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for people  
for ever

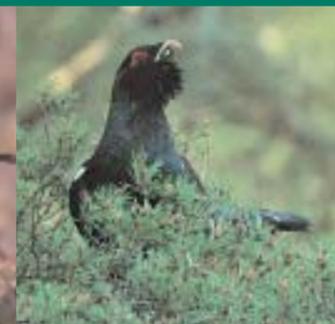
# LIFE FELLOWS' **NEWS**



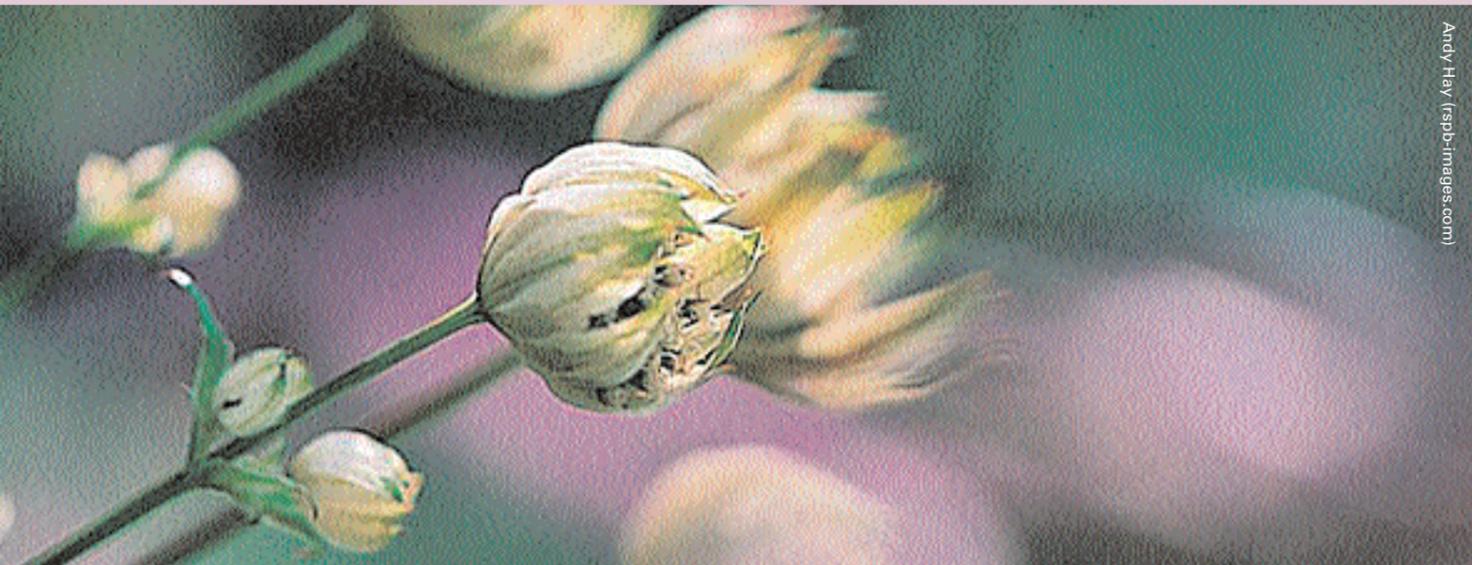
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- Celebrating 10 years at RSPB Conwy Nature Reserve
- The ups and downs of the capercaillie in 2004
- Working for Belarus
- Lines in the sand: news from The Lodge nature reserve
- Sir John Lister-Kaye
- Ospreys move to North Wales



## AN UNUSUAL LEGACY . . .



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

People leave all kinds of things to the RSPB, generous and caring in their determination to help us conserve birds for future generations.

It was unusual, though, to receive a sum of money plus all the royalties from a number of books and film and television scripts. These were written by RSPB fellow, Wilfred Greatorex.

Mr Greatorex, who included nine other charities in his Will, enjoyed

gardening for wildlife, but he made his living by creating and writing ground-breaking plays and series for television. These included *The Plane Makers* (1963–65) and its follow-up series, *The Power Game* (1965–66 and 1969) and *Front Page Story* (1965). His next series was *Hine* (1971) and he wrote scripts for *The Frighteners* (1972–73) and *The Secret Army* (1977–79), before he devised a new series, *Airline*, in 1982. He also wrote novels and co-wrote the screenplay for the epic film *Battle of Britain*.

Greatorex ceased writing after the death of his wife, saying that he realised that he had written

everything for her and now had no motivation to do more.

We are always grateful to supporters who show great foresight by including a gift, large or small, to birds, via the RSPB, in their Wills. If you would like to know more about how your Will can benefit birds and other wildlife, we have a small information booklet that you may find helpful.

