

THE FOREST OF DEAN  
&  
SOMERSET LEVELS  
10<sup>TH</sup> – 14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2014



ORIOLE BIRDING

## TOUR LEADERS

Neil Donaghy & Ashley Saunders

## TOUR PARTICIPANTS

John & Claire Benson  
Brenda Campbell  
David & Annie Erdman  
Pat Flowerday  
David Miller

## 10<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

The group met at The Speech House Hotel at 13.30 and following a quick introductory chat over coffee, we were soon on our way on a cool and cloudy afternoon. The first stop was at nearby Crabtree Hill, where a nice selection of birds was present. The first of several soaring Common Buzzards and Wood Pigeons were overhead, as were three Goosanders and Chaffinches, Blue and Great Tits and Eurasian Siskins were present in good numbers. A couple of Coal Tits, two pairs of Bullfinches, a pair of Goldcrests and a Common Kestrel were also present, but the highlight here was a very obliging Great Grey Shrike that gave superb views as it perched up in hawthorn saplings, while making the occasional hunting foray and returned on a couple of occasions to its favourite perches with bees in its bill. A great start to the trip... Moving on to Woor Green, we were treated to fine views of a perched male Common Crossbill on what was now a sunny afternoon. The lake held small numbers of Tufted Ducks, Canada Geese, two Greylag Geese, a Common Moorhen, a Common Coot, at least six Little Grebes and three Goosanders including a very showy and obliging male. Our final stop was the woodlands around the hotel and we enjoyed excellent views of two Common Treecreepers, at least four Common Nuthatches, five Goldfinches, a pair of plus another individual Stock Dove, as well as House Sparrows, Long-tailed Tits, Pied Wagtails, Northern Wren, Blackbird, Song Thrush and three Mistle Thrushes and five fly over Redwings as well as a Grey Squirrel.

## 11<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

The day began cold and overcast with a real bite to the north easterly breeze. Our first stop was at Brierley and we soon had a flock of six Hawfinches in flight, but unfortunately they disappeared into dense woodland and despite hearing them calling, we were unable to relocate them. We did get excellent views of several Eurasian Siskins and a sizeable flock of Lesser Redpolls, as well as Chaffinches, Coal Tits, Blue and Great Tits, Song Thrushes and European Robins. We made our way up the hill to Serridge Ridge, adding a few Eurasian Jays, a flock of Greenfinches and a nicely scoped up Great Spotted Woodpecker. Our target here were crossbills and we found a large flock of Common Crossbills flying overhead with one or two perched up rather distantly. These birds soon moved through, so we continued on to search the Larch trees along the northern edge of the ridge. We stopped at an area where the trees thinned out and some of the group were able to hear the calls of Two-barred Crossbills, which were what we were searching for here. However, a stroke of good or bad fortune, depending on how you look at it came our way as a juvenile Northern Goshawk came drifting low overhead, which seemed to spook these birds as we were unable to hear them again after it had passed... The goshawk was of course very welcome, but perhaps not just at that moment. Despite searching the ridge again on the way back, we saw just one male Common Crossbill in the gloom.

A ground feeding party of Chaffinches contained at least three Bramblings including one superb fully breeding plumaged adult male and a scan of an open area of forest produced a displaying Peregrine and a Common Raven, while the walk back down the hill saw us stumble across a singing Firecrest that gave absolutely superb views, as it showed down to a couple of metres and it even flared its crest at one point. A couple more frustrating glimpses of Hawfinches followed before we decided to head to New Fancy View raptor watch point for lunch. A brick red male Common Crossbill gave fantastic close up view here as it perched right in front of us, while a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew low overhead, as did a small group of Common Starlings and a couple of Bramblings. Thankfully, the sun emerged from behind the clouds for twenty minutes or so and that was all we needed to enjoy the amazing spectacle of a male Northern Goshawk circling extremely low over our heads; so low that all identification features could be seen clearly. Fantastic! At least ten Common Buzzards, several Wood Pigeons, Carrion Crows and a Common Raven were also overhead and unbelievably, we then had the incredible sight of a second male Northern Goshawk chasing the first bird out of its territory, while a huge female bird was briefly in switch back display before being subjected to an aerial bombardment by a relentless Peregrine which eventually saw the accipiter give up and drop out of sight. As this happened, the sun disappeared back behind the clouds and we left elated at what we had just witnessed. With our luck in, we headed to park End and after a few frustrating efforts, we managed to get scope views for everyone of a small flock of Hawfinches as well as several flight views. Also here were a couple of Dunnocks, a Redwing and a few Eurasian Jays. By now it was late afternoon, so we made our final stop at Cannop Ponds. A pair of Grey Wagtail were feeding on a rocky island, a pair of Common Kingfishers sat next to each other on a riparian bush allowing for great scope views and three drake and a female Mandarin showed very well as they roosted under a tree stump with a further three seen distantly on the water. A Great Cormorant flew overhead, two Mute Swans and seven Tufted Ducks were on the water and a pair of Reed Buntings at a feeder rounded off a superb days birding in what was now a beautiful early evening.

