

Birdwatching – October 2018 – September 2019



Here is a record of the iU3A Birdwatching group visits from October 2018 through to September 2019, the end of the iU3A year. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

October 2018



Walthamstow — this was our local outing to Walthamstow reservoirs. Walthamstow reservoirs (now supported by WWT) and apart from still being an important part of the system for supplying London's water, are now being made bird-friendly. Some of the reservoirs have had their edges softened with reed beds and other vegetation. There are now islands and inlets making it a very good place for birds. We started to spot birds even as we walked along from Tottenham Hale. Overall we had a high success rate with 30 species being

spotted and highlights of the day including a curlew, peregrine and a kingfisher!

Stocker's Lake — on another glorious autumn day we headed to Rickmansworth. After cutting through the town we picked up the Grand Union canal and followed it for a bit. This gave us our first sightings of the usual array of ducks and geese. We then left the canal to circumnavigate Stocker's Lake (we couldn't decide on the correct pronunciation). We've been to Stockers about 4 times before but this probably gave us our widest range of duck sightings, including pochard, gadwell, mallard, tufted, grebe. However the world was a gog when we spotted an eclipsed wigeon!!!! It was just like the picture in the book. Then followed debate about what was an 'eclipsed' species. The possibility of it being a hybrid or a transgender was dashed when Geoff (or Google) announced that it was a bird with plumage in transition! so now you know.



Woodberry Downs — for our 'local' visit this month we returned to our nearest reserve. Woodberry never startles but we do see some good sightings here. This time it was a water rail. Much debate over if it really could be a water rail but the collective conclusion was that it was one indeed. A count of 25 overall.

November 2018

Thurrock Thameside — a new destination for us. The Longer Walks group had seen this new Essex Wildlife Trust centre being built over the last couple of years and the

reclaimed land being opened up, and it was time for a visit. It's been billed as car-friendly but unfortunately it's not public transport-friendly. So it's a bit of a hike in from East Tilbury station along the Thames Estuary Path. But actually this section proved rewarding with many a sighting along the way. However, it being a cold day, reaching the centre was a welcome relief. It's a great centre at a prime viewing position of the estuary and mudflats. Curlews and kestrels were probably the highspots. But we also saw the first of the season's fieldfare and redwings. Was the sighting of a cetti's warbler more remarkable? A count of 36 in total. Eventually the cold got to us, so it was a brisk shorter walk out to Stanford-le-Hope.

December 2018



Walthamstow — this was to be our monthly local outing. Walthamstow reservoirs are an important part of the system for supplying London's water. Some of them are quite 'hard-edged' and not so great for birds. Others are much softer-edged and there are islands and so forth, so overall they are very good places for birds. It was a cold day so we kept moving, but we still saw a wide range of bird life. Bramblings were probably the highlight but teal, great spotted woodpecker and chaffinch also provided excitement. Overall a very good range of

species were spotted (31 in total) but there was no peregrine in residence this time.

January 2019

Two Tree Island — we returned to this Essex reserve. Our visit here in January 2018 proved a stunning visit with a high count both in variety of species and in volume of each as well, so expectations were high for this return visit. Again it was a cold January day. While by the end of our visit our count was 34, we didn't quite match the joys of last year. But it was close with some particular stunning sights: the murmurations of knots — hundreds if not thousands of them — curlews, avocets, sanderlings, to name a few.



Woodberry Downs — our stalwart for local visits, we had a good wander around the reservoir on a cold day. Nothing too spectacular but our count was a healthy 28. Siskin and chaffinches were the best sightings, with a good range of ducks and tits.

