

RSPB Bexley Group Walk – Hall Place South and Crayford Rough. Thursday 16th January 2020.

Relying only on social media and word of mouth to promote this early year walk it was great to have 10 members/friends join us for our first Hall Place South/Crayford Rough walk in four years. Threatening rain clouds soon passed and skies opened to provide some blue sky and sun. The very early arrivals might have seen the sparrowhawk high above but it soon disappeared.

We set off to the hide and feeding station where the usual species - robin, chaffinch, blue and great tits, dunnock were busy taking advantage of the food provided by local volunteers. Interesting to see one blue tit using a nearby nest box and emerging with something white in its beak – surely not a faecal sac this early in the season? There was no further evidence of early breeding. Around 7 moorhen were feeding away from the river as we wandered slowly towards the visitor centre/toilets (yes it was planned). A common buzzard flew out from the nearby trees, hotly pursued by a couple of carrion crows. Sadly it did not show itself really well; even landing in a more distant tree didn't help as about 10 parakeets soon saw it off, not to be seen again. The river Cray was understandably running quite fast and heavy after all the recent rain – perhaps too heavy for grey wagtail which often frequents this area but not today. A group of about 30 greylag geese were feeding, a pair of mistle thrushes showed well and a grey heron wandered up from the river to stand, sentinel like, under a tree - perhaps considering its next move. All that was on the river within the formal garden area were a pair of Egyptian geese. Toilet stop duly undertaken by some, off we headed for the meadows.



Stonechat (male) - image Harry Halstead



In search of gulls – image Brenda Todd

Not too many dogs/walkers and sadly not too many gulls either. After Friday evening's talk at the group on gull ID surely everyone present was eager to show off what they had remembered – just a single common gull (correctly identified) was all that was present – the area is usually awash with gulls. Today only the occasional black-headed and herring gull flew overhead, none landing. A second pair of mistle thrushes on the football pitch was of some compensation.

We did not see much along the river until we reached the rough grassland where the pair of stonechats that have been present since at least Christmas put on a decent show for us, especially when viewed through the telescope.



Common Gull – image Ralph Todd



Mistle Thrushes – image Nicky Wilson

For some, Crayford Rough was a new destination (if you can call it that?) – it was a bit wet underfoot and the river vegetation had clearly been knocked about/flattened due to the fast flowing river but our hope for water rail remained optimistic. Some had good views of a single greenfinch (a quite rare bird in Bexley) and a song thrush kept well-hidden for a long while before Lesley eventually found it at the back of the nearby tree we suspected it was in. A great spotted woodpecker flew over, calling and Harry found a lump in another tree which turned out to be a jay, unusually for here, the only one seen (just). A couple of moorhen appeared from nowhere which raised our hopes again for water rail. The warmth of the sun encouraged us to stand and watch/listen and discuss the Rough in a little more detail. We even had a short literary lesson about the novels of William Shaw featuring Dungeness. We decided to retrace our steps which we did but sadly the water rail was either being incredibly elusive or had just moved elsewhere. We wandered along to the path leading to Crayford Station so everyone could get a feel for the extent of the Rough and its relationship with Hall Place.

Walking onto the raised bank (flood defence) we had even better views of the stonechats - this time with the sun behind us. The walk back to the car park was generally lacking in birds, a small flock of goldfinches were in the alders and six mistle thrushes together were on the same football pitch where the pair had fed earlier. All in all, a very enjoyable walk, some lovely views of most species, great company as always and a determination to return in the Spring when there should be even more birdsong than we heard today (song thrush, robins and great tits all making an early start in establishing their territories – let's hope they don't get caught out).

Next Walk Lamorbey Park Thursday 18th February, meet Leisure Centre car park – more information RSPB Bexley Facebook page and web-site.

Birds Seen: Grey heron, greylag geese, Egyptian geese, mallard, sparrowhawk, common buzzard, kestrel, moorhen, black-headed gull, common gull, herring gull, stock dove, woodpigeon, ring-necked parakeet, great spotted woodpecker, wren, dunnoek, robin, stonechat, blackbird, song thrush, mistle thrush, blue tit, great tit, jay, magpie, carrion crow, starling, chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch (31 species)

Ralph and Brenda Todd
16th January 2020