## 12<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

We woke to thick fog and it was by no means warm as we checked out before heading back to the Serridge Ridge. Wed spent a frustrating couple of hours chasing the crossbill flock, getting occasional glimpses of perched birds. With time beginning to run out, we eventually got lucky and found a male Two-banded Crossbill perched among a small group of Common Crossbills and the bird perched just long enough for everyone to get a brief look through the scope before it flew off never to be seen again. We also had brief views of a male Brambling plus the usual Song and Mistle Thrushes, Chaffinches, European Robins and Dunnocks. We also heard a Northern Goshawk calling on several occasions and had a male Mandarin on a small roadside pond. We headed south and a stop at Aust Warth near the old Severn crossing, where after a short wait, we enjoyed fantastic views of a Twite perched up in a willow tree and then a small piece of flotsam on the salt marsh. At least nine Reed Buntings were also present, along with four Sky Larks, ten Meadow Pipits, a pair of Eurasian Wigeon, four Common Shelducks, two Greater Black-backed Gulls and five Eurasian Curlews. We continued on to the Somerset Levels and our base at Meare noting several large herds of Mute Swans, one of which included a now tickable Black Swan, as well as a few Common Pheasants, Herring and Black-headed Gulls, Collared Doves and Rooks, all of which were new for the tour. Upon arrival, the sun broke through and after a short break; we headed off to Ham Wall in the late afternoon. As soon as we arrived, it was evident that a small fall of Common Chiffchaffs had taken place with at least seven birds and while watching these we picked up what was possibly the showiest Cetti's Warbler any of us had ever seen, as it flitted through a willow in clear view for a good couple of minutes.

Several others were heard. Small numbers of wildfowl included Common Teal, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Pochards and a few Great Crested Grebes, while eight Little Egrets were seen overhead and a couple of Water Rails were heard calling. The first of three Great White Egrets flew in but landed out of sight, but we were treated to excellent views of another as it landed in full view and began to feed at close range. Unbelievably, a Great Bittern then gave scope filling views as it walked along a reedy channel before it disappeared out of sight. A female Marsh Harrier quartered the reeds and a couple of Eurasian Sparrowhawks patrolled high above the gathering masses of Common Starlings as they went into roost in huge numbers. Fifteen Sand Martins also went into roost in the reed beds, a Peregrine made a brief appearance and eight Common Snipe were seen flying high overhead at then of an incredible couple of hours birding.

