

Halifax Scientific Society Newsletter, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

From the membership secretary Laurence Sutton: [lasusu@laurencesutton.co.uk](mailto:lasusu@laurencesutton.co.uk)

Dear all, I hope that you are all keeping well and remaining relatively sane during this challenging period!?

Please see in the paragraphs that follow, a message from the chairman Mick Harrop and some commentaries returned to me from several HSS members. Some members have added to the blog recently so please refer to this on

<http://calderdale-wildlife.blogspot.com/>

***If any member wishes to write a short article for this newsletter in the near future please send it to me for inclusion plus any photos. All contributions are very welcome.***

**Message from the HSS Chairman Mick Harrop.**

#### **HSS Chairs Report April 2020**

Hello everyone, I sincerely hope that this, our first newsletter during these unprecedented times finds you & your family safe & well.

It seems like an eternity since our last meeting on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> March where we listened to another wonderful & interesting talk from Dr Heather McHaffie, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh's Scottish Plants Officer. Heather's enthusiasm for her subject shone through again as she talked about the Ferns of Scotland and the effects of climate change on these ferns.

Today we should be looking forward to hearing about Badgers in Calderdale from Cath Baker, Chair of the Calderdale Badger Protection Group. I'm sure that we will be welcoming Cath to one of our meetings in the not too distant future.

Over the past month we have seen spring truly arrive with fine, warm & sunny days and in turn nature has responded with leaf buds unfurling & trees blossoming. Amphibians have returned to their breeding grounds and birds have started nesting en masse. Those early risers amongst you or those like me who enjoy a lie in but have their bedroom windows open have been treated to the wonderful dawn chorus.

I consider myself very lucky at this time in having a garden to enjoy & a greenhouse where I can lose myself in sowing seeds & growing on the resulting seedlings. Bird feeders hanging in the garden ensure I have constant company in the way of Starlings, Goldfinches, Chaffinches, and Wood Pigeons etc. I hope too that you are all as lucky but if you don't have a garden please make sure you get out for your daily one hours exercise. Again we are really lucky in that we don't need to travel far from our houses to reach nature.

One piece of good news during this time is that stories are coming forward that would seem to indicate that as we would expect our nations wildlife is benefiting from the sudden downturn in human activity. One example of this is as you will read in Charlottes report, Toads have not had as big a gauntlet to run on their journey to their breeding ponds. Perhaps more bizarrely birders are reporting seeing bird species in their gardens that they have not recorded for decades. This of course could be explained simply that the birders are spending more time viewing their gardens than the sites they would normally patrol.

Some things are still happening within the Halifax Scientific Society .....

- Our new website is almost ready to be launched online. You will be notified as soon as this is available to view.
- Members are adding posts to our blog – [calderdale-wildlife.blogspot.com](http://calderdale-wildlife.blogspot.com). From here you can access links to other local wildlife blogs including the Birds one & Moths & Butterflies one. I am aware that some members do not have access to post on our blog & this is one of the things we were going to address this year. This will be done once things return to normal. In the meantime if anyone without access wishes to add anything to the blog I would be happy for you to send the text & any photos to myself at [hxscientificsocietychair@outlook.com](mailto:hxscientificsocietychair@outlook.com) & I will post on your behalf.
- An informal agreement has been reached with Calderdale Council for us to have use of the classroom at Ogden Water. We will consider using this resource to deliver workshops from next year.
- HSS is leading on a Hedgehogs in your Garden survey for the area. Notice of this has gone out on Facebook to local public groups within Calderdale.

We will endeavour to send similar newsletters each month until we can once again meet face to face on the second Tuesday of each month and enjoy walks & surveys together again.

In the meantime, Best Wishes & Stay Safe

Mick Harrop Chair Halifax Scientific Society

### **Some observations from Dave Sutcliffe: Bird and Mammal recorder:**

HSS Bird and Mammal Report – 10<sup>th</sup> March to 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020 - Recent Highlights

Please note that due to the ongoing Corvid -19 situation it has not been a good time during the last month to visit many of the usual birding sites in Calderdale.

