

THE FOREST OF DEAN  
& SOMERSET LEVELS  
14<sup>TH</sup> – 18<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016



ORIOLE BIRDING  
TOUR REPORT

## TOUR LEADER

Neil Donaghy

## PARTICIPANTS

Alex Banwell

Sally Bolton

Sandra Clements

Jo Dowle

Richard Heap

David Higham

Valerie Sargent

## 14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016

Sunny with a blustery easterly wind.

Following an hour's delay on the inbound train to Newport, we headed north east to our base at Speech House and after unpacking we began our quest for our target birds in the beautiful Forest of Dean. We began at nearby New Fancy View, where several Common Ravens were displaying at close quarters; a couple of carrion Crows, Wood Pigeons and a single Stock Dove also gave brief fly by views. We were hoping for raptors here, but the wind was really gusting across the forest and disappointingly activity was at a minimum. That said, we had a few distant Common Buzzards, a Peregrine come overhead and a rather distant female Northern Goshawk that did a brief switchback display flight before it was lost to view. Unfortunately only a couple of the group got onto the bird as was also the case with a fly over Hawfinch. We were struggling with the conditions and decided to move on having also added Greenfinch, Eurasian Siskin and Blackbird to the trip list. Our next stop was Park End Village and this was also difficult as the very area where Hawfinches had been seen earlier in the day now contained a photographer in a mobile hide and unsurprisingly no Hawfinches. Several Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, European Robins, great Tits and Chaffinches were feeding under the yews and limes, while a Mistle Thrush showed well on the village green, a Redwing was grubbing around in fallen leaves, a pair of Common Nuthatches were inspecting a nest hole and a Common Treecreeper did what treecreepers do. A Collared Dove flew over, Common Buzzards were again displaying here and a couple of pairs of Mandarin Ducks flew overhead. Our final stop was near our hotel where good numbers of Chaffinches were joined by a couple of Long-tailed Tits, a Pied Wagtail, a couple more Blue and Great Tits, two Redwings and a Great Spotted Woodpecker before we headed back for dinner.

## 15<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016

Overcast with a lighter, but cool easterly breeze

With no pre-breakfast walk planned, just a couple of the group made an early morning excursion to have a look around the area surrounding the hotel. A couple of Greylag Geese and three Lesser Black-backed Gulls flew overhead; two Pied Wagtails were on the roof and a couple of Stock Doves and a brief Hawfinch were perched up in a dead tree on the opposite side of the road. Following breakfast, we made the short drive to Crabtree Hill. The garden of Kelsey Lodge produced a small flock of Goldfinches, displaying Greenfinches and a male Eurasian Siskin, while the walk up the hill saw another male Eurasian Siskin, a few Song Thrushes and Blackbirds and European Robins. Our target bird here was the wintering Great Grey Shrike and it didn't take us long to find it perching up in a small willow. The bird was a little mobile initially, as it was flushed by a couple walking past it, but eventually it sat up and we were able to scope it as it preened allowing everyone to get excellent views. While watching it, we also noted three Linnets and four Roe deer walking through the clear fell. A pair of Common Stonechats and a couple of Mistle Thrushes were also present, but it was otherwise quiet in the cool conditions, so we headed back down the hill, picking up a party of seven Coal Tits, seven Redwings, a couple of Common Treecreepers and Common Nuthatches and at least three Goldcrests, all of which showed well.

A quick scan of Woor Green Lake produced several little Grebes, Canada and Greylag Geese, Common Coots, a pair of Mute Swans and surprisingly a drake gadwall among the Mallards, but not other wildfowl. The first common Buzzards of the day were on the wing and we had excellent views of a singing male Reed Bunting. A quick walk at Yew Tree Brake produced more thrushes but nothing else, so with it being mid morning, we made our second visit to New Fancy View in the hope of some raptor activity. Once again conditions were less than ideal but we soon picked up a Eurasian Sparrowhawk dashing through the car park and Common Buzzards and Common Ravens were on the wing as we reached the watchpoint. It was really quite murky as we scanned, but thankfully this didn't prevent us from finding at least two Northern Goshawks. The birds were never close, but gave reasonable views as they circled the wooded hill and were occasionally seen together in brief display flights and stoops, so we left happy that we had achieved another target species. Our next stop was also a return visit, this time to Parkend, where thankfully there were no photographers today. Once again Redwing, Blackbirds, Song and Mistle Thrushes, Common Nuthatch and Chaffinches were all seen feeding under the yews, a few Common Buzzards soared overhead and a Eurasian jay flew though. We could hear a male Hawfinch singing constantly in a Yew right above our heads, but during the whole two hours that were at the site, not a single person including a couple of other birders could see it—remarkable!! Thankfully, a different male dropped down to feed on a couple of occasions and we had fantastic scope views of this very handsome species before we left. Another target in the bag!! We decided to give Nagshead a go for lesser Spotted Woodpecker; a long shot but worth a try. Naturally, we didn't find any, but we did have very nice views of a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a fly over Peregrine and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk chasing a Redwing, which escaped, as we left. Next stop was Cannop Ponds where we immediately found two Marsh Tits on the bird table. The birds gave great views as they fed amongst a plethora of Coal, Blue and Great Tits and other common species including the first Dunnock that everyone had managed to see. Our second target here was Mandarin Duck and seven of these exquisite birds were on show at very close range, while four Common Moorhens and two Grey Wagtails were also new for the trip. More Little Grebes, Common Coots and Mallards were also present. Flushed by how easy that had been, we returned to Yew Tree Brake but once again saw little other than a few thrushes and our final stop of the day back at Woor Green this time produced the pair of Goosanders that we were hoping for to round off an excellent days birding.

