

## KOS conference 4<sup>th</sup> Nov 2017 – Impressions

The object of this short article is to highlight the superb KOS conference held recently in Canterbury. I will not be able to detail all the subject matter discussed within the nine talks, needless to say they were varied, thought provoking and not all doom and gloom with regards to birds and other wildlife in Kent. Why am 'I' writing this, well in a nutshell Norman McCanch somehow twisted my arm.....

Despite birding in county since 1977 to 1978, I failed to attend the historical conferences held before so ably organised by John Cantelo and Chris Cox, therefore fast forward many, many years here we are.

With a low attendance at indoor meetings and views from other counties on what they do, it became apparent that holding a one-day conference, on a Saturday during daylight hours was worth revisiting. Special thanks to Chris Roome and Brian Watmough for having that vision, securing a venue, the speakers including a celebrity speaker and advertising the event.

This resulted in over 110 attendees, a pleasant venue at Canterbury primary school, great lectures, excellent artwork from Norman McCanch, Stephen Message and Ian Rendell, and a KOS stand amongst others.

Once registered on arrival with our name badges, it was a good opportunity to drink tea, coffee, fruit juice and meet friends old and new in some cases even put a face to names. It seemed at times like a who's who of Kent birders for those that could attend, a day when opportunities arose to talk about past adventures, sightings even observatory life in Kent. Martin Coath and Chris Roome opened the meeting, we all sat patiently and the lectures started

Paul Hadaway of the KWT presented a superb lecture entitled 'Making spaces for Nature-KWT and Living Landscapes. Broadly speaking, breaking down the county in distinct areas or regions that represented geographical zones which offer wildlife a haven to thrive in but which in many cases are isolated from one another thus require corridors of habitat creation. Offshore as well as on land, marine areas are rich in wildlife which require monitoring, protection and long-term study. It was stated that DEFRA now recognise the usefulness of beavers which live in east Kent and with time hopefully otters can colonise other parts of the county once the Asian short clawed Otter has been ruled out as a species being recorded. Meadows and small areas of grassland carefully created and nurtured by involving school children create new wild rich areas that birds can feed in. Turtle Doves are in steep decline but a local project in Staple has seen birds breed in the area whilst working closely with farmers sowing seed in field with certain plants that Turtle Doves feed their chicks on has proved vital in supporting their chances of surviving in Kent.

Next up, Alan Johnson of the RSPB talked about the usefulness of predator fencing in the county and how this was improving the survival rate and success of Lapwings and Redshank in the county as foxes for one are unable to access the areas thus fledglings do better. The creation of many new reserves in the county often well away from public access have enabled many species to prosper especially waders. At Great Bells reserve on Sheppey using GPS guided tractors a projected plan modelled on Elmley was created exactly as the plans and has proved a huge success with breeding birds.

David Walker was on next with a whistle stop talk on Dungeness Bird Observatory, detailing via graphs and photos the changing landscape at Dungeness, the importance of long term monitoring via counting and ringing of birds and the value that it has. A partnership and sharing of information with neighbouring France has proved useful as has attending international ringing conferences. Long term monitoring has been shown that species like Willow Warbler have over the decades had highs and lows in numbers recorded. Other species like Great White Egret once a rarity have hugely increased as have Common Buzzards, in fact it was a long time before David recorded a Common, and he only used to see Honeys over Dungeness such was the rarity of the former species. Caspian Gulls also have seen a huge increase in numbers and as with other species those sporting a colour ring have been read, their history obtained via the internet. Recent advances in technology have allowed

identification of species via their faeces samples leading to confirmation of the identification already suspected of the Acadian Flycatcher, the first British record.

Following on, Ian Hunter spoke about Sandwich Bay Bird observatory from its humble beginnings in a rented-out series of sheds to a state of the art cosy field centre complete with planning regulatory watch tower in case of floods. Ian like David extolled the importance of long term data sets of sightings and ringing., species such as Common Buzzard and Sparrowhawk once rare are now recorded in large numbers every year in the recording area. Cormorant data was also revealing indicating that since the advent of the windfarms offshore, the birds appear to be feeding there in increasing numbers. Thanks to the help of some early pioneers some still birding locally Sandwich has seen huge changes in terms of birds trapped, education of youngsters through events held, some of which may in the future get really interested in wildlife. More recently, the use of high tech sound recording equipment with a parabola has enabled species flying overnight to be recorded, the sonograms analysed.

