high-pass” filtered. This has the effect of retaining the sharp details – the birds – while flattening the slowly changing background. Such filtering can be carried out in Photoshop or similar programs.

In this case, CB filtered the jpeg, set the detection parameters for counting dots (i.e. Jackdaws) to a minimum size of around 3 and a maximum of around 300 (these are adjustable on a scale in DotCount) and reached a figure of around 1990. Using the same threshold HP got 1847 but on lowering the minimum to 1 got to 2247 – almost exactly the same as the count by eye! Reducing the maximum from 300 to 60 resulted in 2188 detectable dots/Jackdaws, proportionately a small difference.

Once one’s practiced with DotCount it can take just seconds to count dots on a photo. Even though Jackdaws, being quite large and dark, probably make ideal subjects, those at Buckhurst were taken with an ordinary camera lens and were a long way away – perhaps no smaller pixel-wise than the closer Linnets in CB’s picture. Further trials would be useful, for example for flocks too large to count easily (for example gulls, waders or even Brighton’s Starlings) and, just as importantly, to do so accurately. With time, perhaps, cameras and DotCount (or any similar software) could become as crucial for census work as they already are for species verification.

See photos on the following page -

A: a part of HP’s original photo.

B: the “flattened” version.

C: the thresholded version that DotCount uses.



Field outings reports - February & March

By Mark Wright (outings organiser)

Unfortunately, this quarters' outings programme was severely curtailed. Bad weather caused the postponement of the Dungeness outing and the cancellation of the visit to Itchenor planned for 21st February. Then, during March, it became obvious that the programme could not be continued under the restrictions imposed by HM Government.

5th February 2020 - Cuckmere Haven

Spring-like weather brought out an unusually large flock of 20 SOS members for this mid-week walk led by Chris Barfield; it also brought out a variety of birds in good numbers and showed them off at their best. Around the car park, Greenfinches, Great Tits and Chaffinches were in song, Little Grebes were on the water close by, and a flock of around 20 Long-tailed Tits were foraging. The fields nearby produced good views of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Shelduck, and along the path down to the sea, singing Skylarks and Meadow and Rock Pipits were noted as well as more common passerines. The gull roost in the fields at the southern end of the Haven was conveniently split into three sections – mixed Common and Black-headed, Herring, and Greater Black-backed. In the last group a solitary Lesser Black-backed Gull was picked out, very helpfully standing at the extreme end of the flock and clearly showing its yellow legs and smaller size. A Barnacle Goose was also found among the many Canadas. A noisy group of Oystercatchers was seen; also a small flock of Curlews.

A piece of luck followed when one of the group picked up a Whatsapp message from a birder on the other side of the river to say that there were two Goosanders and a Red-breasted Merganser on the scrape (thanks Liam Curson!). Good scope views of them, together with an Egyptian Goose, were obtained from the hill by the cottages.

Walking over to Hope Gap, excellent views of Fulmars and a Raven were enjoyed, and on the way back a few members glimpsed a Kingfisher, bringing the outing total to 53 species.

7th March 2020 - Dungeness

Postponed from 15th February, the Dungeness walk returned to normal service as 17 members met Derek Barber and Mike Scott-Ham at the Old Lighthouse, under far better skies than the originally planned date. Within seconds of arrival Derek had found a Peregrine, while other species found at the start included Pied Wagtail, Skylark, a murmuration of Starlings, Meadow Pipit, Reed Bunting, Chaffinch and Dunnock.

Scanning the bay showed up plenty of Red-throated Divers heading parallel to the shore in one direction or the other and at various heights and distance. A Gannet was seen well out to sea; later on another was seen much closer inshore, while a Harbour Porpoise and a curious Grey Seal also appeared. A reported Glaucous Gull made the party work hard for a sighting; a long trudge across the shingle gave distant views of the bird among a raft of gulls off shore – where there was also a Guillemot and a Great Crested Grebe. A large group of Turnstones were seen on the shingle.

Moving on to the ARC hide, views of a Red-necked Grebe were enjoyed; a couple of Mediterranean Gulls, a male Goldeneye and plenty of Shoveler, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Coot and a sprinkling of Gadwall were around, while there were some Oystercatchers on the pontoon. Moving to the screen hide there was a small roving band of Long-tailed Tits and a Grey Heron doing very little it seemed, while on the water beyond were a group of Black-headed Gulls and a few Common Gulls. At the main reserve feeders was a fine male Greenfinch and there were of course Blue and Great Tits, Chaffinches, Reed Buntings and House Sparrows.

For those who lazily had a coffee in the visitor centre there were good views of beautifully plumaged Teal but at the next hide everyone had splendid views of a male Firecrest. Water levels were high, so there was little space on small islands or trees; in these conditions Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls, plus Herring Gulls and Cormorants dominated the scene at this point, but on the water there were a small number of Pochard and three Goldeneye that attracted amused speculation about their relationship!

Heading to Denge Marsh, Shelducks and Lapwings were seen. Mike was determined to find a Water Pipit, so a search was made, first picking up a group of male Reed Buntings with a single female before finally finding the quarry, a number of which had infiltrated a restless group of Meadow Pipits. One gave particularly good views as it investigated a long section of mud in the open. A Great White Egret and a female Marsh Harrier were also seen on the Marsh. After much banter about the teasing nature of Cetti's Warblers, not one but two gave some members at the viewpoint a prolonged view! At the end of the walk most should have had around 58 species for this walk.

21st March 2020 - Old Lodge

In the spirit of the idea that "...being outside and active remains positive for our physical and mental health, and birds are a source of hope and inspiration for many" (BTO message) four members met Mark Wright in the car park at Old Lodge and set off in a reasonably socially distanced sort of way. Just within the reserve a Robin dropped down from a Holly bush but other than that, only a busy solitary Coal Tit, two Long-tailed Tits, a few Goldfinches and a single Carrion Crow were found.

To the leader's relief, the first of the resident Stonechat pairs were seen, followed by brief appearances of a Wren and a Treecreeper. A view of a distant Kestrel was immediately followed by the appearance of two larger raptors – a Red Kite and a Common Buzzard which took exception to the Kite's presence. Then three Ravens arrived on the scene, one of which was carrying something in its beak that caused speculation but not resolution despite the birds crossing first one way and then the other in front of the group.

Mark had just said "I think I heard a snatch of Woodlark song" when one leapt up and sang skyward from the ground and gave excellent, though brief, views. On the edge of the military training ground, two Great Tits were found together with a Jay. A little further on three overflying Herring Gull appeared and a small flock of, more by process of elimination than great views, Redwing. Overall a tally of 21 with pleasant company and sourced "hope and inspiration" (BTO again).



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Back cover: Sparrowhawk, March 2020 [Bob Eade]