## 16<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016

Overcast and breezy in the morning becoming increasingly sunny but with a cold breeze

Today was transfer day, so once we had finished breakfast, paid our bills and loaded up the bus, we set off south to the lagoons at Goldcliff on the Welsh side of the Severn Estuary. En route, we saw at least two hundred Redwings just outside the hotel grounds, our first Rooks of the trip, and a Peregrine dashed through a large gull flock in Monmouth Town Centre. Upon arrival, it seemed like we had made the wrong decision as the lagoons were fairly devoid of birds other than for a small flock of Northern Lapwings, twenty or so Eurasian Curlews and several Common Shelducks that were scattered around the various shingle islands. However careful scanning and some good fortune revealed a wealth of species and we had a thoroughly enjoyable couple of hours here. A couple of Little Egrets and a smattering of Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shovelers, Common Teal, Mallards and a few Gadwall emerged from the dense vegetation and all hell broke loose as first a circling Peregrine and then a Red Kite that came in off the sea scattered birds in all directions. A Spotted Redshank was feeding with a single Common Redshank, allowing great side by side comparison of identification features, and were soon followed by several more Common Redshanks, while a noisy and very mobile flock of approximately forty Pied Avocets and similar numbers of Dunlins and Black-tailed Godwits flew in and settled right in front of us. We worked through the flock and were delighted to pick out a couple of Red Knot, four Ringed Plovers, two European Oystercatchers, a beautifully marked Ruff and finally a couple of Common Greenshanks as well as more Little Egrets and some displaying Sky Larks. A single female Common Pochard was also present. By now the sun was out and the day had warmed up and we decided our luck was good, so we moved to the Redhouse Barn part of the reserve and soon picked up the Glossy Ibis that has been present for around a week.

The bird was always a bit distant and in the sun, but was perfectly identifiable and was seen feeding alongside a couple of Little Egrets, while small numbers of Tufted Ducks were on the scrapes. What a cracking mornings birding! Following lunch, we headed south to our accommodation in the small town of Meare and after time for unpacking and a cup of tea, we headed to the nearby Ham Wall reserve, where we spent the remainder of a very pleasant afternoon. Large numbers of Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Common Pochard were present, as well as a drake Northern Pintail, our first Great Crested Grebes, Great Cormorants and Grey Herons. A fall of Common Chiffchaffs numbered approximately ten birds, and at least five Sand Martins were also new in. A Goldcrest showed briefly and we enjoyed super views of a singing Cetti's warbler as it flicked its wings and its tail before belting out a rendition of its explosive song. Three Great White Egrets were seen in flight, a small party of Black-tailed Godwits were roosting on an island, several Marsh Harriers drifted over the reed beds, Common Kestrel and Common Buzzard were also noted, a Water Rail flew across a small pool and a couple of Great Bitterns were heard booming but none were seen. We ended the day with the most amazing sunset and an incredible murmur of Common Starling that must have been in the millions as the sky was literally black with birds as birds swarmed in seemingly endless tight flocks before dropping down in to the reeds for the night – awesome!!

