



TOUR REPORT
FOREST OF DEAN & SOMERSET LEVELS
8TH – 12TH MARCH 2024



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8th MARCH 2023

Unlike last year the drive across county from Great Ryburgh to Newport was smooth and largely trouble free. I even had company this time with Marilyn on board. Red Kites were seen in amazing numbers as we headed west and while going through the western Fens we saw a herd of Whooper Swans and six Cranes including two that glided low over the van in glorious sunlight!

Most of the party we picked up at Newport station and we met the remaining two at Speech House in the Forest of Dean and before too long we were all back out in the field and walking up the track to New Fancy View in the slim hope of a late afternoon Goshawk. It was cool and breezy and we did not see one but the local Ravens put on a show with tumbles and rolls but were strangely silent.

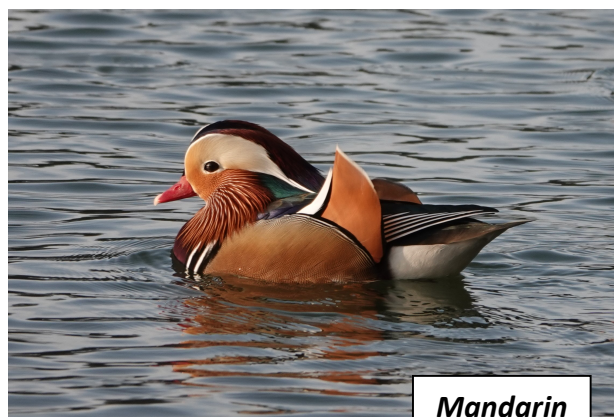
A couple of Buzzards were up and about and Siskins buzzed past us in bouncy dabs of green and yellow.

A Common Crossbill called as it came to in to land behind us and even began singing but soon dropped into the pines and was lost. The pesky sun was also in our eyes and three more calling birds back near the van similarly eluded us. As expected there was ample evidence of Wild Boar in the verges.



We looped around to Cannop Ponds and immediately stumbled onto a female Brambling down on the feeding station boulders where she was consorting with a few Chaffinches which was an unexpected bonus. The regular Tits were coming down including Coal and dapper Marsh Tits and several Siskins were hogging the niger feeder.

There were 28 gaudy Mandarins paddling around with sails up and colours gleaming despite the lateness of the day and a pair of Grey Wagtails were commuting to and from the slipway and stream.



We ambled along the lake edge listening to the evening chorus warming up with Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and Robins while Dunnocks and the odd Chaffinch and Tit joined in. A pair of Treecreepers played chase around a mossy oak and a small party of Redwings were calling softly in the canopy. Not long now till they start to move off.

We had driven past verges covered in blooming Celandines and Daffodils but there was not one flower around the lakeside and only the Wood

Spurge was attempting get things started. We retraced our steps and got better Wagtail views with Pied now joining the Greys along with pointy two Nuthatches. Marilyn pointed out a raptor overhead and although going away from us it was clearly a male Goshawk. Hopefully we shall get a better chance tomorrow morning.

9th MARCH 2023

It was a grim, grey morning and very chilly too but a hearty breakfast got the crew ready for FoD action. By 9am we were down at the Yew circle in Parkend and within about two minutes a male Hawfinch called and flew in to the top of the tallest Limes. Thankfully he stayed long enough to get everyone onto it. It always amazes me how loud the call is. We stood and watched the Yews but only noticed that two more were down with Greenfinches and Chaffinches a second before they flew up. The Chaffs reappeared by the Haws did not.

Mistle Thrushes sang and rattled and Nuthatches were especially noisy with both songs and calls heard. We walked down the road to the sound of fizzing Siskin song and followed the stream behind the Fountain Inn in search of Dippers. Grey Wagtails followed us down the stream and there were rocks clearly used by our bobbing friends but there was no sign.

Mistle Thrushes were here too and defending the Ivy berries from the Wood Pigeons while at our feet the first Celandines and Wood Anemones were starting to show. A random wander an extra fifty yards downstream suddenly saw us with a Dipper whizzing back the way we had come low to the water and 'chinking' madly.

Retracing our steps I was pleased to discover it up by the pub in almost the same spot as last year and even more pleased to discover that it was the same colour ringed bird although no one knew who had rung it when I asked last time round.



We watched it for ages before moving back towards the van but no before some walls attracted our attention with spreads of impressive *Peltigara* lichens in between the mosses, Maidenhair Spleenwort and Wall Rue along with a *Psycoidea* moth larva in the sporangium under the leaf of a Hard Fern.



It felt like Goshawk time so we headed back up to New Fancy View and were treated to a party of at least five quietly calling Bullfinches feeding on Hawthorn buds as we walked up. Two Crossbills flew over as we reached the top and a single female later posed briefly for us.

