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NEWS FROM THE BROOKS

November 2011



Small pleasures

Firecrest by Julian Dicks

'Titchy bird with a yellow mohican hairdo' is how I'd describe the goldcrest – one of my favourite birds. You can find them here at any time of year, but over winter we often see them in greater numbers. Despite its tiny size (it weighs about the same as a 20 pence piece and is our smallest bird) goldcrests migrate, crossing the North Sea, and often arrive with an influx of winter thrushes and woodcock. Legend has it that the cheeky goldcrest hitches a ride in the woodcock's plumage, emerging from their feathers on reaching dry land – an old name for the goldcrest was 'woodcock pilot'!

This winter we're also seeing firecrests, with their brighter, flame-coloured crown stripe and distinctive white and black eye stripes. The best spots to look have been Fattengates courtyard (where Julian took his photo) and along Green Lane. They've often been spotted alongside goldcrests so check anything small and squeaky carefully!

Please contact the editor, Anna, if you have any questions or comments

RSPB Pulborough Brooks Nature Reserve, Wiggonholt, Pulborough, West Sussex, RH20 2EL

Telephone: 01798 875851 E-mail: pulboroughnewsletter@rspb.org.uk

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Wildlife feature

Welcome back 'Ratty'!

A couple of months ago, I was in a meeting, only it wasn't like a 'normal' meeting where you're stuck in the office, but one where it was possible to do a little bit of nature-watching at the same time! We'd paused down near black pond, when I heard a 'plop' and spotted a dark shape doggy-paddling across the pond before sneaking into the rushes.

This was my first sighting of a water vole on the reserve. Our wardens, Pete, Paul and David had found evidence of water vole activity on some of the ditches around the reserve, so we knew they were out there, but sightings were few and far between. Since our encounter at black pond, we've had an increasing number of water vole sightings – a really encouraging sign. Your best chance of finding one is from Nettley's hide – peer into the ditch that runs in front of the hide. You should also keep your ears open for both the distinctive 'plop' made when entering the water, or for the noisy chewing of rushes and other vegetation. In summer they'll snack on reeds, rushes and sedges, but in winter they'll nibble on willow and hawthorn bark - and they eat a lot – up to 80% of their bodyweight daily!

Water voles can sometimes be mistaken for rats –indeed 'Ratty' in Kenneth Grahame's 'The Wind in the Willows' was actually a water vole – but water voles have much rounder noses, chubby faces and short fuzzy ears. Unlike rats, their tails, paws and ears are covered with hair.

Water voles suffered one of the fastest declines of any native mammal and Sussex lost around 90% of its population – the causes are thought to include water pollution, the draining of wetlands and an increase in predators, especially the American mink. So we're really happy to be welcoming them back to Pulborough Brooks!



Water vole by Chris Prince

From the visitor centre

Christmas shopping made easy...

If you've still got Christmas shopping to do, why not let us help you – we've got lots of great gift ideas! There are gifts for the birds, gifts for keen birders, great stocking fillers for kids and some lovely new books, scarves and jewellery.

How about giving a year's membership this Christmas...and help save nature without it costing you the earth. RSPB membership makes a wonderful gift for anyone who loves birds, wildlife and the great outdoors. As a member, they'll enjoy a year's worth of fantastic benefits that will inspire and grow their passion for nature.

What's more, you'll be supporting our vital conservation work to protect nature and the environment. You won't just be giving a present that your loved-one can enjoy all year round, you'll be making a difference, giving nature a lasting gift too. Just ask us when you visit and we can show you all the goodies that you can take home and wrap up!

For the keen wildlife watcher, we stock a wide range of binoculars, telescopes and accessories and our team can offer advice and help you to choose the right pair. Over the weekend of Saturday 03 and Sunday 04 December we're holding a special optics event where Viking optics will be in the centre to help with any questions that you have.

If you'd rather let them choose something for themselves we've just launched our gift voucher scheme – the Wild Card. And if you need a little something to help you get into the festive spirit, our cafe will be serving Christmas dinner and mince pies from 01 December!