Most recent reports below come from local patches. We will have missed some special birds.

## **Birds**

**Winter visitors** – there are still some small flocks of **Fieldfare** scattered about though soon to leave. **Bramblings and Redwings** are scarce, soon to be on their way to Northern Europe breeding grounds.

**Short-eared Owls** - very scarce all winter and still scarce – hopefully some back on our moorlands soon.

**Long-eared Owl** – Small population in Calderdale. Annual survey is not possible this year in the present situation

**Peregrine** – one is still occasionally roosting in the daytime on Dean Clough chimney.

**Returning waders** - **Lapwings, Golden Plover, Curlew and Oystercatchers** are already back in reasonable numbers along with an occasional **Common Sandpipers, Woodcock, Snipe, Redshank, Ringed Plover and Dunlin. Little Ringed Plovers** reported in the last few days on Whiteholme Reservoir, a **Jack Snipe** was photographed on Soil Hill and **7 Terns** (species unidentified) passed high over Northowram on 11<sup>th</sup> April.

**Breeding Bird Surveys for the British Trust for Ornithology** – **Grey Herons** are already in residence at local colonies and have young now. **Rookeries** are active, though the annual survey will not now take place this year. The last survey result - 586 nests from 50 colonies in 2019

**Summer Visitors** – **Hoopoe** photographed in a garden at Heptonstall on 12<sup>th</sup> April was special. **Wheatears** arrived on time, mid-March, as did a good number of **Ring Ouzels and Chiffchaffs**. Other migrants followed - **Sand Martin, House Martin, Swallow, Willow Warbler, Blackcap and Whitethroat** though the main influx is yet to emerge along with the other summer visitors. A treat for us all after most travelled to Africa last autumn and returning after the many hazards of such long migrations. The last to arrive will be **Spotted Flycatchers** and **Swifts** usually in the last week in April or first week in May.

**Common Scoter** – a big surprise in early April was the nocturnal migration of several flocks heard at night heading over Calderdale from the Irish Sea to the North Sea and beyond to their northern breeding grounds. The migration was witnessed over many sites in England during the same few days.

Seven individual **Ospreys** were reported passing through our area in early April and a **Marsh Harrier** over Soil Hill. There still might be other migrant raptors to follow.

## **Mammals**

Not a lot to report other than a few Roe Deer, Badgers and Foxes.

Please pass on all Mink, Otter and especially Hedgehog records to me by email. Date, location, number, alive/dead/road casualties etc.  
d.j.sutcliffe@btinternet.com

**Local Web-sites - For recent news on the Internet then try the following blogs. *Calderdale Wildlife, Calderdale Birds, Cromwell Bottom Wildlife Group, Calderdale Moths, Charlies Moths of Calderdale. West Yorkshire Birding.***

David Sutcliffe

**Commentary from Laurence Sutton, membership secretary April 16<sup>th</sup>.**

**Manor Heath Park and environs.**

So far this year has been extraordinary for the world and for us all, in lock- down in our respective locales since Mother's Day on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March. It is likely of course that the lock down will remain extant at the current level of severity for at least another three weeks. On the bright side (allowing us some degree of levity in this time of threat) the jet stream has had the decency to move away from the British Isles affording us with settled weather which combined with drastic falls in car and aircraft pollution have perhaps given us a glimpse of times long ago! Who has failed to feel the near alpine air upon our faces on our walks (just the one a day, Officer!) or appreciated the crystal blue of the skies? Moreover you can hear the Birds without the moronic thunder of traffic to drown them: which reminds me, amongst the announcement of lock-down I failed to notice the departure date of the Redwings from Manor Heath Park. As usual this winter we have had many and up to their point of departure they have congregated in the park trees in the mornings before feeding, oddly difficult to see but clearly evident from the increasing cacophony of discordant chatter which seems to get louder as each day passes: and then they are gone- back to Iceland and Scandinavia. In 2019 this happened on the 31<sup>st</sup> March: This year, no idea but definitely not here in April.