### 13<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

We were greeted once again by thick fog and no wind for our full day on the levels. After much deliberation, we decided to head for Catcott Lows and meet up with our good friend Roger Whittlesey, but it really was impossible to see more than a few metres in front of the hide. A couple of extremely close Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon and Mallard, a Common Snipe and a Grey Heron were all that we managed before we decided to cut our losses and try and find somewhere where we could actually see some birds. With news of a Yellow-browed Warbler at Bruton Sewage Works, that was our destination and it proved to be a good call although we didn't see this bird. The sun was out and we saw several Goldcrests, Common Chiffchaffs, Long-tailed Tits and Blue and Great Tits were present, as well as a couple of Common Nuthatches and a pair of Common Treecreepers in sexual chase. Our first Fieldfare and a couple of Redwings were seen alongside each other and the pleasant conditions meant that we also saw Brimstone and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies and a couple of Rabbits. The drive back produced a couple of Roe Deer and a Peregrine that locked onto a pigeon right over the bus, but was unsuccessful in its pursuit. Back on the Levels at Meare Heath, we immediately picked up a Common Kingfisher in flight and had excellent views of a Marsh Tit near the car park. The sun was warm as we finished lunch and the walk to Noah's Lake and the lake itself produced good numbers of Tufted Ducks, Common Pochards, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, displaying Great Crested Grebes, thirty Northern Shovelers and a pair of Northern Pintail. A Common Toad on the path was a surprise; two Sand Martins flew overhead, a Common Snipe showed extremely well on a grassy bank and a female Bullfinch was in the car park on the way back. All the while the songs of unseen Cetti's Warblers and booming Great Bitterns accompanied us. Our final stop was at Westhay Moor NNR, where it was more of the same species with the addition of a large flock of Fieldfares, a eighteen Little Egrets, a female European Sparrowhawk, small numbers of Great Cormorants, Reed Buntings and Common Chiffchaffs and a brief male Marsh Harrier. Large numbers of Mute Swans were seen by the access road and several Water rails were heard at close range, but unfortunately not seen. By late afternoon, the fog had returned and we made our way back to Meare at the end of a rather difficult day.

### 14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

Another morning of blanket fog meant that we were only able to see small areas of our final destination – the usually excellent site of Chew Valley Lake. It was disappointing not to be able to see much, but we did manage a few Tufted Ducks, Common Pochards, Great Crested Grebes, Goosanders and Black-headed Gulls, as well as adding Common Gull and Common Goldeneye top the tour list. Otherwise, just a male Bullfinch, a couple of calling, but hidden, Water Rails and a Little Egret rounded things off before we said farewell in Bristol at the end of a very enjoyable tour.

## 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/ Mute Swan
- 9/ Greylag Goose
- 10/ Canada Goose
- 11/ Common Shelduck
- 12/ Eurasian Wigeon
- 13/ Mandarin Duck
- 14/ Gadwall
- 15/ Common Teal
- 16/ Mallard
- 17/ Northern Shoveler
- 18/ Northern Pintail
- 19/ Common Pochard
- 20/ Tufted Duck
- 21/ Common Goldeneye
- 22/ Goosander
- 23/Black Swan
- 24/ Marsh Harrier
- 25/ Eurasian Sparrowhawk
- 26/ Northern Goshawk
- 27/Common Buzzard
- 28/Common Kestrel
- 29/ Peregrine
- 30/Common Pheasant
- 31/Water Rail [H]
- 32/Common Coot
- 33/ Common Moorhen
- 34/Northern Lapwing [H]
- 35/Common Snipe
- 36/Eurasian Curlew
- 37/Common Gull
- 38/Great Black-backed Gull
- 39/Lesser Black-backed Gull
- 40/Herring Gull
- 41/Black-headed Gull
- 42/Stock Dove
- 43/Wood Pigeon
- 44/Collared Dove
- 45/Common Kingfisher
- 46/Great Spotted woodpecker
- 47/Green Woodpecker [H]
- 48/Sky Lark
- 49/Pied Wagtail
- 50/Grey Wagtail

51/Meadow Pipit  
52/Sand Martin  
53/Northern Wren  
54/Dunnock  
55/European Robin  
56/Blackbird  
57/Fieldfare  
58/Redwing  
59/Mistle Thrush  
60/Song Thrush  
61/Common Chiffchaff  
62/Cetti's Warbler  
63/Goldcrest  
64/Firecrest  
65/Long-tailed Tit  
66/Blue Tit  
67/Great Tit  
68/Coal Tit  
69/Marsh Tit  
70/Common Nuthatch  
71/Common Treecreeper  
72/Eurasian Jay  
73/Black-billed Magpie  
74/Western Jackdaw  
75/Carrion Crow  
76/Rook  
77/Common Raven  
78/Great Grey Shrike  
79/Common Starling  
80/House Sparrow  
81/Chaffinch  
82/Brambling  
83/Greenfinch  
84/Goldfinch  
85/Lesser Redpoll  
86/Eurasian Siskin  
87/Twite  
88/Bullfinch  
89/Hawfinch  
90/Common Crossbill  
91/Two-barred Crossbill  
92/Reed Bunting

#### **OTHER WILDLIFE**

Rabbit. Grey Squirrel. Common Toad. Roe Deer. Small Tortoiseshell. Brimstone.