



Chesil Bank and the
Fleet Nature Reserve
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Newsletter Winter 2009/2010

The Chesil Centre's 15th Anniversary

The 15th Anniversary of the Chesil Beach Centre was celebrated on August 4th. Appropriately the celebration focused on the volunteers who have manned the Centre, delighting visitors with information and interpretation on Chesil, the Fleet and Portland. Volunteers Pat March and Colin Winder, two of several volunteers who have been involved with the Reserve throughout this period, received on behalf of all the volunteers a copy of a photographic album from the Hon. Mrs Townshend. The album was specifically produced for the occasion and recognises the contributions made by volunteers involved in helping on the Reserve in general, with the Fleet Observer, the Chesil Multi-media project, the swans at Abbotsbury, study and research, and protecting the terns.



Miss Helen Brotherton CBE

As many readers will know, Helen Brotherton died this year. She was a pioneer of British conservation. During the Second World War she moved to Dorset where she spent the rest of her life. She was a key to the establishment of the Dorset Wildlife Trust and its subsequent success; she secured Brownsea Island for nature, and was instrumental in setting up the Portland Bird Observatory. Miss Brotherton also played a major role in promoting the nature conservation interests on Chesil and the Fleet. She was a member of the working party that produced a report in 1974, highlighting a number of issues that needed attention, in particular the plight of breeding common and little terns which had suffered a notable decline in numbers during the 1950's and 60's. She attended every one of the annual Fleet and Chesil Conservation Management Meetings from their beginning in 1978 until last year. 'Miss B' became a trustee of the Fleet and Swannery Trust when the charity was established in 1994. Along with many people in the county and beyond, we will miss her wise advice, her humour and her unflinching interest in our work.

Couch's Goby

Couch's goby *Gobius couchi* is a rare British marine fish which feeds on algae, crustaceans, bivalves and polychaetes. It can grow up to 9cms and live for about six years. It was only discovered in British waters in 1974, and in the Fleet in 1983. This summer the fish was recorded again in the East Fleet by Lin Baldock who has kindly sent in the photograph with identifying features. The fish has only three known locations in Britain but has more recently been found in the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, suggesting that the distribution of the species may be wider than initially considered.



Sea grasses flourish

Sea grasses are the Fleet Lagoon's speciality. Two species of *Zostera* and two species of *Ruppia* carpet most of the floor of the Fleet. Sea grasses grow in the spring after being dormant in the winter, flower and seed in the summer, and die back over a longish period in the autumn and early winter. Throughout much of the year sea grasses are a magnet to other plants and animals, directly supporting rare micro-organisms and providing habitat for a range of brackish water vertebrates and invertebrates. This mass of life is in turn preyed upon by larger animals - the swans and migrant wildfowl in the winter, and fish and water birds in the summer. Despite their abundance in habitats like the Fleet, the sea grasses are sensitive plants and are prone to disease. They are vulnerable to being smothered by rampant seaweeds that flourish in over-enriched water. Not that long ago, the sea grasses in the West Fleet were under pressure but subsequent monitoring has shown an improvement in water quality, and this seems likely to be the reason for this summer's prodigious growth. The improvement in water quality may be associated with the introduction of a range of management measures, but almost certainly this year's performance will be linked to some or all of the various elements in weather patterns that we have experienced throughout the year.

In relation to the performance of the sea grasses, a paper published in volume 130 of the Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society by Patrick O'Sullivan, builds on an earlier paper (Weber GJ, O'Sullivan PE and Brassley P 2006 'Hindcasting of nutrient loadings from its catchment on a highly valuable coastal lagoon: the example of the Fleet, Dorset, UK, 1866-2004AD') that looked at past land use in the Fleet catchment to try and determine levels of nutrients introduced into the Fleet. It was concluded that the Fleet was overloaded in terms of today's 'permissible' levels in the mid 19th century with agriculture being the main long term source. O'Sullivan, in his paper entitled 'Numbers of Mute Swans on the Fleet Lagoon, Dorset, 1808-2008, and their likely effects on nutrient loadings', looks at contributions made by wildfowl and particularly the swans as concerns have sometimes been expressed that the Swannery at Abbotsbury contributes a significant nutrient source, especially during the later part of the 20th century when swan numbers were increasing. By compiling much interesting historical data on swan population levels in the Fleet however, O'Sullivan has been able to reasonably establish that mute swans have probably never been a major source of nitrogen loadings to the Fleet. The swans probably contribute significant amounts of phosphorus, which in turn may have contributed to a recent decline in sea grass at the extreme West Fleet but swans are part of the inherent value of the Fleet. This season's improvement in the sea grass and the continued improvement in water quality may be mainly due to the upgrading of the local sewage treatment works, which was known to have been making an impact.

