

## Birdwatching – October 2019 – September 2020



Here is a record of the iU3A Birdwatching group visits from October 2019 through to September 2020, the end of the iU3A year. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

Visits were less in this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### October 2019



**Rye Meads:** this time we had good bird watching weather — clear blue skies but cold. On arrival the welcome board showed a good varied spot list so our visit held



promise. And we weren't disappointed. We spotted a good range of birds and the highlights included green sandpipers (only confirmed by a local expert), snipe, and my favourite, teal — such bright shimmering colours with sharp outlines. Our count at 31 was quite reasonable. No kingfishers on this visit but their hide is being expanded so I'm sure we'll return in the Spring to try our luck.

### November 2019

**Walthamstow Wetlands:** we welcomed two new members to the group and our monthly local outing. It was a chilly day, so we headed briskly along Ferry Lane to the reserve. 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 that overall it a very good place for birds, particularly waterfowl. We saw the usual variety of ducks, herons, cormorants, and loads of gulls



(black headed and herring). We witnessed some 'gull dancing' — for further info on this habit see [here](#). The resident peregrine was on its perch — high up on the pylon. We enjoyed the new hide (about time too!) as a chance to get out of the biting wind, and there was a great display of little egrets (up to six), cormorants (up to seven), and gulls — all diving for fish at a water outlet. We'd got our timings a bit off as we realised we had to get going or be locked in the reserve overnight, but more

importantly it meant we were too late for tea and cake in the Engine Room. So we had to head for the Costa at Tottenham Hale — with a chance to thaw out there.



**Rainham Marshes:** the weather forecast was not promising but when we arrived at the reserve it was a great day, cool but clear skies (not that this lasted the whole time we were there). But with the rain staying off the birds were out. The benefit of visiting Rainham is that there is always much to see — in quantity and variety. There were only five of us but we managed to spot 38 species. The highlights were probably seeing a stonechat and a curlew, but also seeing the large flock of avocets swimming along was a rare sight.

With the rain breaking out we then had a quick march back to the centre for some food and warmth.

### December 2019

**Woodberry Wetlands:** a clear bright cold day, rather blustery for the birds — and us. I'm not sure if it was the weather forecast or the fact that this was a local visit, but we had one of our highest turnouts at 13. However, we didn't linger but had a smart walk around the perimeter. No great sightings. The birds were hunkered down. One mystery was the photo: we couldn't work this one out. We ended up warming ourselves back in the café over coffee and cake — the cake was a 'Farewell' to one of our regular members, Alison T, who's returning to her homelands of Northern Ireland — soon. We wish her well! We also discussed future dates and visits, so this prompted me to commit and fix dates for January and February — as above.

### January 2020

**Two Tree Island:** our main day visit this month was back to this good location. While it wasn't quite as spectacular a visit as previous years, we still had some good sightings. There were just so many teal — over a hundred — and lots of redshanks. We had murmurations of knots (or were they sanderlings — or dunlins? — too far away to tell). The special sightings were curlews, Mediterranean gulls and brent geese. Missing this time were the avocets and godwits.

**Regent's Park:** a biggish group of us (11) had a good stroll through the park. Normally our count for this location struggles to get into the 20s. This time we made it to 40. A very high score for us — at any location. And that's just with the native species: adding in the non-indigenous sightings at the Wildfowl pond would have made it over 60. The non-indigenous varieties do always add different species to what we normally see at our other visit locations, and are often very attractive. We struggled a bit over whether some gulls were bog standard black-headed gulls, or whether they were the rarer Mediterranean gull. There are more sightings at this time of year of 'Mediterraneans' so we included it in our count.

### February



**Brighton, Starling Murmurations:** while some felt the trip should be cancelled due to Storm Ciara, 21 of us headed for Brighton. There was some train disruption but we all got there only half an hour behind schedule. The rain stayed off but the gale-force wind on the front made it tricky for us to even stand up. Most went for the lunch at the Regency and enjoyed a very good menu and a range of fish dishes. Some made it to the Pavilion for a quick visit, some just had a ramble in the Lanes. We all gathered at dusk (4.30pm) on Palace

Pier. I think there was still some doubt that the starlings would venture out but they soon started flocking, probably lower in the sky this year but still spectacular — seeming to be surfing in on the waves at times before swooping up and round again. We tried to find some shelter from the winds but it started to drive some of us back toward the train station. All agreed that, regardless of the weather, it had been an amazing sight.

