

BOC Weekend on the Isle of Portland – April 2014

This weekend reminded me of the usual comment on my boyhood school report card – “could do better”. I say this because we did have a pretty good weekend by most standards, but we were let down by the conditions, both the weather and the migration pattern.

It is quite a long way to Weymouth so we began the weekend in the New Forest at Acres Down, which is literally 5 minutes off the route, in order to give the drivers a break and get in some woodland bird watching. However when we got there it was raining, but nevertheless less we set off into the forest in the hope of a finding few birds and maybe seeing some improvement in the weather but we were sadly disappointed in both respects. We got soaked and found hardly a living creature as we splashed through the silent forest, trying to avoid the worst of the mud and puddles.

The weather forecast had indicated that it would be better in the west so we returned to the cars and went on to Lodmoor RSPB reserve on the edge of Weymouth and, as predicted, it stopped raining just east of Weymouth. We then had a very pleasant walk round the reserve. The sun came out and dried out our wet clothes and we had some good views of several bird species. A pair of marsh harriers were active; one a very well marked female with the most developed golden shoulder patches that I have ever seen, and her partner, an unusual brown morph male, which we thought was another female at first. Sedge and reed warblers were singing, though in smaller numbers than I expected, and we had close views of a sedge warbler but the reed warblers were very reluctant to show. A pair of bearded tits came right out into the open within 20 yards of us and kept us amused for several minutes. A few lesser whitethroats were singing and were not too hard to see for what can often be a very skulking species. Cetti's warblers were the commonest of the warblers and as ever they were hard to see but with so many making so much noise we did eventually see several. Waders were a bit of a disappointment as was the case for the whole weekend. Excluding a few little egrets and grey herons (which I don't usually class as waders) there was a total of 6 wading birds on the reserve, where in the past I have usually seen reasonable numbers of various species. We found 2 oystercatchers, one ringed plover, one common sandpiper and (a bit of a bonus) two whimbrel that gave us good close views. In fact the visit to Lodmoor established something of a precedent, with waders and passerines scarce, and terns absent where they might have been expected in numbers. Or, as several locals put it, “It's been a funny year”. Many migrants came through early but recently there had been hardly any, a disappointment, as this was the main attraction of Portland in late April. Later in the day we tried our luck on Verne Common (the high part of the island) but it was birdless. In the late afternoon we checked in to Portland Lodge, a basic but adequate hotel with the great virtue of being less than 10 minutes drive from The Bill.

We began Saturday with an early sea-watch, enduring blustery showers and salt spray until the cold and prospect of breakfast in the nearby “Lobster Pot” cafe brought us to our senses. Our time on The Bill was not wasted, however. There was a steady stream of passing gannets, shags and auks to keep us interested and occasional bonus birds such as 3 red throated divers (I had a useful lesson on flight identification of divers from a friendly local birder), a dozen or so Manx shearwaters, some quite close in and, best of all, a great skua passed no more than 100 yards out, close enough to see all the details.



After breakfast we walked through the fields and bushes behind the headland and found 3 wheatears and the same number of whinchats but there was a conspicuous lack of small birds – not a single whitethroat, willow warbler or chiffchaff was singing never mind the hoped for ring ouzel or redstart. Our only rewards were several swallows, a couple of stonechats, a few meadow pipits and a rock pipit. We moved north in search of better luck but at Ferrybridge there were only three waders (yes, THREE! one whimbrel, one black tailed godwit and one ringed plover) and no terns at all! I have never seen so little there.

Our final visit of the days was to Radipole RSPB reserve in central Weymouth. We had a walk round and spent time at the only remaining hide but saw nothing out of the ordinary except that some of us got a good view of the long-staying hooded merganser and though it may be of doubtful origin but is nonetheless a very smart bird, which in itself made the visit worthwhile.

In some ways the meals were almost the best bit of this weekend. The breakfasts in the Lobster Pot were first class and very welcome after a spell on the sea lashed extreme of Dorset. The Cove House Inn in Fortuneswell, where we ate in the evening, is a dramatically positioned pub overlooking Chesil beach, with a nice atmosphere, a fairly sheltered patio, good beer and quite good homemade pub food.

On the final day, Sunday, we began again at 6:15am on Portland Bill and saw more or less the same species as the previous day. Once again there were very few migrant passerines, a group of 5 wheatears in a field seemed to be about the only overnight arrivals. While searching for the regular little owl in the observatory quarry we learned in conversation with someone from the observatory that it had been the same all week with very few birds being netted in the observatory garden. We soon found the owl which was very obliging and was still in view when we passed again an hour later. The high point of the morning (possibly excluding breakfast) was when two bonxies settled on the sea close to shore and proceeded to beat up the local herring gulls. This lasted for several minutes and it was the best and most prolonged view of this difficult species that I have had for many years.

All things considered it was a good, but not a classic, weekend. I clearly remember one day on The Bill when migrants came in thick and fast, a hoopoe flew in off the sea and an exhausted black redstart dropped onto the sea only yards from shore only to struggle off again and make it to the rocks and survival. But unfortunately these 'special' days are the exception. We had a total (including the dubious merganser) of 86 species over the weekend including several scarce or hard to see birds. However, the wash out in the New Forest and the conspicuous lack of passage migrants means that I have to score the weekend 'below average' but I will try again another year knowing that you can't expect a classic fall of migrants on every visit to Portland.

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