February

Brighton, Starling Murmurations: this year we tried our luck to see starling murmurations by going to Brighton (in previous years we had gone to Otmoor, with mixed results). Traditionally Brighton has been a good location to see these spectacular sights. Bad weather was forecast until about 14.00, but six hardy souls set out for Brighton wrapped up well. We traveled down on a train late morning with the rain still falling and we arrived at a misty wet Brighton. So it was a quick scurry from the station down to the front to find a Fish & Chip restaurant to dry out and

linger in the warmth. Then most opted to visit the Pavilion to kill some time there and keep indoors, still hoping the rain would stop in time for the main action. Dusk was scheduled for 16.57 and as the time approached (16.30), and based on advice from the local Big Issue seller advising us that 'oh yes you can see "murmurs" all the time' we got ourselves ready. Published advice was that the West Pier was the best sight, rather than the Palace Pier, so we headed down to somewhere in the middle — and there they were, gathering over the Palace Pier. Were they going to stay there long enough for us to get out on it or would they switch to the West Pier? We decided to commit and headed out along Palace Pier. Their numbers were still growing. The drizzle hadn't deterred them. The sights were amazing. It was obvious by then that they were going to roost on the Palace Pier so we were definitely in the right place and got some great close-ups. By 16.57 they had all settled in for the night and we felt it was time for us to set off for our homes after a truly fascinating sighting. See a video [here](#).

Walthamstow Marshes: a return to another of our favourites on a glorious spring-like day. Surprisingly we saw fewer ducks than previously. However, we saw quite a variety including the usual suspects. The great debates this time were regarding a strange-looking goose. Most bets were on a Greenland White-fronted goose but it could have been one of the many other migrants possible at this time of year. There was also something flitting about the trees — was it a bunting, a warbler or just a finch? Who knows — we didn't! But still a good count at 35. The stars were probably the long tailed tits — just as there were so many of them around. Even the half term holidaying kids didn't spoil our stroll around or our coffee/lunch in the Engine House.

March

Rye Meads: there was a high turnout for this visit. After the station we meandered past Rye House and even before we reached the reserve we had spotted a Kestrel. It lingered on a tree for us to view then swooped off. The office showed a list of 'recent sightings' and their wall artwork proved a bit of a quiz to guess the species before we even set off. The hides gave us time to sit and pick out quite a few waders and ducks. But some were keen to press on to the kingfisher hide. This hide was full of the professionals with an impressive range of photographic equipment. They had sighted the kingfishers earlier (they were on their first brood of the season already). However, we were not to be lucky. Our patience ran out and the pub was calling. However the ritual completing of the high species list gave a high count nevertheless.

Brent Reservoir (Welsh Harp): we returned to Brent Reservoir (last visited July 2018) on a warm March day. From Hendon we walked down Cool Oak Lane and then wove our way past back gardens to find the first hides. Unfortunately this time they were locked. However, we could still get a reasonable view of the south side of the reservoir. From there we retraced our steps and struck out along the north side. Then we struck gold — we sighted a kestrel, then a woodpecker — well spotted Janet! After refueling at the garden centre we made our way back but then turned to the other hide on the River Brent, which was occupied by a homeless person the last time we visited. It had been rebuilt in metal and this time it was empty. From here we had a good view, through the dumped rubbish in the river, of a good range of ducks. So, in summary, a reasonable visit.

April

Stoker's Lake: a select few gathered to revisit this reserve. Even with only a few pairs of eyes present a reasonable count was achieved. The early rain soon died away.

Regent's Park: it's amazing what you can spot even in an inner London location when you have 12 pairs of eyes looking. We achieved a count of 28. And that was by ignoring the collection of colourful non-native ducks.



May



Cheshunt: the rail services tried to thwart us — so we had to make a change from the original plan of a trip to Rainham Marshes, and instead we headed up the Lea Valley to Cheshunt. This was a new venture for us but proved quite an interesting area. With spring growth now well under way there was quite a lot of greenery, so it's getting harder to spot the birds despite plenty of bird calls. The highlight of the day was spotting an albino wood duck. We didn't quite believe it when we were told that's what it was, but there was confirmation at

the Bittern Information Hide. These originate from Carolina, North America and are sometimes called Carolina Ducks. We'd actually seen a clipped Carolina Duck on our recent visit to Regent's Park. Maybe this one today had originally escaped from there.

Barnes WTF: we returned to this reserve. Good to see so many young children out enjoying nature. We lingered over the non-native species before concentrating on our own native birds. Spotting a little ringed plover was probably the sighting of the day.

June

Rainham Marshes: while the forecast showed heavy rain all day five intrepid birders were still keen to head out from Fenchurch Street to Rainham. And we were rewarded by this determination. A pretty high count and some favourites spotted including avocet, redshanks, marsh harrier, etc. etc. We were going to dodge between hides but the scale of Rainham meant we didn't venture that far away from the Centre and were glad to get back there to the café to warm up and dry out. Is it really June?

Walthamstow Marshes: for this visit we didn't proceed immediately to the south reservoirs but instead had a wander through Paradise Gardens — quite an overgrown yet quiet spot, a bit neglected but the birds probably don't mind that. We didn't really see much here, due to the level of growth and cover. After this we walked along Ferry Road but turned into the north reservoirs for a change. There was more open water here, with the usual collection of ducks and several grebes.

The route made a nice change but was probably not as good as the south side ones. After this bit of exploration it was time to cross over to the Engine Room for a coffee/lunch. We didn't then really explore the south reservoirs but did stand looking up at the tower for some time listening to the swift calls, until a warden passed and told us we wouldn't see any actual swifts as it was a recording — they were trying to attract swifts and get them to start nesting there. For those on the recent Islington Swifts walk around Highbury — Islington is the borough with the most swift nesting sites in London. Well done us!

July

Regent's Park: a return to Regent's Park for a stroll through its pleasant gardens, which at this time of year (July) had plenty of greenery, making spotting harder. This time we had the added bonus of a sculpture exhibition in the gardens. Again, while not expecting to see much, we actually did quite well: no great surprises but still a healthy count. And the foreign ducks gave us variety.

Greenwich Peninsula Ecology Park and Thames Barrier Park: this visit to a new destination for the group turned out to be quite acceptable. Good for warblers here.

August

Thurrock, Thameside: while this turned out to be a VERY wet day, it was balanced by some great sightings, in terms not of rarities but of quantities. We saw large flocks (greater than 50) of avocets, godwits, redshanks, Canada geese, greylags, tufted ducks. So it was well worth it for the few who braved the weather.

Brent Reservoir: on a warm summer's day we returned to this site for our fourth visit. We've only been lucky once before, when the normally locked hides were open. Our luck was back this time. Even better, there was a local expert in residence with a telescope. This led to our spotting greenleg sandpipers, in addition to your common(?) sandpiper, a few lapwings, teal (in molt), reed warbler, great crested and little grebe, etc. We also learnt much about the green sandpiper's 'jizz' and hence how to tell the difference from a common sandpiper. Probably we could have stayed just here but we thought we'd venture around the Welsh Harp, not seeing much more, but what we did see was worth it: a great spotted woodpecker, a willow warbler and a chiffchaff. So a successful outing.

September

Woodberry Downs: our regular local vist proved particularly good this time. In addition to the usual spread of ducks and seagulls we did see warblers — willow and reed. So that was a bonus. The woodland walk bit was closed due to trees down from storm damage so that limited the breadth of our sightings this time.

The Middlesex Filter Beds and the WaterWorks Reserve: we last visited here in 2017 and it wasn't that great then. And it proved to be not that great again now. We did see, possibly the same, grey wagtail at the Middlesex Filter beds at the sluice gates. It dipped around there for quite a time to allow us all to have a good sighting. The bottom gate was open, allowing us to cut through toward the WaterWorks. But bird activity was all very sparse. It was a glorious day with heat still in the sun, so we all enjoyed the quiet open space, but it was disappointing regarding bird count — only 13 in total.