

WEEKEND TRIP TO SOLWAY (DUMFRIES & GALLOWAY)
21st – 23rd FEBRUARY 2020

The weather in the two weekends preceding our visit had seen the arrival of both Storm Chiara and Storm Dennis, with high rainfall, very strong winds and consequent flooding and travel disruption. Although the forecast for our weekend was not of storm proportions, they were still forecasting some heavy rain and gusty winds. The advice from Caerlaverock WWT reserve, our planned first stop, was that, due to recent heavy rain, Wellingtons were recommended if you intended to walk the entire reserve.



Barnacle Geese

It was with this background that our party of 28 set off from the Guild, driven by Andy, and the coach was buffeted by the wind as we headed for our brief stop at Tebay. We continued on to Caerlaverock WWT, and, although the weather was not exactly conducive to looking for birds from the coach, we did see a small party of Little Egrets hunched in the corner of a field as we approached the reserve. There were impressive numbers of Barnacle Geese on either side of the road leading in to the Wetland Centre, many of them taking to the

air as we passed. On our arrival, we were briefed by the warden who updated us on the conditions of the paths to the observatory and hides; the staff had done their best to improve the accessibility by putting out duckboards, but paddling was still needed to get to the furthest extremities.

The partially flooded fields seemed to be ideal for the large flocks of Curlew and Golden Plover feeding there, accompanied by a few Redshank and Dunlin; the Golden Plover were particularly notable as they moved from one area to another, with some already showing advanced signs of their change to summer plumage. There was also a nice flock of Black-tailed Godwits in the Folly Field, with Pintail, Shoveler and Wigeon around the pond.



Golden Plover & Starlings

The Swan feed brought plenty of Whooper Swans close to the Peter Scott Observatory, the warden telling us of their journeys and life-styles, and Mute Swans and Tufted Duck added to the spectacle. We were struck by the lack of raptors, perhaps not surprising as it rained for most of the day, but there were plenty of Hares, most hunkered down in the wet grass, and looking like mounds of earth as they remained motionless. There were a few small birds around the feeders and nearby hedgerows, the most notable being the Yellowhammers, Siskins and Tree Sparrows, and the odd Treecreeper.



Yellowhammer

Our visit at an end, we set off for Newton Stewart where our comfortable hotel was awaiting. As we were driving along the A75 and approaching Auchenreoch Loch, I remembered that a Great White Egret had been reported there recently. I jokingly said to those near me at the front of the coach that it was probably the only bird we might see in the failing light; and I was amazed when we spotted an egret at the east end of the loch, and indeed it was the Great White!

After a good dinner and a restful night, we went for a pre-breakfast walk down to the river, but there was little chance of seeing the hoped-for waterbirds. Raging water isn't very suitable for Dippers and Kingfishers. There were, though, many birds in song in the surrounding trees and bushes, nice to hear early in the year as they tuned up for the breeding season ahead.



Rock Pipit

Our first destination of the day was Portpatrick, where the harbour has provided excellent views of Black Guillemots on previous visits. Scanning the fields on the way as we were passing West Freugh, we saw both swans and geese, and a closer look revealed a few Greenland White-fronted Geese together with larger numbers of Pink-footed Geese. However, the sight that greeted us as the outer harbour at Portpatrick came into view was certainly unprecedented as far as we were concerned; huge waves were

breaking over the rocks at the entrance to the harbour, with waves also coming over the sea wall on to the road where we had stopped. From the coach, we saw Gannets passing the harbour mouth, with occasional Shearwaters skimming the waves in typical fashion.

Carefully leaving the coach, we walked to the relative shelter of the inner harbour, but there were no signs of any Black Guillemots; the only bird of note was a sheltering Rock Pipit. Lots of spray was being blown inland by the strong wind, but by climbing the path on the north side we were able to get some shelter, sufficient to stay dry and hold our optics steady. A few Shags flew by or dived with the swell and breaking waves, but conditions were still not easy, and we added no more species.



