

WBC Guided Walk, 5 April 2014:

Part 1: Outney Common, the Lows, Bath Hills and Earsham

Leaders: Steve Piotrowski and Paddy Shaw

After several days of static, dirty air, Saharan dust and cloud, April 5th clear and the sun shined on WBC as a group of 15 joined leaders Steve Piotrowski and Paddy Shaw for a 'bird yomp' across the Outney Common Lows, Bath Hills and Earsham just outside Bungay.

The theme for the day would be early migrants and in particular, a concentration on songs and calls, and differentiating the more tricky ones. Target species were Blackcap, Willow Warbler and Marsh Tit, with hopes that the southerly air flow over the past week would have assisted migration back to breeding sites.

Often the first few minutes of a walk can give a notion of whether a site is going to turn it on or not, and things were looking good from 7.10am, with Song Thrushes nest building, Oystercatchers over and enough of the usual suspects to push a species count to 11 before the party had fully assembled.







A pause by the scrub alongside Station Pit fishing lake gave an opportunity to examine the song differences of Dunnock, Wren and Robin, with Linnet, Goldfinch, and Chaffinch also present. And then, through the Chaffinch song, a longer, less brassy downward cascade of notes revealed the first Willow Warbler of the year. That's it then – it's definitely Spring!

The previously-drenched Lows had obligingly dried out so a crossing that would have required wellies three weeks ago presented no problem at all. The Lows are extensive wet grassland and pasture, set in the loop of the Waveney, which regularly floods in winter and provides a rich habitat for birds throughout the year. The intention was, however, to simply cross this and take the path along Bath Hills, which rises to the lip of the bowl in which Bungay lies. At this time of the year, the still bare trees provide stunning views over the Lows and beyond, while enabling at least glimpses of the woodland bird species that breed here.

Following a discussion on the differences between Blackbird and Mistle Thrush song, two Mistles struck up in competition as we passed through the light tree cover by Baldry's Mill, together with a Blackcap. Less than a kilometre, and two targets ticked....

A steep climb up the side of 'Mount Ditchingham' across from Ditchingham Lodge gains height quickly to an easy path above the river, full of Wren, Blue, Great, Coal and Long-tailed Tit, more recently-arrived Blackcap, Chiffchaff with Jay, Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker providing occasional emphasis (the latter supplying some fairly tentative and non-committal drumming, together with its hysterical 'yip!' calls). Just once, we got the repeat-call of a Nuthatch, like a shepherd whistling his dog round (rather than the tremulous other song, which always reminds me of kids making ghost-noises).

The explosion of hearing a first Chiffchaff a few weeks ago had now dulled as that song receded into a growing orchestra – like building a band one by one, where the new musician is always seen as a soloist as it steps into the spotlight. Soon, Willow Warbler will do the same, I suppose, and take its part in the woodwind section.

The path meanders up and down along the ridge, between the woodland slope down to the Waveney on the left and rape seed fields

on the right, before linking up with the unmade road down to Cold Bath House (and a conservation area). It then descends until it is finally level with the Lows again, affording views across the cattle meadows and the new scrape, which has been built in the middle for the benefit of winter waders and wildfowl.

Highlights along this track had included Bullfinch, Marsh Tit (thanks for not letting us down, chaps – targets hit!) and a heard-but-not-seen Little Owl. A moment of potential ‘twitch-ness’ concerned the over-flight of a female Sparrowhawk with extremely pale rear underparts, extending up the sides and almost to the rump – was it a young Goshawk?

Nope – flap, flap, flap glide as it moved off. But, we’d been doing well for raptors, with Buzzard, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk already in Steve’s list.

As we approached Valley House, there was a shout of Swallow and we all gazed up to see what was for most their first Swallow of the year accompanied by the usual cries of “one Swallow doesn’t make a summer.”

The path eventually joins the road which accesses the Earsham Gravel site, and on to Earsham Gravel Pits. Often through the winter, this site is alive with duck and geese, but gives way in Spring to the displays of Great Crested Grebe. I was watching a head-shaking routine between a courting pair while John Sampson was calling the season’s first Common Tern and then – a grebe – not Little Grebe, not Great Crested.....

It took Steve’s scope to finally nail it as a full summer-plumage Red Necked Grebe, which was (as bird reports often say) ‘obliging,’ diving and feeding fairly close in on the right hand side of the Pit. Bird of the Day!

We’d taken our time wandering round, and some of the party departed at this point, while the remainder headed through Earsham to come back to Bungay across the Earsham marshes. Perhaps we’d get Grey Wagtail on the way.

Well, of course we did, and very early, on the drain that connects the Waveney at Earsham to the river again on the Lows loop. A pair, bathing and luxuriating in the Spring sunshine, taking no notice of us at all.

From there, it's a leisurely stroll back to Bungay via the Earsham Bridge and Outney Road, over the roadbridge and back to the golf club car park.

Of note throughout the walk had been the number of butterflies – Comma, Brimstone, Orange-Tip, Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock and Small White had all been constant companions. Let's hope for another good year for them.

Five of us decided the day was only half done, so after going back to Steve and Kathy's for lunch, tea and hot-crossed buns (thanks Kathy!) we set off for part two, at Carlton Marshes on the edge of Oulton Broad.....

Part Two: Carlton Marshes

We'd targeted 50 species for the day, and already had 62 – could we make 70?

The weather was holding up well, although some cloud was building. A few more marsh-based species may well push the list up.....

We strolled out on the main path from the visitors' centre towards 'Wilton's Viewpoint, which overlooks the new scrape' adding Marsh Harrier and Peregrine to the raptor list.

By the time we'd looped round and walked back, we were up to 68...so, we hung around the car park, hoping for something to turn up and then – 8 Fieldfares!

It was getting like praying for your team to find an injury-time equaliser...

We optimistically scanned the gulls on a nearby field – another birder spoke of an Ouzel having been in the paddock earlier...but no, we were going to have to live with 69, as a beer back in the Green Dragon was

long-overdue. A count up in the pub revealed that our illustrious scribe (Steve) had miscounted and we had knotted up 71 birds after all!

That was my debut as a co-leader, and I'd really enjoyed it (although Steve did most of the work!) I eventually had given in to my slightly left-handed way of looking at song i.d. once the crowds had thinned, and describing the difference between Reed and Sedge Warbler song as the difference in Scouse accent between Ringo Starr (reed) and Steven Gerrard (sedge), but we've all got our own ways of getting to the same place....

That was a great day.

Full species lists for morning and afternoon attached below.

Report by Paddy Shaw