



## Spring 2010 Chairman's Notes

Malcolm has now stepped down from the Chair after his three year stint and he is to be congratulated on a very productive period during which the Society has joined the modern electronic era.

We now have a comprehensive website which is full of information and interest and is linked to other societies – we must not be insular. As writer, editor, compiler and cajoler for items for the newsletter Malcolm has worked tirelessly to produce a little gem every four months. It has always been a pleasure to read but presentation has improved and the photography is eye catching. In the last few months we have been able to purchase a digital projector and laptop which are open to all members to use. All this could not have been achieved without the support which Brenda has given and, oh yes, they do the raffle, too!

Malcolm has been a patient Chairman of the committee and Brenda avidly takes the minutes; and how she so accurately précis all those words I shall never know. Thank goodness she's agreed to continue. Although relinquishing the Chair he will still carry on with the newsletter and the website and he was elected as Vice-chairman, too. So on behalf of all members I give Malcolm our thanks and wish him all the best with his new freedom!

*David Leader*

### Message from Retiring Chairman

As David has said in his kind words above I have now stepped down from the chairman's role and he has been elected as the new chairman, a position for which I know he is ideally suited. I am also glad to say that he will continue to take responsibility for arranging our programme of events as he has done so capably for a number of years now, ably assisted by Jeff Benn.

I have to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed my time as Chairman and I am pleased to say that I shall continue to serve the society in the role of Vice Chairman I would like to thank all those members of the committee who have assisted me over the past three years without who we could not have achieved anything. I wish David all the best in his new role.

*Malcolm Randle*

## Features

### Spring Ducks

It is that time of year when we can see the signs of winter ending and spring around the corner. The Snowdrops are in full bloom, the first daffodils have appeared, new growth is peeping out of the soil, birds have started courting and even nest building. However, Shelia and I have an extra indicator, because at this time of year a trio of ducks appear in our garden and make themselves at home. They don't nest here, possibly because we have a dog, and we have no water other than two shallow bird baths, so we don't know what attracts them, but they are always welcome visitors.

They have come every year, since we moved to Tiverton and we do wonder if it is the same birds. One male is white and easily recognised but the others have normal Mallard plumage. This white male is always seen with another male all through the year on the canal, but they only appear as a trio from February through to October. One day we may find out whether it



Our trio – (photo Peter Richardson)

One day we may find out whether it

is the same female each time. The males are both very attentive and work as a team, with one always on guard while the other one and the female feed or sleep. This year they appeared on the 6th of March.

*Peter Richardson*

## Starling Roost

Like many people I have always wanted to see one of the large Starling roosts that are featured so often in wildlife programmes, hankering to see the giant flocks of birds wheeling round in marvellous loops and swirls before funnelling down to bed down for the night in distant reed beds.

At the beginning of February I was able to watch the start of a roost on a farm near Hartland, North Devon but it was completely different to what I expected to see.

This roost is mainly in a very large cattle shed in the middle of a busy farmyard, with several self catering cottages in the building complex. When I say in a cattle shed I mean just that, the birds roost on every rafter, beam, or nook and cranny near the roof. They also cover all the rails of the cattle stalls, both those at shoulder height and those two feet off the ground, the overflow roost on the backs of cattle or on the few surrounding trees around the perimeter of the yard.



**Farm Roost** (photo Peter Richardson)

The rather poor photographs I took were at about 3.30pm and there were about 2000 birds present. The noise was enormous from the cottage, only 20 yards from the cattle shed. My daughter estimated that the total roost was between 5000 and 6000 birds and before they settled for the night, the cacophony was ten times the level I had heard earlier.

The flock did take off and fly around before roosting but stayed at low level and never demonstrated the aerial ballet which we have all come to expect.

*Peter Richardson*

## The Birdmen of Aswan

In January Brenda and I fulfilled a long held ambition, namely to visit the fantastic archeological sites of Egypt. Our visit commenced at Luxor, previously known as Thebes, on the River Nile. We arrived there in the late evening of 18<sup>th</sup> January and boarded our Nile cruise ship which was like a small floating hotel. The first two nights were spent moored at Luxor whilst we visited as many of the temples and tombs that could be fitted into the time available.

We had done some research on what wildlife we might expect to see and knew that crocodiles and hippos can now only be found above the Aswan High Dam about 135 miles to the south so our expectations were confined to birds, insects, plants and maybe the odd reptile or mammal. In the shrubs and trees adjacent to our mooring were numerous House sparrows and a few of the pretty little Palm doves which are known as Laughing doves in other parts of Africa. Hooded crows were quite common and the occasional Black kite was also seen. Most fascinating were the Pied kingfishers who liked to use the mooring ropes of the boats to take off for their fishing sorties which they performed by hovering about 15 feet above the water before plunging in. We had hoped see Nile-valley sunbirds, Hoopoes and bee-eaters around some of the temples but we only saw more sparrows and some swallows.



**Pied Kingfisher hovering**

(all photos in this article by Malcolm Randle)

At midday on the 20<sup>th</sup> we set out on our cruise up the Nile. As we had anticipated it is a very beautiful river with its lush green tropical growth along each bank. The sand and red rock formations of the Sahara Desert make a striking backdrop and because of the deep blue sky the water is almost always a brilliant blue in colour. At Luxor it is probably about half a mile wide but this varies according to the terrain so widens out in the flatter areas becoming narrower in the more rocky areas. The vegetation tends to follow a similar pattern being cultivated with banana and sugar plantations and other crops in the wider areas and with trees, mostly date palms but also some acacia along most of the banks.



**Cormorants and Grey Heron on typical Nile islet**

The Nile has many islands, some quite large with trees and shrubs whilst others were not much more than a large rock or sandbank. On many of these islands or islets were to be seen groups of Cormorants, Egrets and Grey herons. Some Glossy ibis and Black-winged stilts with the occasional Squacco heron were also seen whilst Pied kingfishers were fairly common, either perched on logs or small rocks and shrubs at the edges of the river or hovering and plunging for fish. We stopped for the night at Edfu, about half way to Aswan, and the following day, after a visit to the Temple of Horus continued on our way. The weather was superb with a pleasant breeze, temperature around 22C and very low humidity and sitting on the open deck as we glided along was wonderfully relaxing. We finally arrived at Aswan in the late evening having seen much the same in the way of birds and other wildlife but we had also seen several Egyptian geese (nice to know that they actually *do* reside there) and quite a lot of ducks, which included Teal, Shovellers and Ferruginous ducks. The latter were quite striking, like a Pochard in some respects but with most of the plumage a beautiful ruddy colour and the upper parts black. They also have a white eye instead of red. In fact it used to be known as the White-eyed pochard and they are of the same family *Aythya*. Although not a British species they do occasionally appear during winter months and some were seen at Chew Magna Lake in Somerset during March. Apart from the Black kites the only other raptor we had seen up to this point was an occasional Marsh harrier.

The



**Cattle Egret**

city of Aswan, which is in the Nubian part of Egypt, is built on the east bank of the river and located at the beginning of the first cataract. There are two dams across the Nile here, the first built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the famous High Dam which is about five miles further up and completed in the late 1960s. Our first day at Aswan started with an early morning trip to view the High Dam which was indeed very impressive. The lake created by the dam, Lake Nasser, is the world's largest artificial lake at 2,030 sq miles and a maximum depth of 590 feet (average 83 feet). It is home to many Nile crocodiles and hippopotami as well as numerous fish which include the predatory Nile perch, Tiger fish and Cat fish all of which can be huge. We didn't spend long there so did not see anything of Lake Nasser itself. There are numerous islands at Aswan some situated between the two dams but many more to the north of the old dam. The rest of the morning involved two boat trips for sightseeing purposes and from which we saw numerous egrets, terns and gulls. Also there were trees full of Little egrets and Grey herons and the occasional Cattle egret. Everything we had heard about Aswan being one of the most beautiful locations on the Egyptian Nile, proved to be correct.

Although the morning's itinerary had been amazing it was after lunch that we went on the trip that proved to be most delightful. We were taken by boat to an island generally known as Kitchener's Island (but now renamed as Plantation Island) situated in the middle of the Nile. The island was presented to Lord Kitchener in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reward for his part in the Sudan campaign. He had a passion for exotic plants and flowers from around the world (an unlikely contrast to his military reputation) and had planted a collection of these on the island and it is now a splendid botanical garden with an extensive collection. Our guide, a young local man, introduced himself as Deya and told us that he was both a botanist and an ornithologist so that he would also be showing us some of the birds on our journey. He said that first he would show us an Osprey which was one of several that wintered in the

locality. Sure enough, as we approached a tall post which seemed to be some sort of navigational aid, there perched on the top was a magnificent Osprey. This was apparently its favourite perch and clearly an excellent vantage point for any bird of prey, especially one whose diet was fish. We did a circuit of the post to get some photos whilst the Osprey watched us but made no attempt to move.

We spent about an hour on this delightful island which was absolutely full of the most beautiful tropical plants and trees. These included bougainvilleas, poinsettias, hibiscus, bottle brush, flame trees, acacia trees, mimosa and mangoes all planted in shady avenues and a very pleasant contrast to the busy streets of Aswan. Although there were birds there we did not see anything we had not already seen. On leaving the island we then spent about  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour exploring the shores of the river which, where they are not rocky are lined with reeds, bamboo and rushes and Deya pointed out some of the birds to be found there. He knew exactly where to find a Night heron in its well hidden day roost, also a Green striated heron both of which are very secretive birds.



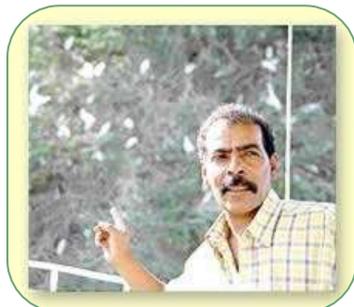
The Osprey



Senegal Thick-knee

On a rocky outcrop were a small number of Senegal Thick-knees, very similar in appearance and of the same family as the Stone curlew *Burhinidae*. (There are nine species in this family which are spread pretty well worldwide). For sheer spectacular colour the Purple Gallinules were outstanding. They are in the same family as Moorhens *Rallidae* (rails) of which there were also quite a number in evidence. Gallinules are found, with regional variations, in many parts of the world. At Aswan they are a resident breeding bird and also known as the African Purple Swamphen. We were able to get very close to them as they were not at all bothered by our presence. A Marsh Harrier was continually flying over us whilst along the shores the Pied kingfishers were very active. Seen on some sandbanks were several Black-winged stilts, plus Redshanks and also some Spur-winged plovers who often perform a service for crocodiles by removing parasites

from their mouths although there were none here to be serviced. An interesting tern with a very thick bill was pointed out, this being a Gull-billed tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*. As well as the thicker bill it has broader wings and a more gull like flight than most other terns. They are occasionally spotted in the UK and have been seen at Bowling Green Marsh the last sighting being on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2009. Another tern that seemed to be fairly common was the White-winged black tern. As we headed back to our own boat towards the end of a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon Deya pointed out another boat with a party of people being taken on a bird watching trip. He said that the guide was his father, Mohamed Arabi, who had started the bird watching excursions many years before and was known locally as the 'Birdman of Aswan'. Deya said his father had taught him all he knew about the birds and plants of the area.



Mohamed Arabi  
The Birdman of Aswan



Purple gallinule

The following day an optional visit to the famous monuments and temple of Abu Simbel was scheduled (the one that was dismantled and moved so that the Aswan High dam could be built). This was to involve a 4.30am start and a 180 mile journey across the desert in convoy (for security reasons) returning by midday. We decided that this was

one trip we could opt out of and we would spend the morning in a more leisurely fashion at Aswan so we asked our tour manager if he could arrange something for us, preferably involving a boat trip and wildlife. Therefore,

at 10am we were picked up from our boat by, much to our delight, Mohamed Arabi. He told us that he was going to take us to a little Nubian type farm where we would see Hoopoes and bee-eaters and other birds but on the way we would also look for whatever else we could see. On the way to his boat he pointed some of the more unusual plants growing beside our mooring spot. On the way to the farm he soon found the hiding places of the Green striated heron and the Night heron of which we got very clear views of both.



