

How many woodcock did you see?

On what was my first trip out with the group for a long time, I joined up with eleven members for what was a very enjoyable few hours birding. Although we didn't see anything rare it was just good to be out on a bright but cold morning in the company of friends and in the comfort of the RSPB harbour estate observation room

Outside the window the snow was still lying from the night before which helped to highlight the black tailed godwits feeding in front of us along the water's edge. Considering the tide was against us we saw quite a few of the reserves birds over the course of the morning .



A few pairs of reed bunting flitted about the bushes in front of the observation room and on the water there were good numbers of shovler showing well with the sun really bringing out the iridescent green in the drakes head. A male sparrowhawk caused panic amongst the birds as it flew past the hide giving us a brief view as it twisted and turned on its way past the window.



There were also good numbers of teal and shelduck, curlew and greylag most of which were on their usual spot at the far side of the lagoon.

At either side of the observation room chaffinches, green finches robins, black birds, wood pigeons and other assorted common birds fed among the shrubs and young trees. We looked among them in the hope of something different but alas no.

After a tip-off from a couple of visiting birders we went to look in the rough ground opposite the reserve where a few woodcock were flushed but only one eagle eyed birder managed to see them. (guess who?)



After abandoning further attempts to get good views of the woodcock for the rest of the party we headed to the hide on the east side of the reserve. We enjoyed good views of goldfinches along the track. The hide brought us closer to some of the ducks such as shelduck and shoveler but we saw nothing new. Before we left the area we went to the waters edge of the channel and found great crested grebe, merganser and guillemot.



Before we called it a day we drove the short distance to Kinnegar shore and stopped for a while recording a sizable flock of ringed plover and a single common gull among the throng of gulls on the beach.



David McCreedy

Greater Spotted Woodpeckers

Whenever I go across the 'sheough' I'm always on the lookout for either Green or Greater Spotted woodpeckers. I find them fascinating birds. I have seen Greater Spotted as far north as Inverness in the Highlands of Scotland in an old Caledonian forest on the north coast where my brother lives. Unlike their Green cousins which feed on the ground, they are difficult to find in forests. Greater and Lesser Spotted species both make the famous drumming sound whilst its unlikely you would hear a Green wood pecker drumming.

The drumming which is heard from late December into spring is not the sound of the bird creating a hole in a tree but a mating call, a territorial warning a form of singing! Its drum-roll may comprise of up to sixteen beats per second!

The hole that they excavate is not just for nesting but it's also for roosting in outside of the breeding season; in fact a young woodpecker will excavate a hole when it has established its own territory.

A Greater Spotted Woodpecker may consume 1,700 pine seeds or 10,000 spruce seeds a day.

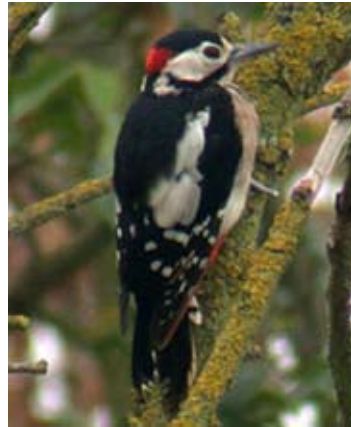
Woodpeckers make holes but add no material as such to nest, just some wood chips and sawdust. There is some evidence to suggest that some Greater Spotted woodpeckers enter a roosting hole to die.

Woodpeckers are very much at their most active in the morning. Sometimes they enter their roosting holes in the middle of the day to have a snooze.

Being an aggressive bird even amongst its own, the male Greater Spotted will go to roost earlier than the female in the evening, and get up later in the morning. (sounds familiar) This presumably reduces aggression at the roosting holes.

Every brood has its smallest sibling and, in Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, this character seems to survive by being extremely aggressive with the rest of the brood. (again, sounds familiar)

Woodpeckers are famous for their tongues which in some cases can stretch out 4cm beyond their bills. The tip can be moved around and has an action a bit like a harpoon, spearing the soft bodies of grubs, which can then be whisked away from their hiding places to be eaten.



A Trick Of Titanic Proportions

A magician on a cruise liner had a parrot, who'd seen all the magician's tricks a million times, long ago having figured out how the magician made everything in the act disappear. The parrot got bored, his owner growing stale and not developing any new tricks that the parrot could figure out. One night in the middle of the magician's performance, the ship hit an iceberg and sank. Everyone drowned except the magician and the parrot. The magician managed to swim to a piece of wreckage and climb aboard, immediately collapsing from exhaustion.