If you have already included the RSPB in your Will, we would like to thank you. In either case, we would be pleased to hear from you. Please contact the Legacy Department at The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, or on 01767 680551.

## TOP DAY OUT IN LONDON TOWN

The RSPB Members' Day and AGM takes place on Saturday 8 October 2005, at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, Westminster, London. It is your chance to see the work of the RSPB first-hand and meet people who make your Society tick. You will hear direct from our Chief

Executive, Graham Wynne, Chairman of Council, Professor Ian Newton and Treasurer, Bryan Barnacle about the RSPB's vital work for wildlife and the environment. This work is made possible by dedicated members of staff and the continuing generous support of our fellows and members.

There will also be plenty of time to peruse the great selection of RSPB goods on sale and to chat to staff at the exhibition stands, who are keen to ensure you enjoy your day.

If you have any questions, please ring Gillian or Carol in Events at The Lodge, telephone: 01767 680551.



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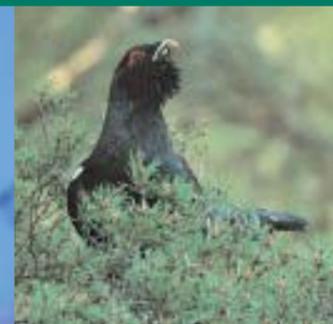
# FELLOWS' NEWS



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The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL. Tel: 01767 680551. [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)

Regd charity no 207076 410-0557-04-05 FRONT COVER: CONWY NATURE RESERVE AND CASTLE BY ANDY HAY (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

## CELEBRATING 10 YEARS AT RSPB CONWY NATURE RESERVE



Steve Knell (rspb-images.com)

Little ringed plovers nest on bare ground at Conwy.

The year 2005 marks a special anniversary for our reserve at Conwy, north Wales, as we celebrate 10 years of operation. The reserve opened to the public for the first time on 14 April 1995 and visitor numbers have grown steadily each year. We welcomed more than 52,000 visitors in 2004.

The reserve owes its existence to the creation of the A55 road tunnel under the Conwy estuary. During the construction, an area for settling the sludge pumped from the excavations was required, and the lagoons that make the reserve were created.

In the early years, the area was very bare and looked more akin to a building site than a haven for wildlife. However, many birds soon moved in to the newly created habitats.

Lapwings were among the first to arrive and enjoy the disturbed earth, which provides a good area for feeding. Within a short while, the first little ringed plover nest was discovered, causing great excitement. This was the first time the species had nested in the area.

Little ringed plovers and lapwings continue to breed at the reserve and have been joined by more than 40 other breeding species. In total, an amazing 220 bird species have been recorded at RSPB Conwy.

In addition to the amazing bird spectacles, people help to make this a truly special Welsh reserve. RSPB Conwy has a unique location lying right alongside the A55 expressway. The reserve now serves as a major

gateway for the public to discover Welsh birds and the work of the RSPB.

The reserve flora has matured during the 10 years of operation. The reed beds, grassland areas and managed scrub all attract a wide range of species. On the estuary, wading birds make the most of the rich habitat for feeding, while many ducks can be seen on the lagoon pools. Views from the centre are breathtaking with our bird feeding station in the foreground and a glimpse of the mountains of Snowdonia in the background.

A busy programme of events has been organised to celebrate the anniversary, with something different almost every weekend. Events range from guided walks and optical demonstrations, to woodcarving and family fun days.

We will be holding our annual Festival on the Bank Holiday weekend in May. The Festival is a major attraction and this year promises to be even better.

With a great team of staff and volunteers, the future for RSPB Conwy is looking very bright indeed. We look forward to offering you a warm welcome.

*RSPB Conwy is grateful for the financial support received via Landfill Tax credit funding from the Waste Recycling Group Ltd, administered by WREN.*

The reserve is on the North Wales coast just west of Llandudno; the nearest railway station is Llandudno Junction. Grid reference: SH799771. The reserve is open at all times; the centre is open from 10 am to 5 pm (or dusk if earlier). Tel: 01492 584091  
Tourist information centre  
Tel: 01492 592248

## THE UPS AND DOWNS OF THE CAPERCAILLIE IN 2004



Chris Knights (rspb-images.com)

A male capercaillie is a stunning sight – if you can find one.

Last year will be remembered for the dramatic changes in fortune for the vulnerable UK capercaillie population in northern Scotland. The outlook changed from very good to very bad within a matter of months. The blood pressure of RSPB staff working with this wonderful species varied accordingly.