**Green Striated heron**

some more juveniles. We were invited to hold one, which we happily did but very firmly! It felt fairly strong although it was quite cool and didn't seem to mind being held as it didn't really struggle. The location of the farm about 75 feet above the river afforded the most beautiful views over it and everywhere there were colourful flowers as well as mango and lemon trees. It was very quiet and peaceful with only a couple of other visitors there. Mohamed conducted us around the farm which was really just a smallholding with vegetables and some sugar cane growing. He showed us a flock of goats in excellent condition of which he was obviously very fond and then gave us a cup of Nubian coffee which was very aromatic laced with herbs and ginger. The extent of the cultivated area extended only about 400 yards from the shore of the river where the Sahara desert then swept down to meet it. Close to the sugar cane which seemed to be growing out of pure sand - certainly there was no sign of any wet area - were quite a lot of dragonflies mostly a large green hawkler species flying very fast and not settling at all. There were also a few brown darter types which were settling on the ground allowing at least one decent photo to be taken. In the



**Masked shrike**



**Little Green bee-eater**

same spot there were some colourful butterflies but they also did not settle so could not be identified. Nearby were a couple of tethered camels quietly browsing some tall grasses. There were several Hoopoes around mostly feeding on the ground and making their quiet little *hoop hoop hoop* calls but one was picking out insects from an old tree stump. Whilst watching this a Masked shrike settled on a nearby branch and stayed long enough to enable a photo to be taken. Mohamed had promised that we would see bee-eaters and true to his word he suddenly said that he could hear them and took us to a spot near where we had seen the dragonflies where a pair of Little green bee-eaters had landed on some power lines. They were a brilliant iridescent green with a broad black eye-stripe below which there was a turquoise flash and a pale yellow area beneath the wings. Whilst watching these a Reed warbler landed nearby and it would have been difficult to find a greater contrast.

All too soon it was time to leave. We could have happily remained for the whole day but we had to be back on our Nile cruiser in time to commence our return journey to Luxor at 1pm. As we were leaving Aswan we saw a solitary White pelican standing by the reed beds of the shore, the only one seen on our visit. As scheduled we finished our stay in Egypt with three nights in Cairo beside the Pyramids returning to a wet cold but lovely England late on 28<sup>th</sup> January. We had seen a total of at least 41 species of birds and despite all the other amazing sights we had seen, the time spent with the *Birdmen of Aswan*, Mohamed Arabi and his son Deya, featured very much amongst the highlights of our stay in Egypt.

*Malcolm and Brenda Randle*

## The Life and Afterlife of an Oak Tree

“Why do you have to cut them down?” came the strident cry from the back.

I was a small part of Ralph’s “Reflections” evening a couple of years ago and was showing the sawing and felling of a 100 year old oak – part of an oak thinning of 30 odd trees at Hazel’s Lodge woods. Gnarled, but with a decent stem, and covered in ivy it smashed to the ground, victim to the destructive power of a forester’s chainsaw. A squirrel leapt from the upper branches when it was three quarters of the way down. Doris witnessed its hurried departure to a neighbouring tree and I, on the opposite side with the camera, saw nothing of this. I could only explain to the meeting with words not film but, while amusing, it did not detract the questioner. Murmurs of support arose.

I explained the benefits of opening up the canopy for adjacent oaks to spread and begin to fulfil their potential; to plants on the ground of sunlight at last and allowing new germination around the previously heavily shaded trunk and spread area. I showed a selection of 17 plants and grasses which had grown in the first summer within a ten foot radius of the trunk and would continue to thrive and multiply in their new found freedom. The smaller branches of each tree (6 inch diameter and less) were piled to nature and provided accommodation and food for a host of minibeasts and fungi; quite a heap from a large tree. There was hope that the fallen seed from some of the oaks would gain sufficient security from red deer to enable the saplings to grow to six feet or more, a height at which the top is too tall to nibble and ruin. 38 piles can do a lot for wildlife. The timber itself was being put to good use. It had been milled and was to be used for local construction.

Ian Mawby, at Brompton Regis, has since built a 2 storey oak framed timber workshop. He has painstakingly milled, jointed, carved and erected everything himself. He makes furniture, very good furniture, and teaches others to learn and attain the same standard – a very patient man.

My own efforts, for an open sided green oak barn, stopped short of building it myself. Very short in fact – just pen-pushing design; although I did cut and haul the western red cedar which was to be the cladding for the roof. But there is a hitch in everything and I miscalculated the thickness necessary for the boards and the amount of waste involved in the milling. The result was only half a roof. I cut the remainder, and more than enough, at the end of last year and the barn was thankfully completed during that wonderful spell of dry weather at the beginning of March. The surplus remains, so there will be enough for a couple of hides by late summer – ready to watch the rut, perhaps; and you’re welcome too.

