

THE SOMERSET LEVELS
& FOREST OF DEAN
MAY 16TH – 20TH 2016



ORIOLE BIRDING
TOUR REPORT

TOUR LEADER

Paul Roberts

PARTICIPANTS

John Boulcott

Sary Davies

Angela Mackersie

Graham & Mary Sparkes

Lawrence & Rosemary Threadgold

16TH MAY 2016

Mainly sunny, with a light westerly breeze.

Shortly after our 13:00 check in at The Speech House Hotel - situated right in the heart of the Forest of Dean - we drove the short distance south to New Fancy View. Here a panoramic viewpoint over the forest has been created atop the spoil of an old mine. We were soon enjoying the first of numerous Common Buzzards, plus the odd Common Raven or two.

However, our main quarry here was Northern Goshawk and after about an hour a male rose up from the forest, subsequently giving prolonged views as it circled over its territory, with a little display thrown in for good measure. Birds noted in the vicinity of the watch point included Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff, Blackbird, Song Thrush, European Robin, Dunnock, Long-tailed Tit and Coal Tit, while Eurasian Siskin called frequently nearby. Further scanning produced smattering of Barn Swallows and House Martins.

Following this successful start to the tour, we took the short drive to Cannop Ponds - two large ponds created in 1925 to supply water to Parkend Ironworks, and now known for their healthy population of Mandarin Ducks. Sure enough, we soon located a male, with more seen shortly after - around ten in total. Other water birds here included Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Mallard, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Common Coot and Common Moorhen.

Common Swifts circled, our first Pied Wagtail appeared and a Common Nuthatch was utilising a feeding station. While walking down the lower lake our attention was drawn to a Pied Flycatcher singing from a waterside oak, looking rather dapper in the afternoon sun. At the far end of the lake we located several Grey Wagtails, a Common Kingfisher carrying a small fish and various birds at the feeders by the stone works, notably a Eurasian Siskin, with Common Treecreeper also seen nearby. Our first Song Thrush was heard, several Common Chiffchaffs were noted and another Garden Warbler was in full song. With just enough time for a short stop elsewhere before returning to the hotel for dinner and decided to call in at Woorgreens Lake. The lake itself held Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Greylag Goose, Mallard and Tufted Duck. A Common Cuckoo was heard distantly from across the lake and several Willow Warblers sang. A Spotted Flycatcher was seen briefly high in the canopy between the car park and the lake, with Common Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Blue Tit and Great Tit also observed. Back at base [and noting House Sparrows, Greenfinch and House Martins at the hotel], we decided to make a post-dinner sunset excursion to Crabtree Hill. Here an area of fairly recent clear felling in the forest has created heath-like conditions. Several roding Eurasian Woodcock flew over giving good views, but we were unable to locate any European Nightjars, despite seemingly ideal conditions. A Common Stonechat sang as dusk fell and we headed back to the vehicle by torchlight, to end an enjoyable first day in the ancient forest.

17TH MAY 2016

Sunny start, with more cloud by the afternoon.

After breakfast our first destination was to be the oak woodland at RSPB Nagshead, close to the village of Parkend. A visit to the Campbell Hide brought us a Spotted Flycatcher on the approach, with Common Treecreeper and Common Nuthatch coming to the drinking pool.

A singing Pied Flycatcher was present at the start of the short trail, but none were seen well elsewhere on the reserve, perhaps because the wood's population were at the laying stage and

retiring in behaviour as a consequence. Great Spotted Woodpecker and Marsh Tit were also recorded nearby. The area around the lower hide was rather quiet, with Spotted Flycatcher and Common Redstart [heard only] the only species of note. Following a short stop for coffee at the hotel we visited an area predominantly of conifers and clear fell. On emerging into the clear fell area, several singing Tree Pipits were heard and we soon had some excellent views of their exuberant parachuting display flights. A few Lesser Redpolls 'trilled' overhead, with Eurasian Siskins ever present. Following our packed lunch we located a singing 'crest' in a Norway Spruce. This turned out to be a Firecrest - of which a small number breed in the forest - with two of these beauties subsequently seen by the group. Here we had a tip off regarding a singing Wood Warbler, reported just to the west of Cannop Stone works. The information we received was spot on, with fabulous views of an exuberant singer obtained soon after we arrived. This would prove to be the only one of the trip; seemingly most of the males located recently elsewhere in the forest had been merely transitory. Symonds Yat Rock was our next destination, where a viewpoint overlooks a spectacular gorge, through which the River Wye snakes. This is a traditional breeding location for Peregrine and we soon located a male perched at the nest hole, once partaking of a short flight, before alighting on a nearby ledge. Bizarrely a Canada Goose was incubating a nest in a cave on the same crags as the Peregrines and one can only guess at how the young would survive their plunge earthwards from this considerable height. Further sightings here included Stock Dove, Great Cormorant, Common Pheasant, Common Swift, Western Jackdaw and Common Raven.