The year started well. A national population survey completed in March revealed that capercaillie numbers had increased to around 2,000 individuals. This was tremendous news. At last,

the long-term decline had been halted and numbers had possibly doubled since the previous survey in 1999.

The annual lek surveys (counting the birds at regular display sites), completed in May, provided more good news – the number of males on the 44 leks counted since 2002 increased again. In 2002 there were 135 (an average of 3.07 per lek); in 2003 there were 154 (an average of 3.5) and in 2004, 185 males displayed at these 44 leks, an average of 4.2 males per site.

Given that the capercaillie had been in decline since the 1970s, when an estimated 20,000 were present in Scotland, these exciting results were very welcome. The increases were not entirely unexpected, however. An enormous amount of effort had been expended by the RSPB and other organisations, such as Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission

Scotland, trying to save this species from extinction in the UK. Much RSPB effort was made possible through generous support from fellows and members, in particular through a new initiative called 'Friends of the capercaillie' led by the Earl of Lindsay. Members of this group receive special newsletters and invitations to capercaillie related events during the year.

By May, we were daring to hope that the conservation work, including a marked reduction in the number of capercaillie killed by flying into fences, was beginning to pay off. The weather in the summers of 2001, 2002 and 2003 had been quite good, so capercaillie had bred reasonably well, boosting the population. Just as we began to feel optimistic, the heavens opened in June and the 2004 breeding season was a complete washout – heavy rain killed most of the chicks.

To keep the population stable, each hen capercaillie must rear one chick every year. In 2004, an average of only 0.3 chicks per hen was achieved on sites that are monitored. On many sites, none were reared at all. This was very depressing given the good start to the year. So long as breeding success is better during the next couple of years, though, the poor 2004 breeding season should not cause a decline. We are already hoping for a warm and sunny June this year.

If you are particularly interested in the capercaillie, would like to know more about its conservation, or how to support new work through the 'Friends of capercaillie' and would like to know about special visits to Abernethy Forest with a chance of seeing this most elusive but theatrical of birds, please contact Alison Connelly at our Scottish Headquarters, tel: 0131 311 6500, or e-mail [alison.connelly@rspb.org.uk](mailto:alison.connelly@rspb.org.uk)

# WORKING FOR BELARUS

Lars Lachmann, RSPB country programmes officer, tells us how the RSPB is working in Eastern Europe.



Mike Lane (rspb-images.com)

**Aquatic warbler: a Belarus special.**

The rhythmic *tatam-tatam* of the rails has come to a stop as my train arrives at the border. We are leaving the newly enlarged European Union and the wheels of the carriages have to be changed. In Belarus and further east in Russia, trains run on wider tracks than in neighbouring Poland and Western Europe.

Belarus – it is not a country or a name that rings many bells for most birdwatchers. This may be because it has been an independent state only since 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up. It may also be because it is not easy to enter, being ruled by an authoritarian president, who is not always fond of westerners. A lack of interesting birds, however, is certainly not the reason: northern species including the great grey owl and smew breed here, as well as birds commonly believed to occur only a lot farther east, such as azure tits and terek sandpipers, or to the south, such as Syrian woodpeckers and rollers. But the main treasures of the country are its extensive fens and natural floodplains, which are no longer found in such quantities anywhere else in Europe.

Old school maps of Europe do not even show Belarus, but they name the so-called 'Pripyat Swamps' in prominent letters. This area in the south of the country is home to about 80% of the world population of the small, striped aquatic warbler, the only globally threatened bird that regularly appears in the UK and mainland

Europe's rarest songbird. A dozen or so visit the south coast of England every autumn: this is where they breed.

I share my compartment with three Belarusians from the country's capital, Minsk: a student, two bicycle manufacturers and an old grandmother. All of them know 'vertlavaya kamyshovka', the aquatic warbler. This boosts the positive response to my regular, non-representative, in-train poll to 80% of Belarusian citizens having heard of this little bird. How come so many know about this elusive warbler?

The bird is the emblem of APB – BirdLife Belarus, the RSPB's young partner organisation in this country. In fact, a search for the breeding grounds of this species, organised by the RSPB-funded BirdLife Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team, led to its rediscovery in 1995. This brought together a number of highly motivated scientists and conservationists and led to the establishment of APB in 1998. The RSPB decided to support this emerging organisation from the very beginning. It now has 900 members and has grown to become one of the biggest independent organisations in Belarus, certainly the biggest in nature conservation and voted 'best non-government organisation in Belarus' during an independent 2002 review. Today, a consortium drives the development of conservation in Belarus with the APB at the hub of these activities. This network connects the RSPB in the UK and APB in Belarus with the German Otto Foundation and the UK Darwin Initiative with the Ministry for Environmental Protection and the United Nations Development programme in Minsk.

The first great conservation successes of APB were management plans to save the three biggest fen mires in the country, which hold 90% of Belarus's aquatic warblers, from destruction. After six years of intensive work, the bird's population at these sites is now secured and expected to grow by 20%. Further work is planned

together with local private and collective farmers to ensure the necessary land use is resumed to guarantee the long-term future of these sites. In the wake of this project, APB launched a campaign to tell people about the natural values of the country's fens and bogs, the 'green lungs of Europe'. Aquatic warblers featured in the first daily TV commercials ever broadcast in Belarus. No wonder everybody knows them.

Now, APB has more ambitious goals. Recently, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) approved a milestone project prepared by the RSPB and APB to restore 42,000 hectares of drained and degraded peatlands at 17 sites across Belarus, with a budget of US\$ 3 million over four years.

Another GEF-funded project is being prepared: APB plans to recreate large areas of habitat in the Pripyat river floodplain and to integrate sustainable land use into all development plans for this huge area. Around US\$ 9 million are likely to be spent for this important project.

With APB only seven years old, but exceptionally successful under difficult circumstances, the RSPB's international team regards Belarus as one of its textbook country programmes. Knowing this and feeling very comfortable with the work that awaits me in Minsk, I lie down again in my sleeper and listen to the comforting sounds of the rails leading towards the East: *tatam-tatam* . . .

**Note:** APB has started a programme to develop sustainable nature and birdwatching tourism to the Important Bird Areas of Belarus. This will offer tours to watch capercaillies, black grouse and hazel grouse and all the northern owl species in the northern taiga forest and greater spotted eagles, aquatic warblers, great snipe and azure tits in the Pripyat lowlands. Watch out for details in future issues of *BIRDS* magazine.

# LINES IN THE SAND

Conor Jameson found a new incentive to walk around The Lodge reserve at lunch time.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

**Manx Loghtan sheep get stuck in at The Lodge.**

The Lodge, Sandy, Beds, is recognisable to many as the UK home of the RSPB. As addresses go it's fairly memorable, perhaps because it evokes a quaint image. I'm lucky enough to work here, along with 500 others. We're not all twitchers, by any means. Or even birdwatchers, for that matter. At least, not till recently.

We have a nature reserve here and, it being a sandy part of Bedfordshire (a Lower Greensand ridge, to be geologically accurate about it), it's

prime territory for a bit of heathland. A little piece of Dorset in mid-Anglia, you could call it, although it's a far cry from the spaces mythologised by Thomas Hardy. One thing that characterises heathland is its simplicity, and its dependence on being kept largely clear of encroaching trees that will shade out the low stuff, bulk up the thin soil, fertilise it with fallen leaves and turn it (as all dry land here will turn, left to its own devices) into forest. It's a harmonious balance of sensitive land use and wildlife, and you don't find much of it nowadays; certainly not inland.

At present, we have just a few hectares of heath at the Lodge. It's gently sloping and is predominantly heather-clad and we have plans we're pretty excited about to increase this area, having recently acquired some neighbouring land thanks to the prodigious response to a membership appeal. We will do this by the gradual

removal of plantation conifers. A small flock of a rare breed of sheep, called Manx Loghtans, will play its part in maintaining clear areas by grazing at an appropriate level. The sandiness can then come into its own, increasing the heathland flora and attracting – we hope – threatened heathland bird species such as woodlarks, tree pipits, Dartford warblers and nightjars. Not to mention the other wildlife that needs a heathland ecosystem too.

Well ahead of the schedule of our restoration plans and on a ripple of excitement in the workplace, a Dartford warbler arrived in November. A tiny piece of Kent on our little bit of Dorset, you could say. It took up residence in the heather: tiny, russet, fiery-eyed and skittish; irritable, poking around unseen in the brush, scolding softly, popping its head up from time to time to survey the terrain and to regard the attendant group of birdwatchers (many of them in office wear in the lunch break), then disappearing again.

Where has it come from? Will it stay and survive the winter? Will it find company here? We can only guess and hope. When I was a child, the Dartford warbler was one of the real rarities among the UK's resident birds, confined to small areas of the coastal strip of southern England. Milder winters and improved habitats have enabled it to spread since then and ours may have come from a population now established in Suffolk, Surrey or Berkshire.

There has never been one here before, that we know of. That it is here at all, that it belongs here, and that it is surviving, so far, makes this a special moment, for me and many others, birders and non-birders alike. And makes going to see it not really like twitching at all. We hope in time that there will be more to come, to check out what we've done, to endorse our efforts, give the seal of approval, and to stay.

## SIR JOHN LISTER-KAYE



Aigas house.

Sir John Lister-Kaye is a writer, lecturer and professional naturalist. He is a Life Fellow of the RSPB and has served on the RSPB's Council and on our advisory committee for Scotland, which he chaired from 1986 to 1993.

Most of his career has been spent establishing the first Field Studies Centre for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, the Aigas Field Centre, and its charitable foundation, The Aigas Trust for Environmental Education. For 25 years the Centre has hosted field study groups and travel study programmes from universities, institutions and other organisations

interested in the natural environment, from all over the world. Aigas lies within the Highland region on the River Beauly, only a half-hour's drive west from Inverness, five miles from the village of Beauly.

He is also a self-employed farmer and businessman running a small family estate with interests in housing, forestry, sport, tourism and recreation and lists among his interests global environmental issues, breeding pedigree Highland cattle and collecting trees, adding to the Victorian arboretum at Aigas.

A defining moment came in 1967, when Sir John witnessed the infamous *Torrey Canyon* oil spill (100,000 gallons) on the Cornish coast. He was inspired to work as a freelance environmental journalist and began a career as a writer, abandoning his career in industry. In 1968, he moved to the Isle of Skye to work

with author/naturalist Gavin Maxwell on a handbook of British mammals, a project that remained unfinished with Maxwell's early death.

In 1976, he founded the Aigas Field Centre and later the Aigas Trust for Environmental Education, a Scottish charitable trust that provides environmental education and field studies for Highland schools.

Apart from his work with the RSPB, he was soon in demand for other influential committee work. This came with the Nature Conservancy Council and later Scottish Natural Heritage, the Centre for Highlands and Islands Policy Studies, the Advisory Council for the Millennium Forest for Scotland, the Scottish Wildlife Trust (of which he was President) and the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (he is still an active Vice President).

His books include *The White Island*, an account of working with Gavin Maxwell on Eilean Bhan and *The Seeing Eye*, the story of the early years of the field centre. *One for Sorrow* is a novel that explores the complicated history of land use in the Highlands of Scotland while *Ill Fares the Land* is a sustainable land ethic for the sporting estates of the Highlands and Islands. Most recently, he has published the acclaimed *Song of the Rolling Earth*, a memoir of 25 years as a Highland naturalist and *Nature's Child*, in which he revisits his own childhood experiences of nature through the eyes of his youngest daughter.

The influence of Sir John's work, writing, lecturing and thinking on the people and wildlife of the Highlands will no doubt continue to grow. Certainly, in Scotland, where the RSPB is so active, has so many superb nature reserves and faces such challenges in wildlife conservation in the 21st century, it is good to have such people on the side of the birds and the unique life of the Highlands.

## OSPREYS MOVE TO NORTH WALES



A splendid osprey: will this become a regular sight in Wales?

An historic event took place in 2004 – two pairs of ospreys chose to nest in Wales for the first time.

One of the pairs was seen early in the breeding season at a site near Porthmadog, in north Wales. As soon as it became clear that the birds were incubating eggs, a round-the-clock watch was set up with help from the local community, landowners, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Snowdonia National Park Authority, North Wales police, the Wales Raptor Study Group and Gwynedd Council.

Ospreys are Schedule 1 birds, specially protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Illegal egg collectors still target them, however, so we made every effort to ensure

the pair was kept safe. Many of the volunteer wardens were local people. They devoted many hours, day and night, to protecting the nest site.

We were delighted when two chicks hatched in mid June. Our hopes were short-lived, though. Unfortunately, owing to harsh weather, the nest collapsed and sadly the chicks did not survive. The adult birds stayed in the area, fixing the nest and hunting for fish.

We set up a viewing point some distance away from the nest, so people could come and see these remarkable birds. Many local people came to see them, along with thousands of visitors, who got a glimpse of the birds before they left the area.

We are pleased to say that the other pair of ospreys bred successfully, elsewhere in Wales, and reared one

chick under the watchful eye of Welsh Wildlife Trust volunteers.

Ospreys have visited Wales on migration to and from Africa, but there are no records of them ever having nested here before. The species had become extinct in the UK by the early 20th century, but returned to the Highlands in Scotland in 1954. Since then, the Scottish osprey population has increased to more than 160 pairs.

Ospreys are very loyal to their nest site and we hope they will return to north Wales next year. If you would like further information on the scheme, or would like to volunteer for next year's operation, please contact the RSPB Wales Headquarters on 029 2035 3000 or e-mail [cymru@rspb.org.uk](mailto:cymru@rspb.org.uk).

We are extremely grateful to the local people for their welcome support for this project.