

Waveney Bird Club

Outney Common and Bath Hills

March 19th 2017

The usual trek round Outney Common in Bungay on a Spring evening before a couple of beers at the Green Dragon received a promotion this year, with its own, whole day billing.

A little earlier in the season than usual, so we were not expecting the usual serenade of Whitethroats, Willow Warbler and Nightingale, but this is a site that, with a little patience, can throw up a good bird list at almost any time of the year.

But of course, being British, we have to start with the weather. A warm, sunny week had broken down into showers driven on a cold westerly wind on the Saturday, with the expectation that not much would change for the Sunday.

The wind was still there, and the skies overcast at 7am as 18 of us assembled in the car park, but at least rain was not predicted until well after dark.

With large groups and single-track walks communication can be tricky, so I positioned myself up front (being extremely familiar with what I regard as 'my patch') and Steve Howell rode shotgun at the back. For those who don't know it, the various trails run around the golf course. Taking an clockwise route takes you alongside the Waveney, with large willows separating you from a driving range and on to an area of scrubby undergrowth with some mature hawthorns – over the past few years, a good site for Nightingales and warblers.

Being mid-March, the main targets were Chiffchaff (one had been singing here the week before) and Sand Martin, which had just begun to arrive across the county, plus perhaps Blackcap.

We weren't very far round before we got the first of an eventual 8 Chiffchaffs – probably the same bird I'd heard last week, as it was roughly in the same tree, but with another singing further back.

This had followed a good sighting of a Kingfisher, skimming up the river before finally perching in a riverside sedge.

The wind was still ripping in from the left, but there was hope that there was a little more shelter ahead as we moved to an area where the river – having looped round under the Earsham gravel workings – rejoined the track, and where a lone Whooper At first, I thought it had gone:

something I thought might be a mixed blessing, as it would have proved this was a genuine wild bird, leaving for the north with its buddies. But no – there it was, actually on the river, trying to be nonchalant as it attempted to hang out with a group of Mutes, that haven't wanted much to do with it previously. A Whooper had been present at the former Earsham Otter Trust, and there is some suspicion that this is that bird – but it has behaved much as a wild Whooper would over the winter. At first it was very skittish, whooping away at anyone walking on the opposite bank and retreating into the marsh fairly rapidly. As time has gone on, it's either learnt from the Mutes, or just become much more familiar with dog-walkers and birders, and is a little more restrained in its departures.

So we headed to where the common track joins the Lows – the extensive, wet grazing meadows which adjoin the river. We didn't have time for this, so veered right round the back of the common. Good decision as it turned out, as we stopped to watch a small flock of Lesser Redpoll, located in one of the trees in this sparsely-treed area of the site. With still leafless branches, this gave us pretty good views to this 'soon-to-be-unsplit' version of the Redpoll species.

Another common favourite – Mistle Thrush – had struck up what bird guides describe as its 'loose verses'; like a Blackbird that has lost something, and is going through all the places it might have last seen it. We slowly ambled back towards Station Pit, where the number of parked cars indicated a fishing match was in progress, so we kept to the high ground above the sandy cliff which would be home to Sand Martins and kingfisher as the season picked up speed.

To their credit, the Common owners have acted on WBC advice that a proper, permanent fence be installed on the cliff top, rather than the insubstantial wooden one that was eternally subject to vandalism. We have suggested this is followed up by signs down below requesting people to keep their distance from the nests themselves.

And as we walked along the top – Sand Martins! Two of them angled themselves westward, vanishing off over the golf course, and a sign of warmer weather to come.....

There was now to be a breakfast break, with a slight but not deal-breaking diversion into Bungay due to myself thinking the venue was the Earsham St Café, not Earsham Hall tearooms, which it actually was....so, 15 minutes lost, but no problem. It just meant going back to Outney and picking up a few cars.

So, perhaps we can ask for a little silence while 18 birders get into a full English in the refined setting of Earsham Hall.....

Thanks. We'll now continue with the tale.

Back to the Outney car park, with a reduced party of about 10, joined by Steve P who had returned from his own breakfast meeting at Heveningham Hall. Don't we live quite the life?

Part two was the extended walk, across the Lows to pick up the Bath Hills trail, rising between Bungay and Ditchingham which gives spectacular views across the Lows, the common, to Bungay and beyond towards Earsham and Flixton. The wooded slope drops down towards Ditchingham Lodge, while the right-hand side is largely arable fields. The first section is not the most bird-rich, but is worth it for the view. Storm Doris had done a bit of work up here, opening out some of the vistas, and by now we had good light and a bit of warmth.

