

Winter 2009 Newsletter

Seals Phone Home *Jolyon Chesworth, Wildlife Trusts' South East Marine Programme*

Seals are some of the most charismatic animals you can see in this country. You might think they would avoid our busy waters in favour of more peaceful places to feed and breed. However, you may be surprised to learn that a small but regionally unique population of seals lives in the West Sussex and Solent area.



Photo: Hampshire Wildlife Trust

There are two species of seals resident in the UK. Grey seals tend to prefer rocky areas and are more common in the south west and off the coasts of Wales and Scotland. Harbour seals, as their name suggests prefer sheltered harbours and estuaries, and it is these seals that are most frequently found in our area, particularly in the sheltered harbours of West Sussex and the Solent.

The UK is home to approximately 40% of the European population of harbour seals, however in some places these populations are declining by as much as 50%, with serious implications for their survival. Nobody yet understands what may be contributing to these declines but all agree we need to increase monitoring to improve our understanding.

Studying seals is tricky; they can range many kilometres to feed and spend significant amounts of time underwater. The Wildlife Trusts in the south east and organisations such as Seawatch often receive sightings from members of the public, however little is known about the seals and where the most important sites are for resting, feeding and breeding.

To learn more about our seals and help protect them, a partnership project between the Wildlife Trusts' South East Marine Programme and Chichester Harbour Conservancy has been using the latest electronic tracking device technology. These are essentially mobile phones with a built-in GPS to provide location data. They also provide information on seal diving behaviour including depth and duration. Once attached, tags last about five months until the seals moult and they fall off.



Photo: Jolyon Chesworth

In March 2009 a team from the Sea Mammal Research Unit at St Andrews University, the world leaders in seal tracking, travelled to West Sussex to deploy the tracking devices on five harbour seals. Catching seals is difficult. It involves finding their resting sites, using a net to corral them onshore and administering a mild sedative to keep them calm whilst you weigh, measure and tag them. Seals are powerful, agile creatures and frequently escaped the nets, swimming just beyond our reach. It took four long days to catch them; however the effort was worth it.

The data received from the tags has been hugely informative and we now know the seals visit nearly all of the Harbours in the Solent - Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, and West

Sussex, especially Chichester Harbour. One seal even swam as far east as Worthing, taking two days, sleeping at sea and feeding at depths down to 60 meters.

From the tags we have been able to identify approximately 15 feeding grounds that are regularly used by, with some of the most frequented sites found off Selsey Bill. We have also been able to locate primary resting areas. This information is crucial if we are to ensure the areas that the seals rely upon are considered in management and conservation plans and fed in to development proposals that may affect them.

Although the tags have given us an excellent understanding of our local seal population, they have now fallen off, so we are also gathering data in other ways. We are keen to receive sightings of seals and have an online recording form. It is important not to get too close or disturb seals and we have issued a code of conduct that should be followed when observing them.

Seeing a seal resting onshore or playing in the water is one of the great wildlife watching experiences you can have in this country. The work of the project will help ensure that seeing a seal in Sussex will remain a possibility for future generations. For more information, the code of conduct or to report a sighting visit www.southeastmarine.org.uk

Sussex Biodiversity Partnership Conference *Laurie Jackson, Sussex Biodiversity Partnership*

The Sussex Biodiversity Partnership Conference 2009 *delivering biodiversity through open minds and grand designs* took place on 3 November in Hassocks. The event was well attended with 73 individuals present representing local authorities, statutory agencies and non-governmental organisations across Sussex.

The conference provided an opportunity to find out more about Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) in Sussex and how the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) has evolved since it was first devised. During the second half of the day, discussion groups enabled organisations to look at the BOAs they were interested in, and to raise areas of work that extend outside of the BOAs.



Photo: Laurie Jackson

The information gathered on this day is of great value to biodiversity work in Sussex, and will help us to focus our efforts and build stronger partnerships to achieve on the ground delivery for biodiversity. If you have any questions about the conference, the BAP or BOAs please contact Laurie using the information below.

News

The Marine and Coastal Access Act came in to force on 12 November 2009 This new legislation has been hailed by Natural England as a once in a lifetime opportunity for marine conservation. The Act makes provision for the identification of a network of Marine Conservation Zones to protect our rare and threatened marine life, which has been subject to sustained pressure over many decades.



