

COACH TRIP TO CARSLINGTON WATER – 23rd JANUARY 2022

Around 20 of us boarded the coach on what was a dry, cold and overcast morning. The coach was again early and we were warmly greeted by Mustafa, our regular driver for a few trips now.

The drive wound through open countryside and from our elevated vantage on the coach we were able to scan the fields and hedgerows, spotting on our way foraging flocks of Starlings and Redwings, as well as good numbers of Pheasants, seemingly some in every field. A Red Kite was seen briefly by some, its characteristic angular tail twisting as it wheeled away.



Common Redshank

Carsington Water is a large multi-user site managed by Severn Trent Water. It's a popular destination, particularly in the summer and school holidays where boats and bikes can be hired to explore the many trails and large reservoir. Thankfully, the quieter winter months make it a more attractive proposition to bird watch, with many migratory winter species making it a home.

The chatter on the coach was about some of the star birds that had been reported on site. Two of these, a Great Northern Diver and a pair of Red Necked Grebes, had been present for a few weeks, so hopes were high that we'd get to see them. The other more unusual sighting reported was a flock of around a dozen Whooper Swans, who'd dropped in only the day before – would they too be there?



Great Northern Diver

As we waited for everyone to get their bearings and form into groups, we stationed ourselves on a terrace just outside the Visitors' Centre. This gave great views over the reservoir and main 'Watersports' island. There was plenty to see, with those with binoculars getting good views of Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Great Crested Grebes. Out on the island with the help of those with scopes we observed a sizeable flock of Lapwings and a solitary Redshank busy at the water's edge.

Even with scopes it was difficult to ID those birds further out on the open water, so we moved along the neck of 'Stones island' to scan the reverse view out to the Sailing Club. Here were more ducks, including Teal and Gadwall, as well Moorhen, Coot and both Little and Great Crested Grebes. We were also kept entertained by squabbling groups of House Sparrows, flitting between the hedges and roof of the Visitors' Centre. Pied Wagtail, Blue Tits, Blackbirds and Robins were also vocal in the surrounding trees and hedges, a sign

that spring was further along than might be expected at this time of year. Indeed, a pair of frisky Oystercatchers were caught making plans to nest.



Coal Tit

A few of us set up our scopes at the head of Stones Island, tipped off that this was the best spot to see the Great Northern Diver. A quick survey with the scopes soon located it, and all soon were gifted a rare inland view of this splendid diver. Even better – perhaps already full from an early morning feed – it seemed happy to pose, drifting little from its favoured spot in the middle of the water. Mostly, divers are seen off the coast on the open sea, typically glimpsed between choppy waves, so to see one not too far out on a flat inland reservoir was a treat that will live long in the memory.

The Group dispersed, with the favoured route the path that led around the north west side of the reservoir, where the majority of the hides were placed. The first stop of note was the Wildlife Centre hide, where a number of the Group were to be found, some talking to the helpful Volunteer Guides and taking advantage of the relative warmth and large glass front overlooking the water. Here we enjoyed great views of Greylag Goose, Grey Heron, as well as more ducks. The highlight, arguably, was the well-stocked feeders, attracting, in addition to the more common Blue and Great Tits, a pair of Willow Tits (we were assured they were indeed Willow rather than Marsh). Competing with them were a pair of Tree Sparrows. To see these birds up close was a delight, particularly the smart Willow Tit, a declining bird nationally.



Marsh Tit



Kingfisher

Time to move on, and we continued along the path toward the next hide. At this point, the omens felt good and we were happy to enjoy this productive stretch of the reserve, rather than try and attempt the 8-mile circular route all the way round. Reaching the next hide took us through some mature woodland, and spotted in the canopy feeding on Alder were Siskin, rather drab in their winter plumage and the flat light, but still an enjoyable watch as they dangled upside-down on the branches. As soon as we entered the hide we knew we were in luck, as a couple of other birders were sat alert, fixed on something. We sat down quietly to be shown a just-taken picture of a

Kingfisher. Had we missed it? No! It was there, tantalisingly out of view to those at one end of the hide, but not for long, and we all spent a few magical minutes watching it flit between favoured perching spots, sometimes diving and at least once observed retrieving a fish.

It was a rare moment to ride out with this most special of birds; contrasting with the rather more usual experience of glimpsing it fly away into cover or round a river bend. The door opened and more of our Group came in, and having had our fill, we felt it fair to let them take our place to enjoy. In our excitement, a couple of the Group left their rucksacks and had to walk back once realised!



Great Crested Grebes

We continued north along the path, ticking off on the way a flock of grazing Canada Geese... we should have been more observant, as once we reached the next hide, some others who had been close behind us asked if we'd spotted the Barnacle Geese grazing with the Canadas. We put it in our back pocket, hoping see them on the walk back.



Red-necked Grebe

In our final hide of the day, we were treated to excellent views of the second star bird – Red Necked Grebe! A very rare summer breeder in the UK: only around 20 birds present each summer according to the RSPB, with slightly more reported in winter, their numbers boosted from individuals moving in from the colder parts of Europe. Like the diver, the best way to spot them is to sea watch, so to see a pair on still water from a hide, and quite close at that, was a treat. The only trouble was separating them with any confidence from their Great Crested cousin. This wouldn't be a problem in the summer, their plumage unmistakable, but in

the winter both species are similarly sooty and cream coloured. Thankfully, as is the advantage of going out with a group, there is usually someone who has the knowledge, and sure enough some of the diagnostic differences were pointed out to us, such as the yellow bill and shorter, thicker neck. Helpfully, the two species were often in the same scope view, enabling us to compare and appreciate these subtleties.

We didn't venture much further after this stop and retraced our steps back to the Visitor Centre, to warm our hands with a hot drink. The species count from the day was 65, with other notable sightings including Dunlin, Snipe, Meadow Pipit, Reed Bunting, Bullfinch, Raven, Dipper and Nuthatch.

The consensus was of a great trip, with close encounters of nearly all we'd hoped to see; the only absence the Whooper Swans.

On a personal note, this was my last outdoor meeting with the Group before I relocate to West Sussex. I leave with many wonderful memories that will always stay with me, particularly the good humour and ever helpful spirit to pass on knowledge out in the field that has aided my experience immeasurably. Thank you!

Photos by Robert D

JULIAN R, FEBRUARY 2022