

Puffins Galore

The Blyth Valley and Southwold branch of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust were happy to be back with “live” meetings after such a long time away.

Our first talk was entitled “Puffins Galore”, presented by Simon Hooten. Simon has been visiting the island of Skokholm, off the coast of Pembrokeshire, since he was a schoolboy, and he gave a lively account of these characterful birds. It is a small island with a long history of rabbit and general farming, but today is owned by the Wildlife Trust, and is a bird and wildlife observatory.

The surface of the island is fragile, with so many burrows, and so visitors are restricted to marked footpaths, but with so few people allowed – a maximum of 26 – there is plenty of space to enjoy the birds in close proximity.

The Puffins arrive in late March, lay one egg in May that hatches in 2-3 weeks, and the young Puffling is fed by both parents in turn. When the chick is large enough to be independent, the parents abandon it in the burrow, and hunger brings it out to face the world and fend for itself. Gulls are serious predators, and the young birds need to keep their wits about them. As well as breeding birds, bad weather brings younger puffins onto the island in huge numbers, and throughout the summer season puffins can be observed at very close quarters.

As well as Puffins, Skokholm’s cliff edges attract huge numbers of Razorbills and Guillemots. At night, Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters arrive. The latter are clumsy on land, and will only approach the island on the darkest of nights to avoid predation. They breed successfully, and Manx numbers on the island have risen to an astonishing forty-six thousand.

As summer ends, the Puffins and other avian visitors prepare to leave on their long voyages across the seas, and the island is left to the peace and quiet of the small resident wildlife populations.

It was an entertaining evening that we all enjoyed.

Our next meeting is at 7.30pm, Thursday, October 14th, back at the **Southwold Arts Centre, Cumberland Road, Southwold, IP18 6JP**. Alice Wickman, from the SWT, will be bringing us up to date on the River Blyth Project. The cost is £3, to include refreshment, children are free, and all are welcome.

Penny Mansfield

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