**Walthamstow:** this was our local monthly 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 that overall it a very good place for birds. It was a wet windy day so not the best for birdwatching. However, we did see a good variety of ducks, herons, cormorants, goldeyes, grebes, etc, etc. The highlight was a firecrest — up close and displaying for us. We were glad to get back to the Engine Room for a chance to dry out and have a hot drink.

**March**

**Thurrock:** we'd only been to this relatively new Essex Wildlife Trust nature reserve a couple of times. Although on our last visit it rained continuously, for this visit the weather was good. We didn't see many birds during the walk in from East Tilbury, but it's a pleasant walk along the Thames Estuary Path. However, things improved at the centre. We saw quite a lot from the comfort of the centre including a sparrowhawk. The tide was in when we arrived, but by the time we left it was out and the range of birds on the shoreline was very varied. The highlights were the flocks of avocets and redshanks. We headed out, spotting a few more things on the way to Stanford-le-Hope. Overall a successful day.



**April & May**

No visits due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**June**

**Walthamstow Wetlands:** this was our first outing after Covid-19. The reserve wasn't fully open (no café or toilets!) but it was great to be out and having the opportunity again to spot birds as a group. Together we managed a healthy 25 species count, the highlight probably being a reed warbler. Loads of Grebes. Loads of youngsters. This time we didn't however see the resident peregrine falcon.

**July**

**Clissold Park and Abney Park:** we had our biggest gathering for some time for this visit showing how many are keen to get out and about, while avoiding public transport. We had to split into two groups to stay within government advice as well

as try to maintain our social distancing within each group. We started in Clissold Park wandering around the two ponds. Lots of gadwells, lots of youngsters, and a cute colourful young little grebe. We then walked along to Abney Cemetery and Park. Always an interesting walk but never that great for bird life. However, we did see a blackcap — thanks to Frank's eagle eyes — and a couple of sightings of a great spotted woodpecker. So not bad overall.

**LWT's Woodberry Downs:** we wanted to return here to celebrate its re-opening, and it didn't disappoint. We had a good turnout — this being the first outing for some since self-shielding — and we were immediately rewarded by sighting a reed warbler. The biggest 'debate' was: were they female mallard and gadwells? Also quite a few hybrids didn't help matters. Then of course there was the usual debate of gulls — pink legs or yellow legs. Having decided they were lesser black backs we read after of the increasing numbers in the UK of yellow legged gulls. Did we witness some of these instead? The Coal Hole café was open allowing a pleasant coffee and agreement of a species count of 22. Not bad for Woodberry.

## **August**

**Regents Park:** it seems to be a bit 'ordinary', but we always actually do quite well in our species count here, and the non-natives are always an interesting diversion. Eight turned up on a very windy but dry day and we saw and identified 24 birds and saw other exotics which we couldn't identify and weren't on the board or in my book, including a very red-beaked duck\*. Because of the wind hardly any little birds were out and about, all sensibly hiding in the bushes. \*The internet told us that the red-beaked one was a Common Merganser (or Goosander).

## **September**

**Rye Meads:** it was good to get back to this RSPB reserve following their reopening. However, soon we were less happy when we discovered that only three of the hides were open and these had such restrictive entrance limits that we didn't get into any. The other problem, not encountered previously here, was the number of mosquitoes around. For those in shorts (to appreciate the late summer sun) we were an attractive meal for them. Not getting into the hides meant we couldn't view some of the large lagoons and hence this limited our sightings. We were in two minds about turning back and giving up but we thought we would do the complete circuit, going through the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust's section. This proved to be a wise decision — the quantity of midges was less and we had our best sighting over this back section, including three (or was it four) marsh harriers swooping down and round. Then some saw the local Kestrel as well, so we ended with a respectable 20 species sightings. The meal deals at the local pub also changed it from a dubious start to a good day out.