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# Eye on Rye

Spring 2012



## In brief

If, climatically, the end of 2011 was not typical then the start of 2012 was extraordinary. January witnessed several days of blue skies and temperatures normally not expected until May. One could be forgiven for thinking spring had arrived and much of the wildlife felt the same. Then, almost without warning, the temperatures dropped and significant falls of snow were dumped upon us reminding us that winter was still around.

These are particularly challenging times for wildlife, food supplies are withdrawn or, at least, more difficult to find. Normally shy birds such as bittern and water rail are forced into the open to forage. Great news for bird watchers but a risk for creatures which normally rely upon the protection of the reedbed for safety. Creatures that escape the cold of winter by hibernating can be fooled by the warm weather and be caught out by a sudden cold snap.

All this added up to some unusual sightings at Rye Meads in the first 2-3 months. Bittern and water rail were seen by lucky visitors, winter thrushes were numerous at times, a fox took up residence and there were unusual sightings, white-tailed eagle and a great grey shrike being two noteworthy stars.

In this newsletter we take a closer look at the sightings during the period and once again, give an update upon the work of the army of volunteers who maintain the site so that it remains attractive to the birds.

**Please contact the editor, Peter Warne, if you have any questions or comments**

RSPB Rye Meads nature reserve, Rye Road, Stanstead Abbots, Herts, SG12 8JS

Telephone: 01992 708383

E-mail: [rye.meads@rspb.org.uk](mailto:rye.meads@rspb.org.uk)

# The work at Rye Meads – Habitat management

Here at Rye Meads we have a fabulous team of staff and volunteers that look after the reserve, keeping it a great place for wildlife. In winter the main habitat management work is looking after our reedbeds.

Each year we cut different areas of reedbed to promote a mixture of reed growth. The cut reeds are removed and this stops the beds from drying out and turning into reed fen and ultimately woodland. Another way of managing reeds is to raise water levels in the winter. If you have been to the Draper hide in recent months, you may have noticed that the water level has been higher than in summer. This benefits both the reedbed and the winter wildfowl. To compensate and provide a scrape for feeding waders, we lowered the water over at the Tern hide. Water levels have now been returned to their summer levels so you'll now see scrape at the Draper hide and lagoon at the Tern hide.

Reedbed is an important habitat, it's quite rare and a number of species depend upon it. The bittern is perhaps the best known but it also provides a home for harvest mice, otter, water rail and others. There were some great views of a bittern this winter and at one point we even had two on site! A primary aim of the recent reedbed management is to make improvements so that bitterns will choose to stay and breed in the Lee Valley rather than just visit in winter.

## Wildlife highlights - the first months of 2012

Apart from the bitterns, water rails have been seen frequently and on one occasion a bird was seen feeding on a dead coot! It often comes as a surprise to learn that water rails are omnivorous, they will eat vegetation but their main diet consists of small fish, snails and insects.

In the middle of January we were delighted to spot a pair of barn owls on site! The pair have taken over one of the owl boxes that can be seen from the Draper and Lapwing hides. We've had some lovely views, and the reserve has stayed open until 6.30 pm on some days so that visitors can see these fabulous birds.



Barn owl pair – Andy Johnson

White-tailed eagle – Paul Mowbray



February turned out to be an extraordinary month for spotting especially when the snow came down. A spectacular visit came in the form of a white-tailed eagle flying over the reserve. Paul Mowbray did really well to get a series of photographs and although distant, the size of this enormous bird is illustrated well.

One of our star species at Rye Meads is the kingfisher and a pair have already been spotted investigating the nesting bank by the Kingfisher hide. Fingers are crossed for another good breeding season.

Other birds of prey highlights have included regular sightings of kestrel and sparrowhawk and there have been good views of a peregrine and a red kite that flew over. Wildfowl have been numerous. As well as our usual teal, tufted duck, pochard, shelduck, shoveler, gadwall and mallard we've seen wigeon (14 on 7 February), two female goosander (12 February) and three male smew (12 February). Watervoles have been spotted as have the first butterflies, both peacock and brimstone.

February also brought a real surprise when a great grey shrike was seen and stayed on the site for several days. These are rare visitors to Britain but if they are seen, it is nearly always in winter when they may move to escape the worst of the weather in their colder European habitats (particularly Eastern Europe and Scandinavia). This particular bird was often distant but we were able to get extremely close views when the Rye Meads Ringing Group were lucky enough to catch and ring the bird.



Great grey shrike ringing  
Joan Childs

# The importance of ringing

Bird ringing is a technique involving the attachment of a ring to a bird's leg (rather like us wearing a wrist watch). The ring may be colour-coded but always bears a unique reference number by which the bird can be identified. When the bird turns up at another site, the ring information can be read and the original ringing group identified and informed. It's a valuable technique which provides lots of information about bird migration and population sizes. It also provides an opportunity to give the birds a health check, measure bodyweight and assess general condition.

Ringling has allowed experts to work out migration routes and the reasons that drive birds to make these extraordinary journeys. The Ringers are trained and licenced to handle the birds without causing harm and to attach the rings which is extremely delicate work. If you would like some more information about the Rye Meads Ringing Group check out their website at [www.rmr.org.uk](http://www.rmr.org.uk). If you are interested in ringing and want to see the Ringers in action they host events at Rye Meads when they invite the public along to see what they do and get close up views of the birds. Keep an eye on the Rye Meads website as there will be events in May, August and September.

