E. N. H. S.

ELMBRIDGE NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

(formerly Weybridge Natural History and Aquarist Society)

BULLETIN

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WINTER 2010-11 PROGRAMME

Wed 8 Dec	"Wealden Woodlands". Talk by Jill Fry.
Sun 9 Jan	New Year bird walk around the Wey Meadows. led by Chris Brading. Meet at Weybridge Station car park, south side, off Brooklands Road (OS grid ref. TQ075636), at **10.30am**.
Wed 12 Jan	Members' evening.
Wed 9 Feb	"What's going on in Elmbridge". Talk by David Page, Countryside Estates Officer, Elmbridge Borough Council
Wed 9 Mar	"Hedgehogs". Talk by Dr Nigel Reeve, Head of Ecology, The Royal Parks.

Indoor meetings are held from September to April, at the Methodist Church Hall, Mayfield Road, Weybridge, at 8.00pm. Non-members are welcome to all meetings (£2.00 charge, refundable if you join the Society).

Refreshments charge (winter meetings): 50p. Details of the spring/summer 2011 programme will be published in the next issue of the *Bulletin*.

PEGGIE MILLSON

Peggie Millson, a member of Elmbridge Natural History Society for a number of years and who celebrated her 100th birthday in April this year, sadly died on 10 November in Whiteley Village Nursing Home. The funeral service was held on 17 November in Christ the Prince of Peace Church, Weybridge. An appreciation of her life will appear in the February bulletin.

ENHS MEETING NOTES

Bryophytes, 8 September 2010

Fred Rumsey of the Natural History Museum, who gave this talk, is one of the small band of between 20 and 30 enthusiastic recorders of bryophytes in Britain. The name 'bryophyte' covers an agglomeration of three, not necessarily closely related groups with superficial similarities. These are the mosses, the liverworts and the hornworts. What they do have in common is a lack of vascular tissue, so being without 'plumbing' they are dependent on a degree of immersion in water, soaked up from below or collected from above. They also need water in order to reproduce, as many have mobile 'sperm' which swim from male to female plant, or part of plant. But some can also disperse vegetatively, through pieces breaking off the plant.

The bryophytes are an ancient group, but not a dead-end, as some show signs of active evolution as they find new niches. They are first colonisers, stabilising the ground for other plants to follow them, and also good indicators of soil and air condition. For its size, the UK has a surprisingly large proportion of the known species, including 60% of the European species. This is thanks to our very diverse range of substrates and underlying geology.

Of the three groups, the hornworts are probably the least known, and contain by far the fewest species. They are odd-looking beasts, rather like 'candles in holders'. The number of sites for one old established species, *Anthoceras agrestis*, has declined drastically with the more frequent turning of agricultural soil. Liverworts are more frequently encountered, as they are found almost everywhere, including sand dunes, cracks in paving, and even floating (as on the Basingstoke Canal). They are distinguished by the lack of midribs in their triple-ranked leaves, which have tiny white breathing holes. They have a basal thallus on which sit cups containing egg-like spore sacs, much like those of the bird's nest fungus. Some are very colourful, in shades of purple. As our knowledge of liverworts grows, so does the number of species, as old species are split up; but at the same time many species are lost to pollution because, like lichens, they are very sensitive to sulphur dioxide.

By far the largest and best-known group of bryophytes are the mosses. These are divided into 'upright' and 'spreading' species. All have distinct midribs in their leaves, and all produce stalks on which seed capsules then develop. They have the ability to dry out in times of drought, but revive with the return of rain. Some species are almost everlasting if not severely disturbed.

Among the most familiar mosses are the Polytrichales, the tallest ones, and the sphagna which create most peat. One species, *Sphagnum austinii*, is responsible for most of the old peat in the country, but is now very rare in the live state. There are 30 species of *Sphagnum* in Britain, a large percentage of the European list. Among the less familiar are the Splachnaceae, which colonise dung or dead animals. They produce colourful capsules that give out heat and a carrion smell, attracting insects to which the spores stick and are carried to new sites. *Tetraplodon* settles on dead sheep, and eventually preserves the shape of the corpse long after it has disappeared! Another species colonises the pellets of birds of prey.

