

Bird Trail 2016

Congratulations on the Successful relaunch of Bird Trail: a celebration of volunteers, young people and wildlife.

Sunday, 25th September began with heavy rain during the night, followed by a grey start which turned into a gloriously sunny day for our 2016 Bird Trail at Blashford Lakes Nature Reserve. The early arrivers successfully negotiated the start of phase 2 (cycling) of the New Forest Triathlon and clicked in to support mode. "Delegate and trust" was Lord Nelson's approach and that is precisely what happened.

From the very start of the arrival and registration process it was clear that the eight groups of young people were positive, enthusiastic and had been well prepared. After an introduction, welcome and launch the Bird Trail began. With their allocated Hampshire Ornithological Society guides and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust volunteers the groups started their day. The staggered start for the actual trail was complemented by other activities relating to the bigger picture of wildlife discovery. There were bird ringers – we will certainly re-locate them next year as they were at Goosander Hide which was the 5th on the trail so there was a long wait before any groups could arrive – pond dipping, river studies, birds of prey display, moth trap analysis, owl pellet dissection and analysis and badge making. These 'bigger picture' activities took place with a background activity of adding to the species count. The emphasis was on fun whilst identifying species and studying a wider range of wildlife-related topics.

We had young people ranging from 4 years old [there was one who was 10 weeks old] to 18 years and this worked beautifully thanks to their own leaders of each group and the focus and determination of the young people themselves. Behaviour was exemplary. The groups came from Hampshire and Dorset with one of the young 'wildlifers' who was visiting relatives, one of whom is a HOS Volunteer guide, coming from Devon.

Our president, Chris Packham, joined the activities and worked with the young people. He gave a keynote speech which was, of course, very well received and then announced the winning groups. There were only three species difference between the first three groups' counts. Winners were the Copythorne Stanley's Own Beaver Colony with 56 verified species, second place with 55 species went to Titchfield Haven Wildlife Explorer Group and in third place, with 54, was Havant Wildlife Watch group – all very close. In addition to winning, the Beavers all gained the 'my outdoors challenge', 'hikes away' and 'explore activity' badges.

We had some very positive verbal feedback from the parents and leaders at the end of the day, all wanting to give thanks to their activity volunteer leaders and birding volunteers. They really appreciated the time and support with the safety logistics. A particular thank you to all those helping with the safe road crossing.

Dawn and Jim from HIWWT and I could not have run the day without the help and support from both HOS and HIWWT volunteers and from our sponsors. Prizes were provided by HOS, Hampshire Swifts, Nutbags (bird food) and In Focus. The certificates and embroidered badge design was sponsored by Christchurch Harbour Ornithological Group (CHOG) and printing was sponsored by Pearsons of Romsey. Liberty's Owl, Raptor and Reptile Centre provided the static birds of prey display which enabled the young people to have close contact with various birds from their centre and SDNP who organised the collection of wild owl pellets for dissection. Chris Packham signed all the certificates by hand so these and the badges were particularly well received. Ian Julian, professional photographer, took photographs of the event and is donating his pictures. Thanks to everyone who made the day such a success.

The importance of volunteers cannot be under-estimated. Bird Trail's base rock is provided by all the volunteers not only from HOS and HIWWT but the group leaders, those who brought the groups. Most importantly, the young people themselves. They took a break from their usual activities for a sense of adventure - not a digital device in sight. Bird trail was not a theme park, but the real thing. Nothing was guaranteed but the results spoke for themselves.

As Chris Packham said, 'As ever Birdtrail was a triumph - superb location, brilliant organisation, well attended, greatly enjoyed and hugely important in terms of engaging young people with wildlife. It should be mandatory for every child in the UK to get involved in events like this'

By Patricia Brown, photos courtesy of Kerry Summer

