

Portland Heights Birdwatching Breaks March 18th – 20th 2016



Saturday March 19th

Weather: overcast in a cold north-easterly wind

Portland Castle, 0900

What proved to be one of the best ever birdbreak weekends got off to a quiet start in very cold and windy conditions with excellent views of red-breasted mergansers and a great crested grebe in the southern corner of Portland Harbour.

Ferrybridge, 1000

A quick stop to look for an early wheatear proved fruitless but instead gave us very good numbers of dunlin, ringed plover and turnstone along with some distant little egrets. Just as we were getting ready to go a bird was spotted a long way out on the Fleet which through the the telescopes turned out to be a splendid great northern diver.

Portesham, 1100

The long-staying Pallas's warbler was our target here and was found pretty quickly giving excellent views as it fed at close quarters in the bushes along the edge of the old Weymouth

to Abbotsbury railway line. A video of this lovely little bird from March 2nd can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rblXuFW5O3k>

Abbotsbury, 1200

Looking out to the very northernmost waters of the Fleet we were treated to a splendid selection of wildfowl, mostly tufted and pochard with a few mallard, shelduck and teal. Searching through the tufteds with the telescopes we found a drake scaup with three females in attendance. We were very pleased with these but could hardly believe our luck when two long-tailed ducks appeared next to them.

Radipole RSPB Reserve, 1300

Our old friend Hoodie the hooded merganser was a very welcome sight here especially as he is now in his ninth year at Weymouth! From the viewpoint at the end of Buddleia Loop several sand martins were flying around and for most of us were the first summer migrants of 2016. A chiffchaff singing in the reeds was probably a wintering bird but the very grey eastern-form chiffchaff nearby showed the pollen-covered face of a bird that has recently been feeding in Southern Europe. From the hide we were treated to no less than three marsh harriers all giving close and prolonged views in flight and perched.

Portland Bill, 1530

An outstanding end to the day with a pair of short-eared owls giving us a superb display high in the skies above us. While we were watching these amazing birds a wheatear was seen flying off the fence of the Admiralty enclosure. Soon this bird was re-found and was joined by five or six others, all giving excellent views in the beautiful surroundings of the Westcliffs. Looking over the cliff-face we found plenty of seabirds with shags and guillemots on the cliffs and fulmars and gannets offshore.

Sunday March 20th

Weather: much the same as yesterday

Portland Bill, 0900

Our second visit to this most atmospheric of birding sites started by adding black redstart to the list, a bird that frequented the MoD enclosure along with several wheatears. Stood next to Pulpit Rock at the Bill we searched the auk flocks for a puffin to no avail but did see good numbers of very smart razorbills. A long search for purple sandpipers followed in very trying conditions as the Eastcliffs were subjected to the full force of the icy north-east winds from Scandinavia. We didn't find any but did see a couple of turnstones and the occasional gannet offshore. Reaching the Bird Observatory we were lucky enough to time our visit just right arriving there just before a lovely little chiffchaff was removed from the mist-nets in the front garden. Our return route took us past the Observatory Quarry where the resident little owl gave us his usual show-off performance.



the chiffchaff at Portland Bird Observatory showing traces of pollen from North Africa above the beak

Barleycrates Lane, 1100

A quick walk out to the Westcliffs gave us good views of fulmars on the cliffs at Blacknor. I was just bemoaning the absence of the resident peregrine when a dark shape appeared off the cliffs and sped towards us passing just underneath our position. We returned to the bus to find that we had also been passed by another falcon – a merlin which had been missed by all but one of our party!

Ferrybridge, 1200

At our usual lunch-stop we were more interested in chocolate tulip muffins but we did see some very close views of a couple of ravens and a little egret.

Sandsfoot Castle, 1300

In spite of a very detailed search of the waters here we could only find a flock of 22 great crested grebes and a few mergansers. But we persevered and from a new position managed to locate a very smart male common scoter.

Lodmoor RSPB Reserve, 1400

This afternoon we had time for a complete circuit of this excellent reserve and added a number of birds to our list including snipe, redshank and reed bunting, For me the star bird and one of the best birds of the weekend was the avocet, a very rare bird in the Weymouth area and one that gave us close and prolonged views.

Maiden Castle, 1600

Our final stop on this outstanding weekend was near Dorchester where we hoped to find corn buntings but instead were very pleased to see the last wintering golden plover.

Altogether an exceptional weekend and one that I very much hope we can all repeat soon.

Bob

Birds:

Great Northern Diver	Ferrybridge
Great Crested Grebe	Portland Harbour, Radipole, Lodmoor
Little Grebe	Radipole, Lodmoor
Fulmar	Portland
Shag	Portland
Gannet	Portland
Cormorant	Portland, Radipole, Lodmoor
Little Egret	Lodmoor, Radipole, Ferrybridge
Grey Heron	Radipole, Lodmoor
Mute Swan	Radipole, Lodmoor
Canada Goose	Radipole, Lodmoor
Shelduck	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Teal	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Mallard	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Gadwall	Radipole
Shoveler	Radipole, Lodmoor
Pochard	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Tufted Duck	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Scaup	Abbotsbury
Long-tailed Duck	Abbotsbury
Red-breasted Merganser	Ferrybridge, Portland Harbour
Hooded Merganser	Radipole
Marsh Harrier	Radipole, Lodmoor
Sparrowhawk	Radipole
Kestrel	Portland
Peregrine	Portland
Merlin	Portland
Buzzard	Abbotsbury, Portland
Pheasant	Abbotsbury, Portland
Water Rail	Radipole (heard)
Coot	Abbotsbury, Radipole, Lodmoor
Moorhen	Radipole, Lodmoor
Avocet	Lodmoor
Oystercatcher	Abbotsbury, Portland, Ferrybridge
Redshank	Lodmoor
Ringed Plover	Ferrybridge
Golden Plover	Maiden Castle
Dunlin	Ferrybridge, Lodmoor
Snipe	Lodmoor
Turnstone	Ferrybridge, Portland Bill
Black-headed Gull	various sites
Herring Gull	various sites
Great Black-backed Gull	various sites
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Radipole
Common Gull	Abbotsbury, Radipole
Guillemot	Portland Bill
Razorbill	Portland Bill
Short-eared Owl	Portland Bill
Little Owl	Portland Bill
Feral Pigeon	Radipole
Wood Pigeon	various sites
Collared Dove	Portland
Green Woodpecker	Abbotsbury (heard)
Skylark	Portland Bill, Ferrybridge
Sand Martin	Radipole, Lodmoor
Rock Pipit	Portland Bill, Ferrybridge

Meadow Pipit	Portland
Pied Wagtail	Portland
Wren	various sites
Dunnock	various sites
Robin	various sites
Stonechat	Portland Bill
Wheatear	Portland Bill
Black Redstart	Portland Bill
Blackbird	various sites
Redwing	Portland Bill
Song Thrush	Radipole
Cetti's Warbler	Radipole (heard)
Chiffchaff	Portland, Radipole, Lodmoor
Pallas's Warbler	Portesham
Goldcrest	Portland, Lodmoor
Long-tailed Tit	Portesham, Lodmoor
Blue Tit	various sites
Great Tit	various sites
Raven	Portland
Rook	Chickerell
Magpie	various sites
Jackdaw	various sites
Carrion Crow	various sites
Starling	Portland
House Sparrow	Portland
Goldfinch	various sites
Chaffinch	various sites
Greenfinch	Portland, Lodmoor, Radipole
Bullfinch	Portesham
Reed Bunting	Lodmoor