It was quite calm and had warmed up a bit and by 11am the first Buzzards were up and engaging in some soaring and a little display. Suddenly Wood Pigeons erupted from the trees below and as I had hoped a male Goshawk powered up above us before plunging back out of view. Close but still not a prolonged view. A while later a big female appeared in the distance and although she did not come any closer she was on view for some time and the scopes were deployed to good effect as she cruised the tree line. A male briefly popped up to say hello and two Sparrowhawks were also seen along with the expected Ravens while a pair of Peregrines was a bonus. The male was quite close and shone silver.

Steve Young had met us at the top and offered to give us a shot at seeing Wild Boar so we followed him not too far down the road and quietly climbed into the woods to where he had been seeing them. Amazingly they were still there and with a bit of patience we got very good views of two sows and some scurrying stripy ginger piglets although the mums were keeping them in amongst the Bracken and Blackthorn for the most part.

They knew we were there but we were content that we were far enough away and posed no threat. The fact that nine of us managed to sneak up on them in the first place was amazing and I commended every one for their stealth.

A third sow appeared behind us and then melted away and Bullfinches called and even plaintively sung from the scrub.



On to lunch at the Dean Heritage Centre where a Dipper zipped through and Mandarin's frolicked while Moorhen was a trip list addition before looping back to Nags Head for a peaceful walk in the woods.



They were quieter than hoped and I could not find Firecrest but Redwings and Song Thrushes showed well and there were a lot of Blackbirds on the Ivy too while we added more Treecreepers to the heaps we had seen during the day along with Nuthatch and quite probably the same pair of Peregrines that we saw from NFV. A vigorously calling Goshawk was in exactly the same spot as the one this time last year.

The Lichens were as wondrous as ever and I must endeavour to learn more but it was too cool for most insects bar a few midges and a single Orange Underwing moth that came out of the Birches. With a few spots in the air we opted for a final look at the top end of Cannop Ponds where there were heaps more Mandarin's, a psychotic pair of Mute Swans, two Tufted Duck, two fluffy bummed Little Grebes and fine male Gadwall. The clouds were rolling in and getting lower so we called it a day and headed back for some down time before another sumptuous dinner at Speech House.

10th MARCH 2023

After a final fine breakfast at Speech House we packed up and made our way south to Steart WWT reserve on the Bristol Channel passing the Mandarin's on Cannop Pond for the day list and a couple of Roe Deer alongside the M5 on the way.

At Steart we had not even left the car park when a Tree Sparrow got up out of the vegetation by the road and flew around calling stridently. It landed out of view behind the works compound with the House Sparrows but we could not then refind it. Not quite what I was expecting.

Cetti's Warblers were in good song and Reed Buntings and Skylarks were giving it a good go despite the gloomy conditions. I showed the group the two common moth leaf mines on Bramble and inside the first Teasel I looked at was the grub of *Endothenia gentianaeana* (the one without the anal comb if you must know).

Avocets could be heard squabbling on the main lagoon along with grumbling Shelduck even before got there and soon the whole flock along with a mass of Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal were in the air as a Marsh Harrier and then a tatty Red Kite drifted through.

Two more Harriers were seen along with a couple of Buzzard as well as singles of Redshank, Dunlin and Lapwing. Wader numbers and variety were disappointing but three sieving immature Spoonbills were soon found and it was good to see them all in action.



Spoonbills

A distant Goose resolved itself into a Bar-headed and Raven and Rooks were noted while the flooded weedy field alongside failed to yield any Water Pipits although there was a flock of Linnets and some Pied Wagtails and Reed Buntings and a male Pheasant sought sanctuary up the top of Hawthorn while a Fox patrolled beneath.

A Chiffchaff was half-heartedly singing in the bushes but remained hidden and as we approached the next hide the first of several Water Pipits got up and flew over calling and try as we might we could not find one on the deck. We settled in to overlook the tidal marsh and within just a few minutes a full adult male was picked up quartering the distant margins. He gleamed silver and white in the low light and we followed him for several minutes until he dipped behind the hedge and out of sight. Carol then picked up a Short-eared Owl the had a quick fly round before dropping back down never to reappear!



***Endothenia gentianaeana* in Teasel**

Two Ravens stopped on the closest pylon – the male being noticeably bigger than his partner and with a few spots in the air was strolled back for lunch seeing a fine clump of Marsh Marigold and finding several Cigar Galls in the Phragmites. Lunch à la car-park and then down the road to have a look at the inevitably expansive tidal flats of the Bristol Channel with Dunlin, Curlew, Redshank and odd stalking Grey Plover but the birds were far away and the light grim.

A pair of Stonechats posed nicely for the crew and Cetti's Warbler shouted but remained invisible while Reed Buntings flicked white tail sides. Skylarks were squabbling over the intertidal saltmarsh area and a flock of Meadow Pipits moved over the road and sat swaying on the barb wire fence.

