



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SOMERSET LEVELS 9TH — 13TH JUNE 2019

www.oriolebirding.com

oriolebirding@gmail.com



SUNDAY 9th JUNE 2019 – *Sunny spells, light to moderate winds, 18C*

Checking in at the hotel early afternoon, the group assembled in the car park at 14:00, where we were entertained by the good numbers of Common House Martins and Barn Swallows, nesting at this location.

Our first destination today would be nearby New Fancy View, where the remnants of old colliery workings afford a splendid vista over a large part of the forest. On arriving, we were quickly onto a Red Kite, drifting over high south. A Garden Warbler gave brief views by the track up to the viewpoint. Unfortunately, Northern Goshawks refused to show in the time that we were present, with a succession of Common Buzzards the only raptor species noted. A Common Raven flew over calling, with a small group of Common Swifts moving through. A showy Common Chiffchaff kept putting in an appearance, with Eurasian Green Woodpecker, Willow Warbler and Eurasian Blackcap heard only. A few European Goldfinches dropped in and a Painted Lady butterfly was the first of the year for the majority of us.

After an hour or so, we headed off to Cannop Ponds, two pools created in 1925 to supply Parkend Ironworks. The site is well known for its population of Mandarin Ducks and plenty were quickly located, including a female with downy young. Most of the males were already moulting into eclipse plumage, past their pristine best. Additional waterbirds at the ponds were Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Tufted Duck, Common Moorhen and Common Coot. A Grey Wagtail was by the stream and a Lesser Black-backed Gull dropped in. Walking to the dam at the southern end, we paused while a tit flock moved through, most numerous being Long-tailed. Marsh Tit, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch and Coal Tit gave good views along the poolside track. Back at the vehicle we were treated to the wonderful sight of a pair of Marsh Tits feeding their fledged young in bracken and low scrub, completely oblivious to our presence.



Marsh Tit

Following an excellent dinner at the hotel, an evening excursion was made to a nearby area of recent forest clearfell, where the heath-like habitat is managed for ground-nesting birds (including Eurasian Nightjar) by the Forestry Commission. Arriving at 21:15, we paused to watch a parachuting Tree Pipit, with a sentinel male European Stonechat also present, while Willow Warbler, European Robin, Song Thrush and Eurasian Blackbird were all in good song nearby. At around 21:30 we heard our first 'churr' from a Eurasian Nightjar, with at least six subsequently appearing and putting on a great show, for once in relatively good light conditions. Pure magic! While here we were also treated to several roding Eurasian Woodcock, plus a few Fallow Deer, leaving for the hotel before proper darkness fell.

MONDAY 10th JUNE 2019 – *Sunny spells and light winds in the morning, heavy rain in the afternoon, 17C*

While mustering to leave the hotel, we noted two Grey Wagtails in the hotel roof, plus a Mistle Thrush in the adjacent field.

Our first destination was to be RSPB Nagshead, a lovely oak woodland reserve in the south-west of the Forest of Dean, just past the village of Parkend (where a few Rooks were seen). Taking in the short trail, we logged plenty of common woodland birds, including Eurasian Treecreeper, various tit species, plentiful Eurasian Blackcaps, Goldcrest, Eurasian Jays, Common Ravens, Song Thrushes and numerous Eurasian Blackbirds, although Pied Flycatchers were conspicuous by their absence.

The lower hide area was a little more productive, with a pair of Common Redstarts feeding (hidden) young and two Spotted Flycatchers, one of which bathed in the pond. Also at the pond was a female Mandarin with young, while Stock Dove, Mistle Thrush, Common Chiffchaff and Eurasian Siskin were also seen in the vicinity.

With the forecast rain starting to threaten, we made our way to Symonds Yat Rock, where a viewpoint affords superb views of the surrounding countryside, past which the River Wye snakes. It didn't take long to locate a soaring Peregrine Falcon, which even tussled with a Common Buzzard, before stooping in spectacular fashion. Shortly after, the same falcon was seen perched atop its favoured tree, giving good, if somewhat distant, views. Apparently, there are two breeding pairs in the vicinity this year, although neither of the nest sites are directly viewable. A large flock of Canada Geese was on the river far below us, with further Common Buzzards, Eurasian Jackdaws and Common Linnets also noted.

By now, light rain had swept in and we opted to drive to Yew Tree Brake, an area of conifers and clearfell in the forest, just east of the hotel. Here a pulse of heavy rain soon sent us scurrying back to the vehicle, but a short while after a slight amelioration emboldened us to take another walk, albeit in our waterproofs. This proved a good move, as we soon 'scoped up a lovely pair of Common Crossbills, while several singing Tree Pipits were undeterred by the weather. A pair of Common Whitethroats were bringing food to a nest, two Great Spotted Woodpeckers called in and a Red Kite flew low East. We braved the walk a little further, but more heavy rain set in and we called it a day, with conditions looking dire for the foreseeable.

