

Birding Outing: 5th March, 2016

Di Stagg

Three intrepid Musketeers – or maybe I should say Binocularateers – set out today in icy winds, driving rain, sharp hail – and was that a dash of sun in the restaurant? – to find what was around of the feathered kind. John, Diana and I, with the aid of the heater, piled into my newly repaired car and set off. Sadly others were poorly, away or too occupied to join us – and maybe some were just put off by the weather forecast!

Nevertheless, we were undaunted, well-layered and off in search of...? Well, 6 Bewick Swans had been reported seen in Ludham; not in itself a surprise because they turn up there most years for the winter, though I had seen no sign of them this year. The 'Oak Tree' pull-in just past Horning Upper Street was a huge swampy puddle due to heavy rains we'd had overnight (I'd warned my two passengers that their reward for coming was to clean my newly polished car on return), however I was able to pull over enough for a while. AND THERE DOWN ON THE LOW MEADOWS WERE THE SIX BEWICKS!

Let me tell you a little about these amazing smallest and rarest of the swans. Like their larger cousins, the Whooper Swans, they are only winter visitors to our island, flying back to the high Arctic Circle Tundra to breed and spend the summer. And, yes they are off on their long journey anytime now, so they are grazing in earnest to put on the extra pound. Unlike our resident Mute Swans (and we have huge numbers of these by Wroxham Bridge), the Bewicks have straighter necks to the Mutes' graceful curve. Mutes have black knobs on the top of their orange beaks (male's is largest; the kids have grey beaks), whereas Bewicks (and Whoopers) have 'Roman noses' with a touch of yellow; except when there is an opportunity of food, Mutes keep in pairs or small family groups, Bewicks are often seen in large flocks.

Together with the swans were some greylag geese, a flock of about 20 starlings blending in with the scenery amongst a larger flock of our common small black-headed gulls whose white winter faces with black dimples were now rapidly turning breeding black. It is a beautiful scene looking across the marshes complete with windmill... OK, windpump. And we nearly missed the 40 or so rooks in the field to our right!

Down the road to Ludham Bridge, there were not so many birds, but other than the gulls, there was a pair of Mute Swans as usual setting up a nesting site in tall grass by a dyke, a skylark singing somewhere high in the sky, and just the other side of the hedge, interestingly, a pair of handsome black and white oystercatchers with their long red bills and legs.

Neither of my passengers had been down the causeway to St Benet's Abbey, so we braved the flood at the top by the farm and drove down to the marshes, where, to my delight I found the rest of the flock of Bewick Swans. We counted over 50 of them and from the Abbey Carpark another 20 or so! Well, this beat the reported six! In all, that little trip (it poured all the way down + hailstones) added three Mallard young men obviously too young to breed, and a separate pair; a reed warbler, 3 magpies, some jackdaws over the farm, crows in the field; a small flock of greylag geese up by the great cross, a distant Marsh Harrier, and a flock of Stock Doves flying round the slurry yard and into the field near some woodpigeons. Their petrol-coloured green-and-purple necks lack the woodpigeon's white collar. Little birds we could identify in the bushes down the end included goldfinches, chaffinches, greenfinches, blackbirds, a robin and a little black-capped marsh tit. Two meadow pipits landed beside us and a yellowhammer I had heard earlier. On the way back, we met a tractor that flushed out the heron we had seen on our way down.

From here, we drove on to the Rollesby and Ormesby Broads car park. The usual mass of swans, ducks and geese were accompanied by at least 3 moorhens, and loads of coots (it is amazing to think that this bird in smart black with a white 'nose', so common in the Broads and rivers is now becoming a rarity). The water was scattered with diving ducks in the form of Tufted Ducks, a distant heron and a pair of Great Crested Grebe swimming together, however when we returned from looking at the Broad opposite, the male grebe

was screaming for his wife who had disappeared (I have never heard a grebe make such a noise!). He hunted everywhere for her and, although he hadn't found her before we left, hopefully she hadn't come to harm from pike or other unmentionable monsters.

We needed a coffee and snack in the nearby Garden Centre after that – yes, what was that yellow light that appeared on the floor? Surely not the sun? It didn't last long.

Diana was really keen to see the huge boat that had come to Great Yarmouth, so we continued – with a short break at Caister beach in search of Snow Buntings. Unlucky. (Did add House Sparrows and Great Black-Backed Gulls to the list.) But the wind was too bitter to stay out very long and we drove on to find the boat. We found Seajacks Scylla, the world's largest windfarm installation vessel, in the new Great Yarmouth Harbour, together with five others. They were huge – with the legs ready to turn them into platforms on the seabed. Well, if today's wind was anything to go by, the farm off Germany would be very successful. Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-Backs were added to our list, and on our return home via Acle Straight, we added a Pheasant, Little Egret that flew across the road in front of us and... guess what...? On the right-hand marsh was another FLOCK OF THIRTY BEWICK SWANS!

List:

Oak Tree:

Bewick Swans – 6	Greylag Geese – 10	Starlings – 20+
Black-headed Gulls	Rooks – 40+	

Ludham Lay-by:

Mute Swans – 2	Skylark (heard) – 1	Oystercatchers – 2
Black-headed Gulls – 7		

St Benet's Abbey Causeway:

Blackbird – 3	Bewick Swans – 50+ to west/ 20+ to east	Blue Tit – 1
Male Mallards – 3 + a Pair	Magpies – 3	Crows – 3
Jackdaws – c.7	Heron – 1 (twice)	Marsh Harrier – 1
Greylag Geese – 5	Reed Bunting – 1	Goldfinch – at least 3
Greenfinch – 1+	Robin – 1	Chaffinch – 3+
Marsh Tit – 1	Pipits – 2	Yellowhammer – 1
Woodpigeons – 5	Stock Doves – 20+	Duncock – 1

Ormesby / Rollesby Broads:

Moorhens – 3+	Coots – numerous on both	Tufted Ducks – numerous
Great-Crested Grebes – 2 pairs	Greylag Geese – 10+	Mallards
Heron – 1	Egyptian Goose – 1	Great Tit – 1

Caister Beach:

(Too many dog-walkers on the beach to see snow buntings)

House Sparrows – small colony in dense undergrowth	Black-headed Gulls – 7+
Herring Gulls – 4	Greater Black-Backed Gulls

Great Yarmouth Outer Harbour:

'SeaJacks Scylla'+ 4 other huge boats	Lesser Black-Backed Gulls	Various other gulls
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Acle Straight:

Little White Egret – 1	Bewick Swans – 30+ (to North Marshes near Stokesby)
Pheasant – 1	Egyptian Goose – 1

Wroxham Bridge: a bevy of Mute Swans being fed Feral Pigeons: flock

TOTAL: 40 DIFFERENT SPECIES...