

Waveney Bird Club

Ditchingham Hall Estate, Good Friday Walk 2016

So the calendar comes round to the first 'official' event of the WBC outdoor events programme (not counting the NYD Lizardland Challenge, of course), and once again, we returned to the fantastic Ditchingham Hall Estate on Good Friday.

Easter seemed ridiculously early this year – the clocks hadn't even changed yet, so the 7am start would hardly be the publicised 'dawn chorus' event. However, weather-wise it was fine – a gap between a couple of fronts, and Storm Katy still three days away, putting on weight out in the Atlantic.

We're also in a kind of gap bird-wise. The winter visitors making their staggered departure northwards to pack their entire family life into a couple of seasons, and the first early migrants presenting their passports along the south and east coast.

As we'd put the WBC signs out the previous evening, a flock of over 400 Redwing had been assembling in the fields around the estate prior to departure.

So the question was – was Easter too early?



Keeping the noise down....



Listening for Chiffchaffs

Whatever birds were about were unlikely to evade the 28 pairs of eyes which set off from the Beaters' Lodge that Friday morning – probably the biggest assembly we've had for one of these walks, despite the early start.

Obviously, such a big group has its own problems – mainly one of noise, just from walking, so as we headed up the track, we kept to the grass to avoid the almost military crunching on the path.

The best technique here is to make frequent stops for some intense listening. Leafless trees allow for easy scanning to detect and confirm the singer. At this early stage in the Spring, it's a great opportunity to practice this technique, before the solo singers get swallowed up by the massed chorus of later in the season.



Redwing considers the journey ahead



It wasn't long before we heard the first singing Chiffchaff and Blackcap; songs that for many are the equivalent of hearing a starting gun for the summer breeding season.

The track we follow on these walks moves up, across then back through the woods, and as we moved, Sparrowhawk and Buzzard fell to various notebooks, and the calls of Nuthatches were never far away. It is obvious the careful management of the Estate has provided these birds with a valuable local habitat, as they are not a common sight in our part of Suffolk.



Nick Clitheroe describes the Grey Partridge re-introduction



Steve and Nick talk Partridges

Half-way round, Nick Clitheroe (the estate's head gamekeeper) explained the strategy for Grey Partridge re-population at Ditchingham Hall, standing by a pen containing a male and female bird, who were very skittery at our presence. This is a complex tale, involving surrogate parents, homicidal females and it was obvious some very important work is going on here. The evidence is substantiated by the small breeding population that has migrated from the Hall to Outney Common, where they have been regularly seen for more than a year. Hopefully this project will result in the 'Englishman' being seen more commonly in this area. They're less obvious than the Red-Legged, and their habit of laying low until almost trod on makes them a more difficult 'tick'.



Grey Partridge pen, with prospective parents

So, after pausing for a brief performance by a Marsh Tit, we moved into the woods for the last leg back down to the lake, and time with a Treecreeper.

After all the months of restricted daylight, wet and (some) cold, there's something that should be bottled about this time of year; it's not here yet, but it's coming. Roots taking up nutrients, buds swelling, shoots of as-yet-unidentified plants poking a small green head above the ground.....all of a sudden, it will explode, but for now, it's like the theatre lights going down before your favourite band takes to the stage.



Looking for Treecreeper



A welcome splash of Spring colour

The Nuthatches were really going for it – all three typical calls in evidence at the same time – as we followed the little Waveney tributary back down towards the daffodil-bedecked banks by the little ornamental bridge which crosses it.



By the road bridge, which had sustained damage from a fallen tree during the winter, we halted for great views of a pair of Grey Wagtails, gathering nest material for their den on the opposite bank, before straggling back to the Beaters' Retreat, where Kathy had spent the morning preparing bacon rolls, hot dogs and hot crossed buns (thanks Kathy!)



A close call for the road bridge after tree fall



Beaters' Retreaters eaters.....

A brief ceremonial moment saw Susannah Ferrers, who accompanied us throughout the walk, present Steve Howells with the BINS Cup for the New Year's Day walk bird count of 111, which was the winning total. This, of course, was more easily achieved because none of the other teams could get it together to actually enter, but that's not the point – WE WON IT! WBC – the Leicester City of Birdclubs!



Steve Howell receives the BINS cup from Susannah Ferrers

And so it was over for another year – Redwings on the way out, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs on the way in – just the way it ought to be. A big vote of thanks to Susannah Ferrers for allowing us to visit this fantastic estate, and to Nick Clitheroe for all the info on the practical aspects of managing for conservation, and to Kathy for the very welcome refreshments!

Some post-walk comments from members:

'Hi, Just to say a big thank you for this morning'

'What a lovely walk this morning, not to mention hot X buns and bacon butties! Thanks to both of you – huge thanks. You've created such a warm friendly group that's great at sharing and not making anyone feel small if they don't know something (quite important!). Just wanted to say that we really appreciate what you do and sorry not to have been able to be more sociable afterwards'

'Thank you to both of you for a lovely walk in the sunshine and then a delicious bacon butty back at the Beaters Retreat.'

'A great walk – some very inspiring work going on there, and lovely to hear so many Nuthatches and that the efforts with the Grey Partridge has spread out to Outney Common!'