

## Blackcap

by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

### Home for Christmas

Sussex is no place for a warbler in winter. As daylight, temperature and their insect food dwindle, blackcaps, whitethroats, chiffchaffs, reed, sedge and willow warblers all evacuate England. Each September their fragile, feathered bodies fly to Spain and sub-Saharan Africa on the promise of warmth, food and, ultimately, life. So finding a blackcap swinging on your birdfeeder in December will be as unlikely as seeing Santa at a midsummer barbeque. But at Christmas miracles can happen.

Blackcaps return to England in April. Cuckoos and chiffchaffs, also early migrants, broadcast their arrival with their monotonous two-note tune but the blackcap lets loose a rich, full-throated, joyous warble; a defiant announcement that he's cheated death for another winter.



*Blackcap c Tony Houlton  
Sussex Wildlife Trust*

This colourful song comes from a colourless bird, yet there's something stylish and continental about the blackcap's appearance. Their two-tone grey suit and black beret pulled over dark eyes make them look like some Parisian beatnik. You'd expect to catch one sat in a willow smoking Gauloises and



*Blackcap c Roger Wilmshurst  
Sussex Wildlife Trust*

muttering about Sartre. The female bird's beret is a rich chestnut brown; hardly qualifying her to use the name blackcap at all.

The laws of nature clearly state that all European blackcaps must migrate south for the winter. But in the sixties a small gang of nonconformist blackcaps in Germany started a revolution. They headed south-west instead of south, ending up in England. Mother Nature is not kind to those who disobey her rules and this suicide squad was surely sentenced to a frozen death in our frosty winter. But instead they found a new England. A land of mild winters, ornamental berry bushes and kind people who hung balls of fat in their gardens. They didn't freeze and starve. They survived.

Not only that; the following spring's short flight home to Germany meant they arrived ahead of their law-abiding neighbours, who were still struggling back from their long-haul holiday. The returning rebels were able to claim the best territories and produce larger families. They raised more revolutionaries who returned to England each winter. Now a small population of blackcaps make our gardens their winter home; exotic apparitions of summer amongst the robins and frost. They'll be gone again by the time 'our' British blackcaps return, exhausted and oblivious, in April.

Animal migration is amazing. Each year across Europe millions of perilous journeys are undertaken as birds, bats, butterflies and other wildlife flee hostile conditions. Each year we as our own species have been forced to make dangerous migrations to survive. The paths of refugees and migrating birds will cross as both are forced on journeys over the same treacherous mountains and seas. Let's hope they all find someplace safe this Christmas.

## RSPB Events for December 2019

### WEST WITTERING

Tuesday 10 December

Morning Bird Walk on East Head with David Hart of the RSPB Chichester Local Group. Meet in West Beach car park at 10.00 am, Map Ref: SZ766984 01243 262833

### DELL QUAY

Saturday 28 December

Morning Bird Walk on Chichester Harbour with Roger Morris of the RSPB Chichester Local Group. Meet at end of Apuldram Lane at 10.00 am, Map Ref: SU836028 01243 262833

## RSPB Events for January 2020

### PAGHAM

Sunday 5 January

Morning Bird Walk around Pagham Lagoon and North Walls with Chris Vine of the RSPB Chichester Local Group. Meet in Church Lane Map Ref: SZ880976 at 10.00 am 01243 262833

### CHICHESTER

Thursday 23 January

Illustrated Talk by Glenda Law on "Wildlife of the Florida Everglades" to the RSPB Chichester Local Group at The Pallant Suite, Masonic Hall, South Pallant, Chichester at 7.30 pm

Entrance members £2-50/visitors £5-00 01243 262833  
wheelchair access

### BURPHAM

Saturday 25 January

Bird Walk on The Burgh with Chris Vine of the RSPB Chichester Local Group. Meet at T junction Burpham Map Ref: TQ042096 at 10.00 am – 3.00 pm approx. Bring lunch 01243 262833

## Chichester Conservancy Volunteers December 2019

### SELSEY

Sunday 1 December

Conservation with the Manhood Wildlife and Heritage Group and Rob Eadie of the Chichester Conservation Volunteers at 10.00 am 07776 150863

### LAVINGTON

Sunday 8 December

Conservation – Heathland Management on Lavington Common with Scott Robertson of the Chichester Conservation Volunteers at 10.00 am 01243 552113/07722 025339

## SUSSEX WILDLIFE TRUST December 2019

No planned events for December

## SUSSEX WILDLIFE TRUST January 2020

### Chichester

Tuesday 29 January

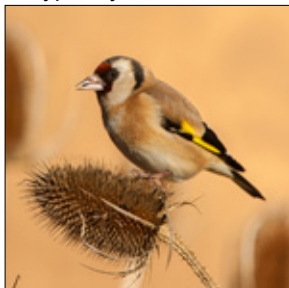
Illustrated Talk by Steve Webster, Site Manager on 'Pagham Harbour' to the Sussex Wildlife Trust, Friends Meeting House, Priory Road, Chichester at 7.30 pm

Entrance Members £3-00/Visitors £4 01243 262833  
wheelchair access

## A flamboyance of finches!

Just as the numbers of our winter wildfowl and waders build up at this time of year, large flocks of songbirds gather in the fields around Medmerry. These mixed flocks are typically made up of finches, pipits and buntings.

