

## WBC MINSMERE WALK 1/6/14

Leaders – Andrew Green and Steve Howell

The welcome arrival of the Springwatch team to Suffolk and Minsmere in particular this year added an extra interest to the day's proceedings for the club. Seeing all the BBC units and camera set-ups really brought home to us the amount of effort involved on the crew's behalf to bring so many wonderful wildlife images into the homes of millions of viewers. We began our walk at 9.00am, before the inevitable big arrival of curious day trippers coming along to be a part of the Springwatch event. We opted to walk round The Scrape first of all, before the reserve became too busy, and to make things more interesting and also for a bit of fun, we decided to try and see or hear 100 species. It would be a tough challenge, but one that is achievable on a good day at Minsmere. We were immediately helped along towards this target with a calling Cuckoo, a lovely pair of Bullfinches perched on some sawn off branches and a Garden Warbler singing from nearby scrub.

It was a warm and sunny morning and therefore it was no surprise that there were already several dragon and damselflies on the wing. A large brown and fast moving hawk in a suntrap just on the edge of the wood turned out to be a Norfolk Hawker (or Green-eyed Hawker as Steve P prefers to call them – nothing against Norfolk, much!). This was the first one ever for me personally at Minsmere. This scarce and local species is an East Anglian specialty, recently forming strong colonies along the Suffolk coast. There is some debate as to whether these insects have expanded from their Norfolk/Suffolk Broads strongholds or whether these new colonies have originated from the Continent.

We walked through the wood and out towards West Hide and noted several species of warbler that were singing well including: Blackcap; Chiffchaff; Garden, Sedge and Reed Warblers. Slightly further on and past the West Hide (now named the Wildlife Lookout) we stopped at a narrow dyke running out into the reedbed that was alive with more dragonflies and they gave great views and photographic opportunities. Four-spotted Chasers and Blue-tailed Damselflies were the most abundant, but there were also single Hairy Dragonfly and Red-eyed Damselfly that provided prolonged

A Bittern was spotted flying over towards Island Mere, which was a good sighting but only the tip of the iceberg to come, in what would turn out to be a superb and memorable day for the species. Raptors were making the most of the warm morning weather and Marsh Harrier, Buzzard,

Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and Hobby were all noted, the latter initially being rather distant to satisfy most observers at this point.

By the time we had left South Hide and added birds like Little Tern, Kittiwake, Bar-tailed Godwit and Wigeon to the list we were already up to around 75 species and well on the way to the hundred, but we also knew that the more birds we added, the harder it would become to find new species and the list could eventually dry up very fast. However, we were enjoying the challenge and, at this point, felt fairly confident that we would attain our target.

We reached the sluice by around 10.30am and rather surprisingly, despite Springwatch being present; it seemed even quieter and there were fewer visitors than on a normal Sunday at Minsmere. The sluice bushes appeared bird less with few passerines to observe, so we continued further south to scan the levels which were more productive. June is not a particularly good month for passage waders but, under the circumstances, we did well and managed to see Whimbrel, Greenshank, and two Dunlins.

A brief seawatch, mostly on my part, in the hope of logging an over-summering Common Scoter or passing Gannet to add to the list proved fruitless, but there were more distant Bittern sightings with two seen together over Island Mere and another flying over North Scrape, which really enhanced the general enjoyment by late morning.

Heading back inland along the north wall towards the Visitor Centre, we bagged some more species with a Water Rail squealing and singing Willow Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat. Steve P did well to spot a single Stone Curlew distantly along the back of the ridge behind the Visitor Centre and we finally obtained a good view of a Hobby over North Bushes, much closer than my earlier claimed specks, followed by yet another Bittern!

We lunched at the picnic area by Minsmere's café and noted another Hobby zipping through and Brimstone butterfly. After lunch, we continued our walk towards Island Mere and were on around 90 species by now. It was becoming increasingly harder to find new birds, so our attention naturally turned towards the insects, which were now out in abundance due to the warm and pleasant afternoon. The South Belt/Whin Hill area is always good for insects at this time of year as it is usually well sheltered from any wind and this day was no exception. The target dragonfly along here was Variable Damselfly. At first we could find only Azures but eventually, we came across our target and noted a handful of Variables, mostly around bramble patches. They can be

identified from other blue damselflies by their broken anti-humeral stripes on the thorax, which look like little double exclamation marks. Also, the U marking at the top of the abdomen is thicker, and has two small blue spots at its base. Looking for these got us some other unexpected goodies including several more Four-spotted Chasers, which showed excellently, a couple more Hairy Dragonflies and another Green-eyed Hawker.

Some very nice butterflies were also found including one each of Green Hairstreak and Brown Argus. The Green Hairstreak is unique in Britain in that it is our only resident that has brown upper-wings and vivid green undersides and a thin white squiggly line that identifies it as a hairstreak. Brown Argus can be confused with female Common Blue, but in general it is a lot smaller, sometimes tiny and lacks spots close to the body on its underside that show on a Common Blue. The Brown Argus is also an attractive and often overlooked butterfly with its beautiful brown upper wings bordered by striking orange.

After a fairly long gap without anything on the bird front, we finally bagged another bird species when we found a Green Woodpecker nest hole half way up a tree and after some patient waiting we were treated to the sight of the adults coming warily to the entrance to feed their young.

Onto Island Mere Hide and the true impact of Springwatch's presence was made fully aware to us with a queue of visitors outside the hide waiting their turn to gain entry. The star attraction was not some wandering vagrant bird from afar but TV nature presenter Nick Baker who along with us (when we finally made it into the hide!) enjoyed cracking close views of Marsh Harrier, Hobby and again, Bittern. At one point, two Bitterns flew out from the reedbed together and one of them flew right over the mere towards us and landed just to the right of the hide. This was probably the same bird that suddenly appeared on the edge of the reeds and swam across the dyke just a few feet away. Give or take some duplication, we must have seen at least seven or eight Bitterns around the reserve during the course of the day and that is certainly the most I have ever seen there. It was also very heartening to see how much Nick positively enjoyed Minsmere's rich and varied avifauna what with him being such a distinguished and well known visitor.

As expected, the bird species list had come to an abrupt standstill, but at a very respectable 95, which was more than we originally expected to get. The commonest bird not noted and which was strangely absent was

Swift. Although most spring migrants would have passed through by now, we expected to get at least one or two wanderers but it was not to be on this occasion.

Otherwise though, in general it was a great day. There were plenty of birds around in the morning to be seen, the Minsmere specialties showed well, and in the afternoon, save from the Bittern sightings, when it might all have fizzled out, the insects took over to entertain us and keep us going well into the rest of the day.

*Steve Howell*