Soon afterward, the parrot flew to the magician and perched on the edge of the makeshift raft and stared at the magician. And stared. And stared. For a whole day the magician was unconscious, and all this time the parrot didn't take his eyes off him. Eventually the magician started to stir. Looking up, he saw the parrot, still eyeing him intently, not even blinking.

Another hour goes by, and finally the parrot squawks, "All right, I give up. What did you do with the ship?"

We're All Going On A Summer Holiday

This man in an estate car is riding down the road with the back full of penguins. A policeman sees him and pulls him over and says, "I want you to take those penguins to the zoo right now!" The guy says, "O.K." Next day the policeman sees this same guy going down the road with the penguins in the back. This time the penguins are wearing sunglasses. He pulls the guy over again and says "I thought I told you to take those penguins to the zoo." The guy answers, "Yeah, that's right, we went and had a great time. We're going to the beach today!"

Royal Air Force Turn Heads On Falkland Islands

Bored Royal Air Force pilots stationed on the Falkland Islands have devised what they consider a marvelous new game.

Noting that the local penguins are fascinated by airplanes, the pilots search out a beach where the birds are gathered and fly slowly along it at the water's edge. Perhaps ten thousand penguins turn their heads in unison watching the planes go by, and when the pilots turn around and fly back, the birds turn their heads in the opposite direction, like spectators at a slow-motion tennis match.

Then, the paper reports, "The pilots fly out to sea and directly to the penguin colony and overfly it.

Heads go up, up, up, and ten thousand penguins fall over gently onto their backs.

Pats Jottings

Atlassing - the female way

Gentlemen, correct me if I'm wrong, but the female of the species does do things differently from the male.

Let's look at gathering information for the Bird Atlas. My guess is that the chaps' technique is to arrive at their tetrad (a 2km x 2km square), note the time and set off systematically recording the name and number of each species seen, stopping only when one hour has passed. They may then go on for a further hour using the same method. Job done. Efficient, economical – chronologically speaking.

How might the girls do it? This is one way. Firstly, team up with a good pal. Brenda and I decided to pair up and do our tetrads together (the female support thing).



One early visit saw us at our meeting point, Sainsbury's car park in Ballymena. It had been a difficult journey, so coffee on arrival seemed in order. Out came the flasks and as we sipped we glanced over the side railings to the river below. And, hey presto, there was an otter! It cavorted briefly before melting into the vegetation. What a thrill!

Better make a start on the count, we felt. But first let's use the facilities. At last we get under way, one carrying the scope, the other the notebook.

Barely had the clock started when a sizeable flock of siskins flew in. The clock is stopped while we count. Good, 30 plus. Onwards again, we cross the river having seen most of the expected species – wren, robin, blackbird, moorhen, heron, chaffinch and a stylishly elegant grey wagtail.



Following the riverside, there is another small stop to check if it was a tree-creeper we just saw. Alas no.

Next we pass through a built-up area, relieved by patches of green or wasteland and some gardens. We had stopped at one to count birds on a feeder when the householder appeared. We explained what we were doing, in a friendly way. Obviously this man hadn't spoken to anyone in ages. Could he talk...! We heard the history of the new bridge and why his natural stone wall was listing. Politely we took our leave pointing out how much we still had to do.



The first hour had passed already (nearer two in real time) when we arrived at a kiddies playground – with seats. Where better to have our next cup of coffee. As we resume our walk, remembering to re-set the clock, a delightful flock of long-tailed tits dances its way along from tree to tree. Fifteen in all: very nice.

We pass through another green area, which leads to a dual carriageway, noting thrushes, blackbirds, robins, pied wagtails, corvids and gulls. After the hazardous business of crossing the carriageway, we are at another area with scrub and a stream. Coot and mallard are added to the list.



The second hour expires just as we arrive back at the car park. By this time we are ravenous, so into Sainsbury's we go for soup and a roll. En route to the cafeteria our eyes were caught by the many BOGOFs and other great savings if you buy two of an item. Generally, neither of us takes up such offers, but with two of us they're just too good to miss. Half an hour later and loaded up, we're happy to head for home. We have had a brilliant day! What do you think the chaps felt at the end of their count?