

THE FOREST OF DEAN & SOMERSET LEVELS



13TH – 17TH MARCH 2017

TOUR LEADER

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PARTICIPANTS

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13TH MARCH 2017

Everyone arrived on time and following a short break for lunch and check in, we were soon on the way to our first port of call at new Fancy View. With such good weather conditions, we decided to have a go at getting some raptors early in the tour, but we struggled despite the seemingly ideal conditions. Several Common Buzzards were noted including one or two in stops and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk gave excellent views on a couple of occasions as it drifted overhead, but the two Northern Goshawks that we did eventually find were both distant and in the air for only brief periods before dropping back into the forest. The one consolation was that at least everyone saw them. A few Common Ravens, Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Wood Pigeons were also noted as were small numbers of Goldfinches, Eurasian Siskins and Long-tailed Tits, while a Common Treecreeper and two male Bullfinches were in the car park as we left. Our next stop was Parkend Church, but other than a couple of Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, European Robins, Blue and Great Tits and a Common Nuthatch there was little to see so we moved to the village and the small area of woodland adjacent to the cricket pitch. A couple of Mistle Thrushes and a Pied Wagtail showed well on the newly mown grass, small groups of Western Jackdaws and Carrion Crows were perched in the tall trees, four Common Starlings, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and twenty eight Redwings flew overhead and a singing Coal Tit perched briefly before disappearing into the dense cover of a yew tree. A couple of Grey Squirrels and two Greylag Geese over the hotel as we returned rounded off a somewhat frustrating afternoon.

14TH MARCH 2017

A few of the group met at dawn for a walk in the forest at nearby Brierley, where we did manage to get some flight and brief perched views of a small group of Hawfinches, but we hope for better views at some point during the day as the light was poor and the birds very flighty. We also saw several Eurasian Siskins, Coal and Blue Tits, Wood Pigeons, Blackbirds, European Robins and Song Thrushes, a pair of Bullfinches and we also added our first Dunnocks before we headed back for breakfast. Four Greylags were flying over the hotel as we arrived. Our next stop this morning was Crabtree Hill, where we soon added a few Chaffinches, a pair of Mallards, a Common Treecreeper and our first Eurasian Jay of the tour. A cracking male Common Stonechat flew in and landed on a sapling but failed to gain the attention it deserved as at exactly the same time, a male Northern Goshawk began circling overhead and stayed in view for a couple of minutes allowing us much better views than we had yesterday, before it drifted off and out of sight. Shortly after, the wintering Great Grey Shrike appeared and we had fantastic scope filling views in much improved light; so much so that we could even see the hook on its bill. The Stonechat finally got a look in and was joined briefly by a female before we picked up the shrike again as it hovered over a area of clear fell before perching up to give further extended views. As we made our way back down the hill, we added a female Reed Bunting to the tour list. A short stop at Woorgreens Lake produced a few trip ticks in the form of a pair of Canada Goose and Mute Swans, ten Common Coot, three Common Moorhens, five Tufted Ducks and at least three Little Grebes. Following a brief comfort stop, we returned to Brierley but once again we frustratingly had only the briefest views of four Hawfinches in flight, but did enjoy a much more obliging Common Chiffchaff that flitted through the trackside vegetation singing occasionally, and a pair of common Nuthatches that flew overhead. We decided to take lunch at Parkend cricket pitch and finally we got our reward as a female Hawfinch was found feeding with a couple of Blackbirds and Chaffinches, and thankfully stayed in view long enough for everyone to get views of it through a scope before it disappeared into some Yew trees – huge relief all round!!

We decided to push our luck and this also paid off as we got brief but perfectly acceptable views of the first ever Dipper seen on this particular tour at the bridge and where we also saw House Sparrow and Stock and Collared Doves Our final stop for the day was Cannop Ponds and this rounded off a successful day as we had excellent views of a pair of Marsh Tits, at least thirty four Mandarin Ducks, most of which were males, and a Grey Wagtail which was also new for the tour. A couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and large numbers of Chaffinches and Great Tits were using the feeders and further Tufted Ducks, Greylag Geese, Mallards and Little Grebes were also on the lakes.

