

BOC Day Trip to Blashford Lakes, 20th January 2022

Throughout these bizarre months of Covid, flow-tests, masks, and social distancing, birding has been sometimes impossible or at least very tricky. Fortunately, most of this year's activities have survived, though they have not always been well-supported. For a variety of reasons, this was the first event that I had been able to attend in some time. It was good to see old friends again and to meet a new member, John Davies.

Five of us gathered at Blashford Lakes on a bright cold morning. Gray Burfoot was leading and, as we waited for the others to join us, a passing Sparrowhawk marked the start of an interesting day.

The Woodland Hide is always a little unreal for its intensity. We had spent a bit of time searching the trees outside for tiny, elusive and fast-moving targets, but the temptation of a feeder-fest was too strong and we were soon watching a constant flurry of small birds as they refuelled after a very cold night. Chaffinches seem not to be so common around my local birding haunts these days, so it was good to see them in good numbers here, even though none of them would turn into a Brambling (though John Froy found two of those there later in the day).



Siskins © Ray Reedman

Siskins were fairly plentiful among the Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Nuthatches and commoner tits. Several Jays came in and some people were lucky to see just one Marsh Tit as it dashed in and away.



Great Egret © Ray Reedman

A session at the Ivy South Hide is always rewarding. A Kingfisher patrolled back and forth in front of us, while a Great Egret sat like a beacon at the top of one of the taller trees. Several Cormorants dried their wings next door. The lake was covered with assorted water birds, dominated by Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks and Herring Gulls. The strong low light was tricky, but in spite of it Robert Godden found a vanishing Green Sandpiper on the far bank.

After a short reprise at the Woodland Hide, we next tried Ivy Lake North. Unfortunately, the warden had reported a full flush of four heron species there the day before*, so the Bittern hunters were out in force and the small space was

fully occupied. Not a mask in sight, not a thought of social distancing and only two tiny windows to open!

Naturally, we beat a hasty retreat and took up residence in the huge new hide overlooking Ibsley Water. There, a steady northerly breeze strode in through the open windows to whisk any bugs swiftly southwards. The only trouble in those conditions is that birds tend to gather in the northern lee of the lake at the greatest distance from the hide. Nonetheless the light was good and we made out plenty of duck species, including: Shoveler, Pochard, Wigeon and Tufties, plus the scarcer Pintails, Goosanders and Goldeneyes. The island strips held a number of Cormorants. Among these were a good number of Lapwings and Black-headed Gulls. Robert again found a Green Sandpiper and a Snipe, and was also the first to locate the cause of a massive panic flight – a female Marsh Harrier, which seemed to be chancing her luck on the way through. A couple of Herons were roosting in the background vegetation, while to the right of the lake a very distinctive white-bellied Buzzard stood out like a roosting Osprey.

There was a bit of activity on the banks closer to the hide, with a few Linnets and the odd Pied Wagtail, but it was pretty quiet there otherwise.

After midday the gulls started to build up in the middle of the lake, the smaller species - Black-headed and Common - gathering separately from the larger Herring and Lesser Black-backed, but they were mostly facing away into the wind and just too far off to pick out any 'strangers'. On good sessions in the past, we have found four more species, but this time there was not even a Great Black-backed by the time Gray and I left. Luckily Robert was still there to locate a Ring-billed Gull, a scarce American stray that has sometimes been recorded there in recent winters.

We were pleased to receive John's news of the Bramblings as we drove back. Blashford is always well worth a winter visit.

Ray Reedman