

PACE Field Trip 3rd June 2025 – Turtle Doves at Wrabness Nature Reserve

Shirley Sampson from the RSPB's Operation Turtle Dove welcomed 30 of us at the entrance to Essex Wildlife Trust's nature reserve at Wrabness, on a cool and breezy evening. We were also joined by David Robinson, the reserve warden.

Shirley began with an introduction to Turtle Doves, their biology, the reasons for their rapid decline almost to extinction, and the actions that are being taken to assist their recovery. Before we started our walk, Shirley played us a recording of the purring call of the Turtle Dove, to help us recognise it if we were lucky enough to hear any.

As we walked, trying not to be too noisy, we had several stops where Shirley and David told us more about Turtle Dove conservation, and answered our questions. We are fortunate to have some sites in Essex where they are now returning to breed again, but they are still in serious need of support, and the conservation work being done by the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and other organisations, is focussed on providing improved breeding and feeding habitats. This is not only on the nature reserves, it also involves encouraging other landowners to do their bit by providing the scrubby habitat, and water, and the plants whose small seeds form the doves' diet:- cereal grains and oilseed rape, as well as wildflowers ('weeds') such as chickweed, clovers, scarlet pimpernel and fumitory. They are also given a supplementary seed mix as feed.

The other main issue endangering Turtle Doves is the hunting that occurs on their migratory route in southwest Europe.

We were all straining our ears to hear the distinctive purring, but sadly only some of the group heard a few very faint calls. The cool windy conditions were not ideal for hearing them, and also the numbers of birds heard at the reserve this year has been lower than last year, and breeding pairs down from four to possibly even none this year.

On the bright side, it was a beautiful spot, and there was plenty of other bird life to enhance our walk. A remarkable number of sand martins (from their cliff beside the estuary) and swallows were swooping above us - evidence that there must have been plentiful flying insects. And the loud burst of song of a Cetti's warbler was heard from a patch of scrub.

Before we left, Shirley mentioned that there will be volunteering opportunities for practical conservation work later in the year. We will publicise these in our Newsletter. And please send information of any sightings (or hearings) of Turtle doves to Shirley.Sampson@rspb.org.uk

We are very grateful to Shirley Sampson, the RSPB and Essex Wildlife Trust for giving us this opportunity and to David Robinson & the volunteers for their ongoing work on the reserve.