

BOC Outing to Portland Bill, Dorset April 2011

Portland Bill is about as far from the Reading area as it is possible to travel for a day trip, so only a few people (who had chosen to stay overnight) assembled at the Obelisk near the lighthouse at 6:45am for the early sea-watching session, but they were rewarded with many parties of Manx Shearwaters going up-channel in lines of up to 20 birds, several Red-Throated Divers, the odd Common Scoter plus a constant movement of Shags, Gannets, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and the common auks, some of them coming very close.

By 8am the activity on the sea was much reduced so we walked round the bushes near the Portland Bird Observatory (the old lighthouse) hoping for some grounded migrant passerines but the whole area was dead apart from the occasional Chiffchaff and Wheatear. On our return to the Obelisk to meet the later arrivals, we learned that we had missed the only Arctic Skua of the morning but we soon had compensation in the form of a passing egret, which looked big, and on more careful examination could be seen to have very long legs and dark feet, so we decided it was a Great White Egret (a breeding bird because the bill looked dark). This egret flew eastwards past the peninsula before turning out to sea again, so was it on its way to one of the breeding colonies in northern France or the Low Countries?

After 10am we walked up towards the top of the cliffs hoping for a Peregrine or some migrants in the fields, but that area was as empty as the bushes had been, apart from a few Rock Pipits, another Wheatear and a steady stream of north-bound Swallows overhead. It was the 5th in a succession of fine, calm days and so I suppose that the migrants had already passed through, to the disappointment of our BOC group and several other birding groups. There must have been at least 50 birders in 4 groups searching the area maybe we just scared them all off!

We moved on to Lodmoor RSPB reserve, though some people chose to divert to Radipole RSPB reserve in central Weymouth to see the Hooded Merganser that has been there for 2 years or more, and which was looking particularly fine in breeding plumage at the time. At Lodmoor, we walked the perimeter path, but here too there was a marked lack of passerines, except for many singing Dunnocks and Reed Warblers, though we did get several brief views of a flock of Bearded Tits. Eventually we came across a knot of birders crammed into a small gap in the hedge who were looking through the gap at something on the scrape that turned out to be the Long-Billed Dowitcher that had been in the area for several days. When the crowd thinned, we were able to watch it at close range as it bathed and preened and those with cameras got good pictures. Further scanning of the pools revealed a group of four Whimbrel that were clearly seen by all.

On balance we had a good day, with fine weather, three rarities, several hard-to-see birds and a day list of 68 species, but the general lack of migrants was disappointing, but perhaps it was too much to expect everything.