

FACT Estuary Birdwatching Weekend

Friday 11th (evening) – Sunday 13th February 2011

Fellowship Afloat at Tollesbury offers a unique opportunity to experience the full atmosphere of life out on the Essex coastal marshes and the sights and sounds of its wildlife whilst staying on a converted Trinity House lightvessel. I arrived a little later than planned and made my way a bit nervously out towards the lights of the ship across the marsh, straining to see the path in the gathering darkness and too lazy to search for the torch buried somewhere in one of my bags. Fortunately I made the right choice where the path divided and soon arrived at “Trinity”, where I was welcomed by the team and shown to my cabin to settle in. We all met in the saloon for an excellent buffet supper and a chance to get to know each other. Following a formal welcome, introductions and the required health and safety talk we then enjoyed an illustrated presentation by Alan Shearring (Fundraising Officer with Essex Wildlife Trust and a keen birdwatcher) about winter birdwatching on the Essex marshes, showing us some of the birds we might expect to see during the course of the weekend (no pressure there then!).

The first event on Saturday morning was billed as “Sunrise Birdwatch” – a pre-breakfast walk along the seawall to an area of managed realignment. It was a rather dull, damp and drizzly start to the day, and the hoped for barn owl failed to materialise, but we had good views of many of the commoner hedgerow birds and, with patience, long tailed tit (“pink ping pong ball on a stick” I think was the phrase used) and a tiny goldcrest flitting through a bramble patch. Despite low tide and lots of mud there were very few waders on view, but a couple of marsh harriers drifted across the marsh and several tail-flicking reed buntings were spotted in the hedge and reeds.

After breakfast we noted murmuring brent geese, teal, curlew, noisy oystercatchers, redshank and a single spotted redshank (greyer plumage and a longer, more slender beak) in the creek by the lightship before heading off in the FACT minibus to Abberton Reservoir. First stop was on the Layer Breton Causeway, where a local birder gave us encouraging news of what he had already seen. We soon spotted the smart drake red crested pochard to the west of the causeway, though it didn't seem to like being observed and flew off, giving great views as it went over our heads. We also enjoyed good views of smew (at least 1 male and 2 redheads), though they were quite mobile and didn't settle anywhere for long.



male red crested pochard (SG)



redhead smew (SG)

Other highlights included goldeneye, wigeon, teal, shoveler, gadwall, tufted duck, pochard, a pair of great crested grebes beginning to display, 3 Egyptian geese, cormorants already nest-building, 2 common buzzards drifted overhead giving great views, a very smart male marsh harrier hunted over the reedbed and a small group of cryptically camouflaged snipe were spotted on one of the islands. However, careful scanning of the reeds failed to find the hoped for bittern.

News was that “the geese” had been seen from Layer de la Haye Causeway so we drove round to there. No geese were obvious, but we did note lapwing, golden plover, linnet and a couple of corn buntings. A small skein of geese was spotted flying away to where we had just come from (!), and there were the right number (15) so the chase was on and we drove back round to the Layer Breton Causeway. Fortunately they had settled on the water close to the causeway and we were soon enjoying fantastic views and sorting out the key identification features and differences between Tundra bean goose (6) and pink footed goose (9). After a few minutes they flew and circled round, again giving good comparison views. We also spotted 3 adult Bewick's swans in a distant field, and then a single juvenile flew across the road.



1 Tundra bean (left) and 2 pink feet (SG)



juvenile Bewick's swan (SG)

After refreshing tea, coffee and cake we drove to Fingringhoe Wick for a change of habitat with woodland and the Colne estuary. Waders were much in evidence along the river, including a large flock of golden plover (500), avocet (400), dunlin, knot, curlew, redshank, grey plover and oystercatcher. Time was spent splitting the ID features of black tailed (plain brown back, long legs, long straight beak) and bar tailed godwits (spangled back, legs looking too short, beak slightly upcurved). Shelduck and a single ringed plover were also noted, as well as a few red breasted mergansers on the water.



avocets (LH)



oystercatchers (SG)

A sudden shout of "male hen harrier" grabbed everybody's attention, but it had dropped down on the saltmarsh and out of sight. All eyes were trained on the marsh to see if it would take off, but it didn't. However, careful scanning of the area eventually revealed it sat down in the marsh vegetation preening. What a stunning bird – maybe not as big as you'd imagine, pale grey with jet black wing tips and a white bar across the rump. It was somewhat distant, but through the assembled telescopes we all had good views. By this time lunch was calling, so we made our way to the Visitor Centre for a rest and refuelling (and more cake!). The birdwatching didn't stop though, and we noted 2 green woodpeckers feeding on the ground, and then the hen harrier flew gently across the marsh and landed again – fantastic!

There was by now some sun and blue sky, and we had a tide to catch, so we drove back to "Trinity" to get kitted out in waterproofs and lifejackets. The group was split between the launch and a rib and, after a few problems getting off the mooring because there wasn't quite enough water, we headed out into the channel and around the estuary (off Tollesbury Wick and West Mersea). Conditions were good – light wind, calm water, lovely evening light from the setting sun – but I don't think I've ever known the estuary so quiet for birds. We noted lots of gulls (especially around a returning fishing boat), a nice flock of avocets (200+) and the commoner waders and a few turnstone and sanderling roosting on the higher ground, but there were no grebes or divers or sea ducks at all. However, it was brilliant to experience the sights and sounds of the marshes with the backdrop of the setting sun.



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We headed back to "Trinity" for hot showers, an excellent dinner and a very interesting illustrated talk from Steve Hughes (Chief Executive of A Rocha) explaining some of the projects of A Rocha (a Christian conservation organisation) around the world. He also tested our skills to identify some of the bird species found at the various locations. Then there was hot chocolate (and cake!) and we retired to our cabins tired after a very full and successful day's birding.

The Sunday dawned cloudy and dry, but with a cold easterly wind, so we all wrapped up well for the pre-breakfast birdwatch from the helideck on "Trinity" scanning across the saltmarsh and Tollesbury Wick. The 'usual' marsh species were noted and at least 3 marsh harriers (adult male, immature male and female), but again there was no barn owl seen. The only additions to the bird list were lesser black backed gull and rock pipit (heard only).

After breakfast it was felt that walking along exposed seawalls would not be very pleasant or comfortable in the cold wind, so we decided to have a change of habitat and try the woodland at Braxted Park. We parked by the entrance to the Golf Club and began to walk slowly along the concrete track around the outside of the estate's perimeter wall. Mixed tit flocks moved through the trees; and then we spotted the main target species of our visit – hawfinch – as 2 birds dropped in to the top of a tall tree within the park. They flew, but landed in another nearby tree and we all managed to get good scope views of these huge-beaked finches – a new bird for several members of the group. We walked on as far as the lake and back noting coal tit (heard only), common buzzard (3), great spotted woodpecker, kestrel and mistle thrush (heard only). After stopping for hot drinks and cake we made our way back to the vehicles, but kept stopping to view goldfinch, redwing, an obliging treecreeper and sparrowhawk overhead. On the drive back to Tollesbury we disturbed a large flock of fieldfares (c300) in a field.

We arrived back at the lightship in time for another excellent meal and then shared in an informal service together (based around Psalm 104). Then it was time to pack and say our goodbyes – to each other and to the team of staff and volunteers who run Fellowship Afloat. The end of an excellent weekend of fellowship and birdwatching – with several people already planning to join the event again next year.



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Liz Huxley

photos by Steve Grimwade and Liz Huxley