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## Newsletter Summer 2008

### Bird Flu



As readers may know, the first cases of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) in wild birds in the UK, were confirmed in the Fleet's swans on 9<sup>th</sup> January. The Secretary of State declared a Wild Bird Control Area and a Wild Bird Monitoring Area around the Fleet on 10<sup>th</sup> January. A further 10 swans died from the virus during January but none after that. The lifting of all restrictions was disappointingly set back to 27<sup>th</sup> March owing to an isolated bird, a Canada goose, being tested positive on 29<sup>th</sup> February.

Although the spread of the virus, which is now across half of the world, had been followed with fear as it travelled from the Far East and through Asia and Europe, the news that it arrived first in this country on the Fleet was a shock. It had already been decided by DEFRA in previous contingency planning meetings that no cull of the Fleet's birds should take place, but no one knew what was going to happen, and everyone realised that potentially the swans and many other water birds could have been seriously affected. Tensions were high for days after the outbreak as the swans were watched from a safe distance to observe what impact the virus may have had. Thankfully nothing much did happen. The infected birds were found either dead or dying, and the overall total of casualties reached for this winter period was below average. The experience was a challenge but messages received from well-wishers were an enormous support especially in the early days. It is acknowledged that many local people with interests in poultry and game were caught up in the restrictions and suffered similar hardships and financial setbacks. Having bravely endured the experience of bird flu and the ravages of the storm on 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> March, the swans and the Swannery staff got back to 'business as usual' remarkably quickly. Egg laying commenced on 14<sup>th</sup> March, one of the earliest ever records, and on March 15<sup>th</sup> The Swannery opened as planned, a feat that was not envisaged with the presence of bird flu in January and February. Currently the swans at Abbotsbury are breeding successfully but nobody is under any illusion that this viral threat is over. Surveillance and testing continues.

*Media interest at the Swannery on the breaking of the news*



## Chesil Bank and the Fleet Bird News - November 2007 to May 2008

**November** records included a Marsh Harrier, Short-eared Owl, Green-winged Teal, Goosander and Black-necked Grebe at Abbotsbury Swannery. At Ferrybridge Red- and Black-throated Divers were recorded and with the Dark-bellied Brent Goose flock were two Black Brants and up to five Pale-bellied Brent Geese. Three Whooper Swans and two Spoonbills arrived on the Fleet in the middle of the month and lingered into February. A Black Redstart was observed on the beach opposite The Bridging Camp, and a Ring-billed Gull was at Butterstreet Cove. November came to a close with a Short-eared Owl at Pirates Cove and a Jack Snipe at The Swannery. In **December**, a Little Auk was picked up exhausted at Lynch Cove, and a Spotted Redshank was an unusual winter record for The Fleet at The Swannery. Six Red-throated Divers off Abbotsbury Beach was a good record as was a peak of 70 Mediterranean Gulls at Ferrybridge. December's highlight however was a Cattle Egret at Abbotsbury. **January** highlights included a Slavonian Grebe at The Swannery, a Jack Snipe at Moonfleet, a Merlin at Abbotsbury and Iceland Gulls at Ferrybridge and at Langton Herring. The Long-billed Dowitcher at Rodden Hive in **February** was only the second record for the Reserve. A Cattle Egret was in the Abbotsbury area from the end of February to the end of April, and a Surf Scoter off Abbotsbury Beach/West Bexington from the end of February and much of March. Other notable records included a Firecrest at Abbotsbury, a Glaucous Gull at Ferrybridge, a Ruff at Rodden Hive and 135 Mediterranean Gulls at Pirates Cove. In **March** a Goosander and four Little Gulls were on The West Fleet, a Merlin and a Glaucous Gull were at Langton Herring, and a Spoonbill at Rodden Hive and Abbotsbury. As expected the number of new arrivals increased in **April** as spring passage got into full swing. Merlins were seen at Rodden Hive and Ferrybridge, Iceland Gulls at Butterstreet Cove and Ferrybridge, Little Stints at Ferrybridge, a Spoonbill at The Swannery and Rodden Hive, a Little Ringed Plover at Abbotsbury, Grasshopper Warblers and a Marsh Harrier were seen at The Swannery, an Arctic Tern at Ferrybridge, and a Goosander and an Osprey at Rodden Hive. Seawatching off the beach produced a Pomarine Skua along with several Arctic Skuas and the odd Great Skua, Little Gull and Black Tern. The April highlight though was a Black Kite over Lynch Cove. Apart from one or two notable exceptions, the sea off Chesil Bank provided the bulk of the **May** bird highlights. On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, three Velvet Scoters and a Pomarine Skua were recorded. Manx Shearwaters peaked at one thousand, and the next day four Black-throated Divers, a male Hen Harrier, twenty-three Black Terns a Little Gull and a Roseate Tern were noted. On The Fleet an Osprey and Hobby were recorded at Abbotsbury, a Reeve at The Swannery, and Little Stints and a Curlew Sandpiper at Ferrybridge. Unusual sightings were a Serin in a garden behind Abbotsbury Beach and a Stone Curlew on Chesil. A Glossy Ibis seen briefly at Ferrybridge was a 'first' for the Reserve, a previous record from Abbotsbury in the 1970's being regarded as an escape. Ringing now proves however that the Spanish birds do wander north on occasions!