We cut our losses and headed back inland to the Somerset Levels and parked up at Ham Wall before walking down to Shapwick, as far as Noah Lake. A stridently calling Firecrest was a great start although it went silent as soon as we got close enough to actually look for it which was frustrating but we found some glowing Scarlet Elf Cups in the process which was cool.

Great White Egrets became our constant companions on the walk down and back with perhaps a dozen being seen. Almost all that were seen well were sporting the black bills of breeding plumage and it always surprises me just how this makes the bill actually look smaller and slimmer than the orange winter version. Several nesting platforms could be seen and the pranced around and postured with necks out in exaggerated flight. I love the fact that they are now an integral part of the birding day.



Three different Bitterns were heard booming although none were especially close while numerous Water Rails squealed and kipped and noisy Kingfishers played chase just out of sight through the wet woodland although we did eventually get a couple of brief fly by views. Redwings and Jays were in the woods and from the hide there was once again huge raft of Wigeon and Pintail. The latter were looking especially fine and the males had all acquired a rich apricot flush to their breast. There were only a few Tufted Ducks and once again Ring-necked Ducks proved elusive for me. Perhaps we shall visit Decoy Lake tomorrow.

A female Marsh Harrier was pushing the duck around and with time pushing on we too felt the need to start walking back. There were Pochard and Great Crested Grebes with the Wigeon and Gadwall on the main pool but still no Bitterns emerged to finish off the visit and it was left to a super glowy pink male Bullfinch in the flowering Blackthorn to welcome us back to the van.

It was time to head to The Swan in Wells and we went via the undulating Westhay Moor road. The fields had dried out somewhat from January and there were about 30 Little and seven Great White Egrets in the fields but we could not find one Cattle Egret where 450 had been present two months ago! Let's see what tomorrow holds.

11th MARCH 2023

It turned out to be an interesting night at The Swan with something triggering fare alarms across the town centre at about 1.30am. Thankfully it was calm and not cold outside for the enforced evacuation but no sooner were we all back inside than it went off once again but this did give the opportunity to hear a Tawny Owl! Sleep was a little hard to come by after this and I think we were all battling weariness today.

However we started on time and made our way down to a murky



Greylake where the water levels had dropped and the duck numbers decreased since January.

Unfortunately this had taken both the Baikal and Green Winged Teals with them but there were still many lovely Teal, Wigeon and Shoveler to scan through. Great White Egrets were liberally scattered across the marsh with eight visible at one stage and after brief views of one pair of flying Cranes we found another pair more content to go about their breakfast routine. Bugling was heard from both pairs while a single Lapwing tried its best to see off the various Marsh Harriers and Buzzards.

A Dunlin and several Snipe were with the duck and two Curlews included one that burst into full song transporting us back to heathery uplands. Carol saw another Kingfisher while a Bittern boomed and Water Rails were noisy but invisible all around us.

Cetti's Warblers were also quite shouty but unlike the Rails afforded us some stunning views as they foraged with a couple of Chiffchaffs in the Reedmace and Phragmites. Fieldfares and Redwings were feeding in a grassy field with some Starlings and a couple of Roe Deer were out on the marshes.

Our loop from here took us back through Westhay Moor where there were still heaps of Egrets in the flooded maize fields with at least 12 Great Whites and 30 or so Littles but still not one Cattle. A flock of Linnets performed close to the van and two Egyptian Geese were something of a surprise while a male Stonechat caught flies from a Willow.

Down the road a way we found where the Cattle Egrets had been 'hiding' with about 140 spread out around a flooded pasture and a herd of Red Poll cattle. Many were starting to sport some colour on the back and crown with the odd one with some pinky in the bill. Relieved to have discovered them we made our way to the Avalon Centre for a coffee and lunch with Grey Wagtails, Buzzards, Sparrowhawk and Fieldfares for company before starting out on the walk into Decoy Lake which took us along the Sweet Track (the Neolithic pathway constructed in 3807 BC). It is a true step back in time and was once again home to some stunning mosses, fungi and mighty Birches.



Cattle Egrets

There were a few small birds with Goldcrest, Siskins, Tits and Treecreeper but it was a bouncy performance from a gleaming Firecrest that brought the smiles.

Just before the hide the first Bittern was heard along with some croaking Common Frogs and then I picked up a pair of Ring-necked Ducks drifting across the view. We all had a quick look from the track and then headed to the hide for unimpeded views of this smart trans-Atlantic duo. The light was actually good and even the bronzy neck ring could be seen on the drake although we all agreed that Ring-billed Duck would be much better.



Ring-necked Ducks

Two other females were soon found a little closer to us as they actively fed with some Tufted Ducks – four RNDs on the same lake! Great White Egrets were moving to and from their platform nests and a second Bittern boomed while Great Crested Grebes were seen in pairs across the lake. Pleased with our ducky success we retraced our steps finding three Roe Deer back up near the main path as well as a single *Eristalis pertinax* Hoverfly basking in the path.

