

BIRD WATCHING GROUP REPORT 2022/23

The September 22 meeting was held at Kent Wildlife Trust' Oare Marsh Reserve near Faversham. Again a good bright morning. The tide was low so the birds were distant. Curlew, dunlin, ringed plover, reed bunting, pied wagtails and black headed gulls were seen as we walked to the hide, but redshank were conspicuous by their absence from the mudflats. From the hide we saw the seals on a distant sandbank and several small groups of avocet. Closer to the hide a group of shelduck were roosting, and as we scanned for more avocets a pair of whimbrel were seen close by. The level of the water in the scrape was lower than usual but still held large numbers of lapwing and roosting redshank. A flock of black tailed godwit flew in as we watched and the usual coots and moorhens, egrets, herons and 3 golden plover were seen.

Our October 22 meeting visited Riverside Country Park. Although it was cloudy and very cold in the wind when we arrived, the weather brightened as we walked to Sharp's Bay and Copper House Lane on a rapidly rising tide. At our first stop a small flock of dunlin with redshank and grey plover were seen and the unmistakable call of a curlew heard as it flew by in the middle distance. As we walked, we saw more redshank, black headed gulls, herring gulls and a flock of turnstone in the distance a flock of brent geese were feeding near our destination for the day. Although the estuary was our principal interest that morning it is always worthwhile checking the trees and bushes on the landward side of the path. One short stretch of the path yielded a mixed flock of long tailed tit and blue tit with a small group of goldfinches, female blackcap, and a small warbler (chiffchaff?). Above the adjacent field the resident kestrel was hovering. We then moved on to watch the flock of brent geese we had spotted earlier. They were feeding on green seaweed close to the shore, grunting and honking as they did so. We also saw a great crested grebe in winter plumage, a group of shelduck, countless roosting redshank on Copper House Island and another grey plover in the saltgrass. On our walk back to the car park we added lapwing, little egret and wigeon to our list.

Our November 22 meeting was held at Riverside Country Park on the Medway Estuary near Rainham. We walked from the Reserve Centre to Bloors Wharf. The morning was still damp after heavy overnight rain but the weather gradually improved during our visit. The tide was very low which meant that the birds were often distant - so the telescope was essential. Heavy rain falling on the mud banks had washed of the soft surface mud to expose the more compacted material below it and similarly expose the molluscs and worms normally hidden below the soft surface. This had attracted large numbers of crows and jackdaws to the saltgrass to feed, as we watched them flocks of waders and ducks took to the air as a peregrine falcon flashed by overhead. Other birds seen and heard included wren, dunnock, robin and green woodpecker beside the footpath, and on the estuary teal, widgeon, shelduck in large numbers and sleeping shoveller duck. Waders included little egret, curlew, black tailed godwit, redshank, dunlin, sanderling, and ringed plover. The most exciting sight was a kingfisher that alighted on a steel pile about 15 feet from us. It then flew down to a perch in the saltgrass nearby and dived to catch a fish. Eventually it flew off but later returned and resumed its perch - at all times giving us a grandstand view of its activity in the by now bright sunshine that made its bright plumage glow brilliantly.

Our December 22 meeting at Oare Marsh near Faversham was abandoned shortly after arrival. Traffic delayed the writer by 25 minutes and a short walk confirmed that all the fresh water in the lake and drains was covered by an inch of ice. Not a bird was to be seen on the scrape. A snipe was seen sculling across the road and on the seaward side the tide was low and several curlew, a flock of dunlin plus redshank and oyster catcher were seen on the mudbanks exposed by the low tide. The sun was very bright with that special quality it has at the time of the winter equinox, and it proved perfect lighting for a female reed bunting that alighted some 8ft away on a reed seed head.

Our January 23 meeting was held at Riverside Country Park on the Medway Estuary. It was one of those startlingly bright mornings that follow a hard frost – ideal conditions, although still a bit cold. The tide was high when we arrived, so we intended to walk to Horrid Hill to witness the changes as it started to fall. As we left the car park, we talked to members of the Bird Wise group who had set up an information table at the exit to promote good practices when visiting N Kent's birdwatching sites. As we chatted a kingfisher flew right to left parallel to the path we were on. We moved on to the peninsula and the first flock of birds arrived – turnstones searching under the wrack growing on large stones at the top of the shore. Nor Marsh opposite our viewing point was the high tide refuge for many birds and we watched as they began departing to feed as the tide began to recede and murmurations of dunlin and flocks of redshank flew up. To our right a very large group of brent geese started to break up and skanes of 10 or 12 flew upstream to feed on the mud banks that would be the first to be exposed as the tide fell. The first mud to be exposed beside us was immediately occupied by a flock of dunlin, then to our right another flock of dunlin arrived closely followed over the next 20 minutes by numbers of redshank, golden plover, grey plover, oyster catcher, and curlew. Other birds seen included rock pipit, goldeneye, teal, widgeon and black headed gull. All in all an outstanding morning's birdwatching.

Our February 23 trip to Kent Wildlife Trust's Oare Marsh reserve took place on a somewhat gloomy morning with drizzle threatened in the weather forecast. The tide was low and still falling. A small flock of greylag geese in the field behind us caught our attention with their loud honking. As we walked along the sea wall one of the resident reed buntings perched on top of a small bush and on the seaward side redshank, grey plover, oyster catcher, curlew and several groups of avocet were seen. As we reached the first hide another 100+ avocets, teal, brent geese, cormorant, great crested grebes and harbour seals were added to the list. As we moved on to the second hide a marsh harrier glided towards us disturbing all the birds on the scrape. From the hide we saw numerous pintail and shoveller duck, gadwall and resident coot and mallard flushed from cover as the female marsh harrier made another pass. As we were about to leave a rarity - a male hen harrier, appeared to our left and proceeded with its characteristic jindvinking hunting flight to cross our view from left to right. It was close enough to see its yellow eye without the use of binoculars. By and large birdwatchers are a taciturn lot but once it had passed it would be true to say that everyone in the hide whooped with pleasure at the sight. It felt as if we had been visited by royalty.

Our March 23 meeting was held at the Kent Wildlife Trust's Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve. The weather was clear and bright and warm in the spring sunshine. We watched a pair of great crested grebes on the first lake with mallard and tufted duck also present. On the next lake it was good to see the herons on their nests with 3 ugly nestlings visible. It is always good to meet members wishes on our trips. One of our new members expressed the hope of seeing a kingfisher. They are present at Sevenoaks but seldom seen. However today we saw one on the opposite side of the lake. Eventually it flew rapidly towards us along the edge of the lake before disappearing into the undergrowth. The next lake was occupied by graylag geese noisily pairing off. Canada geese a pair of Egyptian geese shoveler duck, dabchick, more tufted duck, great crested grebe and mallard were also seen. From the third hide teal and lapwing were added to the list and blue tit, great tit, long tailed tit, chiffchaff, tree creeper and numerous robins were also seen as we walked through the reserve.

One of the consequences of our programme of visits is that we visit some sites on the same week of the same month each year. This gives us the chance to see the differences between each year. So, it was when we visited the Woodland Trust's Hucking Estate Reserve in April 23. Last year we arrived at the peak of the bluebell flowering with some already setting seed. This year the flowers had just started but were still a sight to see especially with the wood anemones nearby. The weather was bright but there was a strong east wind blowing. There was a lack of the usual spring migrants, the chiffchaff and blackcap we heard were probably resident. Other birds included jay, green woodpecker, great tit, blue tit, robin, treecreeper, and dunnock. Only one species of butterfly was active – we saw several specimens of peacock butterfly. On our return we saw a buzzard quartering the field we were crossing, but sadly no nightingales were singing this year.

One of the most astonishing film sequences of the recent "Wild Isles" TV series showed a small member of the falcon family known as a Hobby catching a dragonfly in its talons removing the wings and eating it whilst in flight. During our May 23 visit to Stodmarsh we saw more than twenty of them doing precisely this in the sky above us. The weather was clear and bright – ideal conditions. As we left the car park a greater spotted woodpecker was seen and the first of many cetties warblers was heard, its song bursting from nearby undergrowth. As we emerged from the woodland the first hobbies were seen above. We have heard bitterns booming at Stodmarsh in previous years but this time we caught a fleeting glimpse of one landing into a reedbed. The resident great crested grebes were seen on the lake with terns flying above them earning their alternative name of sea swallow by catching flying insects in their beaks as they flew. Reed warblers were also much in evidence and a cuckoo was heard in the distance. In all we saw three pairs of Marsh harriers over different sections of the reserve. On our return we heard nightingales and a wren in the woodland undergrowth and the cuckoo was now much closer. Other birds included greylag geese, tufted duck, mallard, robin, great tit, blue tit, chaffinch, blackcap, coots, and moorhen.

It has been many years since we visited Yalding Fen Local Nature Reserve, the site of our June 23 meeting. The sun was shining, and the day threatened to become very hot. As we opened the gate a great spotted woodpecker was seen in the branches above us. Mistle thrush, wren and chiffchaff were added to our list as we walked through the wooded area. Several members have a bird song recognition app on their mobile phones – very useful for those birds with high frequency songs we can no longer hear. The app told us that there were also goldfinches singing nearby. As we crossed the meadow a pair of herons flew over us. A profusion of banded and blue damselflies was found near the ponds and drainage channels. We came back to the old orchard across the boardwalk. Last time we came here a party of volunteers were clearing the invasive Himalayan balsam plants – it was good to see that their efforts had been successful. Spikes of yellow loosestrife were now growing in this area. In the orchard we saw pied wagtail, whitethroat and green woodpecker. By now it was too hot, and the sight of the pub was very welcome.

July is always a difficult month for bird watchers. Most birds have completed their breeding cycle and their young have fledged. They start their moult; cease singing and hide away in lush summer vegetation. With this in mind our visit was made to the KWT's Hothfield Heathlands Reserve where a complex habitat offers a wide variety of interest. On entering the wooded area of the reserve, a clump of ragwort had attracted newly emerged red admiral and peacock butterflies and on closer inspection the plants were host to the bright orange and black cinnabar moth caterpillar. On the first of the heathland bogs a wren dived into the bushes as we approached. The footpath itself was pitted with countless tiny burrows of miner bees and tiny solitary wasps. The wasps are uncommon, but their nests are predated by another rare ruby tailed wasp. We have seen occasional single examples on previous visits – this time we saw 3 in the space of 2 square yards. A small copper and small heath butterfly were seen and common darter and migrant hawker dragonflies. A juvenile whinchat flew up from the heather to rest on a bracken frond. As we started our return the songs of 3 yellowhammers were heard. The closest bird came out of the cover to give us a good view. We had earlier heard a kestrel, and this was now also seen flying overhead.

August might well be thought of as the start of the bird watching year. Some summer visitors have already returned and the first passage migrants from the north have arrived. To witness this change we visited Sussex Wildlife Trust's Rye Harbour Reserve. The sun was bright and the tide high when we arrived. From the first hide we could see a large roost of oyster catchers and another of lesser black backed gulls. A small group of curlew and several little egrets were scattered across the saltmarsh. Flocks of starling, linnet, dunlin and knot (still in their rust coloured summer plumage) were also seen. On the fences we counted a total of 5 wheatears and black headed gulls and common terns flew above us. At the second hide we saw dozens of roosting cormorant, a pair of dabchicks and a common sandpiper at close quarters. The third hide was eerily quiet – the noisy tern colony it overlooks was empty, a reminder that 3 years of bird flu has had a deadly effect.