

Our favourite birding sites

Val & Mike Walker

This talk was first given to the RSPB in Pinner and 4 sites were chosen, Barnes Wildfowl & Wetland Trust, Middlesex; Brownsea Island, Dorset; Elmley Marshes Kent; and the Warburg Reserve, Buckinghamshire. The reasons for choosing these 4 were that they:

- are accessible for day visits;
- have a variety of birds at different times of year;
- have photographic potential with near views of birds;
- have good hides or the ability to view from the car; and
- have other natural history interest – flowers, butterflies and insects.

Barnes Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

Green woodpeckers are best seen early in the morning. Grey herons are present in all weathers. Goldfinch feed on alder cones. The hides give good views of most of the ducks, including Shovellers. Great crested grebes, particularly on the Summer Walk, and Little grebes both nest here. Reed warblers are not often seen and patience is needed but they are often heard. Wrens are often seen in March/April before the vegetation gets too high. There are quite a few Water rails but again patience is needed and a little luck.

One advantage of this site is that, because of the large number of visitors, the birds are often habituated to people. The grass verges are left quite wild, which is good for insects such as the Essex skipper butterfly and the Burnet moth. There are quite a lot of orchids, particularly bee orchids and abundant damselflies and dragonflies.

The moorhen is probably the commonest bird at Barnes and the Coot the second most common. Both become much more aggressive in April (the breeding season). Snipe, which are normally difficult to see because of their camouflage, have been seen in January/February when there is less vegetation and the same applies to bitterns, for which Barnes seems to be one of their favoured haunts.

Brownsea Island

Situated in Poole Harbour, there are regular sailings to Brownsea Island from Sandbanks or from Poole Harbour (more expensive but involves a trip around the harbour) from March to November. The northern part of the island is a Dorset Wildlife Trust nature reserve, which has 2 or 3 hides, and the rest of the island is managed by the National Trust. The island is renowned for Red squirrels and there are feeding stations specifically for the squirrels.

One hide has very shallow water in front of it which is slightly tidal and has a lot of very heavy mud. Large flocks of Avocets can be seen and large flocks of Black-tailed godwits are there most of the year. In March/April they get a little combative. Other birds include Greenshank, Oystercatcher, Redshank, and Spotted redshank. The Redshanks are often difficult to identify in winter when they are not in breeding plumage and because the thick mud can obscure some features. Because the hide faces east, flight pictures are best obtained when the wind is from the south-west. There are also a few ducks, such as Gadwall, and a flock of Shelduck for most of the year.

In the National Trust area, near the top of the island is an area of grassland where Wheatears can be seen on migration in March/April. They are often fairly tame as long as you stay low. In an area of heathland Dartford warblers breed every year.

There are 5 small gravel islands for breeding terns, with protection from herring gulls installed. Black-headed gulls breed there and the terns live side-by-side with them. Mediterranean gulls also breed there. Both Common terns and Sandwich terns breed and mostly eat sand-eels. The black-headed gulls tend to steal the fish from the terns if they do not fly directly to the nest or overfly and have to make a wide circuit to return.

Elmley Marshes

An RSPB reserve on the Isle of Sheppey next to a major industrial site but with farmland around, this has a 2-mile winding drive to the car park and is good for photos from the car in the pools alongside the road. At high tide, the birds move from the Swale estuary onto the marshes and Curlew can be seen all year round with Dunlin in the winter up to about March. Little egrets are now much more common all over Britain and Grey herons are often seen. This is one of the best places to see Lapwings at close quarters. They breed here, with chicks at the end of April. The chicks are prey for a lot of other birds, especially the Kestrel, which can often be seen around the farmyard area at the beginning of the drive. There are also Skylarks, Redshanks and Meadow pipits in the meadows on either side of the road. Starlings can be seen investigating animal droppings for insects and Yellow wagtails have been seen there in May. Stonechats have been seen on a number of occasions and, like many of the small birds, they perch on fence and gateposts.

Warburg Reserve

A Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust reserve north-west of Henley-on-Thames, this is a good site for Red kites. It is also a good site for plants and butterflies such as the Peacock, Green hairstreak and Dingy skipper. Pasque flowers are grown in the wildflower garden behind the visitor centre. The hide is set quite low with a pond in front of it and best views are in dry spells. Among the birds seen here are Greenfinch, Blue tit, Coal tit, Great tit, Long-tailed tit, Marsh tit, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Bullfinch and Blackcap. Great spotted woodpeckers are quite common and can certainly be heard and there are Siskins in winter and Jays, though not many.

A Waxwing year

The talk concluded with the speakers visits to Woburn, Abingdon and Fenny Stratford, which are good reserves for seeing Waxwings, flocks of which tend to fly in, pick a berry and fly off.