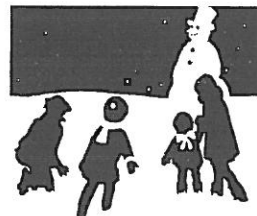


ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY

An Occasional Newsletter



December 2006

Number 12

A Merry Christmas to all our members!

I hope everyone has enjoyed the past year's talks and outings. The lectures have been varied and of a general high standard and we have had some excellent photography to illustrate the talks. Peter Harvey, our speaker in November, showed us some brilliant slides of different species of bees and wasps but it was disturbing to hear how their habitat was being destroyed and contributing to the decline of so many wild species.

The talk in September by Jonathan Smith on Tollesbury Wick Nature Reserve was followed by a very enjoyable visit to the Reserve and a guided tour by Jonathan himself. Our group of about 21 members arrived at the 600 acre EWT Reserve to see a sky of swirling Golden Plovers, under which circled a large number of Lapwings. Two Goldfinches rested on a nearby branch. In a nearby field a hardy British breed of cattle (known as the Crofter's Cow) were grazing the marshes, the flat grass then encouraging the Brent Geese and Plovers to "move in". Many Widgeon which are a grazing duck were amongst the Brent Geese. Also grazing the marshes were a "flying" flock of sheep, so called because they were often sent elsewhere to graze in order to encourage birdlife. A Stonechat was observed amongst the reeds alongside the borrowdyke, also a Reed Bunting.

Most of our members walked almost the length of the public footpath along the sea wall, and in the distance could be seen many Avocets, Shelduck, Bar-tailed Godwits, Grey Plovers, Dunlin, Pintails and one single Cormorant. Our guide explained that there were as many as 100 Avocets in the breeding season. There was a cold wind blowing as the Estuary was approached and some members eventually turned back, making haste for lunch at a local hostelry! Others continued on the circular walk around the Marshes. For those who didn't make the round trip I am sure they will return another time to see the coastal grazing marshes which supports such a variety of wildlife.

CALIFORNIAN HOLIDAY September 2006:



Marbled Godwits on a N. Californian beach

On our second visit to California David and I travelled further north along the Pacific coast heading towards Portland, Oregon. The prettily marked wading birds in the photograph were so tame they would allow joggers to move around amongst them. There must have been a dozen or so of them probing the sand with their long beaks, their heads almost lost in the sand before extracting a tiny crab or other tasty morsel. Semi-palmated Plovers also allowed us to walk right up to them. Looking out to sea there were Pelicans in a "Fly-past" formation! Also there were Cormorants (Double-crested and Brandt's) on the rocks, and seals, their heads bobbing in the water.

A walk to an Estuary revealed a Black Phoebe (Flycatcher family) and the swift flight of a Belted Kingfisher – these latter birds were used by Indians in past centuries. They put dead Kingfishers round their necks in the belief that it would enhance their speed of flight when in danger, but alas many Indians died. We saw the Northern Harrier – once known as the Marsh Hawk and very similar to our own Marsh Harrier. Upon reaching the estuary we spotted an Osprey, and in the distance close to the sea were a colony of Brown Pelicans, in the midst of which towered a magnificent American White Pelican. This huge bird has a wing span of 8 ft. and length 5 ft. 2 in.

Some other interesting birds were Black Oystercatchers, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt and many American Avocets (these birds have pink plumage around their necks), Great Egrets (wingspan 4 ft. 3 ins.) and Snowy Egrets (wingspan 3 ft. 2 ins.), and attractive White Crowned Sparrows. There were coastal nesting colonies of Common Murres making their purring sound. Another bird which can be seen in California due to its Warm Temperate Climate is the Hummingbird. These tiny birds can change their body temperature to conserve energy on cooler nights, and in order to survive they have to eat half their body weight of nectar per day.

In the Point Reyes National Seashore there was a herd of Tule Elk amongst which were three bulls. State Parks were once victims of increased hunting in the Gold Rush period and only a handful of these elk survived (maybe just two). Now they are saved from extinction and there are more than 3,000 in 20 separate herds.