Another, now rare species is equipped with mini-grapnels by which it latches onto birds. One very rare species is found only on lead spoil on acid ground; the spoil heaps from Roman workings at Charterhouse, in the Mendips, is its stronghold. Another favours zinc, but all the plants in Europe are male! There are females in the USA, but the two haven't been brought together yet. Similarly, on the Three Peaks in the Yorkshire Dales there is a moss with the sexes on separate walls and seemingly unable to bridge the gap!

Thatch moss, on ageing straw, is now becoming rare as crumbling thatched roofs become a thing of the past. Fred suggests that it may be spread by birds. Knot-hole moss is found only in wound cracks on old beech trees on acid soil. Some former rarities are now doing well, such as one on elder trees. The successful ones are usually those with good dispersal systems, able to react to improved conditions. But there is a danger that increased aerial nitrogen could throw these gains into reverse.

One alien moss, *Campylopus introflexus*, has been so successful that it might claim the title of 'most invasive plant'. Since 1941 it has expanded its range to cover all of the UK and Ireland. On heathland and other acid areas in can carpet the ground. It can survive dry for five years, and its effect on other wildlife has yet to be measured. Nonnative liverworts likewise have escaped into the wild, mostly brought here by the trade in exotic plants. *Lophocolea semeteres* arrived here from Australasia in 1985 on tree ferns, and is now widespread. *Lophocolea brookwoodeana* is our local speciality alien, only discovered two years ago in Brookwood Cemetery. It is similar to *L. semeteres*, but no exact match has been found in the world. Will it prove to be a pest?

In the matter of conservation, 37 species are protected by the Wildlife & Countryside Act. There are 67 BAP species, and 111 species proposed for protection. Common names have been given to a lot of species, as has happened with fungi. Some may be dreadful, but 'goblin's gold' seems very fitting for one that glows at the entrance to rabbit burrows!

For those interested in increasing their knowledge of bryophytes, Fred recommends the excellent book, 'Mosses & Liverworts of Britain & Ireland', published by the British Bryological Society, lavishly illustrated with photographs. The BBS also holds outdoor meetings and workshops which we are encouraged to attend, but our best bet is to start by learning a few of our most familiar everyday species, and take it from there, as far as we wish. Thanks to Fred for bringing to vivid life this neglected group of plants.

DICK ALDER

Finland and Norway – Land of the Midnight Sun, 13 October 2010

Our lecture on 13 October was given by Mary Braddock. Mary and her husband, Dave, are joint leaders of the North West Surrey RSPB Group. Mary's interest in natural history is wide but her prime interest is in birds. In June 2005 she and Dave went on a bird watching trip to Finland and Northern Norway. Mary is also a talented amateur photographer and her talk was illustrated with excellent slides. Mary has given permission for us to reproduce an article she wrote for the local RSPB Newsletter in Autumn 2005, which is presented below in an abridged form.

We landed at Rovaniemi, inside the Arctic Circle on the evening of 28 May. This is where Father Christmas lives! Although not particularly in evidence, his reindeer roamed the countryside and roads guzzling the fresh green shoots of spring plants. Some snow still lay by the roadsides and when we stepped out of the minibus there was a biting cold wind – a taste of things to come. Fir trees covered the landscape, broken only by water and mankind as we drove to Luoso, and it was broad daylight 24 hours a day!

An early morning walk on our first day got us in tune with the temperatures and the birdwatching that was not going to be easy. We were to find that large gatherings of birds did not happen. However, this did not stop us notching up 200 birds by the end of the holiday with 30 new ones. We found many species that visit UK out of the breeding season but here in Finland and Norway they were in full breeding plumage and singing. A redwing has a beautiful, fluty melodic song never heard here during the winter months, and a soft whirring noise was made by a pair of goldeneye flying over a lake. Many birds we were to see do not make the shores of UK and a black woodpecker going through all his repertoire is a wonderful sight, as is a hazel grouse climbing around in bushes. The other sight that was a real joy was mountain hare in varying shades of white and brown by our hotel. During our time in this area we visited Suvanto where we were treated to coffee in a Finnish log cabin, Vuotos Bogs Nature Reserve and Luiro. The Vuotos Bogs have been under threat of artificial lake formation, but fortunately the environmentalists have won the battle and these bogs, the most important in Europe, will survive in their natural state. Red squirrel were seen readily and elk occasionally – they are enormous!