15TH MARCH 2017

A very atmospheric low mist hung over the forest this morning as we made our way to Yew Tree Brake for an hour before breakfast. A Greenfinch was perched up briefly opposite the hotel and three Goldcrests, five or so Lesser Redpolls and the first sighting of a Northern Wren were added to the trip list in what were quite chilly conditions. Following breakfast, we loaded the bus and headed south to the South Wales coast and the scrapes at Goldcliff Lagoons. The weather was better here and we enjoyed a couple of hours of excellent birding, adding several new species to the trip list. First up was a splendid Spotted Redshank that fed in a small pool just fifty metres from the hide, allowing us to enjoy the salient identification features side by side by the many Common Redshanks that were present. Remarkably, the first of three Common Greenshanks was also present in the same area giving us an unexpected *tringa* hat trick. Good numbers of Northern Lapwings were also on the large stony island where there were also a couple of European Oystercatchers and Ringed Plovers, and a lone Eurasian Curlew was roosting in the deeper water. A Little Egret flew overhead and we noted good numbers of Northern Shovelers, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal and Common Shelducks, as well as smaller numbers of Gadwall, Tufted Ducks and handsome Northern Pintails. A female Marsh Harrier came in from the west and began to quarter the pools sending many birds skywards including a flock of approximately fifty Pied Avocets, while the shorebirds dispersed widely but we eventually found the flock that we were looking for on a grassy bank and this contained around fifty Black-tailed godwits including two in beautiful brick red breeding plumage, approximately twenty five Dunlins, a roosting Common Snipe and a lone Red Knot that was anything but red in its grey winter dress. A Little Egret and a Grey Heron flew in and our first two Herring Gulls of the trip, a lone Black-headed Gull flying over was also new, as were a couple of distant Meadow Pipits and there were also several Mallards, Canada and Greylag Geese. It was time to move on and we crossed the Severn Crossing and stopped at Gordano services to take lunch and a comfort stop before continuing on towards the Somerset Levels noting a Common Kestrel and several Rooks en route. We spent an hour at Catcott Lows watching the large numbers of Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal and Northern Shoveler and there were also a few Northern Lapwings and Northern Pintails among them. Two Common Pheasants were on a grassy bank, as were two Roe Deer, at least three Grey herons and a Little Egret lurked among the sedges and a Great White Egret gave superb views as it stalked the water's edge. We also added Great Cormorant here. Following check in at our guest house, we spent the remainder of the afternoon at Ham Walls RSPB reserve in gloriously warm sunshine. A couple of Common Chiffchaffs and a male Blackcap as well as a Sand Martin perched on an overhead wire were signs that spring comes early here, while large numbers of Northern Shoveler, Tufted Ducks, Common Teal, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon were joined by Great Crested Grebes on the nest and several singing Cetti's Warblers. A couple of the group had a fly by Common Kingfisher and a flock of Common Pochards were also new for the tour. A Peregrine appeared from nowhere but was soon out of view again, a Great Spotted Woodpecker gave brief flight views and a Common Snipe was drumming. We were here principally for herons and we had superb views of five or more Great White Egrets both in flight and on the lagoons, a couple of Little Egrets, several Grey Herons and at least three Great Bitterns, one of which gave a prolonged fly past. The highlight though had to be firstly the one Glossy Ibis that we watched feeding in rank vegetation, which was later joined by a second bird that gave us a superb fly by at sunset before landing a nearby pool and feeding among the wildfowl. We also had a nice murmuration of Common Starlings, but in nowhere near the numbers the we often see here at this time of year and the day was rounded off by four Marsh Harriers going into roost as we enjoyed a magnificent sunset in this most idyllic of places.

16TH MARCH 2017

By the time we finished breakfast any lingering overnight fog had lifted and we headed off to Westhay where we spent the first part of the morning. It was a lot more overcast and cooler than yesterday and consequently finding birds was a bit trickier. We began well with good views of a Cetti's Warbler; the first of at least four seen and up to twenty heard during our visit. A male Marsh Harrier and a Little Egret flew overhead and the various lakes and ponds held the usual Tufted Ducks, Gadwall, Common Moorhens, Common Coots, Canada and Greylag Geese, Mute Swans, Mallards and Great Crested Grebes, and some of the group had a flash of blue as a Common Kingfisher shot past at a rate of knots. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk drifted overhead, up to ten reed Buntings and a few Long-tailed Tits flew near the Island Hide, but the prize here was the pair of Bearded Tits that gave excellent views as they hopped around the base of the reeds before eventually perching on the boardwalk and flying off. The entrance road held many Mute Swans and a few Grey Herons but not much else. A quick comfort stop at the guesthouse was followed by lunch at Shapwick Heath under increasingly threatening skies and lower temperatures. A couple of Common Chiffchaffs braved the elements to sing, a nice flock of around forty Goldfinches were feeding in the car park and further Long-tailed, Blue and Great Tits were also noted, as were a pair of Coal Tits later on. Two Great White Egrets flew overhead and both were later seen from the Tower Hide, where we had tremendous views of another Cetti's Warbler, as well as a male Marsh Harrier which interspersed short hunting flights with long periods perched in a small willow, allowing us to scope it up. A couple of calling Water Rails were also here and some of the group managed brief but good views as one bird finally broke cover only to run into even deeper vegetation and while they continued to call, neither bird was seen again. A couple of Common Buzzards circled overhead, while Noahs Hide produced a sizeable flock of Eurasian Wigeon; estimated in the log book at two thousand birds. Other species noted here included a female Marsh Harrier, Great Crested Grebes, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Great Cormorants, Northern Shovelers, Tufted Ducks and two Black-headed Gulls but not much else. The walk back to the car produced a few booming Great Bitterns but none were seen, though approximately forty Sand Martins and two early Barn Swallows overhead meant that we ended the afternoon with some migrants despite the by now pretty cold conditions.

