

Waveney Bird Club

## Brecks, March 22nd 2015

Driving from my house in Long Stratton en-route to Andrew's near New Buckenham, I came across two Barn Owls hunting in the early morning light which was very pleasing and I wondered if this might be a good omen for the rest of the day. Thankfully, this certainly turned out to be the case for me, Andrew and thirteen other keen early risers who met at St Helen's Picnic site near Santon Downham at 7.00am for our third consecutive annual Breckland field trip. On this most memorable of days we were to be treated to some amazing views of some the finest bird jewels that emboss Thetford Forest's crown.

Within minutes of arriving and before we could even get our scopes set up for the first birders to arrive, we noted a pair of Mandarins fly in and actually land in some poplar trees along the river. At the same time there were two Great Spotted Woodpeckers drumming in the distance which was heartening because my previous two visits to the Brecks earlier in the year were rather woodpecker free. The Mandarins flew down river before most of the Waveney bird clubbers had arrived but thankfully, they soon returned, this time accompanied by an extra drake.

They gave even better views than before, landing in the trees in the car park causing Jane to jump up and down with joy at having achieved a new life tick while Keith who initially missed his year tick due to the call of nature also managed to connect with them.



The bridge at St Helen's

To begin the day, we spent several minutes down by St Helen's Bridge just ticking off all the common species of birds but we also encountered a Chiffchaff singing briefly and noted several Siskins milling around in the tree tops.

However, news on the pager of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker showing briefly along the river a mile the other side of Santon Downham at 7.00am had us trotting back to the cars in anticipation and we drove down to the forestry commission car park in the centre of the village in the hope of walking out and seeing one of these elusive little blighters! From the unlikely setting of the car park and completely out of the blue, we had arguably the best sighting of the day. We had barely walked away from the cars when over on the Norfolk side of the river I noticed that a lot of corvids had suddenly flown up. This was enough activity to warrant a casual scan with my binoculars on the off chance of something good and I was not to be disappointed. I picked up two large raptors engaged in a skyward tussle and almost certainly knew what they were straight away. "Get on these two birds over the tall pine" I shouted with excitement while getting my scope onto them and confirming them loudly as two male Goshawks.

Everyone picked them up fairly easily but what happened next was totally unexpected. One chased the other over the river, into Suffolk and then right over the car park where we were standing which gave us fantastic overhead views of them. This enabled us to really get in on the finer points of Goshawk ID and we obtained good, clear views of the birds large heads, rounded tails, bulging secondaries and finely barred pale under-parts. Not only was it a great sighting for everyone present but as soon as they flew over the county border they became a long awaited Suffolk tick for me personally. In one word, WOW!

As leaders, myself and Andrew knew that with this early good fortune, the pressure would be off us at least for a little while to find another good bird and we really relaxed into the morning. The weather was perfect for Brecks birding and as we crossed Santon Downham Bridge we encountered a mixed bag of no less than six finch species which included two Bramblings, Lesser Redpoll and a fine male Bullfinch which were the highlights.

A couple of Reed Buntings were also along the river to represent that particular family and what with Marsh Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch and Treecreeper, things were definitely still going well. A Kingfisher flew along the river as did another pair of Mandarin.

There were other raptors to be seen and we also logged two Common Buzzards, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel circling on the thermals.



WBC not birdwatching....

We reached the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker site with good expectations but after several minutes without a hint of calling or drumming and no movement up in the trees, the enthusiasm started to wane. I sometimes feel this is a strange site because if there is no woodpecker activity, all the other bird life in the immediate area also seems suppressed and you stand there trying to remain alert but with nothing else seemingly to engage your attention, it becomes increasingly hard to remain focused.

Nevertheless, we spent a good half hour listening carefully but in the end we reluctantly gave up. Thank goodness for the Goshawks earlier! The walk back as always in such a situation as this seemed long and arduous and I was keeping my fingers crossed for a good bird to liven things up again and it was with great relief when after going through the underpass back near the bridge, that we heard a familiar “tuluee” call which was followed by the appearance of a pair of Woodlarks. They flew in and landed on the ground nearby. One showed really well which sent



Jane into more acrobatics – another lifer for her – and everyone enjoyed prolonged views of this little heathland beauty.



