

Martin Hodgson's profile

If you've read other committee members' profiles first, you may wonder on reading mine how on earth I qualify for the honour of being on the committee. Although I'd been interested in birds from quite an early age, I wasn't lucky enough to find a mentor to develop that interest, and I remained for decades a casual observer. It wasn't until the ripe age of 65 that I began to put the "study" into it which the name of our organisation exhorts.

Born in Bradford to a WW2 widow, I had a fairly solitary childhood, one solace of which was a pair of plastic binoculars given as a birthday present. They probably magnified no more than about 3x but they allowed me to watch and identify a good range of garden birds. In those days even our modest grass area of 4x3 metres was regularly vacuumed clean by a flock of 20 or more neighbourhood starlings, and the winter roost of thousands of them on Bradford Town Hall was a thrilling sight for a young lad. I bought my first bird book with my 11th birthday money. It was the Observer Book of Birds' Eggs, chosen because it was the only one in my price range. Despite it still gracing my bookshelves, I have no recollection of ever discovering a bird's egg other than on the stone shelf in the pantry.

When a family friend asked me what I would like for my 13th birthday, I requested a "big bird book" which I'd come across in a local shop. The friend queried what my interest in ostriches was, so I redefined the request as Volume 3 of T A Coward's "The Birds of the British Isles" – not that big, except by comparison with the Observer Book of Birds' Eggs! For a few years that book plus its two companion volumes were dipped into in a detached way and then replaced on the shelves. And 20 further years passed with no recollectible birding activity.

Fast forward to my 30s. In the era of free higher education I'd been to university, passed the Civil Service entrance board and begun a modest ascent within the Inland Revenue. As though waking from a van Winkle-like sleep, and with no prompting that I can recall, I bought a pair of East German Zeiss binoculars, which weighed about 3kg and cost the never-to-be-broadcast-in-the-family price of £75. At the same time I joined the RSPB as a Life Member for the even less broadcastable sum of £147. I remember the figure, as it's a maximum break in snooker.

My first outing with the bins was to the field at the back of our house in North Shields where I quickly picked up a budgerigar in a flock of house sparrows, and a buzzard sitting on a nearby post. This was a tragic start to my renewed interest because it created a mind-set that birding was easy and didn't require effort. My first real birding trip, to Holywell Dene in Northumberland, reinforced that. I parked the car, lifted the bins and saw a great grey shrike on a nearby bush. A short walk brought me a flock of 100+ whooper swans and, I was told by an expert there, a Lapland bunting. Given the pressures of my job, 90% of my subsequent birding was done during overseas family holidays, which again meant picking up some "exotic" species but not really having to do much study of their habitat and behaviour, and with very little attention to British birds in between.

Fast forward again, to my 60s. I'd retired and had moved to Sheffield in late 2006. Browsing one day in the Weston Park Museum shop I came across an attractive book entitled "Birds in the Sheffield Area 2006" published by the Sheffield Bird Study Group. This was what is nowadays called a "Wow moment". Was there really such a rich variety of birds on my doorstep? I'd better join this SBSG lot and find out more.

And so at that late stage realisation dawned that I would actually have to learn a lot more than I'd ever thought if I was to be able to call myself any kind of birder. It's been an interesting and rewarding journey since then.

I took on the Membership Secretary role in 2010, and have aimed always to treat members not just as colleagues but also as customers who are entitled to good customer service. I hope I've succeeded in that.

And so to 2016 when I was invited to join the Committee. You will have worked out by now that that my membership of the Committee is not based on my track record as a birder. I hope instead that the skills of business process and organisation which I gained in the Revenue might be my contribution, along with a continued focus on membership issues.