

Southern 50 Challenge Hike

11th February 2006

Red kites in flight – Walkers' delight

This year's Southern 50 Challenge Hike celebrated its 27th consecutive appearance and turned out to be a soaring success. Over 70 teams (20 up from last year) from 12 counties across the UK assembled at a new venue. Icknield Community College provided us with a fine base in Watlington in Oxfordshire, a village nestling just north of the Chiltern Hills. This area is known for its red kites, a rare species of birds of prey, which have been successfully introduced into this part of the world. These magnificently graceful creatures became a running theme throughout the weekend, and they had a bird's eye view over the teams of four who were testing their skills in navigation, determination, teamwork and endurance.

As usual, Greater London North (GLN) managed the event. The rules gave walkers a free range of either a 50 mile or a 50 km course whilst Explorer Scouts had an optional 30 km course to tackle. These distances are, of course, as the crow flies.

All walkers had to be up with the lark on the Saturday morning setting off at two minute intervals from 0600 hrs onwards. Everybody had to finish within 24 hours, otherwise their goose would be cooked. This year, conditions were cold and still, although the course was extremely tough – certainly not for the faint hearted or chickens.

The main event, the 50 mile hike, was surprisingly won by a team of rookies – Leaders from Amersham and Chesham in Bucks who flew round in 13 hours 28 minutes. They established a swift lead and held off a late challenge from the GLN mountaineering team who arrived home puffin and blowing just 14 minutes later. Third position was nailed by The Halstead Undertakers, made up of Leaders from that part of Essex. Only half the number of individual starters completed the 50 mile event, giving an indication of how much pride that was needed to swallow.

The 50 km event saw a GLN team named "The Phoenix Flyers" swoop to finish on 9-45. They were 38 minutes in front of a flock of Leaders from Essex who kept crowing about their team name "Show us the way to Amarillo". Third place saw a GLN team called "CLVU Return Again" finish in 10-38 just three minutes in front of Devon based 1st Plympton.

The 30 km event for Explorer Scouts was won by the aptly named "Init 2 Winit" team from Essex. They were a collection of a 15 year old, a 16 year old and two 17 year olds from Castle Hedingham and Steeple Bumstead. They kept in formation to clock 7-38, nearly half an hour in front of the 20th Torbay "Raiders from the West" who were strutting their stuff for Devon. They finished 16 minutes in front of a Croxley Green based Explorer team called "Southern Cross" from Hertfordshire.

The event would never have been possible without the help of over 100 volunteers who love the Southern 50 as much as the walkers themselves. They return each year like homing pigeons. These included chirpy checkpoint staff, caterers who enabled everybody to gobble food all weekend and minibus drivers who were waiting like vultures ready to pounce on any retired walker.

During the Sunday morning presentation, the eagle eyed CC Steve Taylor reminded the ensemble that they had enjoyed a cracking weekend. Most said they would be back again next year on 10th February 2007. But they must have been raven lunatics.

Chris Foster
Southern 50 Committee