A vibrant green life can turn into a grey lustre, a portrait in still life, but with almost unending duration, far longer than the original span. Is all killing bad? Is the questioner convinced?

*David Leader*

## Roliphants Report April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010

The first 3 months of this year have been extraordinary. Snowdrops (in profusion by the River Lowman here) were at their best at the end of February whilst daffodils struggled to appear above ground let alone flower until after the middle of March. Spring is indeed slow to arrive and this has noticeably affected our frog and toad migration and spawning which is a particular interest of mine so most of this report will focus on them.

The first frog spawn appeared on February 26<sup>th</sup>.and over the next 2 weeks the majority was being laid in field flood pools and tractor ruts, in spite of the proximity of the usual spawning ponds. Here the likelihood of drying out or freezing [we had heavy frosts then]posed a serious risk to survival and necessitated the transfer of over 200 clumps of spawn to the usual pond sites. Spawning continued throughout March slackening off towards the end and overlapping with toad migration and spawning. To my relief most of the later spawn was deposited in the usual ponds and altogether this has been an abundant season here.

These observations put frog spawning some four weeks late on most years .Frog spawn is easiest to collect and transfer within 48 hours of being laid before it has swollen too much and can more readily be scooped up without falling apart. Salvaging spawn is a valuable conservation endeavour, and also reveals the activities of the local predators to whom the frog is



**Mating toads at Roliphants**

Photo by Alan Hopkins

a welcome dietary addition.

What then of the toads? Toad migration usually starts in early March depending on weather conditions though in some years males may appear in February if it is mild and wet. In a typical year here males have usually outnumbered females by 8:1 so I am always pleased to see females and particularly concerned if any of these are killed (traffic being their greatest threat). This year the situation has been markedly different.

Migration started on the evening of March 17<sup>th</sup> following a very cold dry spell which often delays things but this was not unusual. It was still dry but milder and rain was threatening and subsequently heralded a wet spell. It was immediately noticed that there were more females migrating with the males and many were already travelling as pairs in amplexus. As in previous years I decided to make a count starting the next night and using the farm lane ½ mile walked once each night in both directions collecting toads and counting them before release at one of our known toad spawning ponds. This should give an idea of the sex ratio. Those already in the ponds were not included in the count. The lane is always used for such counts as toads are easily spotted there as opposed to the fields they are also crossing, whilst reducing the chances of them being killed by any late moving traffic.

March 18 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 70 (many pairs)	55males	15 females
March 19 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 56 (10 pairs)	42males	14 females
March 20 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 18 (4 pairs)	14males	4 females.
March 21 <sup>st</sup>	-	Very cold dry night No migration but many toad pairs and surplus males in ponds. No spawn visible.		
March 22 <sup>nd</sup>	-	Very wet and windy. No count tonight		
March 23 <sup>rd</sup>	-	Collected 12 (1 pair)	6 males	6 females. First spawn seen.
March 24 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 25	15 males	10 females Active spawning.
March 25 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 23 (3 pairs)	14 males	9 females.
March 26 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 20 (4 pairs)	9 males	11 females.
March 27 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 4	2 males	2 females. Dry all day but mild, rain promised.
March 28 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 24 (5 pairs)	11 males	13 females. Some appear thin and have likely spawned.
March 29 <sup>th</sup>	-	Collected 22 (2 pairs)	13 males	9 females several thin females. Only 3 spawning pairs left in big garden pond, where there were in excess of 24 pairs.
March 30 <sup>th</sup>	-	Very wet stormy night. No count done.		
March 31 <sup>st</sup>	-	No toads visible at spawning sites or migrating, spawning finished.		

During the period March 17<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> 181 males and 93 females were counted an approximate ratio of 2:1

This is the latest toad spawning to date (March 16<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> for 2009) and disclosed a huge increase in females. Have more females from the last few years spawnings reached maturity? What factors affect the sex ratio and is this a one-off event or a trend? If the latter I would be pleased.