Scaup

Having experienced the conditions on the open coast, we then headed inland to the relative calm of Loch Ryan. The tide was still high, and the fields close to our first stop in the south-east corner were full of Oystercatchers and Curlew. A few Scaup were just offshore with Red-breasted Mergansers a little further out, and at one stage, the waders were panicked by a passing Peregrine. From a higher vantage point further round the loch, we had views of Goldeneye and Eider, but it seemed very quiet compared to previous visits and the wind was in our faces as we scanned the sea.



Long-tailed Duck

We moved round to the west side where the water was calmer, and soon had good views of a male Long-tailed Duck, and, as we worked our way along the shore, some of the other species we were hoping for gradually revealed themselves. A number of Slavonian Grebes, more Long-tailed Ducks, Common Scoter and Black Guillemot soon

had telescopes trained on them as group members took turns to see them as the birds dived and disappeared in the waves. A short walk out towards the Wig brought us closer to a flock of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, but the wind meant that most small birds were staying low. Returning to the coach, we just got back on board before a passing squall turned the sky darker and we avoided some heavy rain. It didn't last long, with a dramatic rainbow forming before the sky turned blue again. This was to be a feature of the rest of the weekend, as we somehow managed to dodge the showers. A stop by the shore where the receding tide was providing feeding areas for waders meant that we were able to find Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot and Ringed Plover amongst the Curlew, Redshank, Turnstone and Oystercatchers. The general weather conditions in the previous days had clearly had quite an impact on the numbers and distribution of birds in the loch, and we left Loch Ryan having failed between us to see a single diver or Great Crested Grebe.



Red Kite

Our final destination for the day was the fields and rough areas surrounding West Freugh, which can normally be quite productive for raptors. The only definite sighting was a Peregrine, which was hunkered down on the top of a heap of manure; when the farmer arrived with his tractor and trailer to add to the heap, it flew just a short distance to an adjacent field where it landed on the ground. There were a number of Roe deer browsing the rough vegetation. We returned to the hotel and a nice glass of wine (or two).

Our first stop the following morning was by the River Cree near Creetown. It gave a wide sweeping view of the estuary down to Wigtown and the RSPB reserve at Crook of Baldoon. As we scanned the river edge and merse, there were Oystercatcher, Redshank and Curlew, and Wigeon and Teal, but our attention was grabbed by a Raven calling not far away in the top of a pine. The road to Laurieston gave great views of the mountains and moors in the sunshine, and we stopped to take in the scene and to look for raptors. It was chilly in the cold wind, but we stuck it out and eventually saw Red Kites, Buzzard and Ravens floating over the ridges and forest. As we went through the woodland, we came across a nice mixed flock of finches including Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Bullfinch. Near Laurieston we started to get really close views of Red Kites and these continued as we drove by Loch Ken. Here, amazingly, we had our first Greylag Geese of the weekend and lots of Snowdrops in the gardens by the road. A lucky few at the back of the coach saw a pair of Red-legged Partridges in a field beside the road.



Red-legged Partridges

A short stop by Carlingwark Loch provided a close look at Little Grebe and a female Goosander (the pair we had seen on Loch Ken were rather distant) as well as displaying Goldeneye. Our final call for the weekend was at Carsethorn where we managed to arrive as the tide was falling and starting to uncover the feeding areas for the many waders that take advantage of the abundant food supply. Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Dunlin and Curlew were all flying in, but the stars of the show were the wheeling flocks of Knot as they alternated light and dark when changing direction, all set off against a background of the light on the water and on the mountains of the Lake District behind.

We set off home with the sun still shining and had a smooth journey back to Wilmslow. Many thanks to Barbara for all the time she puts in to organising such good accommodation, and to everyone involved, including all the members and friends who contributed to making it a thoroughly enjoyable weekend.

Photos by Robert D

BRIAN D