

Birdwatching – January 2015 – October 2016



Here is a record of the iU3A Birdwatching group visits from January 2015 through to October 2016, the end of the iU3A year. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

January 2015



In late January, 11 of us visited the London Wetland Centre. Our first outing, and Rose did brilliantly showing us around a great place where she is a regular volunteer. Promised mild weather and bright winter sunshine, it was mostly overcast until later, but the light was not too bad and we had great views of the birds on the ponds. For many of us it was an introduction to the great variety of ducks to be seen in winter, and there was also pleasure in seeing a fine flock of lapwings regularly taking to flight on some alarm,

real or imagined. Three pintail possibly the highlight, making up for the elusive bittern, on a list of 37 bird species seen. [Report](#)



Our first 'local' visit was to Walthamstow Reservoirs. Convenient at just a five minute walk from Tottenham Hale station on the Victoria Line, this is a great place for birds in winter. Ducks, grebes, herons, cormorants and gulls, and always the chance of a rarity. Five of us ignored a forecast of a wet morning and in the event enjoyed a rain-free and occasionally even bright stroll round the central reservoir. We didn't see the scaup reportedly present but we saw lots else including a very obliging kingfisher. 29 species

seen, maybe omitting a few, we were not concentrating on listing. [Report](#)

February



Our February visit was to Stocker's Lake in the Colne Valley not far from Rickmansworth. Seven of us enjoyed a brisk but often sunny 3 hours with only the occasional sleet shower, and were rewarded with a good range of ducks in all their finery. The lake was busy with tufted ducks and crabby coots, and we had very good views of several species including red kites, grey herons and a black swan. The highlight: probably several goldeneye displaying and generally showing themselves to good effect as we viewed in bright

sunshine from the southern side of the lake.

March



Our first visit in March, and our second 'local' visit, was to the Waterworks Nature Reserve. Between the Walthamstow Reservoirs and Hackney Marshes, and a short ride on the 56 bus, this is a fine, almost accidental, haven that has more recently benefitted from the Olympic legacy. There's a well-designed hide that offers differing views of a good number of 19th century water-purifying filter beds, each now managed for a slightly different wildlife habitat. Our visit was on a cold day, not one for hanging around, but we

enjoyed a good walk, also taking in the Middlesex Filter Beds, and enjoying some good sights including a very cooperative little grebe.



Our next visit in March was to Rainham Marshes, a showcase RSPB reserve on the Thames estuary. Ancient grazing marshes, more recently in military use, then saved from becoming a theme park only because no solid foundations could be found for the slides. Our group of 12 had an expert guide; a volunteer who knew the reserve like the back of her hand. Thanks to her we saw a marsh harrier (Rainham had London's first breeding pair past year) and other fine birds. Some seemed to relish an exceptionally windy day; the lapwings,

jackdaws and even shelduck. A few smaller birds ventured out too, including reed bunting and lots of goldfinches on to the feeders. [Report](#)

April



Our third local trip was to Regent's Park. Familiar to all, if not as a place for wild birds. In fact like most of the green spaces in London it holds more interest than might be supposed. A small group of us enjoyed a lovely sunny day with the park looking good and the cherry blossom at its best. We visited the well-known heronry and enjoyed seeing some juveniles there. Other birds included great crested and little grebe, reed warbler and red-crested pochard. A search for a reported firecrest was sadly unfruitful. Everyone enjoyed

this outing and confirmed a demand for this kind of short local trip. [Report](#)



Our main April trip was to Rye Meads, an RSPB reserve in the upper part of the Lea valley. We managed to see something of the reserve, and some of its birds before a real deluge set in and birdwatching became a rather unprofitable exercise. But spirits remained high and everyone was upbeat and looking forward to visiting again with better weather!

May



May saw 11 of us at Fingringhoe Wick, Essex Wildlife Trust's 'showcase' reserve on the Colne estuary in Essex. We travelled by car, all happily arriving more or less at the same time, to enjoy a warm day in an attractive place with a bit of everything; gorse heath, scrub, woodland and the marshes and mud of the estuary. The famous nightingales performed well (we are pictured listening to them) and we saw and heard some other summer visitors including whitethroat, lesser whitethroat and blackcap. The tide was out

but we still saw little egret, avocet and oystercatchers on the marshes. [Report](#)