17TH MARCH 2017

Our final morning and following breakfast and checkout, we headed to the relatively new reserve at Steart Marshes on what was a fairly pleasant morning. Despite the tide being out, there were large numbers of Common Shelducks present on the mudflats, where a sizeable roost of Common Redshanks were in a creek and approximately two hundred and fifty European Golden Plovers flew over and one or two European Oystercatchers, Common Teal and a Eurasian Curlew were also noted. Three Meadow Pipits, a male Common Stonechat and two Sky Larks were in a patch of weeds and the freshwater scrapes held a few Ringed Plovers, Northern Shovelers, ten Little Egrets, a pair of Northern Pintails, a few Black-headed, Herring, Lesser Black-backed and five Common Gulls and best of all a female Merlin that was perched up on the tyre of some farm machinery and which allowed us superb and prolonged views before it dropped out of sight. As we were leaving, two Brown Hares appeared in a stubble field and a female Common Kestrel hovered over the car park. It had been an immensely enjoyable few days with some great birds and a really nice group.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1/Little Grebe
- 2/Great Crested Grebe
- 3/Great Cormorant
- 4/Grey Heron
- 5/Little Egret
- 6/Great White Egret
- 7/Great Bittern
- 8/Glossy Ibis
- 9/Mute Swan
- 10/Greylag Goose
- 11/Canada Goose

12/Common Shelduck
13/Mandarin Duck
14/Eurasian Wigeon
15/Gadwall
16/Common Teal
17/Mallard
18/Northern Pintail
19/Northern Shoveler
20/Common Pochard
21/Tufted Duck
22/Marsh Harrier
23/Eurasian Sparrowhawk
24/Northern Goshawk
25/Common Buzzard
26/Common Kestrel
27/Peregrine
28/Merlin
29/Common Pheasant
30/Water Rail
31/Common Coot
32/Common Moorhen
33/European Oystercatcher
34/Pied Avocet
35/Northern Lapwing
36/European Golden Plover
37/Ringed Plover
38/Common Snipe
39/Black-tailed Godwit
40/Eurasian Curlew
41/Spotted Redshank
42/Common Redshank
43/Common Greenshank
44/Red Knot
45/Dunlin
46/Common Gull
47/Herring Gull
48/Lesser Black-backed Gull
49/Black-headed Gull
50/Stock Dove
51/Wood Pigeon
52/Collared Dove
53/Common Kingfisher
54/Great Spotted Woodpecker
55/Sky Lark
56/Pied Wagtail
57/Grey Wagtail
58/Meadow Pipit
59/Barn Swallow
60/Sand Martin
61/Northern Wren
62/Dipper
63/Dunnock
64/European Robin
65/Blackbird
66/Redwing

67/Mistle Thrush
68/Song Thrush
69/Common Stonechat
70/Common Chiffchaff
71/Cetti's Warbler
72/Blackcap
73/Goldcrest
74/Bearded Tit
75/Long-tailed Tit
76/Blue Tit
77/Great Tit
78/Coal Tit
79/Marsh Tit
80/Common Nuthatch
81/Common Treecreeper
82/Great Grey Shrike
83/Eurasian Jay
84/Eurasian Magpie
85/Western Jackdaw
86/Carrion Crow
87/Rook
88/Common Raven
89/Common Starling
90/House Sparrow
91/Chaffinch
92/Greenfinch
93/Lesser Redpoll
94/Eurasian Siskin
95/Goldfinch
96/Bullfinch
97/Hawfinch
98/Reed Bunting

OTHER WILDLIFE

Rabbit
Common Frog
Common Lizard
Roe Deer
Grey Squirrel
Brown Hare