

# BIRDING NEWSLETTER

Ely & District U3A Birdwatching Group



## Planning Team

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## Forthcoming Events

### 17th May

Snettisham & Dersingham  
(Babs & Graham)

### 7th June (evening)

Wicken Fen  
(Nigel)

### 26th June

Swanton Novers  
(Sue & Sean)

### 10th July

Grafham Water  
(Graham & Nigel)

### 23rd August

Frampton Marsh  
(Babs & Mavis)

## An ode to a nightingale!

1st May

Dear Birdwatchers,

In the last newsletter I was heralding the arrival of spring, but last Friday, when we met at RSPB Lakenheath, it felt like winter had returned. What a cold and bleak wind there was blowing across the fens. Despite the cold weather we had a successful afternoon and evening and you can read all about it in Babs report at the end of this newsletter.

In the late afternoon, after our visit to the Lakenheath reserve, we moved on to Maidscross Hill with the hope of hearing nightingales. We were not disappointed, but due to the cold wind, there were not so many singing. I tried to make a recording, but the wind caused a lot of background noise and the result was not so good. However, the next day was wonderful and it felt like summer had arrived, so off I went in the evening back to Maidscross Hill to see if they were singing again. I was not disappointed and there was little or no wind, so I could make a decent recording. I have attached a recording I made of a nightingale in battle with a chiffchaff to see who could sing the best. No prizes here, the nightingale won hands down.

Our next outing is on 17th May when we will visit the North Norfolk coast. This will be a late afternoon / evening event. Details have already been sent out for this trip, but if you haven't received them, then please let me know.

Hope to see you on our next trip out.

Enjoy your birding! Nigel

## From Babs York - Dorset Days at Long Last

I've been promising myself I would have a few days down in Dorset looking for the UK's special reptiles for about 25 years. I don't like to rush things and finally got round to it this year in mid-April. The UK has 6 reptiles, 2 of which have very limited distribution; the sand lizard and smooth snake, and both can be found on Dorset's heathland.

I was based in Corfe Castle village which was excellent for exploring the Isle of Purbeck and areas around Wareham. Not so excellent was the weather, although it was largely dry, the chilly east wind kept temperatures low which wasn't good for reptile activity. Fortunately, these areas are also good for some of my favourite bird species, so that when it was rather slow for reptiles, birds filled the void beautifully.



Smooth Snake

I did manage to see and photograph both male sand and common lizards plus a couple of smooth snakes and a slowworm. The male sand lizard is a vibrant green during the breeding period. The female is well marked and brown so much less obvious and quite tricky to find. I was told that smooth snakes are faring a little better than of recent times. Their main prey is lizards, hopefully this means they are doing well too.



Male Common Lizard



Male Sand Lizard

Birds that I found on these same heathlands were tree pipits, wood larks, Dartford warblers, firecrests and my first hobby of the year. It was a wonderful opportunity to immerse myself in the songs and displays of the tree pipits and wood larks. At this

time of year there was one or the other active nearly all the time. I was also very pleased to come across several crossbills as they have been in short supply in England this year. This included a family party. I even managed to get a record shot of a female. Siskins were so numerous that they were impossible to escape and their cheerful twittering accompanied me throughout the trip. Another bird



ubiquitous on the heaths was the stonechat. Many pairs seemed to be feeding young already and both parents dashed around gathering food for their ever-hungry offspring.

When I arrived at Arne, I was surprised that almost the first bird I heard was raven that made their presence known by their gruff call. When visiting another heath the following day, I heard strange far-off calls which sounded rather raven-like, but I wasn't sure. Eventually the arrival of an adult raven solved the mystery, the calls were raven chick begging calls. I followed the adult with my binoculars which led me to the nest. It was high up in a Scots Pine on the edge of the heath. Over the next few hours I watched it battle with the local raptors; buzzard and marsh harriers, every time it crossed their air-space coming in to feed the young in the nest.

Places visited included: Arne RSPB, Creech Heath, Blue Pool, Green Pool, Wareham Forest, Trigon Heath, Gore Heath, Great Ovens, Stoborough Heath and Hartland Moor.



Slowworm



Woodlark



Female Crossbill



Tree Pipit

## From Janet Porter - A Wet Day in the Lake District

Confined to our lodge for the day by continuous heavy rain we were treated to lengthy courting displays on the little “tarn” outside by not one, but two pairs of goosanders! The display was very unexpected – more like great crested grebes – to which they seem to be no relation at all. We got synchronised diving and fast underwater swimming, parallel running across the water surface and lots of head bobbing. Then the female lies very low and flat in the water looking as though she’s dead while the male circles her and then mates. Fascinating!



## From Sean Greenaway

With spring here Sue’s phone is seldom quiet from Bird Guide notifications about migrants popping in. We went off to Devils Dyke to see if we could see the wheatears that had been seen there. Yellow hammers were there in good numbers and they definitely had the soundtrack of the day. After a long walk slipping and sliding down the paths we saw a peregrine grey and red-legged partridges, and skylarks. On the way back however, we did get to see a solitary wheatear on the border of a ploughed field.

A few days later I took a trip to Grafham Water. It was very windy, which I think kept quite a few things off the water. I was able to see quite a bit on the shore line around the dam. Pied and white wagtails, yellow and grey wagtails and common and little ring plovers. They very often appeared very close to each other, so was a good opportunity to compare. The wooded area sounded very busy





with chiffchaff, chaffinch, blackcap and goldfinch, but the increasing foliage and wind in the trees made them difficult to spot.



Common Ringed Plover



Little Ringed Plover



Yellowhammer



Yellow Wagtail



Blackcap



Long-tailed Tit

## From Babs York - RSPB Lakenheath and Maidscross Hill

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Eleven hardy souls braved the chilly April day. We had hoped the weather forecast was correct and that the day would brighten and warm in the late afternoon, but sadly, it was not to be.

We arrived at Lakenheath at 2.30pm and made our way up to the Washland. Overhead there was plenty of activity; sand and house martins plus swallows performed their aerial manoeuvres. After a short while they were joined by a few swifts, that must have been wondering whether the journey from Africa was a tad premature. There was a good selection of ducks on the water and tucked away in the corner were a pair of garganey playing hard to get, although in the end, all had 'scope views of the handsome male. A pair of curlews flew around treating us to their uplifting call, but decided to land out of view over the bank.

While we were there a party of bar-headed geese arrived. They had put in an appearance earlier but, had flown off. They were likely escapees and not wild birds. Nevertheless, they are an interesting species, as for their migration they need to cross the Himalayas and have the highest recorded altitude for any bird.

We made our way along the bank accompanied by the cold wind; a scan of the rushes revealed a bittern in the open. Initially it was 'sky-pointing'; this is something they do to camouflage themselves in the reeds. It then caught something eel-like, before a good neck-stretch and moving into cover. Again, all participants got good looks in the 'scope. Most of the warblers were singing well, but were keeping low and giving only brief views. We wandered back through the trees and were glad of being out of the wind. Birds were thin on the ground, but a pair of long-tailed tits moved around the gorse patch that probably contained their nest.

Some of the party (the more sensible ones?) then opted for a hot drink in the visitor centre, while the others went to have a quick look at the photographers' blind. There wasn't much doing in front of the hide, but behind the hide there was a flurry of activity. A garden warbler sang and then gave views along with its congener, the blackcap. Also showing were whitethroat and sedge warblers.

After a refreshment break, we all moved on to Maidscross Hill. This is a beautiful site the other side of Lakenheath village. Despite the cold some of the nightingales dared to sing, although it wasn't prolonged and they were keeping well hidden. There were plenty of other warblers; chiff-chaff, willow warbler, whitethroat and sedge, also being accompanied by the background song of the skylarks that sang like it was a warm Spring day! Linnets were also on show in their pink finery and all were watchful, as kestrels constantly patrolled the area. We eventually found the yellowhammer after following his distinctive song. A cuckoo treated us to a fly-past, but it was silent. All together we saw 64 species and heard a further 6, not too shabby all things considered.