

Birding Snapshots 2002

Paul Westley, 2003

For me, it is the chiffchaff that signals the true arrival of spring. It is a very rare thing indeed if you have not seen a chiffchaff by the second weekend of March. The arrival of our summer visitors on almost the same date each year never ceases to amaze me. Let me make some predictions for 2003 at Wheatfen: chiffchaff 15th March, sedge warbler 12th April, followed by reed warbler two weeks later on the 26th and whitethroat two days earlier than that on the 24th.

The decoy marsh heronry was very active by early February. I don't think that the numbers of nesting birds has been checked lately. I have intended to check in recent years, however, the site is not easy to get to and extremely dangerous fen has to be crossed.

A mixed flock of siskin and redpoll were regularly found in the alder canopy of alder carr marsh during late March. Visits from these seed eating flocks vary from year to year and this was an especially good year. You rarely get a sighting below treetop level, so identification can sometimes be tricky - especially when looking up at silhouettes against an overcast sky.

During April, I made several early morning visits to try to locate two different reported sightings (well, hearings actually). RSPB staff working on the fen to the west of the Wheatfen boundary heard a spotted crane calling. Unfortunately, I never got to hear a definite call - a possible maybe though. Visitors to Wheatfen also reported hearing the crane.

The other, also unlocated species, was a Savi's warbler. The Savi's warbler's song is very similar to the grasshopper warbler's, but with a slightly different pitch and resolution. They are becoming more frequent summer visitors and have nested up at Hickling Broad. If there was a Savi's present at Wheatfen I'm sure it was quickly passing through.

My early starts didn't go unrewarded though. An osprey on its way to its northerly breeding grounds stopped in for breakfast and was tucking in to a large fish whilst perched on the dead trees at the far end of deep waters. It was constantly mobbed by crows, with at least seven in attendance at any one time. As other crows joined the treetop guard, earlier visitors would move on - a sort of avian changing the guard.

I was also really pleased to get a good sighting of a grasshopper warbler, a bird I had never seen before. It was atop a small hawthorn bush deep in the fen and perched just above the low-lying mist to issue its song. I must admit, it had taken some time to locate, but was well worth the effort.

The numbers of Cetti's warblers on the reserve has dropped since my full breeding bird survey of the reserve in 2000. Having missed 2001 through reserve closure (foot and mouth disease precautions), I have no idea of how they fared during that summer. Wheatfen held at least nine territories throughout the 2002 breeding season. The movement of the birds was quite different compared to that of 2000. As there was more space available maybe their territories were much larger, and they wandered somewhat. This coming season hopefully will help to clarify any changes.

The 13th of July was another new lifetime sighting day. John Ellis and I had wandered along to the coppiced hazel section of Surlingham Wood. Bramble (partly unfortunate and partly not) had quickly covered some of the open ground and hence, provided a mass of flowers for visiting butterflies and hoverflies. White admirals were in evidence in good numbers and made for many a visit with camera in hand. John and I were viewing the scene when a Montagu's harrier swooped into the clearing right in front of us, across, up and out, and then continued on its way towards Rockland. I had heard that there were local sightings, but I had been sceptical. How wrong I was. The harrier displayed its mastery of flight with grace and agility. I was fortunate to see the bird again the next day whilst attending the Wild Flower Day with Grace Corne and Alec Bull.

I didn't spend as much time as I would have liked at Wheatfen during 2002, but that which I did was filled with special events and sightings. Here's to 2003.