

October 2008 Sightings at Wormwood Scrubs



A Long-tailed Tit in the hand

The last of the ticker-tape was still swilling around in the wind and the screams of joy and repeated 'whoops!' had become a memory when October dawned. September had certainly lived up to its expectations.

But what of October?

Well, Octobers past have spawned **Short-eared Owls**, a **Barn Owl**, **Mediterranean Gull**, **Ring-Ouzel**, **Pheasant**, **Great Crested Grebes**, a **Richard's Pipit**, **Woodlark**, **Black Redstart**, **Dartford Warbler** and a possible **Short-toed Lark**. Clearly it's a special time to be at The Scrubs and in 2008, despite no real rarities, we still managed to register the latest **Swallow**, **House Martins** and **Whinchat** here ever.

Despite its potential potency as an autumnal London birding venue during October Wormwood Scrubs is usually deserted for part of it. This year was no exception as several of our number found themselves on Cape Clear Island, Co Cork in Ireland. Lord knows what wonders dropped in on The Scrubs when our backs were turned!

The grasslands immediately south of Chats Paddock and in the south west of the main grassland area were mown short at the beginning of the month. The general idea was to help regenerate habitat essentially for flora, insect life and eventually feeding and nesting areas for our Meadow Pipits. The next stage of habitat protection will be to rotate the desire path that has resulted in nesting failure this summer because it runs directly through the main pipit breeding area.

The end of 2008 is in sight and with the Redpoll and Siskin recorded this month it has brought our total species for the year to a staggering 94. Our

target is for 6 more to bring us to the 100 mark by the year end. The problem is that we have practically seen all the regulars that we can expect.

So what will turn up next?

Contributors: Mathew Bournat, Kim Dixon, David Jeffreys, David Lindo, Roy Nuttall, Jon Osbourne et al.

If you have details of any sightings or observations of unusual behaviour please sent them on no matter how trivial they may seem to: theurbanbirder@theurbanbirder.com

Cormorant

Small numbers headed over during the month with around 6 on the 12th being the high water mark.

Grey Heron

Several were seen during the month including an individual being mobbed by an immature Lesser Black-back and a Carrion Crow as it headed north over the Channel Tunnel Depot on the 2nd.

Mute Swan

An adult flew over Scrubs Lane car park on the 12th and another bird flew over on the 13th.

Canada Goose

The odd small flock was seen throughout the month.

Mallard

The only report of this familiar dabbling duck was of a drake that flew over Lester's Embankment on the 9th.

Sparrowhawk

The occasional bird was encountered.

Kestrel

The usual birds were seen in the vicinity. An immature whilst it was hovering over the grassland on the 17th made a half-hearted attempt to take a passing Goldfinch.

Black-headed Gull

The numbers of this common gull continued to increase with around 50 birds on the 20th being the maximum.

Common Gull

Our first returning birds were first noted on the 6th although they may well have been in the vicinity since last month. No more than a couple birds were noticed per day, which is par for the course as numbers truly start building at the turn of the year.

Herring Gull

At least 30 flew over on the 17th and 25 on the 20th.

Lesser Black-back

The usual low numbers were seen during the month, though some of the brown first winter jobbies were probably mistaken for Herring Gulls as they flapped over.

Stock Dove

At least 3 of these delightful country pigeons were with the migrating Woodpigeon flocks on the 17th.

Woodpigeon

Unfortunately, the annual autumnal movement so loved by certain quarters of The Scrubs birding fraternity, passed us by. This was due to 75% of The Scrubs faithful taking a busman's holiday at the end of the month to Cape Clear, Co. Cork, Ireland. The movement started on the 12th when 150 birds passed overhead. By the 17th the numbers had increased to over 300 birds over in 60 minutes. Last year we recorded over 3,000 on the 30th.

Collared Dove

Our only birds seen during the period was a high-flyer that headed north on the 6th and a speeding bird heading east on the 17th.

Rose-ringed Parakeet

At least 20 were begrudgingly noticed on a daily basis during the month. No early morning or late evening counts were done, though we do plan to do a winter census.

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Up to a couple birds were occasionally seen during the month.

Skylark

A couple passage birds were noted and most exceptionally, 3 were detected overhead on the 20th.

Swallow

A late bird headed south over Chats Paddock on the 12th – our latest record ever.

House Martin

A party of 3 birds headed south on the 13th and like the previous day's lone Swallow, were our latest recorded ever.

Meadow Pipit

October started brightly for this little brown job with at least 70 present on the 2nd. From the 6th until the 17th there were usually around 50 birds present, thereafter dropping to around 20 roving birds.

Interestingly on the 7th when around 65 birds were present, a grey phased individual was discovered skulking amongst the tufts of grass in the main mown area in the grassland. This species is extremely variable in plumage, though usually within the realms of being brown. Grey birds are scarcely noted.

Pied Wagtail

Up to 3 birds were present in the area during the month.

Grey Wagtail

One of these beautiful riparian wagtails was watched feeding on the path near the pony centre on the 9th and another headed north over Scrubs Lane Wood on the 12th.

Wren

As per normal no real counts were made with around 7 on the 12th being the most seen. Of course, had the humble Wren been a rarity then we would probably be counting every feather!

Dunnoek

There at least 6 birds just on Lester's Embankment on the 9th and the 12th so lord knows how many more were on The Scrubs in general. It makes one think that even though we give as accurate counts as we can, the true numbers of birds of all species at The Scrubs is probably far higher than we ever imagined.

Robin

At least 9 birds were encountered on the 12th.

