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Portland Bird Observatory & Field Centre



Spring 2008

Wildlife on Portland

This newsletter has been produced by Swarovski Optik and The Heights Hotel assisting with conservation on Portland.

Welcome to the first 'Wildlife on Portland'

Portland is a unique and special place for wildlife, with many organisations involved in actively managing land and reserves. Monitoring is also an important part of their work, assessing trends and responses to management, and recording a wide range of species from birds and butterflies to the smaller and less obvious, such as lichens and micro moths. The Portland Conservation Forum, chaired by Natural England, brings together wildlife and conservation organisations to exchange information and discuss issues. Thanks to sponsorship by the Heights Hotel, we are now able to feedback information from the Forum in this first edition of 'Wildlife on Portland'.

There are lots of opportunities to get involved with work on the island or attend organised events. Contact the individual organisations, web addresses below each section or the Portland Coast and Countryside Project on 01305 826100.

Goats return to Portland

Last autumn a group of 10 British primitive goats were introduced to the under cliffs on the east side of the island. This project was organised by John Stobart of Natural England and Lyn Cooch the Island Ranger. Lyn explained the idea behind the project:

"Historically goats were a feature of many of the wilder parts of the English landscape including Portland but now most have disappeared.

Without grazing pressure from goats, areas not farmed such as steep, rocky cliffs become overgrown with shrubs which prevent certain plants from growing. This can have a knock-on effect on other wildlife, especially insects.

The Portland goats have settled in well and are being closely watched by volunteer 'lookers'. The goat's effect on the vegetation is also being monitored. This should allow a far greater diversity of flowers and ferns to grow where there previously was just scrub."



Lyn Cooch, Island Ranger

Two of the British Primitive Goats on the cliffs near Grove Point



Birds



Bird Observatory



Wheatear

Martin Cade, warden of Portland Bird Observatory, reports on what has been a lively year so far for birdwatchers on the island:

Highlight of the year so far has been the Siberian Chiffchaff which has overwintered near the Observatory. Other rarities have been more mobile with several Hoopoes around the island in late April, a White Stork flying over on April 15th and a Black Kite, a Mealy Redpoll and an Icterine Warbler on April 24th. May saw an influx of birds from the continent with several Red-rumped Swallows and a couple of Bee-eaters. Despite the very cold weather in mid-April the commoner migrants arrived in good numbers with Redstarts particularly in evidence during most of April. Arrival dates of typical summer migrants this year include:

Manx Shearwater	March 1st	Ring Ouzel	April 8th
Sandwich Tern	March 10th	Pied Flycatcher	April 13th
Wheatear	March 14th	Lesser Whitethroat	April 18th
Puffin	March 15th	Swift	April 20th
Firecrest	March 18th	Garden Warbler	April 20th
Willow Warbler	March 24th	Spotted Flycatcher	April 29th
Tree Pipit	April 4th	Turtle Dove	May 1st
Whitethroat	April 5th		

You can keep up to date with the latest sightings at the observatory web site at www.portlandbirdobs.org.uk

A Chiffchaff caught for ringing at Portland Bird Observatory



Hidden Ledges

A grant of £25,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and support from QinetiQ and Natural England has made it possible to film the hidden cliff ledges west of Portland Bill, home to one of the largest seabird colonies on the south coast.

Two cameras installed on the cliff are now relaying live images of seabirds to a colourful new display in the Weymouth and Portland Borough Council Tourist Information Centre, Portland Bill Lighthouse (TIC).

People visiting the famous lighthouse will now be able watch close-up views of the seabirds, such as Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes on live screens. Images of birds jostling for space, sitting on eggs, carrying in food for their young will be on view leading up to and throughout the breeding season. The cameras will also be used to monitor numbers and breeding success.



Guillemot



Photo by Brian Edwards

East Weare and Penn's Weare

Scrub management for lovely liverworts and micro moths! East Weare and Penn's Weare is a special place for wildlife. The sheltered conditions found on the eastern undercliffs, coupled with Portland's mild and sunny climate provide, an ideal habitat for many rare lichens, liverworts and mosses, some of which are more common in the Mediterranean region. A tiny dark green liverwort *Southbya Nigrella*, no more than 5mm long, is found among mosses in short turf and along paths. This species is only known from two sites in Britain and Portland supports over 90% of the population. It requires very open conditions and is threatened by the Cotoneaster shrub which will shade it out.



Penn's Weare

The Weares of Portland also support a wide range of moths, one of the most important sites in the country, with many nationally scarce and threatened species. Perhaps the most significant is also one of the smallest, Richardson's Case-bearer *Eudarcia Richardsoni*, a micro-moth, associated with the rocky scree found in the Weares, and is only known from one other site in the world, that is also in Dorset (near Swanage). This is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority species.