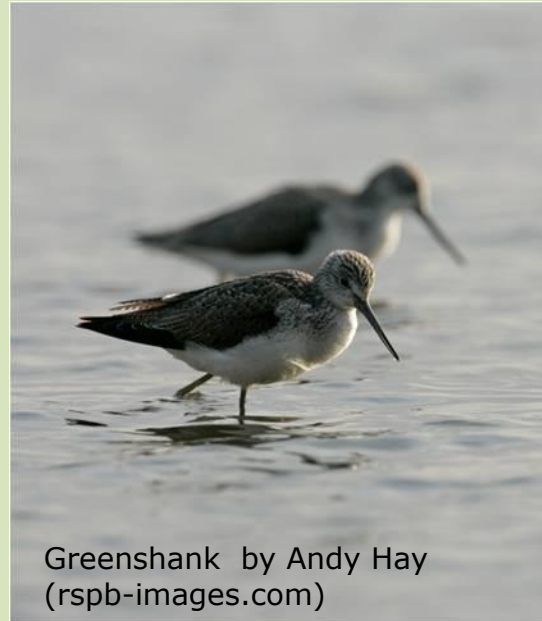


Wildlife news

Are we up to the challenge?

We seem to have got ourselves involved in a bit of inter-reserve rivalry and we're asking for your help to enable us to come out with our heads held high...

The RSPB reserve team has launched the 'Love passage waders challenge' ... an inter-reserve competition to see who can attract the greatest range of wader species over the course of a year, with the best overall site being presented with the prestigious 'Golden Wellie' award.



Greenshank by Andy Hay
(rspb-images.com)

The rules are that waders must be recorded 'feet down' within the reserve boundary. As well as the variety of species and number of birds, we can also be awarded bonus points for breeding waders, visitor spectacle and best visitor comments.

What we're asking you to do...

Make sure you record any wader activity in the recent sightings book – we can then gather the information needed from one place. Encourage all the other birders you know to do likewise.

Please feel free to make comments, we'll be relying on the bonus points – perhaps along the lines of "Snettisham's 30,000 knot is nothing compared to the spectacle of just 1 at Pulborough Brooks!". (Snettisham's report of 30,000 knot accounts for almost half of all the waders reported on RSPB sites in October!). We know we're not going to be able to compete with some of the coastal sites but if we can out-trump some of our inland and South-east rivals that would be great!

There's a serious side to all this too – it's an opportunity to share good practise across RSPB sites, swapping tips on habitat management work that seems to have brought in the waders and ensured that visitors have had good views of them. Your help could spare our wardens the ignominy of being sent on a scrape management course!

What's out and about this month?

A wide variety of birds will be here this month. They can be divided between those that are easy to see and others that are more difficult, either due to their behaviour or their scarcity.

Top of the easy category are many of the birds to be found on the flooding and the surrounding meadows. Hundreds of dabbling ducks, mainly wigeon, teal, mallard, pintail and shoveler, spend all of their time, clearly visible, in the open. Equally obliging are the lapwings, which gather, often in thousands, in the same places. Other wading birds are more of a challenge, snipe because they are so well camouflaged and others such as golden plovers, ruffs, dunlins and black-tailed godwits because they are often only present in low numbers.

The courtyard feeding station is another place for effortless watching, this time of birds like dunnocks, robins, coal, blue and great tits, chaffinches and greenfinches. Nuthatches are almost as undemanding but much more patience is necessary to see one of the few marsh tits that come to the feeders.

Many small birds that are only encountered in ones and twos during the breeding season form flocks in the winter, making them easier to see. At times around the reserve there can, for instance, be flocks of skylarks, meadow pipits, fieldfares, redwings, long-tailed tits, chaffinches, goldfinches, linnets and yellowhammers. Members of the tit family often get together in mixed flocks that are joined from time to time by goldcrests and treecreepers.



Lapwing flock by Chris Prince

Reserve news

Management news – our wardens, Pete, Paul & David tell us what they have been up to...

The summer and early autumn is a critical time of year for us – there is a lot of work to be done out on the brooks to ensure that the conditions are spot on for the breeding waders, overwintering wildfowl and for the aquatic plants and invertebrates that live in the ditches.

In addition to all the topping (mowing the fields to control the growth of the rushes and ensure the correct sward height), this year we also had some new water control structures installed, the river bank was repaired, several ditches were cleared and pool edges re-profiled. All of this work should help us to manage the water levels more effectively, allowing us to distribute water across the site. It should also help to ensure that there are better, closer views of some of the waders we see on migration.

It's well worth a look around the heathland trail at the moment, there is always the possibility of crossbills, siskin and reppoll in addition to large mixed flocks of tits with goldcrests, nuthatch and treecreepers thrown in for good measure. You could also encounter some rather larger creatures, the highland cattle, who are now making inroads into the birch, bramble and rush growth on the central section of the heath. They'll also be trampling through the bracken.

