

**RSPB Bexley Group Local Walk – Foots Cray Meadows – Upper College Farm – Five Arches
Tuesday 20th March 2018 Led by Ralph and Brenda Todd**

Advance planning of field trips can be risky. Twenty four hours before 13 members joined us for our walk, Foots Cray Meadows was carpeted with snow and an uncomfortable cold north easterly wind. An afternoon of sun disposed of the snow and so when we met there was some cloud, later sunshine, blue sky and no wind. We were set for an enjoyable three hours of some familiar/unfamiliar habitats.

The Leaffield Lane display board allowed us to acquaint those new to the site before making our way past the allotments towards the River Cray and north towards Bexley. A group of black-headed gulls provided the first discussion with some adults displaying dark brown hoods, others not and some juveniles amongst them plus a single common gull for comparison.

A pair of great spotted woodpeckers flew over, their final destination not seen. Otherwise not much activity as we checked the playing fields, just a distant mistle thrush, or the riverside until we arrived at the iron footbridge. The first thing of note was a flight of not one but six jays, most landing in nearby trees. From the bridge we had wonderful views of a pair of very photogenic mallard (the sun showing off the male colours brilliantly) and two grey wagtails, one obligingly perching on a shrub close by. From here we were also able to compare a pair of stock doves with nearby woodpigeons and on the playing fields a gathering of jackdaws with a couple of carrion crows. Three more jays were in the trees by the narrow footbridge on Water Lane.



We now left the meadows into new territory for many, cutting through to Riverside Road, Albany Park then onto Kelsey's Farm land and Upper College Farm (UCF). Yet another three jays were seen on the farmland edge – surely a cold weather movement? A walk around the recently ploughed land and into the scrubby area adjacent to the railway line produced the expected common species – wren, robin, blue and great tit and a single chaffinch. Having explained the reasons for having to keep to the public right of way through UCF we discussed previous uses of the site and were able to just stand in the sunshine and experience the wonder of a single skylark as it rose from the ground nearby and sang its way to a height where most of us lost it – it then slowly dropped back to ground until the last 20 metres when it dropped like a stone to be lost from view. We had no need to walk further where we suspected another was singing. The local kestrel (female) made an appearance as we retreated back through the farmland to Foots Cray Meadows (FCM).



We now retraced our steps along the river, 11 fieldfare were seen on the playing fields but soon flew up to the trees along North Cray Road. As we approached the footbridge Brenda shouted a word everyone wanted to hear “kingfisher”, only problem, no one else saw it. Patience was rewarded as it left its unknown perch to fly back past us towards Water Lane. We soon located it and most found it with binoculars and we quickly had the telescope on it as well. Kingfisher is regularly seen along the rivers Shuttle and Cray but we had underestimated just how enigmatic it is for most people, not just birdwatchers. The bird, a male, changed perches a few times but remained within sight. Much excitement was demonstrated amongst the group so much so that for the first time in over 40 years of showing people birds we were thanked with a hug and kiss from one elated member for a sighting that was a first and had made their day/week/year – we rather appreciated the gratitude as well.



After the kingfisher made a final fly past (to be seen again by one member) we continued towards Five Arches, noting a pair of greylag geese flying over. We spent some time watching/photographing a little egret perched high in a riverside tree looking down on a fishing grey heron. With time moving on we pushed on to Five Arches where amongst the gathering of black-headed gulls, coot and moorhen were a number of mallard (two male and a female), tufted duck and a couple of little grebes. A very pale headed Egyptian goose clearly thought food was in the offing so walked alongside the group, to be joined later by a more naturally marked mate. We observed the pair of mute swans, the female now firmly attached to her nest (where three weeks ago two eggs were seen). A very active chiffchaff was feeding around the roots of the fallen tree in the water.

So our walk concluded, once again a most enthusiastic and convivial group, some experiencing FCM or UCF for the first time (which is one of the prime objectives of these walks) and all seemingly having enjoyed the variety of species seen and not least the good weather that had been a delight to walk in after recent days of cold and snow. Thanks to all who came along. (All images Ralph or Brenda Todd)

Birds Seen/Heard (h) – Little grebe, little egret, grey heron, mute swan, greylag goose, Egyptian goose, mallard, tufted duck, kestrel, moorhen, coot, black-headed gull, common gull, stock dove, woodpigeon, ring-necked parakeet, kingfisher, great spotted woodpecker, skylark, grey wagtail, wren (h), dunnock, robin, blackbird, fieldfare, mistle thrush, chiffchaff, long-tailed tit, blue tit, great tit, jay, magpie, jackdaw, carrion crow, starling, chaffinch, goldfinch. (37 species).

Ralph and Brenda Todd
March 20th 2018.

Next walk – Thursday April 19th Martens Grove – 9.30-11.30. Meet Martens Avenue (off Watling Street/old A2) adjacent to Grove Road DA7 6BB (street parking – no facilities).