Compiled mainly from records kindly collected and collated by Steve Groves, Wildlife Officer, Abbotsbury Swannery

*Peak winter counts of Mediterranean gulls in the Ferrybridge and Portland Harbour area are increasing annually*



### High winds and storm on 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> March

In an 80mph storm that battered southern England, Chesil witnessed its most severe weather incident since 1990. The event resulted in wave and shingle over wash, and as usual with low pressure storms emanating from the Atlantic and coinciding with equinoctial spring tides, an extraordinary high water occurred. The predicted high water on 10<sup>th</sup> March was 2.1 metres at 8.30am but one of our water depth data loggers just inside Ferrybridge recorded a massive 2.9m at 9.00am. This flood of high water then penetrated the whole of the Fleet, being recorded in the West Fleet at 11.20am and the Swannery at 12.50pm. Exacerbated by seawater pouring through the beach, high water was maintained for many hours. The event caused thousands of plastic bottles lying on Chesil to be washed on to the land shore along with a tide line of natural debris, and at the Swannery over 80 nests that had just been made were swept away.

## **The Ice Prince – a narrow miss for Chesil but mystery oil washed up**

In a storm that built up in the Channel in mid January, the general cargo ship, Ice prince, carrying 5,258 tonnes of sawn timber, made an emergency call for help 35 miles SE of Start Point. An heroic rescue effort saw the crew taken off leaving the badly listing vessel much to the mercy of the elements. The vessel sunk some 30 hours later 26 miles south east of Portland. The slick of wood eventually was beached in Sussex. Given the conditions and the locations involved, it was feared that boat and cargo would be washed up on the beach. So, whilst the Ice prince's sinking is commercially and environmentally regretted, it was a relief that Chesil was spared a nasty incident. The storm however did leave its mark by depositing a few oiled seabirds and a line of oily debris on the beach. The oil was analysed but its origins could not be determined.

## **Cygnets tagging is resumed**

We are able to report that following a successful exemption application cygnet tagging will be resumed at The Swannery. As mentioned in the last newsletter, the recently introduced Animal Welfare Act forbade animal body piercing and this included making the tiniest of holes in a cygnet's web. Without a tag a lost cygnet cannot be returned to its parents, and the long running genealogical study on Abbotsbury's swans could not continue.

## **Return of Ratty**

Water voles were once commonly sighted in the West Fleet and Abbotsbury Swannery but disappeared completely in a few years in the early nineties. The decline was linked with the increased appearance of mink. Now however mink are not being sighted and water voles have made a very welcome return.

## **What a show!**

As waters warmed in the Fleet during April and May more marine life could be viewed on the underwater screen in the Chesil Centre. Bass, Mullet, Corkwing and Ballan Wrasse and colourful breeding two-spot Gobies are regularly seen and this spring a fabulous Black faced Blenny, a rare fish in British waters, has been making frequent appearances.



*The Black faced Blenny- on the left a male and female as photographed in Portland Harbour; on the right a male as captured on our cameras – please see the newsletter on our website for the actual colour!*

## Summer Beach Wardens wanted!

Whilst our tern wardening operation in the Ferrybridge area provides a high level of management presence on the beach from April- July, the amount of casual patrolling in the main holiday season is minimal. It would be beneficial if there could be some obvious presence on this busy beach to positively and appropriately offer advice and information on Chesil and the Fleet. Such a presence would also help prevent minor infringements from occurring, activities such as picking flowers, taking pebbles, not back filling bait digging holes and of course keeping dogs under control. With a little informal training undertaken, being a beach warden would be an enjoyable, rewarding and fine weather way to pass a few hours.