## 17<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016

Sunny all day with a lighter, but still cool breeze

Following breakfast, we headed to Westhay Moor on a fabulously sunny and cloudless morning. Almost as soon as we got out of the car we got views of the first of several Cetti's Warblers, soon followed by Reed Buntings and fly over Greylag Geese. As we approached the Velindor Hide, a Common Chiffchaff was flitting through the trees with a Goldcrest for company. Some stayed behind while others headed to the hide only to return short time later as the news of a Firecrest was relayed. We all enjoyed fantastic views of this gorgeous bird as it flitted through the willows at close range; what a great start to the day. Back in the hide, Common Moorhens, Common Coots, Mute Swans, Common Teal and Gadwall were noted and a male Bearded Tit gave tantalisingly brief views as it moved between the reeds along the water's edge, but it could hardly be described as satisfactory views. A couple of Common Buzzards and Great White Egrets passed overhead before we decided to give the tower hide a try, noting a Great Spotted Woodpecker as we approached. This proved to be a god move as along with a local photographer we had superb views of displaying Great Crested Grebes with one occasionally sat on the newly built nest, as well as several Reed Buntings, and a very showy Cetti's Warbler, while the plaudits went to a female Bearded Tit and a Water Rail that also gave exceptionally good views as they move along the base of the reeds. Finally, a Great Bittern gave a fly past across the reed bed and that was all of our target species achieved and was a signal to move on. Our next stop was Avalon Marshes for a cup of coffee and a comfort break and we then moved on to Catcott Lows. To be honest other than large numbers of Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Shovelers, a few Common Teal, Tufted Ducks, Gadwall and a drake Northern Pintail there was not a lot else to see here. A small party of Black-tailed Godwits dropped in and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Kestrel, Grey Heron and Common Buzzards completed the picture. We took lunch in the car park at Shapwick Heath and walked to Noah's Hide noting many of the wildfowl already seen elsewhere today, but also some Common Pochards and a couple of Little Grebes, as well as at least eight Great White Egrets, a few Marsh Harriers and a Comma butterfly. The hide was cramped and the light somewhat difficult but there were masses of Eurasian Wigeon in particular, as well as more of the same wildfowl in good numbers. A few Great Crested Grebes were also present, four Lesser Black-backed Gulls dropped in and a distant Little Egret dropped in to the reeds. Careful scanning brought us nice views of a drake Common Goldeneye and we were treated to several close fly pasts by three Common Kingfishers, so it was well worth the discomfort of the hide. An unidentified large bat also flew around for a while; perhaps newly emerged from hibernation? Our final stop was back at Ham Wall where further Great White Egrets, a small flock of Northern Lapwings, grebes and ducks and another fly over Great Bittern rounded off a hugely enjoyable day.

18<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2016

Overcast with cold wind.

We spent our final morning exploring the new reserve at Steart, but the light was pretty terrible and the wind cold and we struggled to see a great deal which was a shame as the site has obvious potential. Good numbers of Common Shelducks, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal were present on the mud flats, along with a few Common Redshanks, Eurasian Curlews and Dunlins. A couple of Black-headed Gulls, Little Egrets and Grey Herons were feeding on the flooded meadows, a Peregrine flew overhead before landing on an electricity pylon and we added Fieldfare to the trip list as a small group perched up in a Hawthorn bush. Time ran out and we said our farewells in the car park before heading off in various directions at the end of a fantastic few days birding.

#### 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/Mandarin Duck
- 12/Common Shelduck
- 13/Eurasian Wigeon
- 14/Gadwall
- 15/Common Teal
- 16/Mallard
- 17/Northern Pintail
- 18/Northern Shoveler
- 19/Common Pochard
- 20/Tufted Duck
- 21/Common Goldeneye
- 22/Goosander
- 23/Red Kite
- 24/Marsh Harrier
- 25/Eurasian Sparrowhawk
- 26/Northern Goshawk
- 27/Common Buzzard
- 28/Common Kestrel
- 29/Peregrine
- 30/Common Pheasant
- 31/Water Rail
- 32/Common Coot
- 33/Common Moorhen
- 34/Pied Avocet
- 35/European Oystercatcher
- 36/Northern Lapwing
- 37/Ringed Plover
- 38/Black-tailed Godwit
- 39/Eurasian Curlew
- 40/Common Redshank
- 41/Spotted Redshank
- 42/Common Greenshank

43/Red Knot  
44/Ruff  
45/Dunlin  
46/Herring Gull  
47/Lesser Black-backed Gull  
48/Black-headed Gull  
49/Stock Dove  
50/Wood Pigeon  
51/Feral Rock Dove  
52/Collared Dove  
53/Common Kingfisher  
54/Great Spotted Woodpecker  
55/Green Woodpecker [H]  
56/Sky Lark  
57/Pied Wagtail  
58/Grey Wagtail  
59/Meadow Pipit  
60/Sand Martin  
61/Northern Wren  
62/Dunnock  
63/European Robin  
64/Blackbird  
65/Fieldfare  
66/Redwing  
67/Mistle Thrush  
68/Song Thrush  
69/Common Stonechat  
70/Common Chiffchaff  
71/Cetti's Warbler  
72/Goldcrest  
73/Firecrest  
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/Black-billed Magpie  
85/Western Jackdaw  
86/Carrion Crow  
87/Rook  
88/Common Raven  
89/Common Starling  
90/House Sparrow  
91/Chaffinch  
92/Greenfinch  
92/Eurasian Siskin  
93/Goldfinch  
94/Linnet  
95/Hawfinch  
96/Reed Bunting

97/Glossy Ibis

**OTHER WILDLIFE**

Rabbit

Roe Deer

Comma

Small White

Grey Squirrel

Pipistrelle sp.