

WELCOME TO 2014

The new year has certainly started with a bang! The storms and floods which have wreaked havoc across the country will long remain in our memories as the TV footage and still images of the massive storm waves around the coast remind us that no matter how clever we think we are, nature is still in charge. While we're being battered by storms, America is being plunged into record low temperatures as a cell of super-cold air sinks down from the Arctic causing chaos as far south as Florida. We often experience the tail end of American weather systems, it will make for some interesting conditions if the polar vortex which is causing their current weather drifts eastwards and ends up across the UK. It'll be time to dig out the thermals and snow shovels and all the little daffodils which are already showing their heads will be in for a nasty shock.

BIRDING OVER CHRISTMAS

The latter months of 2013 were notable for the lack of unusual birds in our area. Checking Bird Guides on a daily basis as I usually do, we appeared to be experiencing a drought of rarer species. However over the Christmas period things have certainly perked up.

On the 22nd of December I ventured into the wilds of Pelsall where a Glossy Ibis had turned up in some horse paddocks. It had been there for about a week and according to reports, was showing really well. That was certainly true; after a little difficulty finding the site I was dismayed to see the bird in flight as I approached, but my fears were unfounded as, after a couple of circuits, it returned to feed in a boggy corner of a rough paddock only twenty yards or so from the path. I'd seen Glossy Ibis before but never this close, all the details of its plumage were clearly visible including a fine pale blue stripe which runs across the top of the beak and above each eye. In older bird books this bird is hardly mentioned as it is a resident of eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries but, like several other large wading birds it has become a frequent visitor to our shores. While most sightings occur along the south coast and East Anglia practically every county has at least one record as far north as the Shetland Isles! Birds, like the weather just ain't predictable.

Other notable sightings:

Great Northern Diver; at least one around being reported from Gailey, Belvide and Blithfield.

Great White Egret; currently very easy to see at Gailey.

Drake Smew at Kingsbury Water park.

Velvet Scoter and female Smew at Aquelate Mere

Parrot Crossbills are being reported among a flock of Common Crossbills on Cannock Chase.

Today (7th Jan) Approx 1000 lapwings and few Golden Plover at Whitemoor Haye.

A Kingfisher has taken up residence on Leomansley Pool, I've seen it three times since Jan 1st.

So, there are some good birds out there to add a bit of class to your 2014 list.

OTHER NEWS AND INFORMATION

NIGHTJARS: It seems ages ago now but in June we had two Nightjar evenings on Cannock Chase. On neither occasion was the weather perfect; it was cool and breezy and sightings were very brief though we did hear churring. As a compensation there were plenty of Woodcock on nightly patrol— or the same one going round in circles! On the second Tuesday we had the excitement of watching the local fire brigade making its way cross-country to attend to a fire in a clump of conifers. This had been deliberately started by local loonies and Chris and Garth performed heroic civic duties by dashing across to the site and keeping an eye on it till the firemen arrived.

BRANDON MARSH: Towards the end of May we visited Brandon Marsh, a Warwickshire Wildlife Trust reserve south east of Coventry, about 50 minutes or so from Lichfield using the M42 and A45. I'd known about it for ages, in fact Rex Trelfa recommended it, but this was my first visit. It's a site with loads of potential and well worth a visit particularly in spring and early summer. We saw and heard a good range of warblers and the highlight for us was watching a pair of Hobbies hunting and perched up in a dead tree.

SHAPWICK FEN: Our joint trip with Sutton RSPB Group was very successful. Rather than both groups struggling to make a trip viable, together we filled 49 seats of a fifty seater coach. It rained most of the way there and drizzled till midday but after that it brightened up and we all enjoyed a good day's birding. A total of 70+ species was seen including Marsh Harrier, Great White Egret and a flock of about 20 Black-tailed Godwits resplendent in summer plumage. As you would expect, warblers were well represented, with the once rare Cettis being easily the most common. Some of us had the pleasure of watching a couple of Reed Warblers feeding newly fledged young just a few feet from the path.

PHOTO EXHIBITION: At the Christmas meeting you are all invited to submit a display of your favourite photographs from the last 12 months. This event has proved popular for the last two years and it does encourage us all to get out there, take interesting pictures and get them printed and displayed. I'm sure 99% of pictures taken in this digital era never get printed and stay unseen in the mysterious innards of the computer. Just make sure the subject matter is wildlife or landscape based and mounted on card so they can be presented on our display stands.

JOHN HITCHENS: In July we lost another of our long-standing members when John Hitchens died peacefully at home. John was an asset to the group in a quiet, unassuming way; at coffee time he would voluntarily help to collect cups and take them to the hatch and after the meeting when everyone left for home, John would stay behind and help rearrange the tables and chairs. Neither of these are major tasks but someone has to do them and John recognised the need and just got on with it with no fuss. The sympathy of all group members is extended to his family.

NEXT MEETING

Our own resident ace photographer Phill Ward takes us north to some of Scotland's best birding sites on Mull and Shetland. This is all new material from recent trips so we can expect some superb images.