Working closely with Dorset Environment Records Centre, Butterfly Conservation and Natural England, contractors and volunteers will be managing, through selective spraying and cutting, the clearance of the invading cotoneaster and other non-native shrubs throughout East Weare and Penn's Weare over this next year. www.derc.org.uk

Birdwatching

2008 marks the ninth year that Bob Ford - naturalist, has been leading birdwatching weekends for The Heights Hotel on the summit of the Island. In that time he has recorded 219 different species of birds, including some national rarities. He remembers some of the more memorable moments: "It was on a warm sunny day this spring. We were stood at Portland Bill in weather that was far too calm to expect to see any seabirds blown in. And yet just offshore was the most amazing flock of Manx Shearwaters I have ever seen. These birds usually fly straight past, and normally a fair distance out to sea as well but on this day there were hundreds of them, milling around just off the rocks. At the same time there was a constant stream of Gannets coming past really close as well, and to top it all a summer-plumed Black-throated Diver flew just over our heads! Then there was the time we saw a female Peregrine make a mistake on a high-speed attack on a pigeon - and dive headlong into the sea! We all thought she had drowned, but somehow she managed to swim ashore and climb onto the rocks to dry off. We had very good views of the Little Owls this year as well, but then we see them most weekends." You can read all about the birdbreak weekends at the Heights web site, www.heightshotel.com



Little Owl

Arable Strips at Portland Bill

The Bird Observatory now own or lease a total of 33 acres of fields and arable strips at Portland Bill and are managing them to the maximum benefit of wildlife. Historically, the area has always enjoyed low-intensity agriculture with a good population of birds such as Corn Buntings and Skylarks. The fields also used to be home to some very rare plants such as the pretty Pheasant's-eye, last seen in 1964. In recent years, the Corn Buntings and most of the rare arable weeds have disappeared, although happily Skylarks remain common. By a variety of management techniques, including sowing bird-friendly crops, it is hoped that the wildlife will return to these fields. Martin Cade, the warden at the Bird Observatory, says that there are already signs of an improvement, with a sizeable flock of Linnets over-wintering at the Bill for the first time in many years and plants such as Sharp-leaved Fluellen becoming common again in some areas. The project has also benefited the island's characteristic network of dry stone walls with many being rebuilt on Observatory managed land with the help of the Island Ranger, Lyn Cooch.



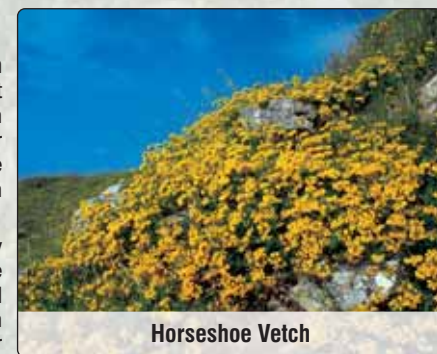
Skylark



Pyramidal Orchid

The wet spring has encouraged a great many flowers to grow better than usual this year. In particular the Sea Pinks at Chesil Beach have been very bright and at Portland Bill there has been a good display of Early Purple Orchids. Soon the Pyramidal and Bee Orchids will be out as well. Let's hope this is a better year for the Bee Orchids as last year's cold spring was disastrous for them. At the end of the year the strange little Autumn Ladies Tresses orchid will appear all over the island in grassy turf in quarries, on cliff-tops and even on the lawn of The Heights Hotel!

A short walk from the Height's Hotel is the Dorset Wildlife Trust's King Barrow Quarries. This is far from being just a disused quarry, old quarrying methods have left behind a wealth of accessible geology, fascinating industrial archaeology and lots of places for wildlife. Flowers are flourishing in King Barrow Quarry, with Horseshoe Vetch and Birdsfoot Trefoil currently covering much of the rockier slopes. These legumes (members of the pea family) provide food for the caterpillars of four species of blue butterfly - Adonis, Chalkhill, Common and Silver-studded. Patches of Kidney Vetch in the reserve also hold colonies of the rare Small Blue. For more details please see the web site at: www.dorsetwildlife.co.uk



Horseshoe Vetch

Butterflies

With cold easterlies dominating much of April, the general impression is that most species are a bit later than usual. The first Holly Blues, Green-veined Whites and Speckled Woods were seen at the Bill on April 1st, with a Clouded Yellow and Hummingbird Hawk-moth on April 3rd, Small Coppers on April 15th, a Painted Lady on April 27th and Orange-tips and Walls on April 30th.

May has seen warmer weather and a good hatch of Holly Blues. This species varies greatly in numbers from year to year, largely depending on population levels of a parasitic wasp which attacks the caterpillars.