Manor Heath Park does support Brambling in winter but not last winter and just the one bird the year before amongst the ground feeding chaffinches. Previous winters have revealed more Bramblings and I recall one season well over 10 years ago when we had over 200 birds. This coincided with a bumper crop of Beech mast and a cold winter.

Spring has brought much bounce to the park! Two pairs of Nuthatch calling, two pairs Great Spotted woodpecker hammering out their territories (now one). Blackbird singing sweetly, Song thrush, repetitively and Mistle Thrush dolefully, all add to the usual suspects of Robin, Wren, Tits (all three) Hedge Accentor, and Chaffinch. At night I hear the male Tawney Owl (one for David). This last two weeks has brought back the fluting song of the blackcap of which I have counted two on the park. I do wonder if one has over wintered in the area. The Chiffchaffs have paid a visit but have passed on but no sounds of the willow warblers yet which do pass through our parks and gardens.

A shy bird also makes its presence known for those that can detect its low diminutive "PEW" amongst the higher pitched calls of the other birds. This is the Bullfinch which is surprisingly common in the suburban areas of Halifax and shows off its brilliant plumage well so far before the leaves fully open on the trees and shrubs. For a colourful bird it has a terrible voice!

A welcome return this spring is of the Greenfinch to the north east area of the park. Greenfinches have been in decline over several years due to a protozoan infection *Trichomanes gallinae* first noted in 2006. Let's hope their numbers are on the increase. They do come to feeders quite readily and this may well have been the original source of the infection. Therefore it is essential that bird feeders are regularly sterilised.

When I first moved to live on the edge of Manor Heath Park in 1990, there were no (very very few) House Sparrows here or in Skircoat Green, now the area and my house are festooned with them. I have a large colony in my Gable end. (Not a medical condition). These chaps and chips are great company: they sit on my window sill looking into the kitchen in the morning.

Just an hour ago on returning from a brief walk with dog (just the one walk!) onto the park I encountered a head on view of a sparrow hawk coming towards me chasing a blackbird into next door's hedge. I think if I had not been in the way at that moment the blackbird would have been no more. I watched the hawk over the park and circle before diving down again away and out of sight.

Numerous black and white Ashy Mining Bees (*Andrena cineraria*) have turned up over the last few days on the park creating their mini sandy volcanoes in the nearly bare ground around the grass edges. The larger females have very fashionable white ruffs around their upper and lower thoraces.

Plenty of plants flourishing now in the warmer weather. Thanks to lack of street cleaning interesting things are popping up. Under the tall wall on the west side of Skircoat Green Road between the post office and All Saints School there is a flush of the annual Henbit Dead-Nettle. Also in the area in general there has been plenty of Whitlowgrass with its tiny bright white flowers.

For those who may stroll near Albert Promenade and fancy recapping on some native wall ferns, take a look at the wall in Kensington Road to the west of Rocks Road for Wall Rue, Black Spleenwort, Harts Tongue Fern, Maidenhair Spleenwort and the beautiful Rusty Back Fern.

Finally take a read of "Can farming make a space for nature?" an article by Sam Knight of the New Yorker on the colourful and visionary Jake Fiennes (Cousin to Ranulph Fiennes). Be prepared for some swearing!!

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/17/can-farming-make-space-for-nature>

All the best wishes to all. Remember to send me your articles of inspiration to our next newsletter!!!

Laurence

### **Commentary from Charlie Streets 16<sup>th</sup> April**

SPRING TIME IN THE WOODS.

On March 23rd I took a walk through North Dean woods heading east along the riverside path at Copley church. Lockdown was already in place so it was nice to get out and about and back to nature in the fresh air. One of the first things that struck me was the amount of river bank and footpath that had been eroded or simply washed away by floods that had occurred since my last visit. As usual the

riverside trees were adorned with debris marking the height of the floodwater. A resourceful Long-tailed Tit was tugging at a piece of white fibrous material to add to its nest somewhere nearby. March is the usual time to see them nest building and it lifted my spirits no end.

Two swans flying up the valley at altitude were probably Whoopers judging by the number of local reports for this species in recent days. A singing Dipper and vocal Kingfisher looked like they were holding territories or looking for mates. I suspect the Kingfisher at least will stay to breed.

I feel blessed at this time of year to have a keen interest in birds, invertebrates and fungi as there's always something to catch my eye and investigate.

Moving away from the river by the viaduct a thickset, almost alien-like millipede was seen making its way across a moss covered stump, a Pill Millipede, not a species I'd seen before. The slightest of touches caused it to roll up into an impenetrable "pill" of armoured scales.

Nearby a rather nondescript brown mushroom was poking through the moss covered ground, I instinctively picked and smelled it, it had quite powerful but pleasant aroma - a Fragrant Funnel, an unexpected bonus and another first for myself.

Aside from the wildlife I think it was the calmness of the fresh spring air and the solitude that made the day special and all just 20 minutes from home.

With these uncertain times we can count ourselves pretty lucky in Calderdale in that most of us are within walking distance of productive wildlife spots which can help us put things in perspective a little and give us a welcome distraction if only for a short while.

### **Commentary by Sarah Flood April 16<sup>th</sup>.**

#### **MIDGLEY MOOR.**

What a wonderful few weeks we've had. Crisp mornings, and hot afternoons.

I saw my first swallow on Good Friday, and two today. Does that make a summer I wonder?!

I took a stroll over Midgley Moor today, listening out for the newly returned Cuckoo, on the way (no luck today).

Butterflies were abounding on the moors; Peacocks, Tortoiseshells, and clouds of Green Hairstreaks. Back down in the valley, Orange Tips, and Speckled Woods could be seen in smaller numbers.

I was also lucky enough to see a Common Lizard, sunning itself on a sandy track. Unfortunately it scurried off before I could get a photograph.

A species of mining bee was also busy excavating holes on the moorland tracks, with a species of Nomad bee (which parasitise the Mining bee) taking great interest, and trying to enter the burrows.

There were also plenty of birds about. Buzzards were soaring on the thermals, Kestrels hunting, and Skylarks ascending!

In the valley, Chiffchaffs could be heard chiffchaff-chaffchiffing, and also Willow Warblers, with their cascading song.

### **Toads Galore!! A Report from Charlotte Weightman.**

#### **The Cottonstones Toad Patrol**

**Behind every distressing story there is a silver lining – and this one is about the effect of lockdown on toads! With so little traffic on the lanes, and with the temporary closure of the very popular Alma Pub, together with the need for people to get interested in something apart from their day-to-day ordinary lives, the toads at Cottonstones are having a great year!**

The Cottonstones Patrol was registered with Froglife in 2017, with the help of Calderdale Countryside Services. There are 3 lanes to patrol, with volunteers moving the toads to their ancestral breeding pond just off Lumb Lane.

In 2018, from April 4<sup>th</sup> we escorted 864 toads across the road, but a further 101 were sadly squashed by vehicles. The migration ended on April 21<sup>st</sup>. In 2019, from March 20<sup>th</sup>, the numbers were 553 alive, 83 dead, many dehydrated by the effect of gritting and salt on the roads. The migration of toads ended on April 24<sup>th</sup>.

However, this year the toads started to move much earlier – on March 9<sup>th</sup>. Up to and including Easter Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> April, we had collected 1,117 very amorous toads, 23 lively frogs and one bemused newt. 45 toads were sadly squashed, too many of these were actually in amplexus which is even sadder.

We have had more volunteers this year than ever before – with up to 20 volunteers coming out (not all at the same time!), with a good number of very enthusiastic and keen eyed children which is always heart-warming. There have also been a considerable number of passers-by who have become interested and helped for a while. Numbers dropped drastically after lockdown, and also after the clocks changed, as the toads didn't start coming out until 8pm – 8.30pm rather than 7 o'clock. A small number of volunteers have diligently come out every night that they can which has been of invaluable help. However, one very warm day last week, it was reported by a local resident that there were a large number of toads heading to the pond...during daylight hours!

