

RSPB Bexley Group Walk – Crossness Nature Reserve and River Thames Tuesday 21st February 2017.

With the unusual opportunity for the group to meet and park cars within the site it was good to see all 17 members found their way arriving in time for the 9.30 start on this fantastic local nature reserve. We were very appreciative that the warden, Karen Sutton was able to join us and shepherd the final few through the gates before locking us in. A skylark was seen singing by some near the entrance. It was great to see quite a few new faces to these local walks and even more so that some were new to the reserve. With that in mind we gathered in the upper floor of the superb hide within the protected area for an introduction and orientation of the site. There were very audible murmurings of how unexpected and good the hide was and even more surprise that toilets were also available. Seven male shoveler on the West Paddock, resident greylag and Canada geese and coot on the wader scrape pool were first sightings. Off to a good start.



Photo – Karen Sutton

It was a chilly, overcast morning with only the very occasional flicker of sunlight breaking through, the sort of day when you sense it is quite quiet and not much moving. Undeterred we started off looking around. Hardly had I got the words out of my mouth that there had been wintering bearded tits in the reed bed off the boardwalk but none had been seen for a few weeks when two called from within the dense reed – we stood in anticipation of a small eruption (of birds) but only those of us over 6' were able to see at least one flying low from the point where the calls were heard to another piece of dense reed bed. Perhaps we would see them better from the viewing screen. A few ripples in an open stretch of water suggested possible water vole – some of those patient enough to hang back did indeed see the back end of this rare mammal (Britain's most rapidly declining mammal) – for some others it was just the ripples. Blackbird, Cetti's warbler and dunnock were heard and in the open area a small flock of blue tits moved through with a couple of great tits in attendance. A grey heron flapped over. Karen showed off the new barn owl box and gave a little history of this enigmatic species on the reserve, proudly boasting of the time when two broods of 5 were fledged in the same year – 2010 – given she thought small mammal populations had a seven year abundance cycle this might be a year to pay close attention to the box.

Returning via the new viewing screen, no luck with the bearded tits just a few chaffinches, we made our way out of the Protected area (PA) and onto the reserve but not before Karen had shown the group some smooth newts and explained how to differentiate adults from palmated newts (it's the spots under the chin).

Wandering down the track adjacent to the PA towards the Island Fields, more Cetti's were heard calling, a pair of mute swans rested on a ditch edge where a few teal, gadwall and a wigeon were also noted. Plenty of moorhen, coots, and geese (Canada and Greylag) were seen. A little egret flew over and a little grebe was seen by some; on the pool within Island Field at least 3 male and one female pochard were seen – not a common duck in the Borough.



Photo Karen Sutton



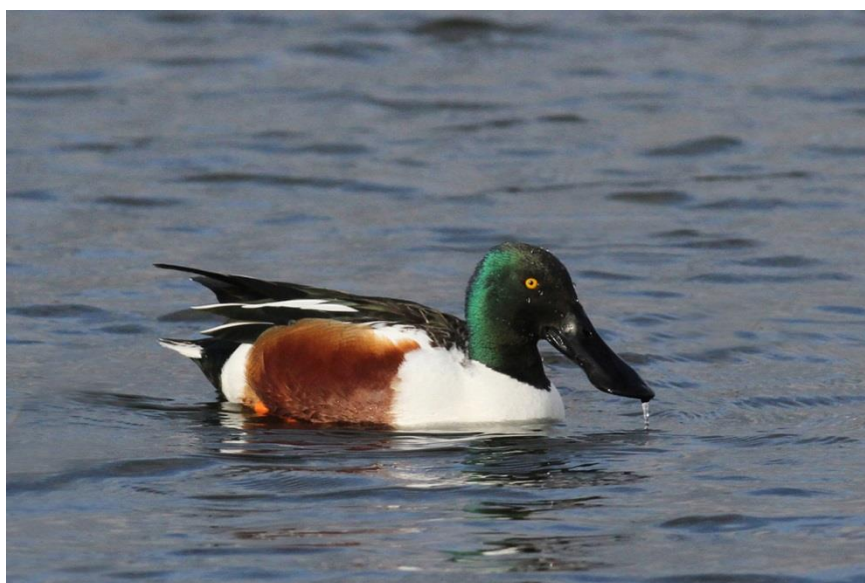
Grey Heron – Ralph Todd

Time marched on, it was already past 11.15 am so we made our way to the river, stopping en route to enjoy meadow pipits and linnets in the Seawall Field – a cock pheasant fed unconcerned by our presence.

With high tide at 8.45am there was now sufficient exposed mud and tidal water to see a whole host of wildfowl and waders in really good numbers. The first eye catching moment was when a flock of c180 dunlin rose up and flew around in what, if they were starlings would be called a murmuration – for dunlins I think it is just a flock – not quite so imaginative but impressive to view nonetheless. There were far too many shoveler and teal to count from the viewpoint, a dozen or more redshank, a few lapwing, black-headed gulls, some mallard and Shelduck. Walking along to the “Outfall” it became clear there were even more dunlin feeding on the mud, more redshank but the shovelers had mostly been replaced by an even larger number of gadwall, more teal and 8-10 wigeon. Cormorants sat, stretching their wings. A single common gull amongst the black-headed didn't stir much enthusiasm amongst the gathered group, perhaps because a grey wagtail was being elusive, a common sandpiper made a brief appearance and not one but three chiffchaffs either showed themselves or gave their distinctive call to alert us to their presence. As we left a little egret (perhaps the one from the reserve) dropped down to the water's edge and a grey heron appeared near the viewpoint. Bizarrely with all the talk during the morning of how important the site is for birds of prey, we didn't see a single one. Oh well, another visit is required.



Common Sandpiper



Shoveler – photos Ralph Todd

All in all a most enjoyable morning, hopefully highlighting what an excellent site this is for a wide variety of wildlife and birds, thanks in no small way to the efforts of Thames Water and their Warden, Karen for whom we are most grateful for the opportunity to visit, park our cars safely and for her enlightening comments throughout.

42 species of bird seen/heard

Birds seen/heard: Crossness Nature Reserve: Little grebe, cormorant, grey heron, little egret, mallard, teal, gadwall, wigeon, shoveler, pochard, greylag goose, Canada goose, mute swan, pheasant, moorhen, coot, black-backed gull, woodpigeon, skylark, carrion crow, magpie, great tit, blue tit, bearded tit, blackbird, robin, Cetti's warbler, dunnoek, meadow pipit, goldfinch, linnet, chaffinch. Plus – water vole and smooth newt.

River Thames: Cormorant, grey heron, little egret, mallard, teal, gadwall, wigeon, shoveler, shelduck, moorhen, coot, lapwing, common sandpiper, redshank, dunlin, herring gull, common gull, black-backed gull, carrion crow, magpie, wren, chiffchaff, grey wagtail.

Ralph and Brenda Todd
February 22nd 2017.