

CHRISTMAS TRIP, CHELFORD SAND QUARRIES

It was the 14th December and the last field trip of the 2019 birding year. We met at 9.00am at a Chelford layby parking area. The weather looked bright and promising after days of dark and damp that had left the Cheshire winter fields submerged and sodden under vast areas of standing water.

The area was the heart of the UK's most important silica sand extraction sites and for those that did not know it comes as a surprise to see the extent of the quarrying taking place and how it is only when you explore the area on foot that you realize the impact on the landscape and how large an operation it is.



The flooded footpath at Mere Farm Sand Quarry

Our first visit was to the Mere Farm Sand Quarry which now comprises of two pools, North and South separated by a public footpath. The effect the recent wet weather was brought home to us as the footpath was completely underwater and as such impassable making access to the rest of the site impossible. We had hoped to see Snipe on the island but were unlucky but there was a flock of Black Headed Gulls taking refuge on the semi submerged fenceposts that were the only visible indicator of the route of the footpath.

A condition attached to the original Planning approval for permission to extract sand was that the site be restored and landscaped to form a Nature Reserve and be managed as such. However, there has been a subsequent planning application submitted for the water area to be used for recreational purposes, a use that would be in clear conflict with its Nature Reserve designation. It was the detailed recording of the subsequent colonization of the site by bird life that was compiled by Brian and Alison that formed a substantial part of evidence used to defeat the application. It's regrettably not the end of the story as a further modified application has been submitted and as yet to be determined. A very apt example of the importance of recording local species in safeguarding such fragile resources.

Unable to explore the site further we headed back to the cars, a timely decision as the sky became leaden and the rain poured down looking at one stage that the weather was set in for the rest of the day. At one point it even started to sleet, but as suddenly it started, so it passed. Blue sky reappeared. Our next site was Lapwing Hall pool.



Common Pochard

This is another completed extraction site but with more established landscaping. Accessed through a mature woodland the site comprised of a large lake with a pathway around the perimeter and a richer population of birds. Shelduck, Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Pochard and Tufted Duck were all present. It was here that the most unusual of the days sightings was seen, a single Red Crested Pochard with its striking coral-red bill, a rare winter visitor which occasionally shows up in

Cheshire, possibly a feral bird? Also present were Greylag and Canada Geese, Great Crested and Little Grebes.

Our last site of the day was Acre Nook where the access is more restricted. The site is the largest visited covering some 179 acres and along with the other quarry sites in the area supplied over 1m tons of silica sand a year principally for the manufacture of glass. Flooding of the quarry was due to be completed in 2020 and will be used for a variety of water sports such as sailing, rowing, windsurfing and fishing. While we were there, we saw Shelduck, Crested Grebe and Grey Heron.



Red-crested Pochard

Other birds we saw throughout the morning included Blackbird, Redwing, Lapwing, Lesser Black Backed Gulls, Woodpeckers, Raven, Buzzard, Magpie, Jackdaw, Long Tailed Tits, Starling, Pied Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch. In total 36 species.

We had 14 in total on the trip – 13 for the first stop before the rain, and having lost 3, we gained one to have 11 for the second part.

At the end of each of our birding trips I always ask myself the question what was my “bird of the day”? Often a difficult question. This time there was a clear winner. A beautiful Pheasant wrapped in crisp bacon, surrounded by a flock of roast potatoes and nestling on a bed of seasonal vegetables. Thanks, Annette, for organizing our Christmas Dinner and what better way of ending the Birdwatching Group’s 2019 Year and here’s looking forward to 2020.

Photos by Robert D

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