Dormouse

Fleet Study Group member, Dr Sue Eden, has just had her book, entitled 'Living with Dormice', published. Although formerly a professional botanist, Sue became intrigued with dormice living in areas of climatic coastal scrub at the back of Chesil Beach. The perceived view used to be that dormice were exclusively restricted to specific woodland habitats. Painstaking research over a wider area, including the willow beds bordering the Fleet, revealed healthy populations of dormice. Sue has been able to prove that dormice do not have exacting habitat requirements and are elusive rather than rare. Sue's book, published by Papadakis, is set out in numerous topically entitled, easy to read chapters. There are plenty of excellent photographs and illustrations, including this one of Sue's.



News from the Swannery

This year's nesting season began on the 16th March and cygnets started hatching on 27th April. In total 500 cygnets were produced from 150 nests, and at the end of the season 120 fully grown young were ringed. This June legislation was put in place allowing the Swanherd and his staff to be licensed to resume tagging cygnets. Knowing an individual cygnet from hatching means that a lost cygnet can be re-united with its family, and this has a significant affect on cygnet survival rates in the colony. Also, knowing the individuals and families in successive generations means that the important study on the colony's genetic make up can continue. This year a drug known to kill ingested bacteria was sourced and administered successfully. This had an immediate effect with far fewer cygnets being killed by the harmful *Clostridium* bacterium.

The biennial swan roundup was held on the 24th & 25th July, in fine, but windy, weather. Altogether 683 swans were caught and 'processed', 109 of which were newly ringed. Apart from the opportunity to ring new birds and record the individuals previously ringed adding valuable data to a long running study, the round up enables a huge amount of bio-metric data to be collected. The study continues to benefit our understanding of Abbotsbury swans and swans beyond. The round up also provided the opportunity for every bird to be vaccinated against Duck Viral Enteritis.

This autumn under close scrutiny of the Swanherd, a small number of swans were involved in a trial to determine a swan's feeding rate. The results may help to provide a benefit for the conservation of swans in general.

There is some news on mammals at the Swannery. Water voles continue to do well following their comeback two years ago, more and more evidence of otter visits is being found and there is a section in Sue Eden's book 'Living with Dormice' devoted to dormice in the Swannery where there is a good population.



June 25th Roundup

Mollusc survey of the East Fleet

This was undertaken by Dr John Fisher from June 19th-26th. This was an important survey as little has been done since major survey work was carried out in the 1970's by Dennis Seaward, and in the 1980's by Jan Light. In making supporting comments on the list of 53 species recorded, Dr Fisher's survey presents an opportunity to see if any possible changes have occurred over the 40 years. Hopefully there will be some news on this in the next newsletter.

Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009

The 'Marine Bill' became an Act of Parliament on 12th November. It is believed that the bill may provide many benefits for marine wildlife with a quarter of our seas, as opposed to the current 8%, having some form of protection. By contrast, it is likely that coastal wildlife may be put under threat by increased public access. In aiming to secure a continuous long distance path with wider spreading room for open-air recreation, and access to the foreshores and cliffs, sensitive habitats might well be compromised. If the current access arrangements relating to Chesil and the foreshores of the Fleet are removed there is little doubt that wildlife will suffer, visual quality will be impaired and members of the public will put their safety at risk in a number of ways. The Act requires Natural England to prepare an access 'scheme' on how the new coastal rights will be implemented. There is public consultation on the content of the proposed scheme, and comments may be submitted via Natural England's website by 5th February, 2010. The very first stretch of the coastal route is a short section of coast at Weymouth Bay to be completed in time for 2012 Olympic sailing events.