The following morning we heard a cuckoo – a very strange sound in snow! Fortunately the roads were clear as we left for Batsfjord in northern Norway. Our lunch stop at Utsjoki proved to be a wonderful place: a small restaurant beside a lake that was still mostly frozen, with all sorts of birds in the garden and beside the water, including arctic redpoll, mealy redpoll, brambling, siskin, red-throated and black-throated divers close by, and greenshank and wood sandpiper along the shoreline. We crossed into Norway and the scenery changed, becoming softer in the river valley and alongside the River Tana (pictured above; photo: Peter Hambrook), small farms dotted the landscape. We had fantastic views of hawk owl sitting 20 feet away on the roadside telegraph wires. We were told that these birds are difficult to find so we were pleased that Dave saw it as he drove along. We stopped for a gyr falcon alongside the River Tana. This is ahuge bird and another rarity. One more stop at Hoyholmen gave us the chance to study the rock formation as well as watch plenty of small waders along the water's edge. Among the waders we found that Temminck's stint far outnumbered little stint.

As we made our way to Batsfjord the weather and landscape began to change. The trees completely disappeared and we found ourselves in snow-covered tundra, with wonderful sights such as long-tailed skua diving and wheeling, Lapland bunting and snow bunting at the side of the road, and Arctic terns flying overhead. We spent time exploring the road between Batsfjord and Berlevag. Willow grouse and ptarmigan joined the list of birds seen on this snow-covered land. Having almost been shovelled up in the biggest snow plough ever seen, we made it down the Kongsfjord to Berlevag, which is the most northerly point in Europe where anyone can actually stay. We found a white-billed diver, a bird we had always wanted to see. We also had our first views of king eiders in the bay together with a real rarity, a pochard! It was during this part of the trip that we tested our thermals and 23 other items of clothing for warmth!

We left the high tundra for Vardo, which is situated at the end of the Varanger Fjord. The road along the fjord is probably about 100 km long and set in the most wonderful red, gold, green and yellow rocks, blue sea and low-growing vegetation. At one point there were about 1,600 red knot feeding at the edge of the shore. Red-necked phalarope were found in good numbers at Vadso doing their wizzy spinning dance on the water. A fishing boat took us out to Hornoya Island to watch the wealth of breeding seabirds on its rocks. Brunnich's guillemot share ledges with razorbill, black guillemot and puffin (pictured above; photo: Dave Braddock). We spent time on this island using cameras and binoculars; telescopes were not really needed! Having experienced a fantastic seafood lunch at the hotel, we set out along the last part of the Varanger Fjord to Hamingberg (End of Europe). Here we were to see the most fantastic sights of the white-billed diver, Steller's eider, long-tailed duck, skuas, terns, gulls and the star performer of the day, a bluethroat that danced its way around some bushes.

We set out on a beautiful calm, cool, sunny morning to travel south and back to Finland. Back along the Varanger Fjord we counted 28 white-tailed sea eagles. High off the road a small lake, Komagater, held 48 red-necked phalaropes, ruff lekking in the grass and a jack snipe flying overhead. 400 km later we reached Ivalo, well back into Finland. We freshened up, had reindeer for dinner (!) and went out to Veskoniemi Bog for jack snipe. We heard the fantastic galloping horse noise they make in display flight as one flew overhead. Other birds wandered around the lake and a merlin gave fantastic views as it sat on a stake in the sunlight at 11pm. Onwards towards the south, we stopped at Kaunispaa for dotterel. Later that morning we had two-barred crossbill in Purnunukka Wood on the way to lunch at Peurasuvanto. Our lunch stop was beside a river with pied flycatchers and great spotted woodpecker, and we later stopped at Ilmakki Bog where broad-billed sandpiper gave fantastic flying displays. Ever southwards, crossing the Arctic Circle (with the inevitable photocall!) and a giant snowman, we eventually reached Ruka, a ski resort in the Kuusamo region.

