

Warden's Report to AGM – May 2021

2020 was a bizarre year with the words 'furlough' and 'lockdown' heard more than ever before. Thankfully the Observatory survived O.K. and its important monitoring continued uninterrupted. The Restharrow Scrape Project continued throughout and saw the first signs of success, including a great start to Observatory life from new Assistant Warden Becky Downey.

In the early winter period there were lots of sightings of Tundra Bean, White-fronted, Pink-footed, and Pale-bellied Brent Geese. Two Siberian Chiffchaffs, two Cattle Egrets, a Slavonian Grebe, and plenty of Water Pipits also added to the flavour. New Assistant Warden Becky Downey settled in well and hit the ground running with her outreach and interpretation. The Observatory attended MOTUS and BOC meetings, ran a holiday to Bulgaria, continued to run Bird Identification and Disturbance Sessions in conjunction with Kent Wildlife Trust, performed a Beached Bird Survey, and completed a full wader survey around the Thanet coast. New MOTUS aerials were also erected on the Observatory building and we look forward to the results it will give us.

The first signs of spring migration occurred in March with Dartford Warbler, a movement of over 1,000 Chaffinches on the 15th, and White-tailed Eagles on the 25th and 31st. The Eagle theme was to continue into April with records on the 2nd, two on the 4th, and another on the 15th. One of these birds came from the Isle of Wight release scheme but the others were presumed continental migrants and represent the first records for Sandwich Bay. Everything of course changed with the Coronavirus lockdown. The residents on site still managed to maintain the continuity of the important SBBOT dataset but the Field Centre was closed, and all events were unfortunately cancelled. Monitoring the recent developments on the nearby RSPB Lydden Valley produced an excellent variety of waders. Usual spring fare such as Great White Egret, Osprey, Nightingale, and Garganey were recorded, but Stone-curlew, Hawfinch, Kentish Plover, and Night-heron also appeared in the Recording Area.

May saw a slew of rarities with four Honey-buzzards, Black Kite, Montagu's Harrier, White Stork, two Temminck's Stints, four Red-footed Falcons, and a Golden Oriole. Red Kite passage was phenomenal and built to an astonishing 140 north on 2nd June. Early June also saw Purple Heron, Bee-eater, Honey-buzzard, and the continued presence of at least four Red-footed Falcons. Invertebrate highlights were many with Black V Moth, Dusky Marbled Brown, Light Crimson Underwing, and exceptional numbers of Dainty Damselfly, Southern Emerald Damselfly, and Norfolk Hawker. Bird breeding success was good inland on Worth marshes and Restharrow Scrape but disturbance in Pegwell Bay and along the beach was again a real issue.

Interesting summer invertebrates like Large Tortoiseshell and Small Blue butterflies, Small Purple-barred moth, and good numbers of Southern Migrant Hawkets dragonflies were seen subsequently. Autumn bird migration began early with Whinchat, Redstart, and Spotted Flycatcher all recorded weeks earlier than usual. An exceptional Wood Warbler passage began and an unseasonal Redwing was trapped and ringed. In August we ran a special Nature Holiday Club designed to benefit under-privileged children who had been adversely affected by the Coronavirus lockdown. It was a fantastic success and something we hope to repeat in future years. With the easing of restrictions we began phasing back in some guided walks, as well as running our first ever livestreamed moth night. Interesting records of Quail, Pied Flycatcher, and Ortolan Bunting were recorded on 'nocmig' and an Icterine Warbler was trapped and ringed. Two Kentish Plovers and a Long-tailed Skua were good to see whilst excellent moth-trapping provided Four-spotted, Dusky Hook-tip, Pale Shoulder, Clifden Nonpareil, and Beautiful Marbled, as well as many Golden Twin-spots.

September was fantastic for both quality and quantity. Two Red-backed Shrikes, two Honey-buzzards, two Pectoral Sandpipers, White Stork, Corncrake, American Golden Plover, Cattle Egret, Barred Warbler, and Ortolan Bunting were the rarity highlights with good sea passage noted and a mammoth movement of 4,000 Siskins over on the 28th. There were some excellent falls of Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps again. Assistant Becky ran events at many local schools and we dipped our first toes into Zoom waters with a series of online lectures. October continued the excellent run of rarities with Red-throated Pipit, Wryneck, Radde's Warbler, Pallas's Warbler, Richard's Pipit, Dusky Warbler, two Great Grey Shrikes, five Glossy Ibises, and some huge movements of Lesser Redpoll and Crossbill. We organised our first 'Big Bay Birdwatch' with local schools and Restharrow Scrape opened (very briefly) at the end of the month.

Unfortunately, 'Lockdown2' caused the closure of Restharrow Scrape again and hit the pause button on our engagement activities. The presence of a semi-resident Tree Sparrow flock brightened up this early winter period

with numbers increasing to at least 53 birds. Fingers-crossed this declining species will stay to breed next year. Another Pallas's Warbler and Dusky Warbler then appeared and up to four Cattle Egrets lingered in the area. We produced a fantastic 'Birds of Sandwich Bay' film to purchase on a USB which was received well.

The Great Grey Shrike remained into November, as did the four Cattle Egrets, plus a handful of Hen Harriers, Water Pipits, and Bearded Tits. November cemented 2020 as one of the best autumns for Common Redpoll for a few years with at least five trapped and ringed. The discovery of an Eastern Yellow Wagtail on Worth marshes on the 20th was the cherry on top of an excellent autumn. It was a first for Kent and amazingly the same bird seen in Norfolk a few weeks previously. Hawfinch, Goshawk, Siberian Chiffchaff, and a small flock of Lapland Buntings also provided variety. At the end of the month a significant influx of geese occurred with up to ten Tundra Bean, 550 White-fronted, 240 Pink-footed, and 31 Barnacle Geese recorded. The White-fronted Geese particularly enjoyed the area and stayed until the end of the year; just rewards for the hard work the RSPB have done with wetland creation on Lydden Valley. There was still some good sea-watching to be had with Black-throated and Great Northern Divers, Black-necked and Red-necked Grebe, Velvet Scoters, Little Gulls, Little Auks, and Shag logged. A Woodlark and Waxwing were surprise highlights at the end of the year, but not more so than an immature Kumlien's Gull in Pegwell, constituting a first for the Recording Area.

The only downside to such a great year of Natural History was the inability to share it with many of our members. Hopefully, we'll start to see some respite from Covid-19 restrictions in time for autumn birding. Thanks as always to all the trustees and volunteers for all their help and advice throughout the season and SBBOT members for supporting the work of the Observatory.

By Steffan Walton