We picked up Marsh Tit as part of a mixed tit flock as we ambled towards the end of Free Lane, Ditchingham, which marks the start of the descent towards Cold Bath House. It's here that things usually become a bit more interesting. There's one particular slender tree, just clinging to life, where I'd found a Nuthatch nest two years back, which had been re-used last year. As if on cue, finding the tree meant finding the Nuthatches – a pretty vocal pair, who were obviously attempting to do their place up for the new season, and were politely requesting us to be orf. While common in many areas in the west of the county, they're a good find round here....

From here the path moves through a conservation area, with wet, tangled woodland on the left and a rise of mixed trees on the right before it opens up to a field containing Highland Cattle, where in the past there has been Little Owls – but not today.

So, onto the surfaced road towards the Earsham Gravel works and the lakes, which were not heavily populated – a flock of Tufted Duck and randomly-spaced Great Crested Grebe. It's mainly arable fields from here towards the A143 and the crossing-over into Earsham village itself, and out the other side, down the footpath beside the village hall, with a few urban birds dropping onto the lists – Sparrow, Blackbird, Starling, Chaffinch, Greenfinch mainly.

A left hander as the path meets the road takes you down past the church and the Atlantic Superstore towards a small bridge which has been a favoured spot through the winter for a Green Sandpiper and a pair of Grey Wagtail. There has regularly been 3 Green Sands between the Lows, Outney Common and Earsham over the last three or four

years, but this year, the only one I found was at Earsham. Here's hoping a migration chain hasn't been broken....

Anyway, neither species were at that location today, but Ruth (designer/supplier of the WBC clothing range) was doing some gardening.....and it was time for a brew....

So, into Ruth and my old mate Chris' large garden, and onto the deck in front of their marvelous, Finnish-style wooden chalet, and Ruth got busy with the kettle, mustering enough mugs for the whole party while we identified the birds in the garden by song, and checked the owl box Steve put up last year for Chris' birthday.

And then off again for the last leg, back to Bungay and probably the best birding moment of the day...

(Before that, I had to stop for a while to get the 'context' of my house, which is visible from a 20 metre stretch of the path and which – when I'm in it, or walking back from the Green Dragon – never seems to be in the place it actually is....I think the drugs are wearing off)

We'd split into two groups, when Steve Howell (in the front group) started shouting back at us and pointing in the air above the town. 'Red Kite!' And as we scanned through the gulls and corvids, there was not just one, but three, wheeling slowly over the castle in that very un-deliberate mode of travel, seemingly unconcerned with very much at all. Great views as they turned in what was now very good light, and on towards...MY HOUSE! Damn – would have been a great one for the garden list. Anyway, it was a Bungay tick for me.

And there we were, on the edge of Outney Road and Earsham St, with the pedometer reading 10.5 miles for the day. A great early Spring walk, with the early songsters going for it, singing-in the others which are going to make up the Outney Orchestra by early May...Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Whitethroat, Nightingale...all those to come – but that'll do for today!

Paddy Shaw

And so for the species list:

Mute Swan

Whooper Swan

Greylag Goose

Canada Goose

Barnacle Goose (4)

Egyptian Goose (3)

Gadwall (5)
Mallard
Tufted Duck (32)
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Great Crested Grebe
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Red Kite (3)
Sparrowhawk
Buzzard (2)
Kestrel
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Feral Pigeon
Stock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (calling)
Kingfisher (4)
Green Woodpecker (7)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin (2)
Grey Wagtail (3)
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Blackbird
Song Thrush (5)
Mistle Thrush (3)
Chiffchaff (8 singing)
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit

Marsh Tit (2)
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch (6 – 2 nesting)
Treecreeper (4)
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll (9 incl summer plumage male)
Bullfinch (4)

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Muntjac
Chinese Water Deer (male, with tusks)



Whooper Swan, Outney



The Outney trail



The Redpoll Twitch.



All eyes on ...



The Sand Martin protection fense



Breakfast break



The expanse of The Lows



How Low can you go?



Hellebores at Bath Hills



Mollie advises on the location of Tufted Duck flock....



You hint from round here, are yer?



Tea for ten, please...



360 degree birding



Cold Bath Road