

Waveney Bird Club

LizardLand Challenge – Jan 1st 2016

Waveney Bird Club's year-starting birding trip has for years centred on Lowestoft and Lothingland; an area offering a range of environmental choices at this time of the year.

Since 2015 though, this has evolved into a co-operation with the Lowestoft Lounge Lizards and the 'Lizardland Challenge' – perhaps inspired by (or in competition with) the Suffolk Bins New Year Bird Race, where teams scour Suffolk for the common and the rare, seeking to break the New Year's Day maximum of 130, set a few years ago.

While the WBC team makes up the infantry, with around 20 members scouring 2 or 3 sites, the Lizards are the commando teams, in groups of 2 or 3, starting before dawn and hitting as many sites as possible.

Another departure was away from our usual starting point of Carlton Marshes, moving to the south wall of Breydon Water. It had been thought that Carlton's tracks are quite often quite 'gloopy' at this time of year, and was only likely to turn up species we were likely to catch elsewhere. It also takes quite a while to get round it, so the decision had been made long before Breydon offered the lure of a peek at the Lesser Yellow Legs, which has been in residence for a while (although sightings have been a little off and on).



First blue sky of the year....

So to the morning itself. Winter so far had not been too promising. Most December days had been warmer than the May 2015 equivalents, with the jet stream stuck over the UK and most of England to the south of it, drawing warm, wet air off the Atlantic. Wind, cloud and rain seemed to be a permanent feature.

So, what a surprise on New Year's Day to be scraping ice off the windscreen at 7am, and to drive across to Lowestoft with a spectacular red sunrise slowly taking shape to the east. Could that actually be the sky up there?

By the time we assembled at the rugby club car park, we had a cool, crisp winter morning, with a bit of a southerly blowing up the estuary. Steve Howell was leading today, and had already arrived, to bag a Barn Owl on the adjoining meadow.



The Steves...

So, it was crisp new 2016 notebooks out, and off along the wall. The south side of the estuary is still Suffolk according to the Watsonian boundaries, established to keep wildlife recording consistent in the context of local/county authority territory re-drawing, so the Suffolk listers were up and running.

Breydon can turn up extraordinary numbers of certain bird species. A recce trip a couple of days before had, for instance, established there were 10,000-plus Golden Plover currently in residence.

There were also huge numbers of Lapwing and Wigeon, interspersed with Dunlin, Common and Black-headed Gulls (with several Mediterraneans amongst them), Curlew and smaller numbers of Turnstone, Ringed Plover and Redshank.



After the Peregrine....

Of course, such an abundance is going to attract raptors. The sight of thousands of birds taking to the air providing a display of black, white, grey and golden wings in order to provide a kaleidoscope of confusion immediately sets the optics scanning for the perpetrator. At first, it was Marsh Harrier but then – Peregrine! In the course of the walk along the wall, the falcon made several passes, usually high above the wheeling flocks of waders, presumably suiting the in-built attack programming. We walked as far as we dared, bearing in mind the time factor and the other sites on the schedule, hoping for a Short-eared Owl on a meadow used for grazing horses, where one had been sat a couple of days before. No owl, but distant skeins of Pink-footed Geese flying north over Great Yarmouth was a bonus, as were the Stonechats, Reed Bunting, Meadow Pipit and Skylark adjacent to the estuary.

Starting from below the Church, we located a couple of Spotted Redshank and a single Knot, but no LYL. There was more chance of that with the larger groups of Redshank up by the castle itself.



Yellow Legs in blue light

A fairly large group were already assembled at the watch point below the castle walls, and a few 'stretch and peek' views were available, but the bird (and associated Redshanks) were moving up river as the tide came in, so a group of us went over the wall to where a grassy slope provides a break in the trees and a more open aspect towards the river and marshes around the Berney Arms.

And there it was – for a while in glorious isolation, away from its Redshank mates, in Suffolk territory! We hung around long enough for Jon Warnes to get a few of us onto a Short-eared Owl, which we'd not been able to add to the list at the GY end of Breydon. Now Lowestoft called, and the lunchtime 'late arrivals' rendezvous at Leathe's Ham.



Deciding to tot up the lake's inhabitants and get down to Lake Lothing before lunch (so as to fit a sea-watch in), we headed off down to the railway bridge, which gives views up Lothing towards the sea and back into the marina in the Oulton Broad direction.

It didn't take long to get on to the Great Northern Diver, which was seeming to enjoy its winter break in Lowestoft – in the same spot it had been in a couple of days before. We also picked up the first Lesser Black-backed Gull of the day in the party assembled on the quayside towards the silos.

To make the trip even better, the Guillemot (which hadn't been reported that day) had moved upstream, and was contentedly floating about between the boats. It was a 'now you see it, now you don't' event, but most of the group picked it up from the vantage point of the bridge.



Lake Lothing's bird hide....



Oops....

The tide was high now, leaving little mud around Mutford Lock Bridge, so there was no sign of the Common Sandpiper reputed to be spending

some time there. A few Redshank and an excellent Kingfisher flight completed this part of the day.

So we picked our way back through the curious blend of boatyards, derelict sheds, piles of rubble and weeds and human rubbish that is the bank of Lake Lothing

Last stop – Ness Point, for Purple Sandpipers and sea-watching. The sandpipers were ridiculously easy; our arrival on the Ness put up a group of Turnstones, leaving 13 braver purps to continue to forage for whatever it was they were finding there.



Purple Sandpiper Point



Another New Year, another sea-watch

The wind had built up, and the clear skies of the morning were a distant memory as we assembled the WBC Scope Forest under Gulliver, the huge wind turbine which – for some unfathomable reason – was not turning in the strong southerly.

Visibility wasn't great, but we did ok – Brent Geese, Red-throated Diver, Kittiwake, Gannet and the bonus of Little Gull and Eider fell to the notebooks. The party was dwindling now though, as we were treated to a shoreline fly-past by a Shag.

This was the cue to break the group even further, as we tried to discover the roost point, thinking it to be somewhere on Hamilton Dock. Hamilton Road turned up nothing, so we hared round to the South Pier to race the light. Nothing there either. Oh well.....



A message to Steve Piotrowski from the Stanford Arms

And so to the pub, and the Great Reckoning with the Lounge Lizards. A message came through from Andrew Easton that he would be delayed by the presence of a Glaucous Gull in the roost at Oulton Broad, so still it went on into the dark hours.

Eventually, we were all there, and glasses were donned and lists compared, by those who are good at such things. The rest of us just chatted and drank, because that's what we were good at. Each man to his own profession, I say.

With the late addition of a Green Woodpecker which hadn't been included, the Lizards had 99 and we had 88, having not taken in any woodland/arable sites.

Comparison of the lists turned in a very impressive total of 111 species for the day, which was a marked jump-up from the previous year.

As a last opinion, it must be that the Lesser Yellow Legs was bird of the day. However, the sight of thousands of Lapwing, Golden Plover and Dunlin wheeling against a pale blue sky with a Peregrine cruising above was a Top Birding Moment, and a fantastic start to a new year.

(We'll try and present a full species list to accompany this report on Steve P's return from Cuba)

And a last thanks to the Lumix TZ3 that has supplied most of the pics for the trip reports in the last year. The TZ3 is dead – long live the TZ70!