Incidents and issues

It is not that often that we highlight undesirable happenings and issues. Thankfully there are not all that many. The ones that we have to deal with though tend to be damaging to the environment, time consuming and costly to put right. Currently we have to deal with a 10 metre boat that was deliberately and irresponsibly beached on Chesil as an un-seaworthy vessel. The owner was challenged about this as the boat was on private property without authorisation and potentially threatened the Fleet. The threat became a reality during the night of 20th/21st of October when a high spring tide, strong winds and low pressure combined to lift the boat off the beach. The boat was then carried by wind and tide across the Fleet until it became entangled in a mooring, thankfully not occupied, and for several days periodically leaked a small amount of oil. The boat has now been secured and steps are being taken to recover and dispose of it. This will however require specialist equipment that firstly can access the Fleet under the low Ferry Bridge and secondly that can work in shallow waters. The whereabouts of the owner is not known now. Incidents like this will surely only strengthen the call for boating to be legislated against, and the cost of boating to go up, something which the vast majority of boat owners who take the trouble to manage and maintain their boats properly do not deserve.

The second incident that is highlighted is a particularly bad case of disturbance by a kite sailor who endeavoured to travel along the whole of the Fleet. This caused an enormous amount of stress to birds in the West Fleet before the activity could be brought to a halt. Whilst this is an isolated incident, it was a deliberate intrusion.

Finally, that on-going issue of litter. We have just compared an analysis of litter picked up on the beach this autumn compared with one made in 1985. Essentially there is no change. Plastics, and in particular wrappings of foodstuffs, drinks and bait left by anglers still lead the way. One difference though is the amount of plastic bags containing dog faeces. This did not occur in 1985. We would rather dog walkers on Chesil not 'pick up' as faeces quickly disappear in the shingle. Neither is it practical or cost effective to have pooh bins everywhere. Picking up may be an appropriate urban practice but is it appropriate in the wider countryside, especially if a significant amount of it is almost immediately discarded and seen literally hanging around for ages in plastic bags? Another development is the practice of bagging up litter and leaving it by the nearest sign or seat for someone else to deal with.



Councillor Doug Hollings

It is very sad to report that Cllr Hollings has died. He took a great interest in the Fleet, and worked hard to ensure that the lagoon and its surrounding environment maintained its tranquillity. He was particularly keen to see the Chesil Beach Centre development proposal take place. A knowledgeable local historian, Doug produced a well researched millennium booklet for Wyke Regis in 1988, which was updated as a 'History of Wyke Regis' in 1997. The history contains many interesting references to Chesil and the Fleet.

Filming on the Fleet

The BBC was busy on the Fleet this summer. The purpose of the ancient 'Wadeway' crossing the West Fleet still remains a mystery. In a programme filmed in May, a variety of ideas are put forward and discussed. Next year marks the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. The BBC is planning to televise a series of programmes entitled 'Dig 1940' in which the stories of several incidents of fighter planes shot down in the process of defending our shores are told. A camera crew spent several days filming a group of enthusiasts painstakingly excavating and recovering pieces of a Hurricane aircraft shot down near Langton Herring. Autumnwatch presented by Kate Humble and Chris Packham, was carried out on Portland and Weymouth in early October and included filming on Chesil and the Fleet at Ferrybridge.

Fleet Observer – glass bottom boat

It is a pleasure to report that following its refit the Observer was in the water as planned for Easter and available throughout the season. This is the first time that we have been able to do this. Visitor numbers on the boat were better than last year but only just, as for the second year running, the weather has been poor in August, the main month for business by far. The team of skippers worked hard throughout this long season, and hopefully will get what they deserve in 2010, a sunny summer!