## Stargazing LIVE

Many of you may have watched the January 2012 edition of BBC's Stargazing LIVE with Professor Brian Cox and Dara O'Brien. Well this year, and for the first time, we held our own event at Rye Meads - our own stargazing event!

The Loughton Astronomical Society came over to the site with telescopes and their expertise and we had a fabulous evening. We saw stars including the twins (Castor and Pollux which make up the constellation of Gemini) and the Andromeda galaxy. And we saw planets; Venus and Jupiter with its 4 largest moons. Over **70** people came along and we all had a great time! Keep an eye out, we'll be running events like this again!

If you can't wait for the formal event, you can look up an astronomical events listing for the month on [www.astronomy.co.uk](http://www.astronomy.co.uk). If Jupiter's moons are favourably lined up, they can be seen through binoculars as tiny but distinct points of light. And our own moon looks completely different through binoculars or even a small scope.



## Things to do at Rye Meads

### Springwatch with the RSPB; Saturday 2 and Sunday 3 June

If you enjoy the BBC's Springwatch and want to see some for yourself, come along to our special days in June! Discover how to make your garden wildlife friendly, explore the reserve with a special trail for kids, go pond dipping and minibeasting! For more information and times please contact the reserve.

Also see "Getting close to Nature" overleaf, our feature article for this issue.

These are just some of the fabulous things we do at Rye Meads check [www.rspb.org.uk/ryemeads](http://www.rspb.org.uk/ryemeads) for more family events! Rye Meads is a great place for families! Don't miss out on some of these fabulous events coming up this year!



### Wildlife Explorers Club - Third Saturday of each month, 11 am-1 pm

The Wildlife Explorers Club is a monthly club for 6-11 year olds to explore nature while having fun playing games and doing crafts. We do lots of different activities, including pond dipping, making minibeast homes, exploring other nature reserves, and more! Booking is required. Cost: £3 for RSPB Wildlife Explorer members, £4.50 for non-members, and free for accompanying adults.

## Wacky Wildlife Adventures – holiday fun for 7-13 year olds

Outside of the formal term times, Rye Meads hosts a series of fun days for children between the age of 7 and 13. The adventures run every day between 10 am and 4 pm during school holidays and are guaranteed to banish boredom and keep everyone happy with fun games, activities, crafts and much more! Each day will have different activities.

The RSPB's Wacky Wildlife Adventure is organised and run by trained RSPB teachers. For more information, and to receive a booking pack please contact the reserve. The cost is £17 per day for Wildlife Explorers members and £25 per day for non-members. The fun starts in the Easter holidays – 3-5, 10-12 April. There are further days scheduled for the summer holidays (6-10, 13-17, 20-24 August) and the October half-term break (30 October-1 November). Booking is essential as these days are extremely popular and numbers must be limited.

## Education at Rye Meads

We have a fantastic education scheme here at the reserve! Throughout the year school classes visit us for one of our fabulous courses where children can get really close to wildlife, have a hands-on experience, go pond dipping, minibeasting and more! Rye Meads is a place where children can learn to love wildlife and the great outdoors. We provide risk assessed, curriculum linked courses for all age groups from foundation to key stage 5. To find out more you can visit our website [www.rspb.org.uk/teaching](http://www.rspb.org.uk/teaching) and click on Rye Meads.

If your looking for a fabulous place to take your class, or want to suggest us to your child's teacher do so today! Check out the website or you can email Caroline Gellor (our Education Officer) today [caroline.gellor@rspb.org.uk](mailto:caroline.gellor@rspb.org.uk)

## Getting close to nature – A garden pond

As traditional habitats are being lost throughout Great Britain, many wildlife species are fighting back through the occupation and exploitation of household gardens. And if you want to encourage these visits, almost the single most important thing to introduce is a garden pond. It doesn't have to be large. Even something the size of a bird bath will make a difference if water levels can be maintained. But if you can create something slightly bigger with a shallow shelf at the edge to provide an escape route, you are likely to witness some astonishing wildlife visits.

Water is a magnet for all sorts of creatures. As soon as frogs and newts awake from winter hibernation (frogs probably from the bottom of your pond) they seek out water for spawning (frogs first, newts later). Under the surface, more mysterious creatures may be lurking. Damselfly and dragonfly larvae live out the bulk of their lives submerged, feeding on other water creatures. Their adult life is relatively short. If you are lucky, however, you might experience their emergence as they climb aquatic plants under the cover of darkness (to escape predation). Take a torch and watch their transformation from "grub" to "jewel" on a warm summer evening.

Come the winter, put feeders around the pond with suitable perches to attract birds who will both feed and bathe. Finches could include siskins and redpolls on migration, winter thrushes, fieldfare and redwing escaping the Scandinavian winter, starling flocks and if you are very lucky (and suitably cunning with your feeding) woodpeckers. All it takes is a hole in the ground and a liner available from all aquatic centres. Add some pond weed for aeration and some ramshorn snails for cleaning, sit back and watch.



Pictures both Peter Warne