

# **Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust**



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## **WARDEN'S REPORT ON THE YEAR 2019 FOR THE 'VIRTUAL' ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 2020**

How quick does a year come round? My first year in charge has been eventful with the Restharrow Scrape Project rightly taking centre-stage. It's been one of those moments in SBBOT history that make you think, we were there when that happened, we did this. Later in the report Sally Hunter explains all about it in more detail as she has led the project brilliantly from its inception.

January began with good numbers of Water Pipits and Short-eared Owls whilst a small flock of overwintering Pink-footed Geese was unusual. Mid-February saw the usual return of return of Shelducks, Ringed Plovers, Coots, and Avocets back to their breeding areas. There was a record arrival of Garganey at the end of March with at least 24 birds on the 28th. Even more bizarrely, a Night-heron was sound-recorded flying over us at night. RSPB staff became much more noticeable at the Observatory as we agreed a three-year contract with them to share our office space. During this time we also ran trips to North Wales and Islay, attended the Bird Observatory Council meeting in Thetford, Royal St George's Greenkeeping Course, and ran Bird Identification and Disturbance Sessions in conjunction with Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT). Greg Lee arrived as a volunteer in early Spring and spent three months with us learning the ropes at an Observatory. His eager eyes were well-received and he contributed plenty of bird, moth, and bat sightings during his stay with us.

In April, the Observatory began a five-year contract with the Environment Agency monitoring the birdlife on New Downs, a new crow trap was built, and there were meetings regarding MOTUS and Kent Ornithological Society records. The accommodation was very busy but Dawn Stockley, who joined us as Field Centre Manager in late 2018, was up to the task and has since proved to be a valuable member of our team. Good numbers of Sand Martins were recorded, a Kentish Plover was present on the 3rd, and followed by a White Stork and a run of Cattle Egrets on the 9th, 18th, 21st, and 22nd, another Kentish Plover on the 24th, and regular sightings of Spoonbills and Ring Ouzels. A couple of Red-rumped Swallows on the 1st was a good start to May and it continued with another two Kentish Plovers, three Golden Orioles, two Honey-buzzards, singles of Montagu's Harrier, Black Kite, Purple Heron, and Temminck's Stint, plus good movements of Little Tern and Red Kite. The AGM was a great success as were our guided river trips at Grove Ferry and the day out across the Channel at Parc du Marquenterre.

A Quail on 1st June and a Hoopoe on the 3rd were the last notable spring migrants but further avian highlights came in the form of Black-headed Gulls and Egyptian Geese breeding on Restharrow Scrape for the first time. A juvenile Siskin trapped on the 11th was certainly interesting too, it must've bred somewhere not too far away. As the weather heated up so did the invertebrate records too with Speckled Footman and Currant Clearwing appearing, Ringlets seemingly cemented themselves as a resident in the Recording Area, whilst our first independent Bee Identification Course run with Steven Falk was an overwhelming success.

Autumn began picking up slowly during July and by the end of the month Waders, Terns, and Warblers were abundant. A Cattle Egret on Worth on the 23rd was unseasonal. There was good productivity of nesting Turtle Doves on Worth and Cetti's Warbler was confirmed to have bred on the Estate for the first time. A few Garganey began appearing followed by impressive numbers of Wood Sandpipers. The contents of the moth trap were fantastic too with Splendid Brocade, Dewick's Plusia, Dark Crimson Underwing, Shining Marbled, Pale Shoulder, Marbled Clover, Great Brocade, Dusky Hook-tip, and Mocha all making an appearance. Meanwhile the discovery of Dainty Damsel fly at a private site was one of the biggest finds of the year.

In August it was great to have regular sightings of Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, plus a few Wood Warblers, and we ran another excellent Ringing Course. A mega emergence of butterflies saw 503 Red Admirals counted on the 7th and 285 Painted Ladies on the 8th, whilst there were sightings of Southern Migrant Hawkers for the second

year in succession. The nocturnal sound-recording picked up more surprises near the end of the month with Ortolan Bunting on the 26th and then Dotterel the following night. A Honey-buzzard flew over on the 29th.

