

## Coach Trip to WWT Slimbridge, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2015

In 2014 flooding scuppered our January trip to the Ouse Washes, but this year the weather was almost too perfect – calm and sunny - as we set off with a full coach for Slimbridge.

When Peter Scott set up the reserve, he did so because there were so many White-fronted Geese there each winter, and Bewick's Swans were numerous too. In recent years numbers of both have fallen, possibly because milder winters allow the birds to find adequate conditions further north and east. This time some of the group were lucky enough to be in the vicinity of the Holden Tower when a flock of a hundred or so White-fronts made a short visit to the Tack Piece. Among them was just one Pink-footed Goose. Of course there were Greylags, Canada Geese and Barnacles a-plenty, but those are local and feral, and nothing like as alluring as the truly wild geese and swans, the hardy adventurers from the High Arctic. Bewick's Swans were in view all day in reasonable numbers, but it was relatively hard to spot the one Whooper Swan – though its distinctive monitoring neck-collar did help! What did surprise us was the ease with which three Cranes from the reintroduction project slipped in unnoticed to start feeding in the marshy pools, where their great size seemed to diminish against the muddy background. Later in the day there were seven of them out there, their bugling calls a true delight.

The ducks - Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler, Tufties, Pochard, Shelduck and Pintail together formed an amazing kaleidoscope of colour and shape in such good light. The brown camouflage of waders, such as Curlew, Redshank, Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit made them much harder to define, but two Little Stints were mercifully close on the margins of a pool. The presence of two Peregrines, a Buzzard and a Marsh Harrier kept all the birds jumpy. Frequent panics sent flocks of birds into the air, with the Lapwings and Golden Plovers up highest and longest. Not that the raptors were that active: we found one of the Peregrines perched out on the Dumbles and another was in the hedge behind the Tack Piece. Alan Absalom also found a Tawny Owl in that same hedge.

It is hard to leave such sights, yet there is always much to find elsewhere: we made sure of a Water Rail on the inner pools, where a Brown Rat became almost attractive as it washed at the edge of the water. Smaller, and certainly much more popular with the viewers, were several Bank Voles, which were tempted from their burrows by strategically-placed grain.

The bird which everyone wanted to see from the South Finger hides was an elusive Bittern. It eventually showed for many people, though some saw it much better than others in the crowded hides. A couple of nearby Ruffs were a bonus while we waited.

The collection birds are especially smart at this season, and are a remarkable resource for photographers and for anyone wanting to learn the wildfowl of the world. I still find it an uncanny privilege to walk among such as the once-endangered Hawaiian Goose, the Nene. There are also the special conservation projects to visit, but for me the wild birds are the greater priority during a winter visit.

South Lake produced nothing of particular interest and it was soon time to return to the Rushy Lake screens to watch the birds arrive for the floodlit feed. I have watched that finale many times and never tire of the beauty, variety and grace of the wildfowl as they arrive on

fleet wings to land sometimes in impossibly-crowded water. Now that is a bird-table and a half!

With the birds and the weather behaving perfectly, nearly fifty people had enjoyed a near-perfect day out. With BOC members boosted by a good number from two local RSPB groups, the trip had been so well supported that we were subsequently able to send a donation to WWT in support of the work to conserve the seriously-endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper.