

## Waveney Bird Club

### Brecks, Good Friday 2014

Leaders: Steve Howell and Andrew Green



Perhaps we don't consider often enough how lucky we border people are: Norfolk and Suffolk are separated in the east by the glorious Waveney, and in the west – at least for a part of it – by the Little Ouse in the Brecklands. Contrasting environments and birds, but both equally beautiful.

And so it was that an intrepid group of 17 – led by Steve Howell and Andrew Green – sacrificed a Bank Holiday lie-in to assemble at the St Helen's picnic site at Santon Downham near Brandon on a sunny Good Friday. A slight nip to the air, but mist rising on the river and the trees clad in what Dorothy Casey of SWT calls 'willow warbler green.'

Part one of the day was to follow the river towards the village and cross the little road bridge, heading up towards Brandon through some typical Breck riverside woodland of willow, alder and silver birch. Sadly, no-one really talks of finding willow tit here anymore, although there was still possibility of lesser spotted woodpecker.

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This is a genuinely delightful walk, and worth the drive alone, particularly in the early-morning light of mid-April, when each green is a different green, with a soundtrack of distant green woodpeckers, mistle thrush and the calls of crossbills and nuthatch. We moved slowly, slightly astonished by the number of crossbills, and rather late bramblings (probably 50 plus of each in total), the latter in their summer plumage. Calls coming from the other side of the river further up proved to be mating toads.

A pair of mute swans were busily nest-building against a semi-submerged willow, and we paused to watch a pair of nuthatches who were furnishing their new home and goldcrests attempted perpetual motion in river-level vegetation on the opposite bank.

As we approached the bridge, a lone duck flew fast downstream – Steve immediately identified it as a drake mandarin, which of course elevated it instantly to Bird of the Day – so far!



So, over the bridge and onwards, with conversation turning to 'different drums;' particularly the audible difference between identifying great spotted and lesser spotted woodpeckers.

But no lesser spots – each drum burst was examined for the abrupt stop rather than brief fade, but it was not to be. However, the question did arise that – if the lesser spot drum is higher in pitch – perhaps the head might be a 'resonating chamber,' with a smaller head producing a higher note?

We headed back to Santon Downham churchyard, a famous spot for firecrests. The main party went to the churchyard itself, while I trawled the conifers by the roadside, where I'd found them before, with a total of 5 birds between us (located mainly on their song, which is like a goldcrest that has forgotten the words).

So on to part two at Mayday Farm, located on the road that joins Brandon to the A11 at Elveden, with a series of parallel tracks that cut through the forest. The principal targets of this location would be woodlark, perhaps goshawk (although maybe getting late for display flights) and a double-perhaps of tree pipit. And of course, crossbills.....

What you're looking for with woodlark is an area that has been grubbed up, so that's where we headed, with Andrew taking the lead. You've also got to have your eyes tightly screwed in to spot these birds, as they often stand still and are well disguised against this particular environment. But we got them – two of them, hanging around long enough to get scopes lined up and everyone getting a good view.

A real bonus was on the way back (at what must remain an undisclosed location) was when Graham got onto a tree pipit! Not only an increasingly rare sight, but also a sound – perched in the top of a 20' tree, it gave us a tremendous burst of songflight before returning to its favoured spot. Sorry, mandarin – BoTD second spot. This bird was vocal enough to see how the black 'moustachial' lines fluffed out in song,

giving the appearance of a dark throat.



This experience led to a brief exploration of the various descriptive words typical of bird forums, such as ‘obliging,’ ‘confiding,’ ‘elusive’ and ‘though mobile.’ It also eliminated any thought of a goshawk-hunt being necessary, although the day had been rather raptor-light – sparrowhawk, kestrel and a couple of buzzards at the Mayday car park area so far. However, as with the Outney walk, it was noticeable how many butterflies were about, with green-veined, copper, speckled wood, orange tip, peacock, small tortoiseshell, red admiral all in fairly good numbers.

So to part three at Lackford Lakes, and the convoy set off across the A11 for a lunchbreak.

The rest of the world had now got out as well, so the car park was fairly full. Lackford is a popular spot, offering a linkage of easy-walking trails through a range of environments, all built around the lakes themselves. While some of the party took themselves upstairs to the glass-fronted visitors' centre, a few stayed outside on the benches, where we got a good clear view of a buzzard passing – and after that, a heron, and then – what looked to be another heron, but through the bins (although much more distant) was clearly bigger, with slower wing beats and a noticeable white and black wing pattern. It was slowly descending from evergreens on the right to disappear behind poplars. Ok, there are cranes at Lakenheath, but a quick check of the staff Collins' Guide pretty much ruled that out. No-one else seemed to have seen it, but my reaction had been white stork, having seen that lazy wing beat in Bulgaria.

What with the winds onto the east coast over the past week and it being the migration time, it wasn't impossible – later information showed one to have been seen on the Welsh coast, which is certainly further west last time I looked.

So, while the rest of the group took in the calm of Lackford and views of red-crested pochard, mediterranean gull, tufted duck etc. I tanked round the whole reserve twice trying to get to where I thought it had gone down – but couldn't. And anyway, it might not have landed. And it might have been something else. But what, at that size, wing speed and colouration? However, I got as far as a good view of the trees it had disappeared behind, and this was a fair distance from the visitors' centre, so it was BIG. Why hadn't I noticed how the head was held in flight? Too late now....but better to call it and be wrong than not to call it, I reckon.

We met up again at a hide at the far end of the reserve, and we tried not to mention it. At least no-one said anything about telling stork from butter (at least within earshot).

A few of the group thought they might make a late charge to Cavenham Heath for stone curlew and wheatear, but the majority felt the Brecks had been largely done, and we'd been out around 9 hours. It had been another great day, with much thanks to Steve and Andrew.

And with that, we storked off home.....

*Report by Paddy Shaw*

## **Species List**

### ***Birds:***

Mute Swan Greylag Goose Canada Goose Barnacle Goose Egyptian Goose Shelduck Mandarin (3 drakes flying at Santon Downham) Gadwall Teal Mallard Shoveler Pochard Red-crested Pochard (Lackford) Tufted Duck Pheasant Great-crested Grebe Cormorant Grey Heron Red Kite (2 from car park at Lackford) Sparrowhawk Kestrel Common Buzzard Moorhen Coot Oystercatcher Little Ringed Plover (pair at Lackford) Lapwing Black-headed Gull Lesser Black-backed Gull Great Black-backed Gull Herring Gull Stock Dove Woodpigeon Collared Dove Green Woodpecker Great-spotted Woodpecker Woodlark (2 at Mayday Farm, Spinks Lodge) Sand Martin Swallow House Martin Tree Pipit (displaying male, Mayday Farm) Pied Wagtail Dunnock Wren Robin Blackbird Song Thrush Redwing Mistle Thrush Cetti's Warbler Willow Warbler Chiffchaff Blackcap Sedge Warbler Goldcrest Firecrest (total 5 around Santon Downham church and road) Long-tailed Tit Marsh Tit Blue Tit Great Tit Nuthatch (2 nesting pairs at Santon Downham) Treecreeper Magpie Jay Jackdaw Carrion Crow Starling Chaffinch Brambling (60 Santon Downham, 1 Mayday Farm) Greenfinch Goldfinch Siskin Linnets Lesser Redpoll (8 Santon Downham, 1 Spinks Lodge) Crossbill (50 Santon Downham, 8 Mayday Farm) Yellowhammer Reed Bunting (Total 77)

### ***Butterflies:***

Orange Tip, Small Copper, Small White, Green-veined White, Speckled Wood

### ***Others:***

Muntjac (2 at Mayday), Bronze Ground Beetle, Common Toad