Later on, in September the winds switched and seemed to hamper visible migration. Despite this a Wryneck was ringed on the 9th and a super flock of 10,000 Swallows was observed coming into roost overnight on the 12th. Once again there were sizable arrivals of Blackcaps, and later Chiffchaffs, which are now becoming standard events in the Sandwich Bay calendar. Meanwhile a White Stork wading around the saltmarsh in Pegwell Bay on the 29th was from the recent Knepp release scheme. During the month we also advertised for an Assistant Warden to lead on the outreach and interpretation side of the Restharrow Scrape Project and help with Observatory activities. Rebecca Downey impressed in interviews and was appointed at the end of the year.

October started well with Sabine's Gull and Purple Sandpiper amongst a big Brent movement on the 2nd, followed by a flurry of late Turtle Doves. One of the more intriguing events of the autumn was the prolonged Tit passage through the Recording Area. At least 167 Blue Tits and 110 Long-tailed Tits coasted through the area on the 3rd, with only our ninth ever Nuthatch the same day. Considerable falls of Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps became the norm, with hundreds bouncing from bush-to-bush, and once again there were excellent numbers of Yellow-browed Warblers.

In November there were sporadic sightings of Little Gull, Slavonian Grebe, Mandarin, and Hen Harrier throughout the month. Three Cranes flew past offshore on the 2nd and two Bean Geese went over on the 16th. A run of Yellow-legged and Caspian Gulls on the new Restharrow Scrape were well-received. Three Cattle Egrets appeared on the 25th and were joined by a Glossy Ibis the next day. The Ibis toured around Worth for a week or so before moving on, but the Egrets remained until the end of the year. Insect news was brought to a climax with the discovery of a Vagrant Emperor on the 17th. This was the first SBBOT record of this migratory dragonfly and became our 31st species of Odonata, making us surely the most bio-diverse area in the UK for this taxonomic group. The year ended once again with up to 3,000 Cormorants offshore and good numbers of wintering Short-eared Owls, Water Pipits, and Snow Buntings.

It seems a shame that after all these years I still have to report ongoing disturbance on the Sandwich and Pegwell Bay NNR. The cumulative effect of dog walkers, drones, kite surfers, joggers, bait-diggers, and paragliders continue to have a detrimental effect on the wildlife of the area. It is unfortunate to have to relay the ongoing declines in many species, particularly non-passerines for which Sandwich and Pegwell Bay is so important. In the autumn a Public Service Protection Order was placed upon Sandwich Bay beach by Dover District Council in an attempt to restrict the effect of dog disturbance on the wildlife, you can see their new signage along the beach. This is a small step in the right direction and we await to see the results of this work. I have also worked in conjunction with the KWT on many occasions during the year as part of an ongoing project educating volunteers on bird identification so they can monitor the birds and disturbance in our protected area.

As well as our own wetland development the nearby RSPB Lydden Valley continues to flourish. With their recent £1.3 million funding they have created a series of scrapes and pools and produced the largest wetland in South East Britain. Combining this work, SBBOT's own Restharrow Scrape developments, Dick Daws' farmland scrapes, the expansion of Ham Fen by KWT, the creation of pools on New Downs by the Environment Agency, the new dune-slacks created on Royal St George's, Prince's, and Royal Cinque Ports Golf Courses, with the expanse of Pegwell Bay, we now have a phenomenal landscape-scale approach to wetland bird conservation. The future looks bright for Sandwich Bay.

Thanks as always to all the trustees and volunteers for all their help and advice throughout the season. Thank you to Greenwich University for supplying microscopes for the Bee Identification course, John and Gill Brook for their Odonata monitoring and knowledge, and Sandwich Bay Estate Residents for supporting the work of the Observatory.