Tonia Hallet of Weymouth's Harbourside Rotary presents a £500 cheque to Warden, Don Moxom, for the Fleet Observer. The formal appeal to raise £15,000 for the boats recent extensive refit has been successful, but as the refit was several thousand pounds over budget, contributions are still welcome



Breeding birds

2009 has been a disastrous year for several of our key species. For the first time ever as far as our records go back (and this is to the 19th century), the little tern failed to nest on Chesil. Approximately 30 birds arrived at Ferrybridge in May as usual but despite staying for a number of days they moved on without a nest being scraped and an egg being laid. This occurrence was even more disappointing in that a team of wardens were on stand by to give the birds 24 hour protection and the nesting area was surrounded by an effective anti-fox electric fence. Whilst this outcome is a bitter disappointment it is perhaps not that surprising as over the last five years only a handful of youngsters have been reared. Hopefully the terns will come back in 2010, and so this year's special wardening preparations will be carried out again. One of the country's leading seabird experts, Bill Bourne, predicted in the 1980's that terns nesting on Dungeness and Chesil would disappear. As the Dungeness colonies became extinct some years ago, it seems that his sad prophesy is going to be realised.

Hérons may have always bred on the Fleet intermittently. There are some records of them breeding in early 20th century, and after a period of absence they started breeding again in 1976. Since then their breeding has been continuous in a number of copses bordering the West Fleet. The colony has never been stronger than 15 pairs but was thought to have been quite productive, especially in the 1980's. In recent years numbers have dwindled, and this year no nesting occurred. Compounding this year's sorry situation are the facts that our common terns abandoned their nests, the little egrets that started breeding with us last year did not turn up this year, and the few pairs of ringed plover nesting at Ferrybridge produced very few young.

This photograph, taken in the 1980's depicts some of up to five pairs of herons that nested in a single Scot's Pine in Cuckoo coppice situated by the shore of the extreme West Fleet in the Swannery embayment.



Storm period 14th – 27th November

For the second time this year the beach has been battered. On 14th November, gale force winds from the SW whipped up 10 metre waves which crashed onto the beach sending spray high into the air and salt several hundred metres inland. The winds that followed the gale blew almost relentlessly for a fortnight. Although this storm had higher waves and stronger winds than the February storm, its nature was entirely different, and the impact on the beach's profile was less marked, especially in the west.



Waves over topping the beach at Ferrybridge. Visitors experience the full blast of the wind and spray from crashing waves, but some people went too close

The Reed Beds at Abbotsbury

Readers may recall in last winter's newsletter that a fresh initiative was being considered to enhance the opportunities for breeding song birds in Abbotsbury's reed beds. Despite the beds being well known as a site for breeding migrants such as Reed and Sedge Warblers, a formal estimate on numbers has never been carried out. This survey therefore was considered a priority along with recording physical data on the beds themselves. The findings were approximately as expected - Reed Warbler 51 pairs, Sedge Warbler 7 pairs and Reed Bunting 11 pairs. Other species recorded in and adjacent to the reed beds were 4 pairs of Wren, 2 pairs of Moorhen, Pied Wagtail and Cetti's Warbler, and a pair of Lesser Whitethroat. Surprisingly the numbers of pairs in the managed and harvested beds (reeds cut for thatching) appeared to be proportionate to the numbers in the non-harvested beds. Banks, ditches, wet areas, water flows and other habitat features within both the harvested and the non harvested beds are likely to be providing the most favoured nesting habitat and therefore determining distributions. More research will be carried out.

Coincidental to the aim of improving the reeds for breeding passerines, we were delighted to receive a visit from Arnaud Neve this autumn. Arnaud is a member of a team involved in a large scale project to protect the Aquatic Warbler, the rarest European songbird and a globally threatened species. Arnaud has studied the habitat requirements of this warbler, and is visiting locations that the bird uses on migration between its breeding grounds in Eastern Europe and its wintering area in Senegal. Particularly in the autumn, the Aquatic Warbler follows the English Channel coasts, regularly stopping to feed. There are around 20 records of Aquatic Warblers visiting our reed beds and two have been ringed. As the bird is so secretive and quiet in the autumn it is likely that there are more visits than records suggest. Even so the recorded level of use is not insignificant considering the status of the bird. Arnaud's visit was arranged through the RSPB in the course of him visiting Marazion, Radipole, Lodmoor and Poole and other reed beds further east. Essentially Arnaud outlined the feeding habitat of Aquatic Warblers as being open, low and varied wet vegetation fringing reed beds with muddy areas and not too much leaf litter. The bird's diet is mainly flies and aphids but with other invertebrate groups being well represented is more catholic than that of Reed and Sedge Warblers. However its foraging is limited to invertebrates found near the ground, as opposed to prey found on reed stems and flower, and this is why it has to be specially catered for. According to Arnaud the best habitat can be provided by cutting and clearing areas of reeds in June and July, ensuring of course that no other nesting is occurring within them. The late, low, weak growth that follows on from this presents an ideal vegetation structure. This management has benefits for other reed bed wildlife including other such rare species as corncrake and bittern. Abbotsbury's reed beds have long been considered as too small an area, too exposed and lacking in appropriate food for many reed bed specialists. However our Reed and Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting populations seem to compare favourably with other sites, and with bitterns breeding so well in Somerset this year, and the huge improvements being made to the beds at nearby Radipole recently, maybe we can play a greater part in helping and enjoying these beautiful and rare reed bed birds.

