

The RSPB's Sophie Atherton talks to the charity's conservation manager about what made him an advocate for birds

Inspired by nature

Leigh Lock doesn't look like your average conservationist, and indeed he isn't. Dressed in fashionable jeans and a faded-purple shirt, he joins me for a pot of tea in Topsham, which we drink sitting on the quay in the blazing sun, while I grill him about how he got into conservation.

It all began in rural Kent, where as a boy he would wander off to explore the surrounding countryside. "I used to go off and look for bugs and birds and grovel around in the mud and collect things," he tells me. "I'd put the bugs into match boxes and also collect flowers and press them, but I'd also look them up in books so I got to know the names of all the things."

So it wasn't all birds from the word go, but as he got older, the nearby farmland and woodland began to seem a bit too ordinary, so he ventured further afield. "Eventually I got brave enough and fit enough to start going out on my bike and cycling to Dungeness, which took me about three hours! When I got down to the coastal marshes, there were suddenly loads of birds that, before then, I'd only seen in my books. Ducks and geese were all completely new to me. I found that very exciting." With only his bike as transport, Leigh didn't get to these new places very often, but says it was always "very special" when he did.

Birders - a term that the RSPB shies away from, mainly because of its anoraky image - usually keep notebooks to record what they see, so I ask Leigh if he has any records of his formative forays into the natural world. "Sadly, I'm not a great list-keeper. But I wish I had been, because I vividly remember cycling along in the early morning, on what were then quiet roads, with grey partridges running along by the dozen and corn buntings singing along the roadside for miles and miles. Now, there are hardly any of these left. It would be really interesting to look back and compare."

Leigh's obvious enthusiasm for nature was interrupted by the distractions of his teenage years. "I was 16 in 1976, so it was the Sex Pistols and all that. It was very nearly the final nail in the coffin of my interest in birds! Suddenly there was music and girls and a whole big adrenaline rush of going to gigs in London and Brighton. There was a period between about '76 and '81, when I finished university when I didn't really do anything related to wildlife and I sort of regret that."

But teacher training reminded him of his childhood interests, and how much inspiration he got from the natural world. This put him back on the path to a career in conservation. His first jobs didn't involve birds at all, but mainly plant and insect surveying which took him all over England, and gave him the opportunity to gain experience of a wide range of habitats as well as building experience of ecological issues.

Some 13 years ago, he took a job as assistant conservation officer for the South West region of the RSPB, at a time when the regional office consisted of just two people (there are now around 30 working there). Since then, he has worked on some of the charity's most notable achievements, including restoring the curlew population from just 118 pairs in 1989 to around 700 pairs today.

"When I started, there had been a lot of research on curlews to highlight why they were declining, and the RSPB was thinking what to do about it. I thought we should have a project officer to advise farmers and landowners in making use of government grants to provide suitable conditions for birds."

The curlew project has gone on to be one of the best examples of a species recovery project and of enabling farmers to use "agri-environment" scheme money to deliver what birds need. "It is one of the



things that I am most proud to be a part of,' says Leigh.

And then there's the return of the chough to Cornwall. Leigh was involved in many years' work to get appropriate land management for the chough in the South West, with the hope that one day they would return and benefit from what had been done in their absence. In 2001 they did just that. "I was so excited. I was there at dawn, rushing around Lizard Point and I saw the birds and heard them and it was an amazing moment," says Leigh, describing the event as a "major ornithological milestone".

Five years on, the Cornish choughs continue to breed successfully, but Leigh says there are always more challenges to come - which is what he loves about his job. "Although I deal with the sort of thing that any other manager deals with, like money and budgets and people, the job changes all the time - it's very dynamic. I'm as excited about it all now as I was when I first began."

Bird of the month: The Herring Gull

Much-loved part of seaside life or annoying villain, people either love or loathe seagulls. Yet few may know that the herring gull (the 'seagull' most people encounter) is actually in trouble. The last 30 years have seen numbers fall by 40 per cent, a decline probably caused by the amount of food available in their natural habitat.

Gulls are adept scavengers, which is why their numbers have increased in urban areas, driven by the growing mountains of rubbish and waste food produced by humans. Our expanding towns also provide ample nesting sites away from their traditional coastal breeding grounds.

Take a closer look at herring gulls. Adults have striking yellow eyes and powerful yellow bills, with a red spot on the lower tip (young gulls peck this spot to make their parents regurgitate food!). But don't feed gulls - they can lose their fear of humans and grab food from unsuspecting people.

Photo: Mark Hamblin
rspb-images.com



AREN'T BIRDS BRILLIANT! SEABIRDS AT BERRY HEAD

Open most days. 10am - 5pm. Home to one of the South of England's largest guillemot colonies, Berry Head in South Devon is a magnet for wildlife. Breeding fulmars and kittiwakes share the ledges of the 200ft limestone sheer cliff faces with over a thousand breeding guillemots. Free watchpoint not staffed every day. For full details contact the RSPB, 01392 432691. Car parking charges apply.

SATURDAY JULY 1 - BERRY HEAD - BRIXHAM WALK

10 am - 12.30pm. Meet at pay and display visitor centre car park (SX 943566) to see breeding auks and summer migrants. Contact Eileen Willey, leader, Plymouth Local Group, 01752 208996.

MONDAY JULY 10 - NIGHTJAR WALK

9.30pm. Come and join RSPB staff on an evening foray to listen to and possibly see one of the heath's most charismatic birds. Meet at Joney's Cross car park, off A3052 Exeter to Sidmouth road (SY 058897). Booking essential. Contact the RSPB, 01392 432691

THURSDAY JULY 13 - SINGING THEIR PRAISES

7.30pm. Concert celebrating the world of birds at Paignton Zoo. Throughout the centuries, birds have inspired poets and composers so join Tony Whitehead from the RSPB, Exeter poet Cathie Hartigan and vocalists Nota Bene, for an evening of music, visual art and talks celebrating the world of birds. Tickets £12. Contact Paignton Zoo, 01803 697500. This project is supported by Exeter Arts Council.