

## WBC - Orfordness Weekend, 11-12 October 2014

Is there an adjective you couldn't use for Orfordness? It's one of those areas that can be everything, and sometimes all on the same day – in bright sunshine, the fantastic skyscapes can rival anything in the UK; with grey, rain-filled clouds scudding in it can be bleak, threatening; in the half-light of morning or evening, the deserted and broken war-time buildings make it ghostly.

However, whatever the mood, once you get on that boat from Orford Quay, someone throws the bird-switch. Salt marsh and grazing marsh, reed-bed, estuary and tidal flats, shingle, pools, busted buildings and the sea. If you're a bird, you can take your pick.

Having the opportunity to spend the whole weekend there, accompanying the National Trust/WBC ringing team, was an opportunity not to be missed. Like a WBC international trip, it was also an excuse to focus for every waking hour on the business of birding – if not doing it, then talking about it.



### **Saturday**

So at 8am, Steve and I joined Roger Walsh, Patrick Barker and Dave Crawshaw on the quayside with enough vittels to choke a horse, sleeping bags, liquid refreshment and a couple of toothbrushes, while Glen Moon from the National Trust brought the boat over. A quick Landrover trip to the accommodation block, dump the stuff, swallow a brew and grab the bins.

Roger, Patrick and Dave joined Mike Marsh and Gill Hammond at the ringing hut for a morning of demos, while Steve and I went off a-

surveyin'. This was going to principally feature a morning on the roof of the Bomb Ballistics building, and an afternoon sea-watching (but what we really wanted was a merlin....) However, it was also the weekend of the BTO's golden plover count (we got about 280 of them on the Saturday, and I'm expecting the call to Thetford to receive our medallions any day)

The expected foul weather never arrived, but we could see it from there ... nasty clouds covered the coast, while Orfordness remained bathed in sunlight, except for a blowy squall while we were on the roof. A National Trust warden on a bike cycled out to open the lower floor of the building so we could shelter if it got out of hand; a trip down the stairs revealed a museum room dedicated to the function of the building as a filming centre for bomb tests on the sea, with a bench and a window which made it into a serviceable hide, if we'd have needed it.

The bird count was rising steadily (a full list will be attached to the report); 5 spoonbill, golden plover, lapwing, wigeon, teal, marsh harrier, egrets (a quick chorus of *Je n'Egrette Rien* was probably appropriate), blackwits, curlew adding to the skylarks, rock and meadow pipits which were all over the shingle.

Apart from the harriers and a kestrel, very few raptors though – and no lesser black-backed gulls.

A quick trip back to the ringing hut, a lunch break, then out to the beach, where it was actually warm in the sun and reducing wind. There were quite a few lighthouse-visitors about, but we set about a brent count. We'd already got to around 500, flying south in skeins of between 20 and 30, but in the next couple of hours, added another thousand. There were also a few common scoter, three bonxies (these birds heading north) and a solitary Iceland gull going south, adding to the Arctic skua we'd got earlier. There's something about sea-watching that reminds me of fishing – you may not be doing anything in particular, but it's totally absorbing, and time flies past. Makes you look forward to the winter. So, a target was set: we'd stop at 1500 brent or 3.30pm, whichever came first. They just about coincided in the end.

The public were starting to dribble away, being rounded up by Glen in what looked like a golf cart, as we headed back to the roof for another merlin-scan. For some reason, I was certain we were going to get one sometime this weekend. I'd seen one at Spurn the weekend before, but Steve had gone a couple of years merlin-less. There are very few occasions this happens, and – for shame! – I was milking it. '5 days

without a merlin is long enough for me!' (I'd better shut up, before he shows me his world list)

Odd... we got back on the roof, but no skylarks, no pipits, no plover – a few Chinese water deer (actually about 7) but all quiet, bird-wise.

Steve spotted it first – an adult peregrine, sitting down on the shingle to the left of a water deer.

Despite a guide, I couldn't get on it. Wrong deer! I got with the programme just in time before it took off; an absolutely stunning bird!

Explained the lack of pipits, anyway. It was also good to see quite a few hares, re-populating after the decimation of last December's tidal surge.

The ringers had seen a peregrine earlier, but that had been a juvenile.

This was definitely adult, and so a different bird.

Heading back over the bridge, a largish bird whipped over the path ahead and into the brambles, accompanied by a machine-gun call....ring ouzel?

Then there was Patrick and Roger, acting as beaters. They'd got on it, and were trying to drive it back to the nets to catch it. Steve joined them, skirting the river wall. To cut a long story short, they won – a female ouzel in Roger's hand for the first time. I think he was quite pleased at that – a ringed ouzel!