Identifying these areas will be undertaken by independent regional stakeholder groups representing environmental, social and economic interests, and in the South East this is being led by the Balanced Seas team <http://www.balancedseas.org/>



2010 is International Year of Biodiversity In declaring it, the United Nations aim to increase awareness of the importance of biodiversity to our lives and celebrate the successes we have so far achieved in conservation.

Are you planning or would you like to plan an event to celebrate International Year of Biodiversity? Please contact Laurie using the information below.

The South Downs is confirmed as a National Park The purpose of national parks is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of an area and, to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of these areas by the public. The South Downs will be Britain's 15th National Park and with an estimated 120000 residents it will have the largest population. A new South Downs National Park Authority is expected to be established by April 2010 and will assume its full range of functions from 1 April 2011.

Funding Deadlines

- SITA Small Grants Scheme (grants of £250 - £5000) **10 December 2009.**
- Secret Millionaire Fund (grants of £300 - £10000) **21 December 2009.**
- Ecominds (medium bids of £20001 - £60000) **8 January 2010.**
- Cemex Community Fund (grants of £1000 - £15000) **25 January 2010.**
- Great Crested Newt Conservation Grant Scheme (grants up to £500) **29 January 2010.**
- SITA Small Grants Scheme (grants of £250 - £5000) **2 February 2010**
- BSBI training grants for aspiring botanists (grants up to £200) **6 February 2010**
- SITA Enriching Nature Programme (grants up to £120000) **15 February 2010**
- Department of Energy and Climate Change Bio-energy Capital Grants (up to £500000) **26 February 2010**
- The Idlewild Trust (grants up to £5000) **26 February 2010**

Look out for

- **The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity** study is an international initiative to draw attention to the global economic benefits of biodiversity and highlight the growing costs of biodiversity loss. The project team have launched the first part of their report for policy makers <http://www.teebweb.org/>

¹ This includes the Broads which is designated under different legislation to the national parks, but is subject to the same level of protection.

- Natural England report on the **environmental impacts of land management** <http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NERR030>
- The Wildland Research Institute is a new institute at the University of Leeds which aims to identify the requirements, strategies and policies for a transition to a greater presence of wild landscapes in Britain and Europe <http://www.wildlandresearch.org/>

Upcoming Events

December 6: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and the British Herpetological Society hold a joint scientific meeting on amphibian and reptile biology and conservation in Bournemouth http://www.thebhs.org/Documents/main_documents/meetings/ARC-BHS%202009%20Sci%20Meeting%20Flyer.pdf

February 2-3: World Wetlands Day Conference 2010 - *Wetlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change* is held in Peterborough <http://www.coastms.co.uk/conferences/428>

February 19-21: 2nd International Berlin Bat Meeting - *Bat Biology and Infectious Diseases* is held in Berlin <http://www.izw-berlin.de/>

March 2: SDUK 2010 Conference - *Transition to a Low Carbon Economy*, is held at the Royal College of Physicians, London. <http://www.govnet.co.uk/sduk/index.html>

March 2: Greenspace conference - *Sustainable Parks: Sustainable Futures*, is held in Liverpool <http://www.green-space.org.uk/events/GS/latestconference.php>

March 24: Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management Spring Conference - *Ecosystem Services* is held in London <http://www.ieem.net/conferences.asp>

March 26-28: Butterfly Conservation International Symposium - *The 2010 target and beyond for Lepidoptera* is held at Reading University http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/text/2751/international_symposia.html

April 21: The first Floodplain Meadows Partnership Conference will be held in Milton Keynes http://www.floodplainmeadows.org.uk/p6_1.shtml

April 27-29: Association of Applied Biologists Conference - *Agri-environment schemes - what have they achieved and where do we go from here?* Is held at the University of Leicester <http://www.aab.org.uk/contentok.php?id=91&basket=wwsshowconfdets>

Is there something we should know about? Got an article you would like us to include?

Email Laurie with the details if you would like something included in a future newsletter. The deadline for submissions for the next edition is **19 February 2010**.

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