Down at Black Pond we've re-arranged the fenceline to allow grazing right up to the pond edge and we'll also be extending the pond system to increase the habitat for dragonflies and damselflies. Once this work is completed, we'll be reinstating access and creating a great place to stop and wildlife watch.



Highland on the heath by Pete Hughes

Wildlife news

Wildlife highlights

Everyone's been talking about the unseasonably warm and dry weather we've been having this November - the stream that feeds West Mead pool is dry (almost unheard of in late November) and rather oddly some of the hawthorns can be seen sporting both berries and blossom!

Despite this, we're continuing to witness the arrival of our winter visitors; in addition to the goldcrests and firecrests, November saw the arrival of a yellow-browed warbler - rarer, trickier to spot, and equally small. Coming all the way from its breeding grounds in Siberia this is the first ever record for Pulborough Brooks. For such a little bird, it has caused a great deal of excitement as birders from Sussex and further afield have flocked to the reserve to try and catch a glimpse.

Birds of prey over the last couple of weeks have included our regular female peregrine, hen harrier, merlin and short-eared owl plus buzzards, red kites, kestrels and sparrowhawks.

In the last week a dozen white-fronted geese have arrived in the Arun Valley and have been seen at both Pulborough Brooks and Amberley Wild Brooks. Their arrival can often be a warning of wintery weather to come; if the weather is severe in Russia and elsewhere in Europe we tend to see more of these migratory geese here in southern England. Last year we reported record numbers in the Arun Valley - will we get a repeat performance?

There's been plenty of funky fungi around too, like this classic red and white fly agaric, shaggy parasols, lilac bonnets, wrinkled peaches, clouded and aniseed funnels!



Wetland bird survey

Every month a group of staff and volunteers face an early start and meet up to count all the wetland bird species on RSPB and nearby land. This Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is part of a national scheme to monitor populations of wetland species. Here are the counts for September, October and November. The numbers for Pulborough Brooks are shown in the first column with the full figures for the mid Arun Special Protection Area (which includes Amberley Wild Brooks and Waltham Brooks) given in the second column.

September		October		November	
CORMORANT	0 3	LITTLE GREBE	0 1	LITTLE GREBE	3 3
GREY HERON	4 9	CORMORANT	0 1	CORMORANT	1 1
MUTE SWAN	12 36	GREY HERON	1 2	GREY HERON	3 7
GREYLAG GOOSE	246 246	LITTLE EGRET	0 1	LITTLE EGRET	0 3
CANADA GOOSE	95 95	MUTE SWAN	7 27	MUTE SWAN	4 20
WIGEON	74 87	GREYLAG GOOSE	98 98	WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE	0 12
GADWALL	0 2	CANADA GOOSE	751 779	GREYLAG GOOSE	27 221
TEAL	361 391	WIGEON	180 220	CANADA GOOSE	633 742
MALLARD	63 300	TEAL	60 95	SHELDUCK	3 3
PINTAIL	3 3	MALLARD	46 112	MANDARIN	0 5
SHOVELER	11 30	SHOVELER	1 19	WIGEON	1279 1311
MOORHEN	20 32	MOORHEN	16 23	GADWALL	27 27
COOT	1 2	COOT	0 2	TEAL	755 812
LAPWING	109 109	GOLDEN PLOVER	1 1	MALLARD	48 116
DUNLIN	3 3	LAPWING	205 288	PINTAIL	2 2
RUFF	8 8	RUFF	4 4	SHOVELER	27 39
SNIPE	2 5	SNIPE	16 24	TUFTED DUCK	0 1
BLACK-TAILED GODWIT	4 4	GREEN SANDPIPER	1 1	MOORHEN	11 19
REDSHANK	0 1	BLACK-HEADED GULL	9 15	COOT	0 3
BLACK-HEADED GULL	1 5	COMMON GULL	0 10	GOLDEN PLOVER	2 4
COMMON GULL	1 1	L.B.B.GULL	0 2	LAPWING	2503 2821
HERRING GULL	2 11	HERRING GULL	0 5	RUFF	3 3
CURLEW SANDPIPER	1 1			SNIPE	92 112
LITTLE STINT	1 1			BLACK-TAILED GODWIT	11 11
EGYPTIAN GOOSE	6 6			BLACK-HEADED GULL	17 41
				COMMON GULL	5 11
				KINGFISHER	0 1
				BAR-HEADED GOOSE	1 1

We are grateful for the support we receive from various organizations including:

