



A million voices for nature

THE

OBSERVERS

Lisburn Members Group News

September 2008



Welcome

This is a picture of our journey home on the Rathlin ferry in June of this year. Thankfully the skies didn't open up until our journey home although the ferry journey was not for the faint hearted. Never the less it was a great day out and as usual the company was good.

Welcome to first meeting of the new season. I hope you were able to experience some sunshine somewhere during the summer months! Our talk tonight is about the Lagan Valley Regional Park and I hope you find it interesting. You will hear about the rich treasure of habitat and biodiversity that is on our very doorstep in Lisburn and the many ways you can use it or be involved in the conservation work within the LVRRP. Stay behind for a cup of tea and a chat.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076,
Scotland no. SC03765

Wasn't it a lovely Day, the Day We Went To Rathlin

I was fortunate to be invited to the opening of the new facilities on Rathlin at the beginning of June. The facilities for those who don't know are a new toilet block and visitor centre at the top of the cliffs at the West Lighthouse and a visitor centre in a room in the lighthouse itself. The trip across the water was not the usual ferry trip but we were taken around the island to view the West Light and the coastal area where the choughs breeding site is. These boats were twin engined power boats and the journey was very exhilarating . There were politicians and the Lighthouse Commissioner and various people from Gov bodies, NGO's and the grandson of the guy who built the lighthouse itself. Graham Wynne the RSPB Chief Executive was there also and I got the chance to talk to him on the boat journey over to the island.



It was good to see the island from a view that you wouldn't normally get the chance to see. The opening day also coincided with Pat Flowerday's week of volunteering on the Island and it was good to see a familiar face on arrival at the West Light.

Group Day Trip On 21st June not just so lovely.

I managed to persuade my wife and daughter to come along on the Group day trip this year. All started well and Bertie's commentary on the bus out to the west Light was as humorous as always. Its true to say my wife is not a fan of bird watching but I do have evidence of her hogging the scope to see the puffins! Another couple of friends came along with us and whilst the women went back on the bus, Les and I walked back by our traditional route without incident, although it was a good bit cooler and breezier than other years. By the time we got back to Church Bay it had started to rain. As many as were allowed, went back to Ballycastle on the 3.30pm sailing but we had to stay on a now very cool and drizzly island until 5.30pm. The journey back was choppy to say the least. Waves were coming over one side and straight over the other side, soaking everything in between. Our departure was timely but as usual it was still a good day out although I don't think my wife is in a hurry to go back!

Robin wins Pecks Factor

Puffins pecked at the post into second place!

Since the launch of the RSPB's "Pecks Factor" competition in May to find Northern Ireland's favourite bird, the votes came in thick and fast. More than 1,000 entries were received and people from across the country have shown their enthusiasm for local wildlife by getting involved, and the results can now be revealed.

RSPB Spokesperson Colum Delaney said:

"After sifting through an enormous amount of votes and with close to 200 bird species to choose from, it became obvious from early on that the robin was a favourite with many people. Whilst the robin was the undisputed winner, it was great to see that a number of other species proved popular with voters – including the puffin, kingfisher, barn owl and blue tit. It was also interesting to see that a small number of votes came in for species such as condors and American Eagles – which of course are not local birds, but proof that people are drawn to a wide variety of different species!

Those voting for the robin were almost unanimous when asked why it was their favourite. Pecks Factor winner, Hilary Walsh summed it by saying, 'Robins are cute, brightly coloured and sing a nice tune. They remind me of Christmas'.



In second place, the comical puffins, much-loved residents of Rathlin Island, put in a strong showing and were almost neck and neck with the robin in the early stages of the competition.

"The robin was perhaps a little lucky that it was not in competition with the red kite, which may have given the robin a run for its money in the voting stakes. The red kite was not included in the poll as it had not been released into south Down in time for the competition, but maybe next year we could see a different winner!

Pecks Factor 2008 has been a great success and is further proof that birds and wildlife are important to many people."

How Many Red kites are there in Northern Ireland?

Answer.... Twenty Seven

Incorrect!, There is now only twenty six

Sadly the historic first bird re-introduction programme in Northern Ireland has been dealt a blow it didn't expect, just so soon. After the July release of twenty seven young birds in the County Down area of Castlewellan into the surrounding countryside one has been found dead. This incident is a mirror image of the first casualty in the Wicklow release almost a year ago.



This does not take away from the success of the release project though.

Robert Straughan the project leader is determined that this programme will not only result in breeding pairs of red kites in Northern Ireland but that it will be a boost to the profile of the RSPB's conservation work in the province and also a boost to the local economy through tourism.

I had the pleasure of being invited to the release of the last of the twenty seven birds at the end of July. It was great to get such magnificent views of these birds as they tentively came out of their holding pens for the first time. Some just simply took flight whilst others graciously posed for us for half a minute before taking to the air.

Robert showed us the now empty cages and demonstrated the radio receiver which is vital for him to keep track of all the birds movements during the first year.

The radio transmitters are attached to the tail feathers and will eventually fall off during their annual moult next year. Its during this first winter that they are at their most vulnerable. Already they are starting to disperse





Shocked and Angered At Senseless Killing of Red Kite

RSPB Northern Ireland has revealed that one of the recently released red kites has been found dead, believed to have been shot.

The crime occurred near the townland of Leitrim in South Co Down. Tests carried out by the PSNI suggest the bird may have been killed deliberately and that both wing tags and an identifying leg ring had been removed before the bird had been recovered by the RSPB.

RSPB NI Director Aidan Lonergan said:

“We are shocked and angered by the senseless killing of one of the recently released red kites. These magnificent birds were neither a threat to humans nor livestock, so we can only assume that the bird was blasted from the sky by an ignorant person or by someone who gets some perverse sense of enjoyment from killing birds of prey.

“We believe that there will be much anger not only from local people in the south Down area, but from right across Northern Ireland. Red kites are a globally threatened species and their reintroduction locally became a celebration of the return of an iconic species to Northern Ireland.

Red kites were hunted to extinction in Ireland over 200 years ago, at a time when there was much misinformation about kites and birds of prey in general. In 2008, there can be no such excuses.”

“RSPB Northern Ireland had been working tremendously hard behind the scenes for a number of years, to get the Red Kite Reintroduction Project off the ground, and we are determined to see it succeed. The message needs to be sent out that these birds should be a treasured addition to our countryside and not a target for illegal shooting.

“This red kite would have been no more than four months old and represented a threat to no one. This comes at a time when the RSPB will be going into local schools to tell pupils all about the red kites. One local school will now be deprived the opportunity to name and track one of the birds through our ‘Adopt a Kite’ initiative. “Anyone with information on this incident should contact their local PSNI Station.”

Commenting on the incident, PSNI Constable Alex Beck said: “Wildlife crime is taken seriously by the PSNI, and it’s significance can not be under estimated. Red Kites, like all wild birds, are protected by law under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. As such, any person involved in this type of crime could find themselves subject to a report to the Public Prosecution Service. I would ask anyone with any information to contact their local PSNI station on 0845 600 8000.”

Pats Jottings

Weather-wise it wasn't great. But to everything there is an up-side as well as a down-side. Here are just some of my highs and lows this summer. The first high has to be the call of the cuckoo in early May. Wonderful! It had returned.

During May and June I was part of a small team undertaking a Common Bird Census at Oxford Island. Chaffinches, Willow Warblers and Robins were the dominant species whilst the more elusive ones were Grasshopper Warblers, Stonechats and Tree Sparrows. A full list is being compiled.



You all know the one about the early bird Well it pays to be an early birder too. My early-to-rise conscientious census colleague, Steven, was up and at work in time to see a White-tailed Sea Eagle! It had been seen a few days before at Portmore and a few days later in Co Down when it was identified as a young Co Kerry bird on a visit to the North.

A personal high was my week on Rathlin Island – a truly captivating place. Visitors flooded in from far and wide to marvel at the spectacle before them. Puffins delighted and enchanted all. My favourites were the Chough family and the golden hare – also the reasons it took an hour to complete a 20 minute walk to work each day.

The prize-winning question from a visitor (American) was: 'Why is that stack prime real estate for Murres?' How do you answer that one? Fortunately another American came to the rescue explaining that their Murres are our Guillemots.



The week also brought a number of VIPs to the island. First came the official opening of the Information Centre and toilet block, bringing relief to visitors and staff! Next, a couple of days later, the full RSPB Council and Board of Directors arrived. They too seemed impressed by the clamour, volume and variety of the birds on view.



They had first been treated to a boat trip around the island where it appears some useful alliances were formed.....

Who will forget the really big highlight of July 2008? I refer, of course, to the release of magnificent Red Kites into the wild at Castlewellan. If you haven't yet seen them, the RSPB has a viewpoint in a spectacular location where you may just get a fly-past. Better still, go there for a day and support Shelagh Henry who does a great job, with little help, every weekend -Thursday to Sunday.

With the increase in Little Egrets in N I, it was only a matter of time until one arrived on 'my' bit of the lough. Lo and behold, there it was on 27 August in one of the flooded fields along with good-sized flocks of Black-tailed Godwits, Lapwing and Red-shank. All stayed in the vicinity for a couple of days.



And what about the lows? Well I never heard the cuckoo again: last year's corncrake didn't return: garden greenfinches, once the most numerous finch in my garden, are dying as a result of a parasite called Trichomonad. Given time, their numbers will build up again.

All in all, the highs well out-number the lows. Soon the swallows and martins will be gone so as we wish them luck we can also look forward to the delights in store over the coming months. I shall be looking out for more waders along the lough shore, also Hen Harriers and Merlin as they leave their breeding ground for the more open rough grasslands around Lough Neagh.