Bird News, May to November

(based on notes kindly supplied by Steve Groves, Abbotsbury Swannery)

Ferrybridge held a good selection of waders in early May, including Sanderlings, occasional Little Stints and a Curlew Sandpiper. On 16th May all three of the commoner skuas, Arctic, Pomarine and Great, passed by close inshore along with the Reserve's first Cory's Shearwater. A Marsh Harrier was at Abbotsbury on 11th. A late Hen Harrier was at Lynch Cove on the 20th. A big surprise was the six Bee-eaters at Rodden Hive on the 20th. Several Yellow Wagtails passed through The Swannery where single singing Grasshopper and Marsh Warblers were recorded on the 1st and 23rd respectively. A drake Garganey at The Swannery was the last notable observation in May. As usual, June was much quieter. A Turtle Dove at Abbotsbury on 16th and an Osprey on 30th being the only scarcer migrants reported. A Balearic Shearwater was off the beach at Ferrybridge on the 17th July. The Chesil Beach Centre was the place to be to witness the return passage of waders with a peak of ten Sanderlings and two Knot on the 19th July. The first of several Yellow-legged Gulls on the Reserve this summer was also logged on 19th.

The first day of August saw a Roseate Tern pass by off the beach at Ferrybridge and on the nearby sand flats Sanderlings were regular throughout the month amongst the commoner waders. They were joined by a few Knots and four Little Ringed Plovers on 14th. Singles of the latter were also seen at The Swannery on a couple of dates, as was a Wood Sandpiper and two Little Stints. August raptors included a Red Kite at Langton Herring, Marsh Harriers at Rodden Hive, and at Abbotsbury an Osprey and a Hobby. A migrant Wood Warbler at Butterstreet on the 9th was unusual, and a Spotted Crake at The Swannery on the 24th was a good record. At the month's end at The Swannery there were several small flocks of Yellow Wagtails, an Arctic Tern and another Garganey.

The Swannery virtually had the monopoly on migrant raptors in September with Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Hobby and Merlin reported but a Red Kite over Lynch Cove was a first for that site. In fact the Littlesea area had a good month with a Black Redstart at the Bridging Camp, and a Rosy Starling at Little Bridge Farm on the 5th, only the second record for the Fleet. A group of six Glossy Ibises over a Littlesea garden en route from Lynch Cove to Radipole on the 19th was also only a second record for the Fleet. Smaller wading birds were again most frequently reported from Ferrybridge where the Dunlin flock held up to nine Sanderlings and a Curlew Sandpiper. Elsewhere on The Fleet however a few of the latter were also reported from Rodden Hive and the Swannery, where there was also a Knot and occasional Little Ringed Plover. Rodden Hive also held an 'LRP' while five Avocets were seen in 'The Works' or Langton Hive. The Yellow Wagtail roost at Abbotsbury peaked at thirty on the 11th /12th. The following day a Turtle Dove was at Rodden. The month ended with a brief Great White Egret visit at the Swannery.

