

## U3A Birding Group Outing: 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2016 at Titchwell

### Di Stagg

A **curlew** cries mournfully over the flat sandy West marsh; his grey body and long curved beak so still among the tussocks. The view is a desolate flat wilderness as far as the eye can see. What else is hidden in the scrawny heather? What small finches balance on the crispy brown seedheads of last autumn's plants? We scan the land with our binoculars, hopeful of the smallest movement, the quietest song – skylark, a tiny windblown dot against cobweb clouds. To our right, rough grass creeps up and over the line of sea-bank, where only pounding salty waves of an in-tide and searing sandy wind curbs its progress from covering the beach. A hazy start to the day is rapidly dissolving into spring-blue crossed by fluffy cloudlets.

That is our welcome: the long straight path stretches seaward in front of us: RSPB's Titchwell Nature Reserve.

Seven U3A members have arrived safely at the Reception Centre on the North Coast of Norfolk: we had met at 9.00 am in Hoveton and taken three cars: Sheila and Peter have dreams of a pub meal afterwards; Corrie and Richard have brought Anne our newest member (thanks to the Open Day) and John and I, bringing up the rear (we had waited for stragglers), were waylaid by a tractor the length of the Docking Road which in turn was waylaid by a huge horse transporter making slow progress down our narrow lanes to the International Horse Trials! Birdsong in the Carpark, however, is the cure for our frustrations.

Thus, the **curlew** is our first bird of interest, for the line of feeders has produced little, certainly not Bramblings that are apparently around. We wander leisurely up the main path: dry moor over the bank to our left and Willow Carr on our right. **Chaffinches, Robins** and newly-arrived **Chiffchaff Warblers** accompany us. The Chiffchaff's name reflects its monotonous song, but a thrill to hear for spring is on its way and other migrant warblers will soon follow. Where are the Water Rail and Kingfisher in the little Carr pools and dykes? Simply because they were here, last time, I expect them in the same spot always. Not too crazy a thought as many birds stick to their same areas. But, no luck.

There is a very promising dry scrape on the left where I have seen Ringed Plovers, Snipe and even rare Rock Pipits, but it is empty of birdlife. Are the birds going to desert us today? No, a long narrow dyke on the right is busy with **Tufted Ducks** (white patches on their sides), **Coots** (white 'noses'), a **Moorhen** (red and yellow 'nose') and our familiar **Mallards**. This dense reedbed is famous for its Bearded Tits (not today!). Often called Bearded Reedlings, they feed on the bullrush seed-heads in the winter and are thus easier to see flitting at speed across the area, but insects are hatching in the water at the bottom of the reeds, so that is where they are: out of sight. Instead, there are **Wrens** everywhere, and what is that loud song? Unmistakeable: a **Cetti's Warbler**, the first I've heard this year! The tiny allusive bird has a distinctive phrase starting with the word 'Cetti!' (pron. Chetti) that it bawls out, but find it? Virtuously impossible, even when you know where it is and stare at the bush. You wait forever for the song to be repeated and when you have given up, it sings from another bush further along. In other words, it has crept through the undergrowth without giving away the slightest movement.

The golden reeds with tasselled plumes (so easily mistaken for birds), shining richly in the sun, are interspersed with occasional bushes, mostly willow and alder, that can put up with their roots in water. A stream of little brown birds flit from one bush to another. They are so fast that it is always difficult to name them: they are known in the Birding World as **LBJs** (Little Brown Jobs!). Later, when John, Anne and I are coming out of Island Hide, we are determined not to let one LBJ get away from us. It's another **Chiffchaff** which is just as allusive as the Cetti and is singing somewhere in the bushes beside us. They are ventriloquists, and despite the tree not being in leaf, it takes us some time to find it on the further side even though it is not keeping still. Many of the Warblers are very similar: olive green, with a touch of yellow, sometimes white underneath and usually pale eyebrows over mascara eyelashes: the Chiffchaff is no exception (particularly compared to the Willow Warbler) and, rather like the Cetti, can really only be distinguished by its song. There!

Bird and song. Got you! And on our way back, Anne and I have good sightings of another busy little Chiffchaff flitting in and around the Willow Carr.

From the wooden Island Hide, there is a good view of the Freshwater Marsh, a large shallow lake with shingle islands, very popular with ducks and waders. And indeed, it is covered with dozens of up-ending **Teal** (the smallest duck with chestnut head and green eye-patch on the male; bright green flash on the sides of both). There are also some **Mallards** and a couple of **Gadwall Duck** pairs (grey/brown with a delicate pattern on their backs). The **Shelduck** could be mistaken for male Shovelers from the back view: green heads and white, black and chestnut bodies. But as soon as they turn round, the outsized beak of the Shoveler is obvious, whereas the Shelduck has a bright 'plastic-looking' red beak and wears his chestnut plumage as a waistcoat not as side pockets.