18TH MAY 2016

Overnight rain giving way to scattered heavy showers, with an increasing breeze.

Today we were to transfer to the Meare Manor, our base in the Somerset Levels, via Goldcliff Lagoons, a part of RSPB Newport Wetlands, situated on the Gwent Levels. Leaving the Speech House after breakfast we headed for Monmouth and then took the A449 south towards Newport. On arriving Goldcliff, where a series of shallow scrapes are overlooked by a number of hides, we were greeted by the explosive song of Cetti's Warbler, with a Reed Warbler singing from a nearby reed [as the ditches here are called]. Once seated in the first hide we were soon enjoying the antics of the breeding Pied Avocets, with around forty present, Common Redshanks, Northern Lapwing and Eurasian Oystercatcher, with good numbers of downy chicks of each species present. A pair of Little Ringed Plovers was seen when changing over on nest-sitting duties, although the nest itself was obscured by vegetation. Further waders comprised several Ringed Plover, three Common Greenshanks, two Ruffs and a couple of small flocks of Dunlins. Common Shelducks were much in evidence, with Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, a drake Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck and a few Greylag Geese adding to the wildfowl species present. Intruding Common Buzzards and gulls were seen off with a great commotion by the breeding waders, notably the Pied Avocets. Our first Reed Buntings and Sky Larks of the trip were added. A heavy and fairly prolonged shower was dodged by taking refuge in a hide, before we called in at the visitor centre a short distance away [noting Little Grebe on the pool by the cafe and Greenfinches on the feeders], prior to an uneventful journey onward to Somerset. Prior to our check in we were able to squeeze in a brief stop at Westhay Moor NNR. Walking as far as the first hide we enjoyed several Eurasian Hobbies, an uncharacteristically showy Cetti's Warbler, Little Egret and a gathering of ten Common Buzzards attending a tractor in a nearby field. Once checked in at the hotel, we were keen to get out in the field for a couple of hours before dinner. We first headed west towards Shapwick Heath, where new birds were quickly added - Great Crested Grebe, Grey Heron, drake Garganey, Common Pochard, Marsh Harrier, Black-tailed Godwit [30], Common Sandpiper and Common Whitethroat. We once again dodged a shower, this time using the impressive new Shapwick Tower Hide, where we were able to admire Marsh Harriers at their business. Several Eurasian Hobbies hawked insects among an impressive gathering of Common Swifts - perhaps a few hundred in total. A Great Bittern boomed nearby, but remained unseen and a few Little Egrets were also present. Two Ruffs arrived at the scrape, two Stock Doves flew by and Great Cormorants passed over frequently. We called in at the hide overlooking Noah's Lake, but the evening sun and a

rapidly strengthening wind meant viewing conditions were difficult. With a distant Common Cuckoo heard and the repeated 'booming' of the Great Bittern, we headed back to the vehicle after a great introduction to the magic of the Levels.

19TH MAY 2016

Bright in the morning, cloudier and cooler in the afternoon.