TUESDAY 11th JUNE 2019 – *Strong NE wind and cool, some rain and drizzle, 12C*

Following breakfast, we checked out of the Speech House and headed south. Today we would be transferring to the Somerset Levels, via either RSPB Newport Wetlands on the Gwent Levels, or Steart Marshes WWT, near Bridgwater. Careful consultation of various weather reports and forecasts saw us opting for the latter option, with the conditions set to be marginally better the further south and east we could head.

After the usual M5 traffic around Bristol (noting a Eurasian Sparrowhawk), we relied on the Sat Nav to negotiate the convoluted route between Bridgwater and the reserve, arriving there late morning.

Heading first for the Mendip hide, the main scrape was disappointing, being mostly dry and birdless, although good numbers of Common Reed Buntings and Eurasian Reed Warblers were seen en route, some showing well, despite the stiff wind.

Luckily, the Quantock hides, which overlook Otterhampton Marsh, were much more productive. Here the highlight was a migrant Little Stint, looking smart in its breeding plumage. Further wader action comprised a small flock of Dunlin, a family of Little Ringed Plovers, roughly 40 Pied Avocets, Eurasian Oystercatchers (including chicks and incubating adults) and, Northern Lapwing. Several hundred Common Shelduck were present, with small flocks arriving off the estuary all the while, having been pushed off the flats by the incoming tide. This was perhaps not surprising, given that Bridgwater Bay is a major post-breeding moult location for the species, but nevertheless good to see. A group of (juvenile) Common Starlings were surprisingly the first of the tour. Also noted here were Little Egret, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Stock Dove, Eurasian Skylark, Dunnock and Pied Wagtail.



Little Ringed Plover

After stopping for a chat with TV wildlife presenter Mike Dilger, who was also leading a group here, we drove the short distance towards Steart village, where we would take lunch. Here we noted a few Little Egrets, but didn't spend long away from the vehicle in increasingly challenging weather conditions.

The drive west to the Meare Manor didn't take too long from here and after checking in, we were soon heading out to nearby Ham Wall, fast becoming a flagship reserve for RSPB, and where we would spend the remainder of the afternoon. Here we were quickly onto several Great White Egrets; with at least six pairs here, the species is impossible to miss here. Our first Western Marsh Harrier was pestered by a Eurasian Hobby and several hundred Common Swifts fed all around, having no doubt been displaced by the poor weather, but finding some respite here, with plentiful insects still

available in the lee of the wind. Walking as far as the Avalon hide and back, sightings included further Great White Egrets, Western Marsh Harriers and Eurasian Hobbies, Grey Heron, Cetti's Warbler, Eurasian Reed Warbler, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Little Grebe, Common Cuckoo (heard), Common Kingfisher, Greylag Geese, Common Moorhen, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler and Common Pochard (with young). Several Great Bitterns were heard, with one briefly sighted making a short flight low over the reeds. Having made the best of the less than ideal conditions, we headed back to base for some tasty home cooking, planning out the following day's activities.



Great White Egret

WEDNESDAY 12th JUNE 2019 – *Overcast, light to moderate winds, 14C*

Today we would be spending all our time visiting a number of reserves across the Levels. Just to the north of the hotel is Westhay Moor NNR, a network of open water, reedbed and the largest surviving fragment of lowland acidic mire in the south-west. The approach track to the reserve gave us excellent views of an unusually cooperative Cetti's Warbler, while several pairs of Great Crested Grebes tended young. Heading for the tower hide, a slight break in the weather saw an emergence of damselflies, with Variable the commonest, followed by Azure, Blue-tailed and Common in numerical order. Great views of a male Western Marsh Harrier were obtained from the hide, while Eurasian Hobbies flew through and a Great Bittern boomed unseen. Several Common Cuckoos were calling all around, with one or two briefly showing. Two Egyptian Geese flew over and the trackside bushes brought Common Reed Buntings and Willow Warblers into close proximity.

Following refreshments at the Avalon Centre, we headed for Tealham Moor, a lovely area of authentic levels just south of the North Drain. The reported Western Yellow Wagtails were apparently keeping their heads down, but we did note several Western Marsh Harriers, Grey Heron, Eurasian Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, and Common Linnets. The sun peeped out briefly, allowing us to catch up with Hairy Dragonfly and Red-eyed Damselfly along the drain.



Western Marsh Harrier

Our next site, and where lunch would be taken, would be Catcott Lows. Formerly arable land, Catcott is one of the lowest points in the Brue Valley and has been converted to grazing marsh. The water levels are carefully controlled, so that cattle grazing is possible in the summer. It was around these cattle that we were fortunate to find at least six Western Cattle Egrets, a species which seems to be well on the way to becoming properly established in the UK. Other sightings included around 60 Black-tailed Godwits, Western Marsh Harrier, Gadwall and Northern Lapwing.