June



In June we enjoyed a two and a half mile meander through the freshwater marshes, reed beds, saltwater mud flats, and grassy areas of RSPB's Rainham Marshes. On a beautifully warm day, butterflies, moths, dragonflies, sunbathing Marsh Frogs and basking seals in the estuary all announced that summer had arrived. Panoramic views over the Thames and acres of marshes were a joy, further enriched when we spotted a Marsh Harrier hunting low. Two knowledgeable guides told us the history of the area with its rich

ecology and helped us identify some 46 species of bird including: Little Grebe (pictured), Redshank, Lapwing, Little Ringed Plover, Whitethroat, Linnets and, star of the show, a juvenile Bearded Tit feeding in the reeds. [Report](#)

July



Our local visit in July was to East India Dock Basin, a tiny reserve where the River Lea joins the Thames. Only a small part of the East India Dock remains, behind lock gates that will never again open. For all its urban setting this is still a place of modest tranquility even if the DLR almost overhangs it. Of bird interest throughout the year, we were not sure what to expect in quiet July. But we enjoyed views of several types of gull and duck, cormorants, little ringed plover and a reed warbler singing within yards of a busy

nearby road. The highlight, though, was the terns circling, fishing and feeding young directly in front of us. A little gem, so easy to get to, for a moment of reflection and enjoyment of nature. [Report](#)



Our main July visit was to The Lodge, Sandy, the RSPB headquarters, where Alan is a weekly volunteer. Six of us enjoyed a pleasant stroll through fields, woodland and heath. The RSPB had given us some good information about the site and we saw something of the challenges of heathland restoration, rabbit exclusion and conservation management. We greatly enjoyed views of a topiary avocet in the Lodge gardens and a very great oak owl in the memorial garden. Real birds were more scarce, though we were

able to watch numerous green woodpeckers, and one of the resident hobbies turned up, as if on cue, as we arrived at the favoured spot to see them.

August



Our early August local visit was to the famous Tate Modern peregrines. In fact newbie peregrines because a pair nesting in the Barbican (private, so no nest-cams) have taken over the post-breeding site this year. Probably relatively young adults, there were no progeny and though they took up the traditional perches on the great chimney they didn't have a lot to do except admire the view. So we had good views of the birds, but no ace flying lessons this year. The RSPB volunteers, telescopes zoomed in, were

making the best of it with occasional calls such as 'I've got one preening now'. Here's our little group, please no pantomime cries of 'behind you'.



Our main August visit was to Cliffe Pools on the North Kent Marshes, a fine reserve with open views of the estuary and the flat grasslands alongside. A mix of freshwater to saline lagoons, originally gravel diggings with lots of scrub and so forth for small birds. We had a fine walk on a good day, and saw a fair few birds, albeit a bit distant - this is not a reserve with everything laid on, a telescope would have been a great help. But we saw lots of avocets, large numbers of godwit, and many other birds of the marsh and

waterside. The highlight was a clear view of a peregrine crossing above us and then stooping over a field trying (but failing) to grab a lunch-starling.

September



In early September, members enjoyed a local visit to Camley Street Natural Park, a revelation for some: a tranquil and thriving place for nature - in the middle of the King's Cross redevelopment. The scene of an early conservation victory in the 1980s when an old coal yard that had been overtaken by nature was designated a nature reserve instead of being turned into a lorry park, Camley Street is an iconic little gem, with a fantastic record of bringing urban children into contact with nature.

Islington famously has the least green space in London but we are very lucky to have places such as this on our doorstep.



Our main September visit was to the lovely RSPB Pulborough Brooks, nestling in the Arun valley in the South Downs National Park. A fine day in a lovely place with some good birds. Early on we were rewarded with views of marsh harrier, kestrel and hobby; later, after watching a distant flock, we studied a fine green wagtail sunning itself after bathing in the pond in front of our hide. Lots of small birds, it was great to see big flocks of goldfinches. We also saw whitethroat, nuthatches, goldcrests and a typical extended

family of long tailed tits restlessly moving through the trees above us. Most ducks were still in eclipse plumage and the winter arrivals had not arrived. But we saw dunlin and an elegant green sandpiper on the scrapes - assisted throughout the visit by RSPB volunteers generously offering their telescopes and expertise.

October



For our early October local visit we were lucky enough to have a sneak preview of Woodberry Wetlands We were shown around by London Wildlife Trust's Regional Development Manager, Dave Mooney. This is a truly inspiring place a new nature reserve on our doorstep, a site previously closed to the public since 1833. Dave's knowledge and infectious enthusiasm for a project that must have seemed daunting at times had us all ready to volunteer to help in the future. Provided it doesn't rain so much; it was truly torrential at times. But

we did see some birds: great black-backed gulls, tufted duck, grey wagtail and a sedge warbler tarrying late on its migration. A great prospect for future local birding trips.