October saw the arrival of more wintry fare, with three Whooper Swans, a Jack Snipe and several Bearded Tits at The Swannery, Merlin and Black-necked Grebe sightings at Abbotsbury and Langton, and up to six Pale-bellied Brent Geese and three Black Brants in the Dark-bellied Brent Goose flock. With no 'big blows' from the west true sea bird sightings were restricted to a single Little Gull and Arctic Tern but the Mediterranean Gull flock reached yet another milestone with 230 in Lynch Cove at the end of the month. Arctic wader passage seemed to come to an abrupt end with a Little Stint at Abbotsbury early in the month. Passerines however were still on the move with several Firecrests and Black Redstarts in the Littlesea area and singles of both at Abbotsbury, where there were also a couple of Bramblings and a 'Fleet rarity' a Lapland Bunting. Single Yellow-browed Warblers were reported in a Littlesea garden and at the Swannery mid-month, but whereas these Siberian leaf-warblers are now almost annually recorded in October in the Fleet's gardens and copses, a close congener, of similar geographical origins, that was extracted from a mist net in the Swannery withybed on the 31st was most unexpected...a Radde's Warbler! A first record for the Reserve, this species is the most terrestrial of the leaf-warbler tribe and if it hadn't blundered into ringer Steve Hales' net, would almost certainly have avoided detection in the withy-bed's thick under-storey.

The Radde's Warbler ringed by Steve Hales who took the photograph



BTO Low tide Count Organiser visits the Fleet and Portland Harbour

Neil Calbrade of the British Trust for Ornithology met local surveyors recently in the process of organising a series of 'low tide counts'. Low Tide Counts started in 1992, with the specific aim of counting water birds in inter-tidal areas. These areas, mainly estuaries, though geographically small contain large numbers of water birds. Lying on some major flyways, the UK is of outstanding international importance for wintering water birds. Low Tide Counts are carried out every six years and complement core Webs counts – ongoing monthly surveys of non breeding water birds throughout the UK.

Neil Calbrade, centre right, with local Webs organiser Steve Groves, flanked by Portland Harbour counters, Ken Parker (right) and Terry Coombs (left).



Events on Chesil – Jan – Aug 2010

January

Sun 31 Wintering Birds on the Fleet

Meet Fleet Church, 10:00. Booking essential.
Adults £3, children £2

February

Tue 2 Worlds Wetlands Day

Displays at the Chesil Centre.

Sat 13 Fossils at Ferrybridge

Meet Crab House Café, 11:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sat 20 West Fleet Walk

Meet Swannery, 10:00. Adults £3, children £2

March

Sat 13 Spring Fleet clean

Contact the Chesil Centre for details. 10:00 - 12:00.

Sat 20 Walk at Ferrybridge

Meet Chesil Centre, 14:00. Adults £3, children £2

April

Sat 3 Fossils at Tidmoor

Meet Tidmoor Farm House, 14:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sun 18 Great Dorset Beach Clean

Meet Chesil Centre, TBA

Sun 25 West Fleet Walk

Meet Swannery, 14:00. Adults £3, children £2

May

Sun 2 Spring Birds Chesil

Meet Chesil Centre, 13:30. Adults £3, children £2

Sun 9 Spring Flowers Ferrybridge

Meet Chesil Centre, 10:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sun 23 Fossils at Pirates Cove

Meet Camp Road, 10:00. Adults £3, children £2

June

Sun 6 Wild Plants of Abbotsbury Beach

Meet Abbotsbury Beach car park, 14:30. This walk is free. Book with Natural England on 01929 557456

Tue 8 Oceans Day

Displays at the Chesil Centre

Sun 13 Low Tide Walk Pirates Cove

Meet Camp Road, 13:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sun 27 Fossils at Ferrybridge

Meet Crab House Café, 14:00. Adults £3, children £2

July

Sat 10 Summer Flowers Ferrybridge

Meet Chesil Centre, 10:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sat 17 Fossils at Pirates Cove

Meet Camp Road, 14:00. Adults £3, children £2

Thu 29 Low Tide Walk Ferrybridge

Meet Chesil Centre, 15:00. Adults £3, children £2

August

Thu 12 Low Tide Walk Pirates Cove

Meet Camp Road, 14:30. Adults £3, children £2

Sat 21 Fossils at Herbury

Meet Field Gate at Moonfleet, 10:00. Adults £3, children £2

Sat 28 Low Tide Walk Ferrybridge

Meet Chesil Centre, 15:00. Adults £3, children £2

For more information on our walks please contact the Chesil Beach Centre, tel (01305) 760579.

Thank you for reading this newsletter, compiled by Don Moxom, Warden, who along with colleagues working on the Reserve send best wishes for 2010.