Ham Wall was the final stop for the day and we spent a content and relaxed 90 minutes down at the main view point having seen about 70 more Cattle Egrets with a large gull flock in some distant pasture. Bittern was our quarry but although two frequently boomed we never did see one but were equally content with the numerous Great White and Marsh Harrier fly-bys, two Grey Herons brooding on reedbed nests, more stropky Water Rails and some very obliging Robins, Chaffinches, Blue and Great Tits that came down for some crumbs we put out.



The temperature had started to drop and we sauntered back listening to the ummmm bahhs of the Bitterns and watching a full breeding garb Great White Egret wiggle his toes in an effort to disturb his fishy supper.

12th MARCH 2023

It was a very wet start to the day but some of the crew still managed a quick look around Wells Cathedral before breakfast. Greylake was a only destination for the day – short walk and shelter from the rain. We even got lucky and it let up enough for us to get under cover before the next deluge happened.



No Cranes were seen this time and there were fewer Great White Egrets but the single Lapwing had become at least ten displaying birds and the Marsh Harriers and Buzzards were getting extra grief! It felt like there were fewer duck than yesterday but they shifted around when a Harrier spooked them and revealed the mass of Teal and Wigeon we had seen previously.

I raised my bins and there was the drake Baikal Teal! Momentary panic and then a frantic twenty seconds to get it in the scope and at a height that everyone could see it while giving directions. The hide is not exactly people of scope friendly. It swam just two feet to the right and I lost it before anyone else saw it. The area it chose was completely obscured and despite several shifts in the duck flock, that area remained stubbornly immobile for the remaining two hours that we all stared and

searched for this most gaudy of ducks. He had not been seen for two weeks and I was elated to re-find him but gutted for the group who thankfully were simply pleased that I had seen it. Bless them - they said I should put in the trip report but it is not in the final tally.

The Curlews were singing from several spots now and Snipe were engaging in sword play on the freshly wettened mud along with the same single Dunlin while a female Kestrel was the last new trip bird but with our time up we walked back to the van in an appropriately timed cessation in the rain and packed up for the last bit of the holiday to drop people off at Bristol Parkway after a very successful and enjoyable few days away.



Bird

List:

- 1 Mute Swan
- 2 Greylag Goose
- 3 Canada Goose
- 4 Egyptian Goose
- 5 Shelduck
- 6 Mandarin
- 7 Mallard
- 8 Gadwall
- 9 Pintail
- 10 Shoveler
- 11 Wigeon
- 12 Teal
- 13 Pochard
- 14 Ring-necked Duck
- 15 Tufted Duck
- 16 Pochard
- 17 Great Crested Grebe
- 18 Little Grebe
- 19 Cormorant
- 20 Bittern
- 21 Cattle Egret
- 22 Little Egret
- 23 Great White Egret
- 24 Grey Heron
- 25 Spoonbill
- 26 Red Kite
- 27 Marsh Harrier
- 28 Hen Harrier
- 29 Buzzard

30	Sparrowhawk
31	Goshawk
32	Kestrel
33	Peregrine
34	Water Rail
35	Moorhen
36	Coot
37	Common Crane
38	Oystercatcher
39	Avocet
40	Grey Plover
41	Lapwing
42	Dunlin
43	Redshank
44	Curlew
45	Snipe
46	Black-headed Gull
47	Common Gull
48	Herring Gull
49	Lesser Black-backed Gull
50	Great Black-backed Gull
51	Feral Pigeon
52	Stock Dove
53	Wood Pigeon
54	Collared Dove
55	Tawny Owl
56	Short-eared Owl
57	Kingfisher
58	Green Woodpecker
59	Great Spotted Woodpecker
60	Skylark
61	Water Pipit
62	Meadow Pipit
63	Pied Wagtail
64	Grey Wagtail
65	Dipper
66	Wren
67	Dunnock
68	Robin
69	Stonechat
70	Song Thrush
71	Redwing
72	Mistle Thrush
73	Blackbird
74	Fieldfare
75	Common Chiffchaff
76	Cetti's Warbler

77	Goldcrest
78	Firecrest
79	Great Tit
80	Blue Tit
81	Coal Tit
82	Marsh Tit
83	Long-tailed Tit
84	Nuthatch
85	Treecreeper
86	Magpie
87	Jackdaw
88	Rook
89	Carrion Crow
90	Raven
91	Jay
92	Starling
93	House Sparrow
94	Tree Sparrow
95	Goldfinch
96	Crossbill
97	Brambling
98	Chaffinch
99	Linnet
100	Greenfinch
101	Siskin
102	Bullfinch
103	Hawfinch
104	Reed Bunting

Howard Vaughan