Most of the surface however is covered with black (dark-bellied) **Brent Geese** (the smallest Goose), and black and white **Avocets** with their upward-curving beaks. They usually wade on long legs in the shallows waving their open-beaks from side to side sifting invertebrates out of the water. Today, they are up to the tops of their legs and grabbing food all around their bodies as is everyone else, so the water must be teeming with something. The **Brents** are restless: they keep taking off, flying around and then returning – and it is surprising they are still with us as they are winter geese and have usually left by now to breed in Siberia. Maybe the winds are in the wrong direction.

Flying around are some **black-headed gulls**, but most of them are resting – or nesting in an area over by the new hides, which has been enclosed for safe breeding. Most of the breeding gulls have their summer black heads, now; they lose them in the winter when only their black cheek-spot distinguishes them. They are small with scythe-like wings similar to the soon-awaited Turns. One bird on an island is different from the others. It has long legs like the red-legged **Redshanks** around, but its front is a beautiful rusty red-brown, and it had a very long straight beak: this is a **Black-tailed Godwit** in full breeding colours. I expected to see them in large numbers, but this is the only one. Another Birder remarks on their absence, too. The water seems deeper than usual; maybe that is making a difference.

Corrie, and Sheila and Peter have gone down to the beach which is the same distance on again. The rest of us go down a sunken path into the two new Parrinder Hides. These concrete buildings are made to survive the storm surges. The North Hide overlooks the Volunteer Marsh, a nearly-dry saltwater area that may fill on high-tides. The Tidal Marsh the other side of the furthest bank and out-of-sight takes the brunt of the tides from up the creek by the beach. On our saltwater area, there are certainly more waders: a number of **Redshanks**, a **Common Sandpiper** and four more **Curlews**. In the 'scope', we can see these large handsome birds well. There are two **Ringed Plovers**, and some **Oystercatchers**, whose legs and bill are even redder than the Redshanks. While we are reading the history of the reserve, outside, Corrie joins us, and Sheila and Peter also come up the sunken path to the hides, reading the fascinating plaques as they go.

The moor produces surprises like the group of fat **Greylag Geese** that blend in so well as to be almost invisible: a white **Little Egret** stands out by its pair of black-headed gull companions, another curlew calls and the sound, just as wild, of two **Lapwings** crying out their other name: Peewit! They have soft wide wings with long fingers and a slow, distinctive and unmistakable flap.

To stop at this point; to explain how we wander back to the centre for coffee and refreshments with the thrill of a tame **Song Thrush** picking up crumbs at our feet; to say how everyone has had a lovely day, made even better by fine weather, and that we have seen some 43 species of birdlife – a **Red Admiral Butterfly** and numerous **Bumblebees** humming round silver balls of pussy-willow – oh, and a **Black Rat** that runs across our path. To say that we all go home very satisfied, would be true. But it would miss out the highlight of the day...

The birds I have not mentioned are raptors – **birds-of-prey**. We have seen at least three pairs of our rare and handsome **Marsh Harriers**, two circling the West moor, near a hovering rusty **Kestrel**, and some obviously nesting by dropping down into the reedbeds over to the East; males with beautiful wing-markings; females

dark with a golden head – that is exciting enough. An even rarer, pale grey **Hen Harrier** had been seen from the car park, and Anne is the first to recognise this smaller bird with black wing-tips come briefly on the scene. But as we watch them, two other birds appear from nowhere to join them. Raptors, but far bigger even than the Marsh Harriers: forked tail and magnificent red plumage, enhanced by the sunlight: two **Red Kites**. These birds are only just reaching Norfolk in promising numbers and their sightings here still cause excitement. And no wonder; they are breath-takingly glorious and make our day.

**Sightings:**

Little White Egret – 1	Heron – 1	Greylag Geese – 10
Dark Brent Geese – 100+	Shelduck - 4	Gadwall Ducks - 2 pairs
Teal Ducks – 100+	Mallards - 20	Tufted Ducks – numerous
Marsh Harrier – 6	Hen Harrier – 1	Kestrel – 1
Red Kite – pair	Pheasant – 2	Moorhen – 1
Coots – numerous	Oystercatchers – 2	Avocets – 50+
Ringed Plovers – 2	Lapwings – 2	Black-Tailed Godwits – 1
Bar-Tailed Godwit – 1	Curlews – 5	Redshank – 6
Common Sandpiper – 1	Black-headed Gulls – 20	Lesser Black-Backed Gulls – 2
Greater Black-Backed Gulls – 1	Herring Gulls – 4	Woodpigeons – 7
Collared Doves – 2	Skylark – 1	Pied Wagtail – 2
Wren – 8	Dunnock – 1	Robin – 6
Blackbird – 3	Song Thrush – 1	Chiffchaff – 6
Blue Tit – 8	Great Tit – 8	Long-tailed Tit – 1
Magpies – 1	Jackdaws – 7	Carrion Crows – 3
Starlings – 20+	Chaffinch – 6+	Greenfinch – 2+
Reed Bunting – 1	Goldfinch – 2	Cetti's Warbler – 1

Red Admiral Butterfly                      Bumblebees huge, everywhere especially on pussy-willow  
 Black Rat ran across the path

TOTAL BIRDS: 51.

TOTAL: 40 DIFFERENT SPECIES...