Wood Lark

With another target bird for the day achieved we headed back through the village to the car park. A feeder in someone's front garden attracted a Nuthatch and Brambling and there were some more Siskins. We dumped the scopes off in the cars and headed up to the churchyard for Firecrest. It took a while, but eventually a male began singing, flashed his supercillium and orange crown stripe briefly to some of us who managed to get onto him and then flew back into the woods. A Goldcrest was more obliging, showing well, and then Graham bagged a Crossbill on top of one of the trees briefly – a scarce bird in the region this winter, so well done to him.

There was a long staying Great Grey Shrike at nearby Grime's Graves and such a good bird so close was far too tempting to ignore.

Starting out from Field Barn, there was fortunately plenty of lay-by for all our cars. Looking at the map, it appeared to be a good mile long walk to the site but actually it was only several hundred meters.



Great Grey Shrike

Some recent felling and planting of new trees had taken place which had opened up the whole area to amazing views into the distance which in itself was worth the short walk but we were on a roll weren't we, so it seemed almost inevitable that the shrike would show, and sure enough, there it was, along a line of stumpy trees and bushes. A definite bonus bird and if that wasn't enough, there was yet another Goshawk – a larger bird and probably female. She displayed briefly for us before heading back into the pines.

I picked up two distant passerines in flight but by the time I had noted that one was red and one was green, signifying a pair of Crossbills, they both disappeared into the trees.

The plan for the afternoon session was to meet Steve P at Lackford Lakes at 1.00pm but not part of the plan was Carol noticing that her car had a flat tyre. A brief change of occupation was required from WBC members from birders to car mechanics and road safety officers and between us we changed the wheel, managed passing traffic and got Carol back on the road again and headed off to Lackford.





Ooops.....



Hero Howell – doesn't even take his bins off!

Arriving at Lackford a bit later than planned, we headed straight into the visitor centre for refreshments. While we sat down drinking tea and coffee, we watched through the window, various tits and finches coming to the feeders. Steve P arrived and we told him of our very good day so far and showed him some photos of the Goshawks and the shrike.

Afterwards, we spent a couple of hours walking around the lakes where we saw several Goldeneye on the main boating lake, and a pair of Red-crested Pochards on one of the smaller lakes.

The warm and still afternoon encouraged plenty of birds to sing which included no less than eight Chiffchaffs, three of which could be heard from the visitor centre alone.

To finish off the day, we went to Cavenham Heath which looked beautiful during the last couple of hours of sunlight. We drove all the way down to Temple Bridge at the River Lark – a real rollercoaster of a drive along a very uneven track. Fortunately, the track was bone dry which made navigating it a lot easier. It was well worth the drive though, for there is a lovely stretch of river here and also a weir. Grey Wagtail was expected and a pair were seen but more unexpected was a day flying Tawny Owl which shot past several of the luckier persons in our group. A Water Rail was heard squealing but remained elusive visually.

We managed to see seven of eight Stone Curlews present on the heath. Two were split off into a distinct pair and one of these had its tail cocked up in some kind of display and looked something akin to a giant Wren! There were also a pair of Stonechats and a newly arrived male Wheatear showing off his black bandit mask to good effect.

By now it was almost 6.00 in the evening. Legs were weary and it was time to head for home. Being such a great day that it was, even the drive back to Lackford reserve to drop people off at their cars wasn't uneventful and it produced two Barn Owls along the way. I had finished the day as I had started it!

Back at the visitor centre we said our goodbyes and last words on what was regarded by everyone as an exceptionally good day. Indeed, on the way home, myself and Andrew were in full agreement that this was far and away the best and most productive Waveney Bird Club walk that we had ever led.

Oh for more walks like that in the future – I wonder what Minsmere in May will produce? We can only hope!!

*Steve Howell*