

BIRDWATCHING *Group*

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NEWSLETTER FEBRUARY 2024

TONIGHT'S MEETING (1st February)

Tonight's speaker is Richard Steel who will give a talk entitled "Beyond 66 Degrees North – Arctic Norway". This is Richard's first visit to The Birdwatching Group.

Please join me in welcoming Richard for what I am sure will be an entertaining and educational evening.

COACH TRIPS

The February field trip is the weekend away to Minsmere. See next item for important pre-trip information.

The Coach trip after that is on Sunday 24th March To Middleton Lakes, departing from the Guild at 7:30am.

The RSPB's Middleton Lakes reserve near Tamworth, Staffordshire is a mosaic of wetlands, meadows and woodland in the heart of the River Tame Valley. Several kilometres of trails lead visitors through rich habitats, alive with a variety of birds including Grey Herons, Avocets, Kingfishers and Lapwings. But it's not just birds – the reserve is also home to Otters, butterflies, dragonflies and rare wetland plants.

Middleton's wetlands are an idyllic setting for wintering birds such as Teal, Wigeon and Goldeneye as well as breeding birds including Redshank and Little Ringed Plover. The winter cold brings more species to the feeders, including lesser spotted woodpeckers. Frozen lakes force shy water rails into the open and even wintering bitterns can be seen on the reedbed fringes. Wildfowl and waders reach peak numbers with goldeneyes often found in the quieter pools and on the river. There are also impressive starling roosts.

Toilets are available at the nearby Middleton Hall and snacks at the Visitor Hub. We last visited in 2018. There is no entry fee.

Book your seat at the desk.

MINSMERE 23 - 25 FEBRUARY 2024 Pre-trip IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Our trip is only a few weeks way now and below is some important pre-trip information.

The coach will leave promptly at **7.30 am on FRIDAY 23 February** from the usual pick-up place on the corner of Bourne Street and Altrincham Road.

Please ensure you arrive by 7.15 am so that all luggage can be loaded before departure.

Cars can be parked at the **back of the Guild** for the weekend. Please ensure that you don't park on the yellow-hatched lines.

We will be stopping at Welney WWT for about 4 hours on the way, so please remember to bring your binoculars/ telescopes etc and packed lunch on to the coach with you plus your **WWT and RSPB membership cards**.

An additional requirement is an **up to date ICE form** to be carried in your rucksack. I will have spare forms with me if required.

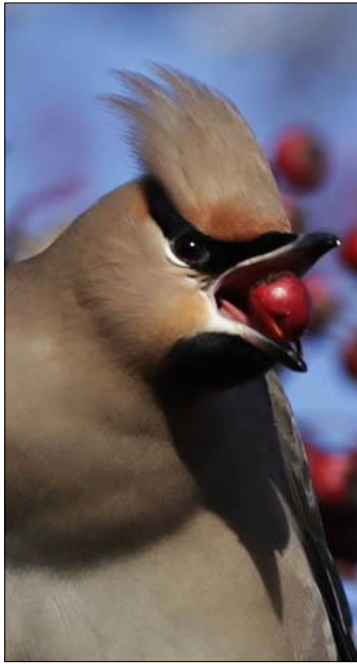
There will be 30 members on the coach so that gives almost everyone a double seat. If you have a spare seat next to you please offer to take an extra rucksack or bag.

Breakfast will be at 8.00 am each morning and dinner at 7.30 pm.

Finally, isn't it just great to be getting out and about again! Let's hope Minsmere lives up to its reputation and we have a great birding weekend ahead.

BARBARA P

OPERATION WAXWING



Tuesday 16/1/24, time 16.06 hrs. Phil Grice triggered the button on the Cheshire Birders WhatsApp with a wonderful photo of Waxwing. This set off a chain of responses.

A huge flock of Waxwings (a “museum”) had been spotted near Harrop Station café in the Peak District on the Monsal Trail. This became the destination of some WGBG members who suddenly became Twitchers. Robert thoughtfully sent the postcode.

Google tells us that Waxwings are winter visitors from Scandinavia or West Russia. Some winters they arrive in thousands, (which is known as an irruption), when there

is a poor berry crop in their home country. Their name comes from the waxy red secretions found on the tips on the secondaries of some of the birds. It is a stunningly exotic, very photogenic bird with a large crest.



Not feeling too well I was resigned to not seeing these visitors, but hubby John volunteered to drive me to the site, even though he is not a birdwatcher. I was delighted to accept his offer.



Arriving at the aforementioned site at 10.30 am on Thursday 18th Twitchers were there, non-twitchers, dog walkers, et al had arrived. All were rewarded with excellent sunlit sightings of these special visitors, busy in the trees and bushes searching for the nourishing berries.

Clear blue skies and splendid views of snow-capped hills and fields of Cheshire and Derbyshire countryside added to make this a most memorable morning.

Photos by Dave Swann

JENNY I

Editor's note: Waxwings were not the only Scandinavian immigrants seen at Harrop Station. Below are a couple more of Dave's photos from the day.



Redwing



Fieldfare

BITTERNS AT MINSMERE



It's usually rather difficult to see a Bittern. In the UK we are talking about the Great Bittern (scientific name *Botaurus stellaris*). There are several different species of Bittern around the world and some of them are very easy to see, especially in Asia, where they like to sit out in the open.

One very good place to see Bitterns in the UK is the RSPB's reserve at Minsmere in Suffolk where many of our members will be going later this month on our annual weekend away. Maybe some of you will be lucky.

I was fortunate to visit Minsmere reserve in June 2022 where I had about 12 Bittern sightings over 2 visits. The summer months of June and July are probably the best time to see Bitterns when they fly over the reedbed on the way out to search for food to feed the young and then again on the way back to the nest. At most other times of the year they prefer to stay hidden in the reedbed.





Of course the best sightings are when you see the birds standing or walking slowly on the edge of the reedbed. The sightings usually last much longer and you get to see more detail on the bird (providing it's close enough). I want to share one such sighting from 2022 with you now.

The first photo is the view from the Bittern Hide at Minsmere, looking to the right down across the main reedbed. All of the action described

took place in the area shown by the red circle.

As the name suggests the Bittern Hide is an excellent place to look for the Bitterns. The hide is high up on stilts and gives an impressive view over the reedbed. I was barely 5 minutes settled into the hide when I heard someone behind me whisper the magic word "Bittern". A quick scan didn't reveal anything flying over the reedbed so I concentrated on the edges and soon found the bird in the indicated area.



The Bittern was walking along the right hand edge of the small pool towards the hide. It kept wandering in and out of the reeds as it moved forwards such that it was quite often largely obscured. I was watching it in the viewfinder and taking photos every time its head was clear and unobscured by the reeds. The holy grail of bird photography is to get the bird's eye in the photo and to make sure that it is sharp.

The bird was in view for 3 minutes before it disappeared into the front right hand corner of the pool. It didn't seem to have anywhere obvious to go, being blocked by a bank on the right so I kept a close eye on the area and before long it reappeared and proceeded to walk back from whence it had come. It stopped to do some fishing and you can see in the photo (right) that it had caught a small fish (probably a stickleback). It took another 3 minutes to walk back before finally disappearing. An excellent sighting.



It is not just the Bittern Hide where you can see the Bitterns. Below is a photo taken from the Island Hide on an earlier visit in 2012. This bird was initially so close that I had to wait for it to walk further away before I could fit it all in the frame (I was using a fixed 300mm lens at the time). Definitely my closest Bittern sighting ever.

Good luck to those at Minsmere on the weekend away.



ROBERT D

NEXT MONTH'S MEETING

The next indoor meeting will take place on Thursday 7th March starting at 7:30pm when our speaker will be Dermot Smith with a talk entitled "Mersey Estuary Birds".

Hope to see you all then.

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS

Still required – your articles for the newsletter. Tell us all about that birding holiday of a lifetime or that unusual visitor to your garden bird table. Send any interesting photos you have taken on our coach trips.

Deadline is the Friday before the meeting.