Goldfinches are immediately recognisable with white cheeks, red face and yellow wing bars. Chaffinch have white shoulder patches and stripes on their wings. The males have a blue-grey head and pinkish breast.



Goldfinch - Ben Andrew

Linnetts, a finch of open countryside and farmland, are typically brown but the males sport crimson chests and foreheads. Corn buntings, yellowhammers and meadow pipits usually make up the other species in these mass accumulations, which may number well in excess of a



Chaffinch - Andy Hay

thousand birds. Like an explosion, the air erupts in a cloud of birds signifying the arrival of a hunting peregrine or merlin hurtling onto the scene like a missile. The sight of predator and prey locked in aerial pursuit is an experience to quicken the pulse and never be forgotten. This is nature in its rawest and most fundamental form, an intense life and death battle of agility, strength and guile. It may not be the Serengeti, but these natural spectacles can be just as exhilarating.

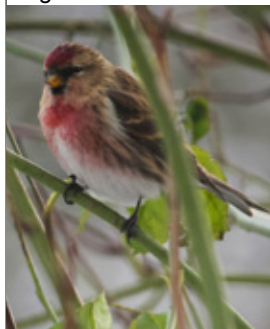
Meanwhile, the bleaker weather draws some more unusual finches to our feeders outside the Visitor Centre. Siskins and redpolls are resident all year round, but their populations are boosted in winter with migrants from Scandinavia and



Siskin - Ben Andrew

Northern Europe. Siskins have streaky green-yellow bodies with yellow wing bars and redpolls have stripy brown bodies, red foreheads and little black bibs.

Join us on New Years Day for a guided walk and see how many species you can find or if you would like help identifying our winter birds, we are running a Birdwatching for Beginners workshop on Sunday 19 January. For more information pop into our



Redpoll - Jenny Tweedie

Visitor Centre on the B2145 south of Chichester or check our website [www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour](http://www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour)

Don't forget Big Garden Birdwatch returns from 25 – 27 January 2020. Being an annual survey, it allows us to monitor trends and understand how birds are doing and your results really do help. All you need is a pen, paper, an hour and a comfy seat. Cup of tea and biscuit are optional! For full details on how to take part and identification tips, check out our website

[www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch) where you will also find a handy online counter!

# Let's give nature a home

## RSPB Pagham Harbour & Medmerry

### December

#### Saturday 07 December, Binocular and Telescope Open Day.

Come along and try our wide range of binoculars and telescopes and have a chat with our friendly optics experts. Whether you're a complete beginner, an experienced birder or buying as a Christmas present, we'll be happy to help.

**10am – 4pm, Free event, no need to book**

### January 2020

#### Wednesday 01 January 2020, New Year's Day Guided Walk.

What better way to start your 2020, than with a New Year's Day walk in the countryside. While winter wildfowl and waders provide the seasons soundtrack of honks, quacks, whistles and squeals, join us for a walk down the **west side** of our **Medmerry** reserve. This 4 mile walk combines birds and wildlife, with Medmerry's history and its creation into the reserve you see today.

**10am (duration 3½ hours) meet Earnley car park PO20 7JL at 9.50am.**

**Booking essential £7 per person / £4 members**

#### Sunday 19 January, Bird Watching for Beginners – Pagham Harbour's Birds of Winter.

Can you separate your female teal from your female wigeon? Your redshank from your spotted redshank? Dunlin from knot in winter plumage? Following the format of our popular Bird Watching for Beginners classes, this workshop focuses on our winter visitors, including wildfowl, waders, grebes and winter thrushes, plus much more. Starting with a short theory session, followed by a practical walk on our wonderful reserve, we look at identification through shape, colour, behaviour, song and habitat, plus discussing ecology, migration and why these birds are attracted to RSPB Pagham Harbour.

**10am (duration 3 hours) Booking essential £10 per person / £8 RSPB members**

### Big Garden Birdwatch

#### Saturday 25 January – Monday 27 January

Take part in the world's largest wildlife survey. You can count here at Pagham Harbour, Medmerry, your local park or even the comfort of your own home. It's easy to do and the whole family can join in, plus you'll be helping us learn more about our garden wildlife. More information is available from our Visitor Centre or from our website and there's even an online counting tool, [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch)

Check out our website [www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour](http://www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour) for full events program.

RSPB Pagham Harbour & Medmerry Visitor Centre, Selsey Road, Sidlesham PO20 7NE

Email: [pagham.harbour@rspb.org.uk](mailto:pagham.harbour@rspb.org.uk)  
[www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour](http://www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour)

Tel: 01243 641508

### RSPB Pagham Seals Wildlife Explorers

Calling all 7-13 year old wildlife and nature enthusiasts...

The RSPB Pagham Seals is for 7-13 year olds and, unless advertised, meets every last Sunday in the month between 2-4pm. We meet the Pagham Harbour RSPB Reserve, but are also off site for many meets at a wide variety of locations exploring the beautiful area in which we live and its wildlife.

For more information and to check the programme and/or location for any month, please contact

George Carney, Wildlife Explorers, Youth Leader  
Tel: 07720946132

Email: [george.carney@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:george.carney@tiscali.co.uk)

Pagham Harbour Reserve, Selsey Road, Sidlesham, West Sussex, PO20 7NE. Tel **01243 641508**