Stephen Moss, taking a different approach without the aid of slides talk was entitled, 'Why patchwork matters; Birding your local area. Early days of living in West London and cycling to Kent to see birds to with time moving house from Middlesex and finally Somerset detailed the importance of meticulous note taking on birds and other fauna recorded. This approach was detailed through excerpts in articles in the Guardian that Stephen read out. Recording sightings this way, illustrates changes over the years in terms of certain species recorded, when they nest, when they sing and numbers present. This enthusiasm for recording birds and putting pen to paper has enabled many generations and a wide audience to either enjoy our natural environment or initiate a lifelong interest in watching birds and other wildlife in this country. It was clear that this has been achieved through Springwatch and books published which if younger generations are taken in will ensure that the future should at least be represented by those that care about birds etc.

Lunch was next on the menu, very enjoyable, tasty, thanks to the catering staff, a chance to continue with stories of old before the afternoon session.

Dr Stephen Wood kicked off the afternoon session with, 'The return of the Red kite' an opportunity to see a short film of Super Ted and Skeletor in an unlikely scenario of attempting to steal eggs from a nest of Red Kite. This highlighted just how rare the Red Kite was in recent decades yet go back to the 1600's in Kent when using Tenterden as an example they were positively common yet persistent shooting presumably performed all across Britain led to the small pocket of population in central Wales. Through release projects though across the country the Red Kite has once again spread far and wide to the point that we now have two pairs breeding in Kent and hopefully this will continue. A large bird that would be an easy target for a shooter, but this toehold in the county with time could see fantastic site of Red Kites once again gracing the countryside in Kent, other than the wandering birds from the Chilterns on their away days around the UK.

Rob Clements, talked about rare Woodland birds in Kent and Hampshire. Having left Kent for a few years now, Rob continued his interest and enthusiasm for tracking down the rarer woodland species. A mission to cover every suitable area for Firecrest and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has already shown larger numbers locally and nationally than at first thought. Working on Hawfinches Rob and a colleague have established the pre-roost and roost sites across the New Forest whilst work on Hobbies has actually revealed lower than expected numbers whilst Goshawk seem to be doing incredibly well and at present not affecting Honey Buzzards, or so it would seem. Conversely in Kent it would appear that Hawfinch could become extinct as a Kentish breeding species and Firecrest may well like Lesser Spotted Woodpecker be under recorded.

Murray Orchard, entertained us talking about Kent's nocturnal birds, an update on the status of Woodcock, Owls and Nightjar in Kent. Carrying out surveys on nocturnal birds isn't always easy as areas are difficult to access, night birding isn't something for the faint hearted. As a result, we probably rarely get good coverage or a true assessment of nocturnal birds in the county. Long eared Owl would appear to be a job for the professionals whilst Woodcock numbers have certainly dropped

as we have gone past the extensive period of coppicing in the county which favoured the birds. Nightjars are also very rare in the county as habitat changes. Short eared Owl often summers but breeding isn't always proven whilst Tawny, Little and Barn Owl are possibly under recorded in some areas.

Dr Hazel Jackson, the final speaker, a primatologist but now with an interest in parrot species which she studied for her PhD. The talk, 'A pandemonium of Parakeets, successful, establishment of the ring-necked parakeet'. Not everyone's cup of tea but like it or not Ring-necked Parakeet have spread far and wide in the UK and are here to stay. There were several theories to the origins of the birds but genetic studies on feathers kindly provided by the public following much coverage produced a huge response. The extracted and sequenced DNA clearly showed that their origins were firmly in the Indian sub-continent. DEFRA have talked about culling them as they can cause extensive damage to fruit farms and also appear to push other woodland species out of their nest holes. The Parakeets would appear to be at least for the time being and many like to see them on their garden bird tables and feeders but not always happy when they appear large numbers of them at roost. With an estimated 38000 individuals in the UK, that's a lot of birds and noise!!!

A great day, apologies if some of the memories and facts from the talks are not quite as others heard them, I didn't take notes or expect to write an article but all in all a really good day with lots of positive feedback!!!



*Ring-necked Parakeets*

**Barry Wright**