

Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT ON THE YEAR 2019 FOR THE 'VIRTUAL' ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 2020

2019 was a remarkable year for the Observatory because of all the progress that was made in our work on the Restharrow Scrape Project. At the last Annual General Meeting in 2019 members were informed about the preparatory work that had already been done but you can now find a more detailed description in Sally Hunter's Vice-Chair's Report on what has happened since. There is also an outline of what we still need to do, especially to meet our commitments to the Heritage Fund. I do wish to mention, however, that one outcome of the successful bid for Lottery Funding was to make it possible in late 2019 for us to appoint an Assistant Warden, Becky Downey, who took up her post in January of this year. Even though she has been with us for over six months now, I wish to take this opportunity of formally welcoming her to the Observatory.

Although the Restharrow Scrape Project consumed much of the Trustees' and members' attention, dedication and hard work in 2019, other things were going on as well and it is to a selection of these that I wish to turn now. It appears from comments which were made at the annual conference of the Bird Observatories Council that Sandwich Bay probably undertakes more activities, both for its members and within the wider community, than any of the other Bird Observatories in the country and this is something that we can all be very proud of. Sue Bennett's Secretary's Report will give members a more detailed account. I wish, as always, to offer sincere thanks to all those members and Trustees without whose dedication none of this would be possible.

In 2019, we continued with our policy of strengthening links and collaborating with other local conservation groups. The presence of the RSPB Lydden Valley Warden at the Observatory has continued to work successfully, with much inter-change of ideas and mutual support going on. We were especially pleased to hear during the Spring of 2019 that the RSPB had released funding to start doing their planned habitat improvements on the Lydden Valley reserve, with results that are already proving very positive in terms of the bird and other wildlife of this important site.

We continue to have representation on such groups as the Pegwell and Sandwich Bay National Nature Reserve Steering Group; the Monks Wall Nature Reserve Management Committee; the Gazen Salts Reserve and the newly-formed Delf Trust Group. Other collaboration has included such diverse areas as contributing to the Dover District Council's work in drawing up their Green Infrastructure Policy; receiving Barn Owl boxes from the Lower Stour Partnership and assistance in a project with Countrywide Productions to make wildlife films for use in primary schools. We also have a contract with the Environment Agency, extending over several years, to monitor the migrant birds making use of the scrapes at Backsand. As in past years, we welcomed visiting groups from a range of local organisations, schools and colleges and had a successful internship for several months early in the year. The now almost annual ringing course in August was another success and several moth evenings over the summer months were well-attended.

Within the Observatory building itself, there has been much activity, often hidden and behind the scenes, but vital nonetheless. The Trustees have continued to review and improve our policies and practices, for example on Health and Safety issues and Risk Assessments. Audits in these areas are now done regularly, to ensure that we meet all requirements in looking after members and visitors alike. We have been able to up-grade some of the facilities in the residents' bedrooms and have plans for some more substantial changes by installing more *en suite* accommodation, to meet changing demands.

We have been steadily up-grading the computer provision within the building and this has aided the on-going process of digitising the masses of paper-based data that we have accrued over the years. Another successful initiative was the production of self-guided walk leaflets for members and visitors to use within the Observatory area. These have been well-received and thanks are due to the small team of dedicated members who took on this task, which involved a lot of field surveying and careful writing up, to ensure accuracy. Arrangements for the 200 Club were also much improved and better-publicised as an additional and relatively painless way of raising funds for the Observatory. On the subject of fund-raising, we have benefitted from several legacies over the year, including a substantial one from the estate of the late Vida Madell. This money was used to fund the splendid new bird hide at Restharrow Scrape, which has been named in her memory, and also the installation of our potentially exciting MOTUS equipment, which is designed to monitor over-flying electronically-tagged migrant birds. The Observatory has also received donations from family and friends in memory of others that have passed on and needless to say, we are always most appreciative of all such gifts.

I have to offer my sincere thanks to several Trustees who are standing down at this AGM. Vanessa Dent resigned during the course of the year and Sue Bennett, Nigel Hefford, Andy Keen and Simon Aubrey-Killen have all decided not to seek re-election. The work that all of these Trustees have done for the Observatory is beyond measure. Thanks are also due to *all* those members who continue to support the Observatory in so many different ways including those who submit their observations on the birds and other wildlife of the area. A special thank-you to our warden, Steffan, for the co-ordination of all of this data. New information is being discovered all the time, whether it be of new species for the area or up-dated details on the frequency and distribution of species that we know are already present.

I have to thank all the local landowners without whose co-operation our work would be much restricted. In particular, I would like to thank the officers of the Sandwich Bay Residents Ltd. for their helpfulness over car passes onto the Estate and also to Richard Daw, our neighbour at Old Downs, for his help on such issues as overflow parking at extra busy times, access issues, and much else besides.

Finally, although the impact on the Observatory of the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic falls outside the remit of this 2019 Report, it would be remiss of me not to mention it here. These are completely unprecedented times that we are all living through and there are still many problems and uncertainties to cope with, both as individuals and as an organisation. The Trustees have had to make a number of difficult decisions in order to protect our employees, the membership and visitors and this process is by no means over. On behalf of the Trustees, I would like to thank all members of the Observatory for their support and understanding during this time.

Ken Chapman

July 2020