Portland is very fortunate in having two butterfly reserves run by Butterfly Conservation. Nigel Spring, Butterfly Conservation's reserve manager, reports:

"Work on the island's butterfly reserves has continued through the winter with more thorn, sycamore and bramble scrub being cleared from Broadcroft. The first Small Blue was seen at Broadcroft Quarry Butterfly Conservation reserve on Weds 7th May. Also 2 Common Blues. On Perryfields BC reserve a big increase in the area of Horseshoe Vetch has followed-on from volunteer work party clearance work. As this is the only larval food plant for Chalkhill Blue butterflies, this is very encouraging."

For more details please see the web site at: www.butterfly-conservation.org



Green-veined White

Clouded Yellow

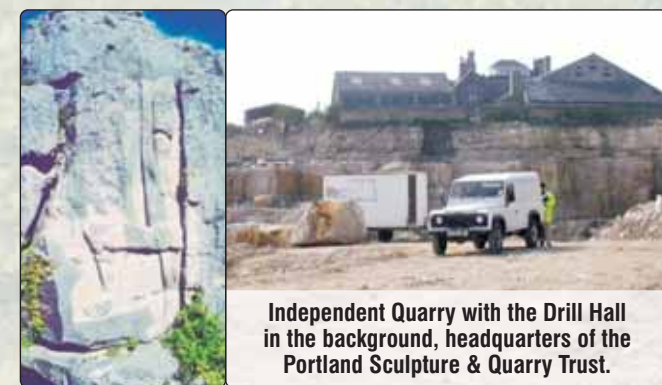
Speckled Wood

Holly Blue

Regeneration of Quarries

This newsletter focuses on Independent Quarry, the first quarry on Portland to be restored by landscaping rather than infilling. The current leaseholders, Albion Stone, have developed a restoration plan with Portland Sculpture and Quarry Trust that puts community involvement at the fore.

Plans include a performance area in the deepest part of the quarry as well as a number of sculptures and installations celebrating the history, geology and wildlife of the area. The trust have also consulted local teacher and naturalist Bob Ford who has advised them on how to allow the quarry to regenerate naturally. Bob says: "It is important to allow the plant species that are in the surrounding quarries to arrive naturally, as they will over the next 15 years or so. Using commercially available seed mixes might green up the quarry quickly but will not provide the mix of local strains that the wildlife need to live in. Many of the plants on Portland seem to grow shorter than they do on the mainland, benefiting from the warmth in the thin soil and giving rise to a warmer micro-climate than in taller plants."



Independent Quarry with the Drill Hall in the background, headquarters of the Portland Sculpture & Quarry Trust.

Independent Quarry will also include a wetland area comprising of a series of shallow ponds that will fill up in the winter rains and dry out in summer. A range of wildlife likes these temporary ponds, such as the rare Red-veined Darter and Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, seen on the island in recent years. More information on Independent Quarry can be found on the PSQT web site at <http://iq.learningstone.net>

Portland Walks

If you would like to be shown some of the wildlife and locations mentioned in this newsletter come on one of Bob Ford's weekly walks around the island's cliffs and quarries. This year the walks are on Wednesday mornings starting from the Heights Hotel at 10.00 am. Each walk lasts 90 minutes and costs £3.00. Booking is not necessary, just turn up at the hotel. Full details are on www.dorsetwalks.com with the new list published in September.

Climbing on Portland

Many climbers new to the sport take their first vertical steps on the Island, but it is equally popular with experienced climbers keen to enjoy the combination of unique rock formations, stunning views along the Purbeck coast, and relatively favourable weather.

The British Mountaineering Council, (BMC) is keen to promote climbers interests and reputation as an environmentally aware group. Through a network of volunteers (including myself), the BMC works with landowners and conservation interests over such issues as protecting habitats for rare plants and nesting birds.

On Portland we have established a system of seasonal restrictions on climbing near nesting Peregrines and colonies of sea birds. A greater part of the West coast, north of Blacknor point has been deemed a sanctuary zone where no further climbing will be developed.

In the past we have worked with the ranger service to carry out a plant survey of the rare Portland sea lavender which grows on the steep banks above the east coast cliffs, an area only accessible from ropes.

A recent initiative carried out with the blessing of the land owner, Stone Firms, and Natural England was to clear invasive species and ivy from the old railway cutting on the east coast, (an area popular with climbers). Around twenty volunteers gave up their day's climbing to clear Buddleia from the base of the cliff and ivy from the cliff face, which was de-stabilising the rock and encroaching on a protected species, Maidenhair fern.

Neal Heanes - Portland Access Volunteer
British Mountaineering Council

Restriction areas can be checked online at: www.thebmc.co.uk



The Isle of Portland, Dorset is 5 miles South of Weymouth, follow the A354 across the causeway to the Island.

Hidden Ledge Cameras, Bird Observatory, Portland Bill