## The coastal zone

In a review of Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs), the Dorset Area Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan Review recognising the need to look more specifically at coastal management and visitor pressure, and the proposed Dorset and East Devon Coastal Corridor Plan present a complex and perhaps for many of us a bewildering focus on the management of our coastline. SMPs encourage a serious appraisal of the rate at which the coastline is eroding and retreating, to develop short (0-20 years), medium (20-50 years) and long term (50-100 years) policies. Essentially AONB's conserve and enhance natural beauty but with the introduction of a management plan and team in 2004 and the subsequent establishment of a partnership of interested bodies, a range of projects has been started and advice on activities and initiatives within the AONB given. As mentioned in the Access report, AONB intends to look more closely into coastal affairs. The 'corridor' plan looks principally at the coast path, its use and management, visual aspects, nature conservation opportunities, engaging the involvement of and use by local communities and maximising economic and environmental benefits. It is planned that the interests of the Reserve will be strongly represented in all of these initiatives.

## Fleet Observer- glass bottom boat

As mentioned in the last newsletter, an extensive refit was planned for the Observer, and it is a pleasure to report that this has been carried out with great efficiency by Clark's Boatworks at Portland. All 17 recommendations made in a professional survey were completed as was additional enhancements including new seats and a new, removable canopy. It is estimated that the refit will give the boat another lease of life, and although the refit is expensive, it is far cheaper than paying for a new boat! We are very grateful to Tim Clark and his team, to Aquarium Technology Ltd (ATL) for gifting new glass panels, and to Roger Quigley, who despite stepping down from managing the boat over the last three years spent many hours planning and liaising with Clark's over the refit.

Operating on a not-for-profit basis, the boat only generates enough income to cover its annual running costs. To raise the required money - £15,000 - to pay for the refit, an appeal has been launched, details of which are on a leaflet enclosed with this newsletter. If you feel you can make a small contribution towards this aim, it would be greatly appreciated. We are hoping to find sponsors and win grants too.



*Back to the bare bones in March*



*Back in the water in June*

## **Fleet Plant Life Survey**

As promised in the last newsletter, here are some results of the survey carried out by Dr Lin Baldock in October 2007 on behalf of Natural England's monitoring of the Chesil/Fleet Special Area of Conservation. Considerably lower densities of the populations of foxtail stonewort *Lamprothamnium papulosum*, and the seagrass *Zostera marina* and *Ruppia* species were noted compared with similar survey work carried out in July 2002. However it is difficult to know whether or not these results are significant as it was found in the October survey that a certain amount of autumn decay had set in and other plant growth obscured observation. Another factor that has always been a major consideration is the natural annual and seasonal variability in the growth of these plants. However there was sufficient mapping evidence to support the belief that whilst these key species are thriving in the mid Fleet, there is a retreat from the east of the lagoon. From experience gained in both of these surveys, a methodology has been formulated that along with more frequent and timely monitoring, will produce true indications of any changes in distributional patterns.

## **Spirit of the Sea Festival, 5<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> July - 'Pebbles, Boats and the Sea'**

The Reserve is making a major contribution to the festival under the natural heritage banner of 'Pebbles, Boats and the Sea'. The enclosed leaflet outlines the exciting programme of events which to a significant degree builds on our last year's successful Marine Week.

## **Fleet Clean March 15<sup>th</sup>**

With the help of members of the public from our local communities of Langton Herring, Chickerell and Wyke Regis, and a number of our own volunteers, a very creditable 80 bags and a big pile of larger items of debris were collected.