Northern Wheatear

Following the 4 birds seen last month, October saw an additional bird found by the groundsmen on the 2nd. Another forlorn looking individual frequented the main mown grassland on the 7th. As a point of interest, our latest ever birds was a group of 3 including finely marked male on the 24th October 2005.

Whinchat

Last month's pair of long stayers lingered on until the 13th after which only one (affectionately named Winnie) remained. Presumably, Winnie the Whinchat's mate had departed to warmer African climes. Despite high hopes that Winnie was thinking of wintering at our beloved patch, he/she/it was last seen on the 17th making it the latest recorded Whinchat at The Scrubs.

Stonechat

Our usual wintering threesome was augmented by 7 other birds on the 2nd including 3 birds feeding on the freshly mown grassland outside Chats Paddock.

Song Thrush

A definite movement occurred on the 9th when more than usual were observed flying high around the site. Up to 10 birds roved that day and at least 12 birds on the 12th.

Redwing

The first for the winter was reported on 7th when a singleton passed overhead. A further 35 flew through on the 20th.

Fieldfare

The first migrants of the winter were watched flying over on the 20th. At least 12 birds were involved.

Mistle Thrush

This large thrush has been particularly scarce at Wormwood Scrubs this year with virtually no youngsters seen this autumn. On the 9th a couple of pairs were seen separately flying over and a singleton headed over from the north on the 17th.

Blackbird

A minimum of 20 were counted on the 9th and 17th which no doubt must of included some continental immigrants.

Blackcap

A female was encountered along Lester's Embankment on the 7th and a male briefly in Chats Paddock on the 12th.

Chiffchaff

This common warbler became decidedly scarce, as many of their number had embarked on their migrations. Very small numbers were observed until around the 25th, thereafter there were probably birds still present but no birders around to see them.

Great Tit

A gross underestimate of around 10 birds was made on the 9th, 12th and on the 17th.

Blue Tit

Around 20 birds were found on the 12th and on the 17th.

Long-tailed Tit

Up to 14 of these endearing birds were counted on the 9th.

Magpie

The usual 20 plus were seen through the month.

Jay

The peak account was over 7 birds on the 9th and on the 12th.

Jackdaw

Larger numbers than usual were seen during October with at least 14 on the 9th. Our biggest ever flock – some 37 birds – flew in from the north on the 17th to alight in the trees at Braybrook Wood. After they departed, another 8 birds flew over.

Carrion Crow

At least 120 of these marauders were counted on the 9th.

Starling

Similar numbers to last month were present with at least 30 birds frequenting the main mown area.

House Sparrow

Several birds were heard chirping on the 12th from the trees next to the prison. These were the first recorded birds since August.

Chaffinch

A varying amount of birds usually flying through were seen during the month with at least 10 noticed on the 12th. Our biggest count of over 35 birds occurred on the 17th as part of a London-wide passage of this finch.

Linnet

A ranging flock of up to 8 birds were sometimes noted throughout October.

Redpoll

A small flock of unidentified finches were cavorting in the birches in Martin Bells Wood on the 9th. One these birds stopped long enough for its identity to be clinched. However, quite recently Redpoll taxonomy has become a very complex matter. What was once a plain old Redpoll has now been split into two species the Lesser and Common Redpolls. Both birds are similar looking and sometimes even have experts flummoxed! We were not sure of this bird's specific identity, so it has gone into the history books as a 'Common Redpoll'. Sometimes it's a hard life being a birder!

Siskin

The distinctive slurring whistle of an overflying Siskin was heard over Martin Bell's Wood on the 9th. This was our first bird of the year.

Goldfinch

A small number of this charming finch was present during the month with 30 on the 17th being the peak count.

Greenfinch

As with their Goldfinch cousins, numbers of this garrulous finch was fairly low during October with the daily maxima of 10 being the norm apart from on the 12th when around 20 were counted.

Reed Bunting

More sightings followed the ones reported in September. It would appear that we might have a wintering population of up to 3 birds, as per last year.

Compartments within Wormwood Scrubs

Martin Bell's Wood – formally known as the Southern Paddock is situated on the south eastern corner close to Scrubs Lane.

Scrubs Lane Wood – the strip of woodland on the eastern edge of the site running the length of Scrubs Lane to the east and along the northern edge to Chats Paddock in the west.

Chats Paddock - will also be known as the main lizard habitat.

Lester's Embankment – marks the north western border of the Scrubs and is also referred to as 'the embankment'. Now named after Lester Holloway who in the 80's unsuccessfully campaigned to stop British Rail developing on the Scrubs.

North West Corner – the western edge of the Scrubs.

Braybrook Woods – the woodland strip running along the southern edge from Braybrook Street up to and including outside the prison along the southern parameter.

2008 Year List

Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Greylag, Shelduck, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Osprey, Honey Buzzard, Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine, Hobby, Kestrel, Pheasant, Moorhen, Lapwing, Greenshank, Whimbrel, Curlew, Snipe, Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-back, Great Black-back, Common Tern, Woodpigeon, Stock Dove, Turtle Dove, Collared Dove, Tawny Owl, Short-eared Owl, Cuckoo, Swift, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Skylark, Swallow, Sand Martin, House Martin, Tree Pipit, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Nightingale, Common Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Stonechat, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Redwing, Fieldfare, Blackbird, Ring Ouzel, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Dartford Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Spotted Flycatcher, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Jay, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow, Starling, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Linnet, Common Redpoll, Siskin, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Bullfinch, Reed Bunting, Little Bunting

96 species thus far (84 species in September 2007 & 88 in September 2006)