Our first destination on our final full day was to visit Ham Wall, rapidly becoming a flagship reserve for the RSPB. Two Great White Egrets were seen as soon as we left the vehicle, up to twenty would be subsequently seen during the morning, with birds showing seemingly almost continually. Having only heard Great Bittern the previous day, we were hopeful of actually seeing them and we weren't to be disappointed - soon locating two in the reeds, both of which then gave a tremendous display in flight. This must surely be the best place in the UK to see this normally secretive species. Several Eurasian Hobbies hunted, with Marsh Harriers almost ever present, while a chorus of warblers sang from the waterside trees and bushes. A brief Barn Owl was seen by just one of the group. The first viewing platform brought yet more Marsh Harriers, egrets and various wildfowl, but best of all an incredibly close flypast by a Great Bittern, down to roughly fifteen metres. A little further on is the new Avalon Hide, another great spot to view Great Bittern [several seen and heard], Great White Egret and Marsh Harrier. The scrapes nearby held a Glossy Ibis, four drake Garganey, two Ruffs and twenty Black-tailed Godwits. Great Spotted Woodpeckers flew to and from the small wood here, with numerous Reed Warblers and Cetti's Warblers trackside. We walked as far as the bridge just beyond the second platform, returning along the track back to the car park after a memorable morning's birding. Next on to Greylake, an area of wet grazing meadows, just over the other side of the Polden Hills from Ham Wall, in the north-west corner of King's Sedgemoor. Here the RSPB have put in structures to keep the water levels high. From the car park the access route to the hides passes an area of reeds and ditches, before arriving at a couple of hides. Numerous Northern Lapwings were immediately obvious, especially when harrying any passing Marsh Harrier or Common Buzzard. A bright male Yellow Wagtail was noted repeatedly perching on a small willow, joined once by a Reed Bunting. Four Common Cranes flew in and commenced 'dancing' at each other and a couple of Great Bitterns were seen in flight. With rain threatening we chose to head for the coast at Bridgwater Bay, where WWT have been responsible for creating a new reserve at Steart Marshes, with a view to mitigating flood risk, while increasing biodiversity. Stood on the bank at the south of the reserve it was evident that large numbers of Common Shelducks were present, with smaller numbers of Little Egrets, Oystercatchers and Ringed Plovers. An immature Little Gull was a surprise, with a lone Whimbrel also added. Driving towards Steart Village, a Common Cuckoo flew across the road; the same bird was seen a little later perched on a fence post. A small flock of waders on the beach held Sanderlings, Dunlins and Ringed Plovers, while a Eurasian Curlew passed along the shore. Heading back to the hotel we had enough time for a short stop at Catcott Lows, an area of wet meadows managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust. A remarkable number of Greylag Geese with goslings were distributed, Northern Lapwings were everywhere and a Common Kestrel was the final addition of an excellent day in the field.

20TH MAY 2016

Mostly cloudy, with a light breeze.

With several hours birding possible on our final morning we first revisited Westhay. Great Bitterns and Water Rails were heard, and a Common Kingfisher zipped over the reeds, but the highlight was a group of three Bearded Tits, a female even perching up for us. We ended the tour at Shapwick Heath, where a displaying Eurasian Sparrowhawk was the final addition of the trip. We were able to enjoy a few last sightings of Eurasian Hobby and Marsh Harrier before heading back to the hotel to collect our bags, prior to our onward journeys home.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe

2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Shag
5. Grey Heron
6. Little Egret
7. Great White Egret
8. Great Bittern
9. Glossy Ibis
10. Mute Swan
11. Greylag Goose
12. Canada Goose
13. Mandarin Duck
14. Common Shelduck
15. Eurasian Wigeon
16. Garganey
17. Gadwall
18. Mallard
19. Northern Shoveler
20. Common Pochard
21. Tufted Duck
22. Marsh Harrier
23. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
24. Northern Goshawk
25. Common Buzzard
26. Eurasian Hobby
27. Common Kestrel
28. Peregrine
29. Common Pheasant
30. Common Crane
31. Water Rail
32. Common Coot
33. Common Moorhen
34. Pied Avocet
35. Eurasian Oystercatcher
36. Northern Lapwing
37. Little Ringed Plover
38. Ringed Plover
39. Eurasian Woodcock
40. Black-tailed Godwit
41. Eurasian Curlew
42. Whimbrel
43. Common Redshank
44. Common Greenshank
45. Common Sandpiper
46. Ruff
47. Sanderling
48. Dunlin
49. Little Gull
50. Herring Gull
51. Lesser Black-backed Gull
52. Rock (Feral) Dove
53. Stock Dove
54. Wood Pigeon
55. Collared Dove
56. Common Kingfisher

57. Common Cuckoo
58. Great Spotted Woodpecker
59. Sky Lark
60. Yellow Wagtail
61. Pied Wagtail
62. Grey Wagtail
63. Tree Pipit
64. Common Swift
65. Barn Swallow
66. House Martin
67. Northern Wren
68. Dunnock
69. European Robin
70. Blackbird
71. Song Thrush
72. Common Stonechat
73. Common Redstart
74. Pied Flycatcher
75. Spotted Flycatcher
76. Common Chiffchaff
77. Willow Warbler
78. Wood Warbler
79. Cetti's Warbler
80. Reed Warbler
81. Blackcap
82. Common Whitethroat
83. Garden Warbler
84. Goldcrest
85. Firecrest
86. Bearded Tit
87. Long-tailed Tit
88. Blue Tit
89. Great Tit
90. Coal Tit
91. Marsh Tit
92. Common Nuthatch
93. Common Treecreeper
94. Eurasian Jay
95. Black-billed Magpie
96. Eurasian Jackdaw
97. Carrion Crow
98. Rook
99. Common Raven
100. Common Starling
101. House Sparrow
102. Chaffinch
103. Greenfinch
104. Lesser Redpoll
105. Eurasian Siskin
106. Goldfinch
107. Reed Bunting