We spent the next two days travelling around the Kuusamo district: Valtavaara for Siberian jay and distant views of a redflanked bluetail. We left a female capercaillie completely undisturbed after brilliant views of her sitting on her nest. The Kuusamo area proved to be the place where our biggest and longest running bogie bird fell - the common rosefinch! We both got photos of this bird at a family-run restaurant where we had a lunch stop in Oulanka National Park. The park is well organised and a walk along the river and falls gave us views of the calypso orchid, a native rarity. We had fantastic views of little gull in their full breeding plumage at Vuotunki Lake, as well as velvet scoter and red-necked grebe. Woodland birds included Siberian tit at Oivanki, rustic bunting and Tengmalm's owl. One evening we found a black grouse lek of about a dozen birds at Rukajarvi. They are so funny to watch. We also found a great grey owl (pictured above; photo: Dave Braddock) sitting on a post in a field at Kahlaniemi later – what a magnificent bird. We arrived in Oulu to a warm summer's evening after a long drive through Syote National Park: it was too wet for any self-respecting bird to show, but a stop, in the dry, at Hirvisno Bog gave us views of cranes and northern grey shrike. Also first views of bog bean and cloudberry flowers. We had been through winter, spring and summer in 10 days, and the flowers were also all confused, with daffodils, tulips and petunias all out at the same time. Our final day of birding was so good it has a special write-up. Just to say – rarities, more rarities and owls!

We were to spend one morning 'bog wading', or falling in, as happened to two people. This magnificent place, Sarkkiranta Bog, was full of flowers and plants as well as birds, with pink Arctic bramble, dwarf cornel (a low creamy white 'tree' with small black centre), bog bean, wintergreen and cloudberry flowers. Our prize bird, a male citrine wagtail, gave wonderful views as it flew from bush to bush. We were to see another of these birds, a female that we found at a car ferry point! Liminganlahti Reserve gave us views of reedbed birds, waders, seabirds and an interesting time watching one of our party rebuild a bridge that the spring floods had destroyed at Tauvo Beach. We found the Ural owl hiding in the wood at Vartti, and Raahe Lake gave us superb views of Slavonian grebes. A lovely touch one evening was being treated to a traditional Finnish meal at Laa-temmes Farmhouse, where our hostess also sang to us. Her food and singing were beautiful and, having left her at about 10.30pm, we went off to listen to thrush nightingale at Sannanlahdi – equally beautiful and not spoilt by the dense cloud of mozzies that sat above our heads.

Our holiday was almost over and it was time to say our goodbyes and thanks to Harri Taavetti: Finnature is an amazing organisation headed by Jari Peltomaki, and Harri is one of only three full-time guides. We joined Dave Pullen from Speyside Wildlife International for our journey home. Dave and Harri's birdwatching skills and knowledge certainly helped to give this trip depth; between them, they gave us the best holiday we have ever had.

MARY BRADDOCK

LETTER FROM SUSSEX

Here we are in September and the temperature is dropping. All the summer birds are on their way south, there have been large parties of swallows, house and sand martins going over, and lots of small birds such as redstarts, spotted flycatchers and warblers hanging about at Church Norton waiting for favourable weather. I was lucky enough to have a good view of a wryneck earlier this month.

Coming the other way from the continent, I have had a couple of hummingbird hawk moths on my buddleia recently and quite a lot of red admirals which have come over. The influx of painted ladies that we had in 2009 did not happen this year; in fact it has been a pretty poor year for butterflies altogether, although earlier orange tips and common blues did well. Ivan Lang, the conservation warden at Pagham Harbour Nature Reserve, keeps his moth trap active all year and has had some good results, the best being the very rare marsh dagger (*Apatale strigosa*) in the summer. He even had moth twitchers coming to see it!

Winter birds are beginning to arrive: there are already pintail and widgeon in the harbour at Pagham, and lapwing numbers are building up. There were more lapwing nesting on the reserve this year, so some of these are our own birds, but most will be coming from abroad. Flocks of knot, golden plover, and bar-tailed and black-tailed godwit are also increasing. The bushes on the reserve are loaded with hips, haws, blackberries, sloes and elderberries, and there are large numbers of spiders – including wasp spiders – and big hatches of craneflies, so there is plenty of food around at the moment for small birds as well.

The talks between West Sussex County Council and the RSPB about the takeover of the management of the reserve are still going on. We hope to have some news in the next month or so.

I am always pleased to see any members of the ENHS who come to visit the nature reserve. Very best wishes to you all from your president.

BRENDA CHAPMAN