A massive thank you to all the volunteers from Cottonstones, Mill Bank and Soyland Town for the brilliant work you have been doing, for keeping to social distancing rules and using this as part of their daily exercise...and we still have more nights to go out. It is always a delight to walk along the very quiet lanes, collecting toads just as dusk settles and night falls, with the stars and planets and moon shining bright in the sky, the owl hooting, the birds settling noisily down for the night – all accompanied by the sound of the stream. To help wildlife in this way is a joy.

Charlotte Weightman

### **Observations from Steve Blacksmith: immediate past president HSS.**

Great excitement among the birders, especially those around Hebden Bridge when a Hoopoe was reported on the Hebweb page. The owner of the garden it has adopted in Heptonstall has forwarded an excellent picture, which now been placed by Aziza Mills as the header of the Hebden Bridge Birders Facebook Page.

In recent years we have been graced with these exotic looking pink, black and white, crested birds at Sourhall Rd, near Todmorden, and at Cottonstones, near Sowerby, also backed up with photos that non-birders have taken. I'm speculating whether it might be the same bird each time, a habitual over-shooter from the north France breeding population. The recent southerly winds would have helped the current one.

Last year a spectacular large blue and brown bird was found in Crimsworth Dean; a European Roller! Many birders took the walk up the track to where it had been first photographed, and a few of them got distant views, but it disappeared after a few days. Then much later in the summer word filtered out that it had been spending the summer in an Oxenhope Garden!

I was looking forward to finding more nests than usual on my daily walks allowed under the Lockdown Rules, but in response to all the comments about which nests were being found on the Nest Record Forum, we recorders were told in no uncertain terms that the BTO is **not** accepting any data collected by nest recorders or ringers unless from the recorder's own property. What a disappointment, but the policy to not encourage ornithologists and volunteer recorders to break the Lockdown is understandable for a national charity. The inequality of life is sharply brought out, when bird study is often the main pleasure of people with no garden or very small ones, while others with great privilege bestowed on them by chance or as a result of their own talent, have acres to stroll across.

I haven't been outside my garden gates for 4 days since that blow. I could go for walks, find and record nests, but there seems no point when the national bird recording organisation does not want them. I could just look for spectacular rarities or listen for furtive little brown birds of scarce occurrence, but that sort of competition doesn't appeal so much as the feeling that I am contributing to a nationwide survey. I had already found two Blackbirds' and two Long-tailed Tits' nests. At least I can record the Blue and Great Tits, the Blackbirds, the Dunnocks, Robins and Starlings that sometimes nest in my hedges or boxes I've put up, and at least I have more time to do that.

Spectacular rarities reminds me of yesterday's series of texts on the Grapevine operated by our own recorder at the HSS, Dave Sutcliffe, assisted by Brian Sumner. "WTE reported Thirsk heading south . . . I've just checked the data and it's the male from IoW." (This male White Tailed Eagle that was released on the IoW is known for his distant wanderings; his first was to Essex and back to the IoW, circumnavigating London.) Later we got at 17.03 "WTE just gone over Harrogate and heading our way." Then "Could be false info. SD says the male is now in Staffs and the female still in North Yorks." Then " From SD - the full track of the WTE shows that the nearest it got to Halifax was Dewsbury" with updates still coming in. Occasionally large rare birds are tracked across several counties by relays of birders looking up and passing info on to neighbouring areas, even without the use of wing tags or electronic tracking devices attached to the birds.



There is an Earnshaw Moor near Blackshaw Head, marked on the OS map. Earnshaw, before it was a surname, was a place-name meaning "a wood where White Tailed Eagles nest". Earn being the old name for a White Tailed Eagle. It's intriguing to think . . . but the moor probably got its name from a former owner.

Steve

**AND FINALLY!**

Keep inspired by the wonders of life around us. Feel absolutely free to write a account to the newsletter, we all welcome news and comments and observations. The Newsletter is yours as much as the "Halifax Scientific Society". Without you what are we?

All best wishes and good health,

Laurence Sutton, Membership secretary, HSS.