Between 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> March several toads were killed by an unidentified predator at North and South ponds and remains collected and photographed. The predator had skilfully skinned the toads discarding this and most of the spawn or ovaries and jelly producing oviducts and consuming the carcass. These kills are likely to have taken place at dusk or at night as toads do not migrate by day. I have previous evidence of a predator killing toads and discarding them intact in a heap on the pond bank presumably having caught them in water (? Otter?) and we know otter was in the area this year. But could it and would it bother with the distasteful toxic toad? Buzzard certainly will take toad and could probably skin it and evidence from other years indicates that they don't much care for the spawn. My efforts to attract our garden visiting buzzards to their feed station with a road casualty toad however were unsuccessful.



**Remains of predated toad**

Photo by Alan Hopkins

Finally I noted the first Palmate newts appeared here March 21-22 a bit early?

With apologies to those prefer more charismatic creatures!

*Alan Hopkins*

## A Mushroom from the Past

A few weeks ago my neighbour, who lives in an old Devon long house, called me to look at some fungi which appeared mid way up his dining room wall. Unfortunately, they were not fully developed.

Some time later, after the insurance surveyor had been and the builder had chipped all the plaster off the wall, they found a leaking pipe. This was repaired and the wall was left to dry out. A few days later my neighbour called again and took me in to see a new lot of fungi. It was a dung loving fungus – a *Coprinus impatiens*. This wall was made of cob, which must have had some cow or horse dung amongst the clay and straw cob when the house was constructed.

I have an Ordnance Survey map of the area dated 1809, and the house is marked on it, so the house must be 200+ years old. The spores of the fungus must have lain dormant in the cob all that time until the pipe leaked and enabled the spores to germinate and build up a mycelium, thus allowing the production of fruiting bodies. I knew that spores of some species were long lived, but this was a bit of a surprise!

*Jeff Benn*

## Meeting and Event Reports

### Friday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2010 -Annual Dinner followed by Martyn Green's talk on Beetles

The Annual Dinner was well supported with over 30 members and guests. After a splendid sit down buffet organised by Doris Leader our speaker, Martyn Green gave an informative and entertaining presentation on his favourite subject "Beetles". Britain alone can boast some 4000 species but worldwide 400,000 are known with more likely to be discovered. They represent the single most successful animal species on the planet. Martyn went on to show and explain some of the diversity the Order (*Coleoptera*).

Most beetles have a tough exoskeleton which is often coloured and elaborately patterned. Many can fly even though they spend little time doing so, but this can significantly aid their distribution ;ladybirds being a typical example. Beetles may be actively carnivorous (violet ground beetle, tiger beetles devils coach horse) vegetarian (chafers eg common maybug, dung beetles and wood boring beetles) carrion feeders (sexton beetles which bury corpses of dead animals to provision themselves and their larvae) parasitic (several species on bumble and solitary bees larvae and nests). Some display subtle defence strategies; mimicry (wasp beetles) noxious secretions (oil beetles, bloody nosed beetle, bombardier beetle). Quite a few species inhabit freshwater but most remain air breathing and can fly (great diving beetle, screech beetle).These were among the common named species, but many more were mentioned which only have Latin names, such is the diversity.



**Bloody nosed beetle**

(photo by M Randle)

No doubt this fascinating talk will cause many to see beetles in a new light.

*Alan Hopkins*

### Friday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2010 - `Reflections` with Ralph Hopper

An evening of members Audio-visual presentations hosted by Ralph Hopper at St Georges Church Hall. Over 30 Members and guests enjoyed a varied selection of photographs and video.

Peter Richardson opened with a portfolio of some of the birds seen on a recent brief visit to Canada .Most were common species and included American Robin, Baltimore Oriole, Blue Jay, Brown headed Cow Bird[a parasite], Brown Thrush, Wild Turkey, Canada Goose[there are several species—the one recorded being different from that commonly seen in the UK] Chirping Sparrow[several other sparrow species occur] Common Grackle, Double Crested Cormorant, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbird, Ring-billed Gull, Yellow Warbler, Turkey Vulture, Morning Dove, and the rare Piping Plover. Of note was the Black Squirrel (a melanistic variant of the Grey Squirrel which has also appeared here in East Anglia and which seems to be a dominant type).

David Leader gave a resume of some British Butterflies and introduced his recording charts which interested members are encouraged to use this coming year in order to detail occurrences and seasonal variations. We would then be able to compare these with some of the very good records made several decades ago.

Ralph Hopper then showed his short video of The German Wasp recorded whilst on holiday in Cornwall. Like the Common Wasp this is a ground nesting species, distinguished by subtle variations in body markings. The

UK has seven species of social wasps including the Hornet, and the parasitic Cuckoo Wasp. The narration included a summary of the wasp life cycle.



**Tawny owlets**

(photo by Stephen Powles)

Gordon Davis gave a fascinating insight into his working life in Kenya when in the early 60's he worked for ICI on the production of soda ash from trona (the sediment formed from the high concentrations of salt and sodium carbonate in Lake Magadi:-one of several large soda lakes in the Great Rift Valley). He was fortunate to arrive in time to witness the unprecedented mass breeding of flamingos and to fly over a population estimated to number 1.1 million pairs. This is the largest so far recorded so his slides are of historic interest.

He saw first hand the problems faced by the young when the drying of the lake waters causes the salts to crystallise out forming shackles around the birds legs making them easy prey for predators and scavengers.

Stephen Powles presented some stunning images of Tawny Owls in flight and at the nest using some sophisticated photographic techniques including video monitoring to predict behaviour and remotely controlled cameras and flash.

In the final presentation Alan Hopkins showed a series of short video clips featuring: Badgers in a Tiverton garden, Otter visiting ponds to predate spawning frogs, Field vole and Wood mouse sharing the same food site, nesting Wrens, Moorhens with young, Great spotted woodpecker, Blackbird at nest sites feeding young, nest box cameras showing Blue tit development from hatching to fledging and Tawny owl collecting food for owlets in the woodland.

*Alan Hopkins*

#### Thursday 11th March - Visit to Ham Wall RSPB Reserve

Thirteen members visited the RSPB reserve at Ham Wall in the Somerset levels, hoping to see a good selection of wetland birds and possibly a Bittern.

We had a great day, dry and bright if a little cool, with some rare sightings. Half of us saw Bitterns, but all heard them "booming" which was a first experience for many, the writer included. We identified 44 bird species including Snipe, Great Egrets, many Marsh Harriers and smallest but certainly the most enchanting, a Firecrest.

Unfortunately, we did not see any Otters although there was much evidence of their eating freshwater clams, the only mammals seen being Rabbits and a Grey Squirrel.



**Firecrest at Ham Wall**

(Photo by Peter Richardson)

Fauna in flower was very sparse, restricted to Gorse, Snowdrops, Primroses, Dandelion, Celandine, Coltsfoot and Hazel Catkins.

*Peter Richardson*

#### Friday 16<sup>th</sup> March 16<sup>th</sup> 2010 - Wildlife of the Dart Valley John Walters

This presentation followed the A.G.M. business. John lives at Buckfastleigh in the Dart Valley with Dartmoor almost his back yard so he knows this area intimately. He uses expert photography and video to capture those special wildlife encounters some of which we were to see. John has also worked with the BBC on several occasions when they needed his expertise and local knowledge. .

He also makes use of his modest garden and was delighted to record the Black Redstart there recently. There are some old mine workings on Dartmoor where a rare Cave spider has been found along with hibernating bats and moths like the Herald. In Hembury woods the local Roe Deer have become so used to his regular presence that he is able to get close to them. Even the tiny Broad-snouted Weevil which feeds on the readily

found fungus and seemingly inedible King Arthurs Cakes was shown in close-up. We were encouraged to look out for the day flying Yellow Speckled Moth which he has successfully reared. Several other species have also been reared giving the opportunity to study breeding more easily. By selecting the largest of the spectacular Vapourer moth caterpillars he can be pretty certain of getting the flightless grub like female moth and can then use this to attract the flying male to come in and mate, and finally observing the egg laying process of this secretive species. Some excellent macro photography of highly predatory wood ants, wasps catching flies, a Purple ground beetle devouring a slug, and soldier beetles pollinating wild orchids completed the invertebrate section.

Last Autumn produced good crops of Rowan and Hawthorn berries attracting numbers of Fieldfares and significantly, many Ring Ouzels en route from Scandinavia to North Africa. Additionally a rare vagrant a Black-throated thrush put in an appearance.