Tanya Welford

MORE TREES FOR ONGAR

A Community Tree Strategy already exists for Theydon Bois, Roydon and Stapleford Abbotts – now it is Ongar's turn! Several Committee meetings plus one Public Meeting have already been held and with the help of the Epping Forest District Council a Tree Strategy document is in the process of being produced. This document will provide an assessment of the treescape of the parish in its historical, physical, social and cultural context, with guidance to its care and future management. The document will consist of maps of key sites within the Parish marking topography, geology and local soils. Upon completion of the document the aim of the Strategy will be to look to the future with regard to the care of existing trees, replanting areas where trees have been lost in the past and planting of trees near the town, in the side road areas and within new housing developments. It is so important to preserve the trees we have in Ongar and to enhance the future landscape. It is hoped that OWLS will be able to help in this venture initially by completing the questionnaire given out at our last meeting, and in the future in some other way with regard to the key aims of the Strategy. Tricia Moxey is Chairman of the Steering Committee and several of our members represent OWLS on that Committee. We will keep you informed of all progress.

REMINDERS FOR 2007!

Field Study Courses: It is time for booking courses again. The Field Studies Council have sent me the programme for 2007. Their courses are excellent and are organized throughout the country and in Scotland. The closest to us are the one day courses held at the Epping Forest Conservation Centre. There are also organized walks which are less expensive but equally as enjoyable. If you have not seen a brochure displayed at our meetings, then Tanya has the details and please telephone her on 01277 363947.

New Year's Party – Saturday, 13th January, 2007 at 7.30 p.m. at Great Stony School: If you have not already bought your ticket, Tanya has these for sale at £5 each. It's a good way to start the New Year and with plenty of good food, flowing wine and maybe a fun quiz or amusing competition, this social event has always been a success!

2007 Programme: If you do not have a 2007 Programme yet then the speakers for the early part of the year are as follows:

Monday, 15th January: Birds of Prey – Back from the Brink by Julian Hughes (RSPB)
Julian Hughes is Head of Species Conservation.

Monday, 19th February: The Wild Tigers of Ranthambhore by Micky Andrews.

Monday, 19th March: Secret Lives of more British Birds by Mike Logan Wood.

Monday, 16th April: Plant Life – Wild Plant Conservation by Mary Smith (Essex Field Club).

Monday, 21st May: Chafford Gorges – A New Reserve in Essex by Adam Rochester (EWT Warden).

If you have any ideas for future speakers or outings, then please contact our Programme Secretary, Alan Cook on 01277 899240.

Also if you would like to write a short article in the Newsletter, maybe about your holiday, or even about the wildlife you may have spotted on a local walk, or any other item of news, then please send this to Tanya Welford at 46 Kettlebury Way, Ongar, Essex CM5 9EX.

BUSTARDS RETURN AFTER 170 YEARS

Great Bustards, the heaviest flying birds in the world, have settled in Britain more than 170 years after they died out here. Conservationists said that at least a quarter of the 33 birds released on Salisbury Plain last year had survived the winter. Six have returned to the area. At least four more have been spotted but it is not known whether they have settled in Britain or France. The birds died out in Britain in 1832 because of hunting and habitat disturbance.

THE CHRISTMAS ROBIN

It is good news that the milder winters mean there is less threat to the survival of the UK's favourite bird, the Robin. The red breast of the Robin is at its brightest around Christmas time and they are particularly chirpy as apparently their courtship period starts in early January ready for breeding in March. Robins first appeared on Christmas cards as a representation of Victorian postmen who wore red tunics and were known as "redbreasts". To help the Robin survive the winter, don't forget to put out **mealworms** on the birdtable as this is their favourite treat. They also enjoy meaty kitchen scraps, fat, cheese, cake, biscuit crumbs and dried fruit, but any unsalted peanuts should be shredded and crushed.

The Committee wish all the members a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

OWLS Committee:

Rob Brooks (Chairman) Tel. 01277 364305
 Tanya Welford (Secretary) Tel. 01277 363947
 John Turnbull (Treasurer)
 Allan Cook (Programme Secretary)
 Anne Brooks
 Richard Cook
 Mike Devonald
 Rosina Lacombe
 Christine Feetham.

Rob Brooks
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