The light was starting to dip now. There was just time for a ring-tail hen harrier between the ringing hut and the accommodation block before calling it a day, and an evening of cooking the burgers originally made for the Minsmere barbeque (it's a long story!), a couple of tinnies, a drop of wine, bird tales and bed.

### **Sunday**

A slamming door before light meant Mike was out to unfurl the nets for another day of ringing. We were on deck about 6.30am, with the boat carrying the main WBC party expected at 8am. This gave us time to brew up, get out with the sunrise and take a slow stroll up to the jetty. We got the hen harrier again on the way back from its roost, and a little owl, silhouetted in the half light on a distant hay bale. Motionless, it should have been accompanied by the whistle theme from 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly'.

The list started mounting immediately; a peregrine overflight (perhaps the juvenile spotted on Saturday), golden plover, shelduck, stonechat, skylark, linnet, mipits and rockits – it was difficult to keep up, and we already had a species list of around 50 by the time the boat turned up.

There were now 15 of us, and the action didn't stop. Greenshank, spotted redshank, gadwall, wigeon, teal – the tally was going up like a pinball machine.

The weather was mellower today, and after a stop for tea, we headed back to the Bomb Ballistics roof for a shingle scan. Still no merlin – but there was still time.....



The shingle is perhaps the most atmospheric environment on Orfordness; unidentifiable piles of rusted something-or-other, curled wire providing a perch for wheatear, derelict concrete huts, the radio masts, the almost classical columns of the buildings used for atom bomb business, designed to blow out and drop the vast concrete lid in the event of disaster, almost swamped by blown-in sand and shingle slopes, signs warning of 'unexploded ordnance' dropped by both sides in the war. It was hard to imagine how busy this place must have been in what is fairly recent memory.

And then there's the lighthouse, with its uncertain future as the North Sea bites into the beach below it. Will it be rebuilt in Orford village, or will erosion get it first? Pretty ironic, that it stands there intending to warn the sea-goers of the land, when perhaps it should be warning the land-dwellers of the sea.....

Poetry over – back to the birding.

The ever-helpful Glen was going to drive the lunch bags down to the beach so we could head down there unencumbered. So we got down to sea-watching.

The wind was swinging now, moving round towards the north. You could watch enormous weather moving either side of the ness, and not be quite certain of what bit you were going to get next.

We settled in to the sea-watch, which also featured seals and a harbour porpoise – and more brent, of course!

Scoter skimmed the choppy edges of the waves, but no skua today. A party of gannets (two adults and 4 juvenile) made a rapid passage north, with one of the youngsters making an unscheduled stop before setting off again to catch the others up. Small numbers of passerines made their way towards the land, most of them pipits, presumably.

Radios kept us in touch with the ringers, who were pretty busy themselves. We were too far off to sprint back when a kingfisher hit the nets, but Mike obligingly came halfway down with the vehicle to show it to those who wanted a close-up.

After the lunch break, with Glen driving down again in the Landrover to pick up the bags, we headed back to the roof. One last chance.....

Golden plover were back on the pool, and Chinese water deer and hare did whatever it is they do on shingle. Marsh harrier skirted the marshes towards Aldeburgh. Then...all the plover lifted simultaneously, giving that 'ayup!' feeling.... and, powering out of the right hand side of the flock with a faster wing beat, down curved and direct – could it be? YES IT BLOODY WAS! Merlin – heading straight towards us then veering north, low and fast – a perfect, adult female. It seemed like it was giving us a flypast, and kept in view for much longer than we deserved. Steve borrowed the grin of triumph from Roger's ring ouzel moment. I was very, very grateful to Mrs Merlin – I was so certain we'd get one, I would have started questioning my own sanity if it hadn't happened. Can we go now?



So, we headed slowly back – a trip back to the ringing hut for a bearded tit, looking extremely angry but strangely dense (they have a very thin head close-up) was ‘in the hand’ which provided a great opportunity to examine the wing and back markings; again, not something that happens every day.

It was coming to an end, but not before the stragglers party heading back to the river caught the hen harrier, quartering the banks around the sheep fields.

And then, suddenly, the boat fired into life, and it was over. The second boat party returned to the accommodation block to pick up bags, before we tried to see how many people, bags, binoculars and scopes we could fit into a vehicle. The answer is ‘too many’.

Sometimes, you get a trip that reminds you why you invest so much time, effort and money into birding. A whole weekend in the open air and this mystical place, surrounded by sky, weather, birds, mammals, with dedicated individuals who survey, ring, report, maintain, monitor and manage the environment that is so important to this area and its future – and a merlin.....



*For an atmospheric reminder of the place, have a look at Richard Taylor-Jones' film on Orfordness at*

<http://www.richardtaylorjones.co.uk/index/2.html>

Also, huge thanks to Glen and the National Trust for a truly memorable weekend.

*Paddy Shaw*