The focus then turned to some of the Dartmoor birds; Wood warbler, Redstart (showing the spectacular male display), Wheatear (just arrived), Whinchat, Great Grey shrike, and some studies of nesting Long-tailed tits, Willow warbler, Meadow Pipit, and Skylark. The Meadow Pipit is a favourite victim of the Cuckoo. Superb stills and video charted the story from the egg through to hatching and eviction of the pipit's eggs or young (the cuckoo hatching first—12days incubation to the pipit's 14) to the fully fledged stage preparatory to migrating back to Africa unaided by its true parent.

Finally having seen the stills of male Adders in combat the video showed the live action where each tries to wrestle the other into submission in order to win mating rites to a female. In spite of his attempts to guard her she may still be mated by more than one male. This "Dance of the Adders" occurs from early April to early May the live young being born in late summer.

An excellent talk and an object lesson in wildlife study.

*Alan Hopkins*

Tuesday March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010 Ambios and Mid-Devon Natural History Society joint meeting. St. George's Church Hall 7.35pm

This event was extra to our published program, sponsored by Ambios, and featured MDNHS member Stephen Powles. Over 70 members and visitors attended for a first class account of

Otter activity on the Little Dart river (a tributary of the River Exe) near Stephen's home. Clever use of security video cameras and remotely controlled digital photography captured the action. Coincidentally heron, fox and rat featured in the supporting cast but the main objective was to chart the otters (a large dog otter plus a female and a sub-adult cub).



**Otter on Little Dart River**

The still photos were excellent studies in their own rite whilst video showed hunting feeding and spraint marking and the frequency and times when the otters passed through this section of river. The study of otters on this small river will continue and be extended to other sections. No doubt there is

more to learn about the largely nocturnal activity of otters in Devon. This lecture demonstrated how much can be done with patience and dedication and many will have left inspired and better informed as a result.

*Alan Hopkins*

## Programme Notes

For much of the country March appears to be in like a lamb, out like a lion. While looking forward to our summer programme we cross our fingers that it is heated.



**Sika stag on Brownsea Island**

Photo by Dave Randle

May sees a follow up visit to the talk by Kate Tobin about the conservation and expansion of the Axe Estuary Project. A private guided tour is arranged (it is not open to public view yet) of the newly created brackish lagoon. The 17 islands are of different shapes, sizes and toppings to attract the greatest variety of nesting birds. It's a whole day spent in the hides, walkways and wider area of this adventurous scheme.

Brownsea Island is on the agenda again. There was so much which we didn't see in the single day last year, and for Arne RSPB reserve we had no time at all. We are making this a two day visit but anyone is welcome to join us for either of these days. Journey time is about 2 ¼ hours with a further half hour for the two short ferries across to Brownsea. If you would like to go please give me a ring to see if our schedule is suitable.

June brings the customary visit to Braunton Burrows. Yes, we have been there many times before but it is so full of spring and summer flowers, orchids a speciality, and so large, that we always cover fresh ground. This year we may well start from the other end. Strangely enough we usually get reasonable weather and, if so, it makes a great day for flowers, butterflies, birdsong and a healthy dose of ozone.

On a Thursday evening later in the month Aylesbeare Common beckons. It is an area of open, mildly sloping land interspersed with scrub, wood and water. It is also within a whisker of being the longest day so there may not be many takers to stay and see the nightjars – unless there is a heatwave when even early bedders may be keen to stay into the welcoming cool of the night to hear the churring, and the myriad insects available to that cavernous gape.

Marsland, a DWT site near Bude, was suggested by one of our members. She is a regular visitor and wondered why we had not been again for ten years. There is an abundance of flowers and butterflies so there is a date booked in early July.

Witheridge Moor finishes off the month and this late date was chosen to suit the height of the fritillary season. A wet day would ruin prospects and there is the possibility of postponement but no matter where we go we are for ever optimistic and live in hope.

Over the period there will be a couple of local evening walks and we do have an invitation from Peter Richardson, who is now guiding RSPB walks around BGM and Darts Farm, to join him on one of these. There may be a bird and hedgerow survey at Roliphants on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> May and another meeting there in August before we go inside at St. George's in September. Keep your eyes on the complete annual programme.

*David Leader*

## Obituary

It is with great regret that we report the recent death of Alan Macdonald who had been a member of the Society for 10 years. Our sincere and heartfelt sympathy goes to his widow Margaret who we all hope will be able to take part in the Society's activities again before too long.