Black-tailed Godwits

A little further to the south is Greylake RSPB, another area of wet grazing meadows, just over the other side of the Polden Hills from the Avalon Marshes, in the north-west corner of King's Sedgemoor. Several Water Rails were highly vocal in close proximity to the hides, but refused to show. A Western Yellow Wagtail perched up on some dead branches near a herd of cows and a Sedge Warbler was surprisingly our first. Non-avian interest was provided by a rather arboreal Bank Vole and two Grass Snakes, seen under some metal sheeting.



Bank Vole & Roe Deer

Our final port of call for the day would be to Shapwick Heath, where we would walk as far as Noah's Lake. On the way out we obtained good telescope views of two Eurasian Hobbies and a Western Marsh Harrier perched up in dead trees, near the scrape. Great White Egrets were frequent, but Great Bitterns were only heard. Plenty of Common Swifts were again present. Two Roe Deers gave some lovely views, presumably not seeing humans as a threat at this location. Arriving back at the car park, we enjoyed watching a pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers feeding a juvenile, which seemed at home clinging to a telegraph pole.

THURSDAY 13th JUNE 2019 – *Moderate SW wind, variable rain, 15C*

The majority of our final morning would be spent revisiting Ham Wall, where we would seek refuge from the rain in the Tor View hide. With Great Bittern sightings having been at a premium so far on the tour, we were determined to succeed in this respect and, with luck, one eventually gave a good flypast, directly over the top of the hide, having had several booming nearby up to that point. Once again, numerous Common Swifts were feeding low over the reeds, with a supporting cast of Great White Egret, Eurasian Hobby, Western Marsh Harrier and Tufted Duck.

By now, we were starting to feel a little chilly, opting to spend our remaining time in the hide at Catcott Low, where some close views of Western Cattle Egrets were enjoyed. Our final addition was a hunting Common Kestrel, with the tour concluding around midday, allowing plenty of time for our various onward journeys.



Cattle Egrets

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1 Greylag Goose
- 2 Canada Goose
- 3 Mute Swan
- 4 Egyptian Goose
- 5 Common Shelduck
- 6 Mandarin
- 7 Northern Shoveler
- 8 Common Pheasant
- 9 Little Grebe
- 10 Great Crested Grebe
- 11 Rock Dove
- 12 Stock Dove
- 13 Common Woodpigeon
- 14 Collared Dove
- 15 Common Cuckoo
- 16 Eurasian Nightjar
- 17 Common Swift
- 18 Water Rail [H]
- 19 Common Moorhen
- 20 Eurasian Coot
- 21 Pied Avocet
- 22 Eurasian Oystercatcher
- 23 Northern Lapwing
- 24 Little Ringed Plover
- 25 Black-tailed Godwit
- 26 Eurasian Woodcock
- 27 Dunlin

28 Little Stint
29 Black-headed Gull
30 Herring Gull
31 Lesser Black-backed Gull
32 Great Cormorant
33 Great Bittern
34 Cattle Egret
35 Grey Heron
36 Great White Egret
37 Little Egret
38 Western Marsh Harrier
39 Eurasian Sparrowhawk
40 Red Kite
41 Common Buzzard
42 Common Kingfisher
43 Great Spotted Woodpecker
44 Eurasian Green Woodpecker [H]
45 Common Kestrel
46 Eurasian Hobby
47 Peregrine Falcon
48 Eurasian Jay
49 Common Magpie
50 Eurasian Jackdaw
51 Rook
52 Carrion Crow
53 Common Raven
54 Eurasian Skylark
55 Barn Swallow
56 Common House Martin
57 Coal Tit
58 Marsh Tit
59 Eurasian Blue Tit
60 Great Tit
61 Long-tailed Tit
62 Eurasian Nuthatch
63 Eurasian Treecreeper
64 Eurasian Wren
65 Goldcrest
66 Cetti's Warbler
67 Willow Warbler
68 Common Chiffchaff
69 Sedge Warbler
70 Eurasian Reed Warbler
71 Eurasian Blackcap
72 Garden Warbler
73 Common Whitethroat
74 Spotted Flycatcher
75 European Robin
76 Common Redstart
77 European Stonechat
78 Mistle Thrush
79 Song Thrush
80 Eurasian Blackbird
81 Common Starling
82 Dunnock

- 83 Grey Wagtail
- 84 Western Yellow Wagtail
- 85 Pied Wagtail
- 86 Meadow Pipit
- 87 Tree Pipit
- 88 Common Chaffinch
- 89 Common Linnet
- 90 Common Crossbill
- 91 European Goldfinch
- 92 Eurasian Siskin
- 93 Common Reed Bunting
- 94 House Sparrow

OTHER WILDLIFE

Odonata

- Azure Damselfly
- Variable Damselfly
- Common Blue Damselfly
- Blue-tailed Damselfly
- Red-eyed Damselfly
- Hairy Dragonfly

Lepidoptera

- Large White
- Green-veined White
- Red Admiral
- Speckled Wood
- Painted Lady

Other Notable Fauna

- Grass Snake
- Rabbit
- Roe Deer
- Fallow Deer
- Bank Vole