On a balmy late October day we visited an RSPB reserve new to all of us - [Vange Marsh](#). Part of a group on the northern Thames estuary, less well known than the flagship Rainham Marshes but very fine nonetheless. Local volunteers, David and Clive, made excellent guides, explaining the history of the place as well as showing us the birds. Highlights perhaps a water rail invisibly screeching right by us and the 653 black tailed godwits. Sobering that we were looking at 1 in 200 of the European population of this declining red-listed bird on a

single pond in Essex. Later we enjoyed the lovely RSPB wildlife garden (pictured), some buying wildflower seeds for Islington.

November



In November, on the first properly cold day of winter, a select group returned to the [Waterworks Nature Reserve](#) off the Lea Bridge Road. An excellent place for a short local visit, we saw little egrets from the bus as we arrived, and more nice birds from the hide. We were lucky to see gadwall already looking at their best; at a distance these birds can seem an undistinguished grey but close-up and in good light their finely vermiculated plumage is beautiful. Plus more obviously showy teal, a jay that decided to rouse them from their

slumbers and a grey wagtail busily feeding on the shoreline.



For our last trip of 2015, on a mild December day, we visited [Wanstead Flats and Park](#). New to all of us, this was an interesting destination, if not obviously offering more than some of our more local birding spots in the Lea Valley. Still, we had a pleasant stroll and enjoyed trying to identify the various gulls in the large flocks of the Flats. Small birds were a bit tricky because of the relatively poor light but we saw a fair mixture of tits and finches, if no typical winter visitors. Quite a lot of ducks too, the highlight being a large group of

brightly coloured widgeon on the last ponds we looked at.

December

No visits

January 2016



Our first, early January, trip of 2016 was to [Abney Park](#). A few stops on the bus and you're in this fascinating Victorian cemetery in Stoke Newington, another good local place for birds. For some of us at least this was a first bird outing of the year and we were enthusiastically ticking 'robin' and other rarities. In fact the trees and bushes were busy with birds and we had the opportunity to watch goldcrests at close quarters, as well as, for example, a fine song thrush doing what it does best. There was much else to draw the attention

too: fine veteran trees, unseasonably early spring flowers, and the splendid chap pictured. A strange and wonderful place.



Our first main trip in 2016 was to [RSPB Otmoor](#) just north of Oxford and an easy journey from Marylebone; though it would have been a fair walk (or a taxi ride) if Robert and Sue had not been able to meet us at Islip with their cars. It's a fine watery reserve, with thousands of lapwings, many ducks and geese and raptors including marsh harrier and red kite. We were there, though, to see the starling murmuration, and a reported 75,000 birds duly obliged as dusk fell. A memorable experience, as was the moonlit walk back accompanied by flights

of geese, honking as they too made their way home to roost.

February



Our February local trip was to [Brent Reservoir](#), also known as the Welsh Harp for reasons lost in antiquity or the local pub. Six of us had a great visit, to yet another fine local place in London with fantastic local experts to help. The site is natural - but urban. Andrew and Roy's advice on where to look for the special birds was on the lines of 'between the dumped wheelie bin and the half-submerged supermarket trolley'. But it's still a great place for wild birds and we all enjoyed watching the snipe prodding away at the mud (it's

a top London place for the species), good numbers of ducks, and a surprising number of others; woodpeckers, lapwings, yellow browed warblers.



Our March local visit was to [Walthamstow Reservoirs](#), with a leisurely walk round the southern reservoirs on a fine but cold day. Coincidentally a couple of days later Simon Barnes in the Sunday Times enthused about the place and the ambitious plan to re-create it as "[Walthamstow Wetlands](#)". We saw evidence of that in some muddy looking work to make new reedbeds in reservoir number 3. Meanwhile the old hide is close to collapse, no doubt to be replaced by a 'viewing centre'. Although early March is a bit in-between

we saw some good birds in good light including goldeneye and goosander. (Note: the February main visit was cancelled because of the weather.)

March



Our March main visit was to [Tring Reservoirs](#), said to be one of the best places for birding in southern England. An exaggeration perhaps but six of us still enjoyed an admittedly rather raw morning picking out the different ducks on the reservoirs. The highlight was a fine male scaup on Marsworth, and we also saw pochard, shoveller, tufted duck, cormorant and little egret. And of course we were pleased to see great-crested grebe, made famous by Julian Huxley's ground-breaking study published in 1914. We had planned to visit College

Lake NR too but the Grand Junction Arms proved irresistible before a gentle walk back to the station along the Grand Union canal.

April



Our first visit in April was to RSPB **Rainham Marshes**. With a local warden and good weather we had a glorious stroll around this extensive area. While we didn't manage to beat our previous spotting recorded for this site (61 species) we did pretty well — about 45 as a group. This included all the common ducks, heron, marsh harrier, kestrel, reed bunting, dunlin, lapwing, barn owl, chiffchaff, redshank, etc, etc — and one of us even managed to spot a cetti's warbler. That's just to mention the bird life. There was plenty of nature generally to

appreciate as well - thanks to our excellent guide. The photo shows the guide sharing some knowledge with us while one member tests a special Swedish birdwatching chair - could be a bit breezy up there in certain weathers. Bird count for the visit [here](#).



Our second visit in April was to RSPB Rye Meads (Lea Valley). A good medium sized reserve within easy reach of Islington (or even Plaistow — for our newest member). Berry Beaumont led us around and it was good to see Rina active again and supporting on call identification. While a cold wind blew it was a clear day for our small group. While there seemed not too many birds to view we did notch up quite a variety in the end. The visit would have been crowned if we'd seen the Kingfishers fly in to their nest onto their eggs. We didn't see them

from the hide but did see them later on the web cam. That counts doesn't it? The sighting of a Grey Wagtail was may be the sighting of the day (well spotted Berry!). Bird count for the visit [here](#).

May



We had an extra visit in May — to the official opening of the London Wildlife Trust's Woodberry Wetlands. While this free guided tour of the old reservoir was very informative the large (public) group probably scared some of the bird life away. But we still managed to hear Reed Warblers and see a Great Crested Grebe, and a range of ducks and gulls. There was great interest at the end when we saw several birds ballanced on the tops of reeds. Were they Dunnocks? No, just House Sparrows! However the site has great promise and

being right on our doorstep I'm sure we'll return.

Our second visit in May was to the WWT London Wetland Centre, at Barnes. Rose organised this one for us. The weather was kind and the group saw over 35 species of bird, plus damsel and dragonflies, butterflies and croaking marsh frogs! Highlights included kingfisher, reed and cetti's warblers, nesting common terns, little ringed plover, redshank, sand martins flying in and out of their nest holes and a pair of great crested grebes! Another great day out.

June



Our main visit in June was to Stoker's Lake at Rickmansworth. While there were only a few of us, it was another pleasant day out. We started with a walk along the Grand Union Canal, then turend into Stoker's Lake reserve. On the first section we had the great experience of walking right by a grey heron. You felt you could stretch out and touch it. Then we passed a Macaw on a boat. On the lake there were the usual collection of ducks and we could have spent all day just watching the Common Terns whirl and dive as they fed on the surface insect life. Lots of fledglings of many species to observe. At the reed beds we could hear many warblers and reckon we saw not only a Reed Warbler but also a Cetti's Warbler. There were several more herons on the lake then we had a quick flash of a kingfisher along the riverbank. We also saw a couple of large terrapins

basking in the sun on one of the lake's islands.



Our local visit in June was to Hampstead Heath. We joined up with the Marylebone Bird Watching Group which turned out to be quite a strong group - in terms of numbers and knowledge. The 4 of us from iU3A were well out numbered by over 20 from the Marylebone group. We were led around by the Heath's Chief Ornithologist who, apart from spotting the wild life, could tell us about the maintenance projects on the ponds. The bird life was a bit limited due to the time of the year. A kingfisher had been spotted a couple of days

previously but didn't display for us. Marylebone made us very welcome and we were encouraged to repeat this group join up - I'm sure we will.

July



Early July saw us trying out **Two Tree Island** — a new destination for us. This 640 acre island is situated about a 20 minute walk from the Leigh on Sea train station. An easy stroll passed the mudflats. It's an Essex Wildlife Trust site. We were blessed with good weather. We didn't see much initially as we circled around it. Perhaps the frequent dog walkers were scaring away the birdlife. The island consists of grassland, scrub and reedbeds. Then we got to the lagoon at the west end of the island and there were many flocks

resting there. We struggled amongst us to identify all the birds but in the end we think we got there. There were many Avocets, Egrets, Lapwing and Godwits.

Although not shown on their website we also found hides and a cafe. Worth another visit at some stage!



Our local visit in July was to **Walthamstow Reservoir** — there are ten individual reservoirs that make up Walthamstow Reservoir, some of them are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as they have rich bird habitat and terrestrial fauna. It is internationally recognised for the diverse range of birds that it attracts. This nature haven in the heart of the capital also offers the budding angler fantastic opportunities to fish specimen carp *Cyprinus carpio*, Bream *Abramis brama* and Chub *Leuciscus cephalus* and Barbel *Barbus* in clear

waters. A wide range of breeding and migrant species, and wintering waterfowl can be seen. A highlight of the site is one of the largest heronries in Britain. This has recently attracted the first breeding Little egrets in Greater London. There is also a large colony of cormorants. Seven of us survived the hottest afternoon of the year on our trip to Walthamstow. We ran into a guide from the London Wildlife trust who gave me a whole wedge of notes and also a key for one of the hides. It was intensely hot and luckily there were the 2 hides where we could get some shade (one of the hides is so wrecked it is dangerous and should be condemned). We saw Coot, Moorhen, great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Cormorant, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Canadian Geese, Egyptian Geese, Greylag Geese, Magpie, Black headed Gull, Black backed Gull, Herring Gull.

August



We started August with a return to **Abney Park**. A fascinating place always. We spent an enjoyable time mainly looking at the over 200 year old trees and, the not quite as old, graves. This was partly due to a lack of bird life. Wrong time of year and probably wrong time of day. In fact the most bird life was seen on the bird feeders at the end. So 6 of us enjoyed the visit regardless.

Our main visit in August was to **Brent Reservoir** (Welsh Harp) - relatively easy to get to (Hendon) but a bit too hot for the birds. One of the best viewing spots was probably the viewing platform just at the beginning. From there we saw many swans, ducks (mainly Mallard) and young black headed gulls. We also spotted: two Great Crested Grebs, Grey Heron, Egrets (we think of the Large variety), etc. We walked the full length of the reservoir but the green spaces didn't offer much. After a refreshing tea or cool drinks stop we walked back and then branched up to the North Marsh and the one public hide. Worth the detour. From here we added to our count by: Little Egret, juvenile Black-tailed Godwit, Egyptian Geese, etc. A count of just over 20 species.



September



For this local visit in September we returned to our local WWT at **Woodberry Downs**. We went early to avoid the heat of the day but caught the rain instead. However it didn't last and soon brightened a bit. We did see a range of ducks (Pochard, Gadwell, Tufted, Mallard), were quite pleased we could differentiate the gulls (lesser black backed [of 3 ages] and black headed - no herring or terns), spotted Great Crested Grebes, Coots & Swans (one being tended by a Warden). Not to mention the numerous Blackbirds, Great Blue and Great tits,

Magpies and Parakeets. The "something green" we will claim as a Greenfinch. So quite a respectable tally in total. Still a great place to have on our doorstep.

For our main visit in September we went to **London WWT** at Barnes for a talk and guided visit. This was a joint visit with Banstead U3A. It was an open day for all U3As by the WWT to celebrate 70 years since their foundation by Sir Peter Scott. The lecture give us insight into Sir Peter Scott's early work and how bird conservation and education was done 70 years ago. Then it highlighted 4 of their projects over those years to save endangered birds in different parts of the world - and again to highlight how things have changed over these years. Their current project is with regard to the Bewick Swan and their "Fly with the swans" project. A WWT volunteer is flying with some of these swans as they migrate from Siberia to the Thames and the flight started the day before this visit. The



picture shows the success of one of their other projects - saving the NeNe.

October 2016



For our local visit in October we returned to **Rye Meads**. There were eight of us for a short afternoon's birding at the lovely Rye Meads reserve in Essex where we had a wonderful time. We were helped by some kind birders with telescopes and cameras in the hides so our bird count is higher than it might have been. The highlights were common snipe, water rail and green sandpiper though we didn't manage to see the jack snipe and kingfisher which had been spotted earlier in that day. Rina thinks she might have seen the bittern fly

but wasn't quick enough to get a sighting in the binoculars. The rest were: sparrow, coot, moorhen, magpie, great tit, gadwall, wigeon, mallard, heron, shoveler duck, starlings, teal (in eclipse plumage) wigeon, cormorant and red kite. Robin and Cetti's warbler were heard.

Nine of us happy birdwatchers had a wonderful sunny warm day (for late October) for our main monthly visit to Rainham Marshes. We saw 26 different species and enjoyed a delightful walk around the reserve. The highlights were Lapwing, Teal, Marsh Harrier, Little Egret and Cetti's Warbler (heard). We didn't have our own personal guide but were helped by the many enthusiasts there. We were astounded to hear that the reserve is suffering from a lack of water in the Marshes so doesn't have as many water birds as usual.



Lessons from today is don't go to this popular reserve at half term or on a Friday as the guide is conducting the weekly walk. Another enjoyable day out!