

BIRD WATCHING REPORT 2023/24

Sometimes you only catch a fleeting glimpse of a bird as it dives into cover and so it was on two occasions during our annual September pilgrimage to Kent Wildlife Trust's Oare Marsh Reserve. We arrived in bright sunshine with the lowest tide of the year was about to turn. Black headed gull, ringed plover, curlew, redshank, oyster catcher and black godwit were seen on the mud of the The Swale as we walked to the first hide. Here we saw herring gull, roosting avocets, more redshank, cormorant and seals on the distant sandbank. As we walked to the bridge we had our first sight of a large flock of blacktailed godwit at rest in the shallows of the scrape and as we crossed the bridge or first fleeting glimpse. - a kingfisher burst out from low shrubs beside the drainage channel and disappeared into the reeds. Walking to the next hide a very large flock of goldfinches were seen feeding on thistles and a green woodpecker heard and seen in an adjacent field. From the roadside viewing point we watched teal, golden plover, a pair of spoonbills and dabchick feeding close by. Then our second fleeting glimpse of the day – three bearded tits dived across and vanished into the reeds and rushes at the water's edge. As we were about to leave to walk to the car park a large flock 200+ blacktailed godwit flew in to join the flock we had already seen roosting in the scrape and a marsh harrier was seen in the distance on the other side of the road.

October's meeting was cancelled due to storm Babet and November suffered the same fate with storm Frederico.

It was raining when we arrived at KWT's Oare Marsh Reserve for our December meeting. It cleared after about 5 minutes but remained gloomy. From the Ferry ramp we could see herring gulls, black headed gulls, oyster catcher, curlew, avocet, dunlin and redshank out on the mud of the Swale as the tide fell. A similar assemblage was seen from the first hide plus the usual haul out of seals on the sandbank in the distance. to the second hide a flock of fieldfares was seen in an adjacent field. On the hide the sight of seven spoonbills was celebrated and the solitary spoonbill sized bird away from this group proved to be a great white egret. Other birds included lapwing, teal, shoveller and wigeon and a fleeting glimpse of a 'probable' immature hen harrier. As we returned to the car park a single white fronted goose was seen.

Riverside Country Park was the location for our January visit. It was cold and bright about 2 hours before low tide. When we arrived on the footpath we saw a grey plover on a mudbank opposite us and several redshank in the creek. As we walked eastward we became increasingly aware of a bird scarer sounding in an adjacent field. Although its target wood pigeons seemed unperturbed, the inlet beside our first stop was devoid of its usual population of wildfowl. Fresh water held back by the overnight high tide had frozen and remained high and dry in the saltgrass at the head of each creek. In the sunshine it looked like sheets of agricultural polythene. Chaffinch and goldfinch were seen in the hedges and a buzzard flew low over us as we walked to Bloors Wharf. In the distance we could see numerous shelduck and curlew, avocet, black tailed godwit were added to our list. At the wharf large numbers of teal and wigeon were seen with mallard, pintail and shoveller ducks (see pictures below) interspersed among the roosting flocks. On our return we saw the buzzard again, this time it was being mobbed by a group of crows.

We returned to Kent Wildlife Trust's Oare Marsh Reserve for our February meeting to see the start of the spring migration. The tide was at its lowest point and after a wet night the sun was shining. From the old ferry ramp good numbers of avocet, and redshank were seen with a few oyster catcher and curlew. In the field beside us greylag geese that had stopped on their way northward were honking loudly. As we walked along the sea wall the unmistakable call of a cetti's warbler burst from the willow scrub behind us. From the first hide a large flock of brent geese was visible in the distance. In the Swale three great crested grebes in breeding plumage were also seen. Among the wrack covered rocks below the hide a pair of turnstones were busily turning the seaweed searching for food and along Oare Creek flocks of teal were roosting. The path to the bridge was extremely muddy but a flock of dunlin and female reed bunting were seen and then as we turned to ward the second hide the first stonechat of the morning. We came to realise the most of the bushes or tufts were occupied by a stonechat, both male and female. A flock must have paused their return migration to feed. At the second hide we saw more greylag geese, gadwall, pintail, shoveller, teal and wigeon in the scrape together with seven spoonbill, a great white and little egret, lapwing, coot moorhen and dabchick and mallard.

Serendipity has a part to play on any bird watching visit and so it was at the start of our March visit to Kent Wildlife Trust's Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve. As we assembled in the car park a red kite flew in low above us. It stayed for a few minutes before flying off and left us open mouthed in surprise. The first lake was strangely empty but as we walked past mallard, canada geese and a single great crested grebe were seen on the opposite side. However the woodland around us was alive with melody. Robin, great tit, wren, chiffchaff, and goldcrest were all in full voice. At the first hide we had a good view of three heron nests, two of them occupied and one with chicks visible. Coot and kingfisher were seen at a distance. Walking on saw a single jay roosting on a branch before arriving at the second hide where two new heron's nests were directly in front of us. Greylag, tufted duck, shoveller duck and dabchick were also seen. We walked back to the third hide through still melodious woodland. Here we saw lapwing, egyptian goose, herring gull, cormorant and last but not least a rare little ringed plover freshly arrived for the summer.

Our April meeting was held at the Woodland Trust reserve at Hucking Estate. As we entered the reserve we heard a whitethroat singing nearby and as we progressed along the path blue tit great tit, robin, and chiffchaff were heard and seen. Hucking Estate is noted for its bluebells and this year they were a truly magnificent sight. Near the old drove road we heard our first nightingale and as we moved back into the woodland we heard pheasant and blackcap and a male blackcap was sighted in a sapling beside our path only metres away. Returning to the car park we heard another nightingale singing loudly nearby and as we walked on another three were heard in the space of 100 metres.

Our May meeting was cancelled due to heavy rain

Our June meeting was held at Stodmarsh NNR, in place of the May meeting abandoned due to heavy rain. To our surprise the first bird we heard while assembling in the car park was a cuckoo. Their breeding season ends in June and they change their song and start their return to Africa. As we followed the path we heard the first of many reed warbler and Cetti's warbler and a male blackcap was seen. In a change to our usual route we diverted to the Reedbed hide where we saw greylag geese, teal, mallard, coot and moorhen, cormorant and several good views of the resident marsh harriers. Restarting to our walk as the sun re-appeared we saw a handful of hobbies in the distance and the common terns on their artificial island. Returning we added long tailed tit, grey wagtail, wren and treecreeper to our tally.

July meeting was cancelled.

Our August meeting at Sussex Wildlife Trust's Rye Harbour Reserve was marred by a strong westerly wind although the sun was shining all morning. The first bird we heard was the churring of a curlew and sure enough we saw it on the mudbanks. There were numerous little egrets hunkered down across the marsh as the tide fell. Oyster catcher, cormorant and flocks of pipits and house sparrows were also seen. When we reached the first hide a group of five roosting greenshanks were seen together with dabchick, more oyster catcher and numerous roosting cormorant. Kestrel and a solitary pair of arctic terns were seen near the second hide but the arctic terns – now a red listed species, were still absent from their old nesting site. However there were 30+ sandwich terns in the middle distance and a few lesser black backed gulls.