

BIRDING NEWSLETTER

Ely & District U3A Birdwatching Group



Planning Team

Graham Cole
Sean Greenway
Sue Greenway
John Middleton
Mavis Middleton
Nigel Puttergill
Barbara York

Forthcoming Events

7th June (evening)

Wicken Fen
(Nigel)

26th June

Swanton Novers
(Sue & Sean)

10th July

Grafham Water
(Graham & Nigel)

23rd August

Frampton Marsh
(Babs & Mavis)

14th September

Cavenham
(Sue & Sean)

It's time for a change!

21st May

Dear Birdwatchers,

Since the last newsletter we have had a couple of good birding events. On 2nd May seven of us met at Consall woods for the start of a three day birdwatching trip to Staffordshire. The weather was kind to us and we had a splendid time. It was organised and led by Babs York and Sue Greenway and you can read all about our adventures in Babs article below.

On 17th May we had our late afternoon / evening trip to Snettisham and Dersingham bog. For this event we had a turnout of nine and once again Babs was leading and has written a short piece about our trip with some photos.

At the end of August I will have managed the coordination of the Birdwatching group for four years and it is now time to hand over the reins to someone else. The running of the Birdwatching group is about planning a programme of events for the year - together with the planning team - and managing communications to group members using the U3A Beacon site. The newsletter is something I started four years ago, but it will be up to the new coordinator if that should continue or not. If you would like to consider taking over the Birdwatching group, but would like to know more first, then please feel free to contact me or any member of the planning team.

Enjoy your birding! Nigel

From Babs York - Churnet Valley Visit, 2nd - 4th May

On a chilly early May morning a small group of birders gathered at the RSPB's Consall Woods car park hoping that it would warm up and wondering what this new-to-all reserve would hold. Sean, Sue and I had already reconnoitred the reserve during the previous 24 hours, so we had an inkling of the delights to come.

The purpose of the visit to reserves in this area was to experience redstarts and pied flycatchers in their breeding habitat. The landscape encountered could hardly be more different to that with which we are more familiar. Gone was the flat ground, replaced by steep sided valleys. Gone were the open vistas, big skies and fields; we were surrounded by trees for as far as we could see. The habitat was different to anything we have in East Anglia and this is why we were there. In these remnant forests our target birds were hanging on, although their numbers are reducing each year.

One of the delights of Consall Woods is that it is divided by the Churnet river, the Churnet Valley railway line and the parallel canal. On our 'recce' day we watched the steam train being given a test run and were transported back to our childhoods.

The first walk of the day was the circular trail in Crowgutters' Wood. As it said on the RSPB's website- it was not for the faint-hearted. The trail was more suited to mountain goats than humans, but we took it at a slow pace savouring our surroundings. Once we were inside the forest, we couldn't help but be awed by the magnificent moss-coated trees, the carpets of wildflowers and the chorus of birdsong. It took a while but eventually we tracked down a redstart although it gave us the run-around. Lots of common birds provided the supporting cast and we made our way back to the car park for lunch.



Churnet Valley Steam Train



In Crowgutter's wood

Even in the car park we were adding to the list, in particular siskin in full song. Sadly, those steep trails had taken their toll and there had been an injury, so the wounded stayed back at the centre while the rest of us ventured the walk on the 'red route' during the afternoon. The first part of this was fairly level and then a loop walk which was very steep. The RSPB have been busy here, erecting lots of bird boxes. As well as being used by the commoner species, some had been occupied by pied flycatchers. We were alerted to their presence by their rather strange little song which provided a

challenge for the leaders. Their habit of quick movements and darting about in different directions- first high, then low - provided a challenge for all of us to get a decent view. Eventually all had

reasonable looks and we headed back for a good meal at the hotel, well deserved by everyone. One disappointment was that we only heard wood warbler here, whereas on our recce we had experienced a male in full song. Sadly, this species hasn't bred locally for 7 years, but they still pass through on migration.

We spent the following day at the RSPB's premier reserve of the area; Coombes Valley, that has been in their hands for many years. Fortunately, the weather had improved and the sun came out - this meant the birds were much

more showy; singing and displaying for prolonged periods. Again, the walks were sometimes very steep and needed to be tackled with care. Yesterday's injuries had settled overnight and the whole group was able to take part. Before too long we were watching the first of many pied flycatchers of the day. A pair of grey wagtails gathering insects on the river was a delight to watch. As we moved into the meadow, we had close-up views of a singing garden warbler. A redstart teased us with its scratchy song. As we reached the valley bottom, we could hear both pied flycatcher and redstart singing and ended up with wonderful views of both songsters. As we climbed up to the rim of the valley, ravens circled and performed their diving displays while the air was filled with their raucous calls. Views across the valley were literally breath-taking. Our target birds were seen throughout the route plus many great spotted woodpeckers, nuthatches, treecreepers, goldcrests and we even had a calling tawny owl.

On our way out we chatted to the warden, he was very impressed that we had explored Consall Woods and had so many bird sightings. Perhaps he thought we looked faint-hearted? Little did he know.

We headed back for an early meal, as we had planned an evening visit. Despite the considerable drop in temperature and the return of the cool wind, we returned to the reserve at 7:15pm. We managed to get better views of a few birds including bullfinches and mistle thrushes and watched the antics of a trio of dunnocks. The icing on the cake was the emergence of a barn owl from a box in the orchard. By then it really was cold, although the clouds of midges weren't discouraged, for which the swooping swallows were grateful.

As we had had such great views of our target birds, we decided to head to the nearby Tittesworth reservoir the following morning rather than returning to Consall. Another lovely location that was new to us all. The first sound that greeted us was the distinctive 'buzzing' of redpolls; they were everywhere. A pair of little ringed plover merged in to the shingle shore and common sandpipers chased each other around the lake. Great crested grebes were showing off their pristine plumes and several drake mandarins put up their gaudy, but rather impressive sails. We had more views of various warblers, which included mating willow warblers. We ate a scone-based lunch at the café before heading home. What a trip!

Many thanks to Sean for the superb bird photographs to accompany the article.



The bright lights of Leek



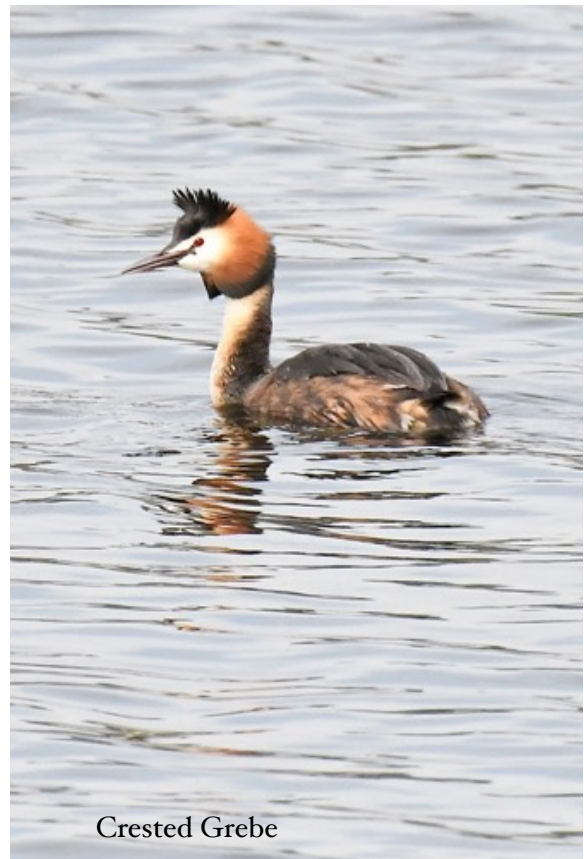
Siskin



Grey Wagtail



Treecreeper



Crested Grebe



Swallow



Common Sandpiper



Redstart



Pied Flycatcher (male)



Redpoll



Pied Flycatcher (female)



Little Ringed Plover



Nuthatch

From Babs York - Snettisham RSPB and Dersingham Bog, 17th May

The forecast was for a sunny day, but it didn't happen; the best we got was milky sunshine and the wind coming from the North-East kept the temperature down. But it was dry and birders aren't easily deterred. The smorgasbord of habitats ahead was mouth-watering and they didn't disappoint.

For the early birders, we kicked off at 2pm and explored south of the car park in the RSPB reserve. The highlight was the breeding plumage mediterranean gulls that were comfortably sitting on their nests alongside their close relatives, the black-headed gulls. Their brilliant white breasts contrasting with their black hoods and their vivid red bills added up to some very smart birds outshining their cousins. There seemed to be good numbers of common terns and their calls filled the air. There was lots of birds' song despite the time of day, but we didn't spend long searching for the vocalists, as we had to get back to the car park. As for the rest of the day, linnets, whitethroats and sedge warblers were showing well. A spoonbill flew over us on our return and then we were delayed, while we worked through a small group of Brent geese, but we made it back to the car park just in time to meet the rest of the group.

At 4pm we set off north to explore the coastal park that abuts Ken Hill reserve, some of which can be viewed from the raised bank. Part of this area was damaged last year by a fire and the skeletal black remains of the bushes are much in evidence and sadly this has affected the bird populations. It's reported that it will take many years for the habitat to recover. However, this area is still a great area to view turtle doves and today was no exception. We started off with distance perched views and ended up with excellent views for everyone of displaying and purring birds- the birds just kept getting closer and closer. They share this scrub with stonechats and we were scolded as we moved through, their young must be about to fledge.

To the west of the path is Ken Hill and this lush habitat hides lots of activity; ducks and waders just disappear into it. I pity the person trying to do a proper count here. As we reached the northern most pool there were several hundred waders roosting. This was in sharp contrast to the recce of the previous week, where c40 waders were present. I was hoping to find the long-billed dowitcher that has been moving around the Norfolk coast, so my heart sunk. However, my 'scope settled on it almost straight away - so lucky. Some people managed a glimpse of the bird, but as usual for this species, it lurked well and then disappeared into dense water sorrel. The dowitcher is a very rare bird usually recorded during the winter months, so it was good to see it in summer plumage - a treat even for 'old hands'. In amongst the other waders (mainly black-tailed godwits and oystercatchers) was a beautiful male ruff in his breeding plumage, definitely the dandy of the marsh. Many of the lapwings had chicks and they protected their offspring with determined attacks on the many attentive raptors. Avocets and redshanks vied for our attention and sometimes it was difficult to know where to look. Swallows, house martins and swifts performed overhead but it was time for a break and some of us enjoyed a 'chippy tea', while others ate their own picnic.

We wandered back to our cars serenaded by greenfinches and teased by bullfinches and drove the 10 minute journey to our next location; Dersingham Bog. We made our way to the far end as we still had some reasonable light. The tree pipits were singing and perching although viewing wasn't close. We then located the singing cuckoo, again rather distant, but another cuckoo threw down the gauntlet

and off they went chasing each other across the heath, giving good looks for all. One then settled near the tree pipits and we were treated to some interesting interactions. Unfortunately, the temperature dropped and with it the insect activity, which then affected the birding. Although several nightjars started churring, there was no flight activity. But we did encounter several woodcocks doing their roding flight, making their cute squeaks and grunts. As we packed up a young tawny owl called, a suitable end to a good day that contained 92 birds including 16 heard. Many thanks to Nigel for stepping in to co-lead and to Sean and Sue for helping on the recce and Sean for butterfly and turtle dove photo's.



Turtle Dove



Turtle Dove



Avocets



Wall Brown