## **Access**

As mentioned in the previous newsletters, the Reserve is threatened by the proposed new Access Bill, which aims to open up coastal access. The objective of wanting a closer re-alignment of the coast path with the shore, opening up foreshores and introducing 'tranquil' areas will cause serious disturbance and damage to Chesil Bank and the Fleet. Despite the proposal declaring that nature conservation interests will be protected, there are no assurances given and the signs are that our protestations are going to be ignored. The Reserve has asked for evidence on the public demand for measures that justify the expense of a new Bill to deliver these objectives, and so far nothing has been forthcoming. It is believed that only a small minority of long distance walkers truly want these changes. It is noted in a citizens' panel assembled as part of a data collating exercise for the revision of the Dorset 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) plan (please see Coastal Zone article), that more opportunities for walking were well down the list of priorities and below the desire to have more areas managed for wildlife. It was also noted when the panel was asked to say what they valued most about the AONB, that scenery and wildlife took the top two places.

On Chesil and the Fleet, it is believed that our provision of managed access – our comprehensive programme of guided events, our glass bottom boat trips and range of carefully considered permissive accesses - allows anyone to visit anywhere at the right time and in the right manner, thereby ensuring that adequate protection is given to the Reserve's sensitivities. It is hard to understand how Chesil and the Fleet with centuries of carefully protected natural evolution can be jeopardised for apparently so little reason.

## **Chesil and Portland Mini-bus Heritage Tour**

Thanks to the willingness and enthusiasm of Andy Martin and his colleague Peter, of the Portland Community Minibus Association, we have teamed up as we did last year in Marine Week to provide a summer service. The GPS triggered audio programme has been revised and the tour fine tuned. The 2-hour journey includes a number of excellent viewing halts and two stops - one at the Bill and the other at Tout Quarry - for passengers to experience the wide range of interests that Portland and Chesil has to offer.

## Cameras on the auks nesting at Portland

You may remember that funds from our last year's Lottery Grant were used to set up a viewing facility to obtain images of the Razorbills, Guillemots and possibly Puffins nesting on Portland. A difficult project, but the hard work of Lyn Cooch, the Portland Ranger, who has overseen the project has paid off. Excellent images are now being displayed at the Portland Bill Lighthouse Visitor Centre. An opportunity to see the camera is included in the mini-bus tour.

## Events July – December 2008

Date	Event	Venue	Time
<b>July</b>			
Sat 5 <sup>th</sup>	Low Tide Walk	Chesil Centre	2pm
Sat 5 <sup>th</sup>	Holy Stones and Billy Winters display	Chesil Centre	10am – 5pm
Sun 6 <sup>th</sup>	Low Tide Scramble	Wellworthy Club, Wyke Regis	2pm
Wed 9 <sup>th</sup>	Undersea World of Portland Harbour – live images relayed	Chesil Centre	11, 12am, 2pm, 3pm
Sat 12 <sup>th</sup>	Maritime Heritage Walk	Chesil Centre	2pm
Sat 26 <sup>th</sup>	Fossil Walk	Camp Road, Wyke Regis	1pm
<b>August</b>			
Mon 4 <sup>th</sup>	Low Tide Walk	Chesil Centre	2.30pm
Sat 9 <sup>th</sup>	Summer Flowers	Chesil Centre	2pm
Tue 19 <sup>th</sup>	Low Tide Walk	Chesil Centre	2pm
Sun 31 <sup>st</sup>	Low Tide Walk	Chesil Centre	1pm
<b>September</b>			
Tue 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Autumn Birds Week Walk	Chesil Centre	3pm
Sun 7 <sup>th</sup>	Autumn Birds Week Walk	Abbotsbury Swannery Car Park	2pm
Sun 14 <sup>th</sup>	Fossil Walk	Ferryman's Way, Wyke Regis	11am
Sat 20 <sup>th</sup>	Walk at Ferrybridge	Chesil Centre	2pm
Sun 28 <sup>th</sup>	Autumn Clean	TBA	10-12pm
<b>October</b>			
Sat 11 <sup>th</sup>	West Fleet in the Autumn	Abbotsbury Swannery Car Park	11am
Sat 25 <sup>th</sup>	Fossil Walk	Camp Road Wyke Regis	10am
<b>November</b>			
Sat 1 <sup>st</sup>	Scavenger Hunt	Chesil Centre	2pm
Sun 16 <sup>th</sup>	Wintering Birds	Fleet Church	2pm
<b>December</b>			
Sat 6 <sup>th</sup>	Walk at Ferrybridge	Chesil Centre	2pm

For information on any of the above walks and talks please contact the Chesil Beach Centre on 01305 760579

This newsletter has been compiled by warden Don Moxom