

# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

## NORTH WALES

11-18 MAY 2024

**Leader:** Simon Eaves.

**Guests:** Dorothy Hutchinson, Sue Bradbury, Jannette & Peter Warden.

**Day 1** We all make our own way into Wales and on into the heart of Snowdonia by road and rail to meet up at our hotel for the week's holiday in the lovely village of Betws-y-Coed in what is a very beautiful part of North Wales.

We meet as a group for the first time in the evening at the hotel for dinner. Here we have chance to chat about the places we hope to visit and some of the interesting birds of the area we look forward to finding. The variety of habitats to be found within just a short drive of where we are staying means we have the opportunity to see some fantastic nature reserves and a multitude of birds.

**Day 2** The weather forecast for the Anglesey area is for sunshine and light winds so after a lovely breakfast we are soon out in the vehicle driving north east to explore some coastal areas.

We arrive at the RSPB's South Stack reserve which is a stunning seabird cliff colony. Wandering down from the carpark we find a couple of fledged young Stonechats and also the brightly coloured male fetching insects to feed his hungry chicks. A Whitethroat and a Dunnock put in brief appearances here too. The path from here continues to one of the main cliff viewpoints.

We are looking across onto cliffs stacked full of Guillemots and Razorbills and today it looks like there are as many auks on the sea as there are on the cliffs, it's quite a sight. Herring Gulls are nesting on the grassy slopes near the top of the cliffs and a few Fulmars glide effortlessly on the updrafts. We linger for quite a while here and spot a couple of Chough flying over which is another special bird of this reserve. Simon picks out a single Puffin floating on the sea below and we get some nice views of it through the telescopes.

Walking on from here a footpath takes us to the steps that lead down towards the lighthouse. There's a different view of the cliffs from here feeling closer to the birds so we get some more views of Puffins as they waddle around the steep lower slopes and much closer looks at the Guillemots and Razorbills too. Simon picks out the distinctive bridled Guillemot with its pale eye ring here also. A Lesser Redpoll feeding on the grass beside the path is a nice surprise especially as it's so close. We add Kittiwakes and Shags to the growing list of seabirds before we brave the walk back up the steps!

We walk back to the carpark and have our picnic lunch near the visitor centre. While eating our picnic a Chough flies over giving us a much better look at this distinctive member of the crow family. A couple of Ravens also adds to our growing corvid tally.

The sun is still shining and we make the short drive back to Holyhead to check the harbour for Black Guillemots. Parking on the seafront we scan between the boats and along the rocky shoreline and Simon soon picks out a Black Guillemot flying low over the water, it continues just out of sight but it looks like we can walk and try and get a closer view. From the edge of a small harbour a smart Black Guillemot bobs to the surface and we get some stunning views of its distinctive brown and white plumage. This species is localised around here so we are lucky to see one so well today.

Driving back we make a stop where mainland Wales and Anglesey is divided by the fast flowing tidal waters of the Menai Strait. We walk down a path that meanders down through some lovely deciduous woodland. The view soon opens out to the bay where a few Shelducks are feeding. On a little rocky island there are several Grey Herons and some noisy Canada Geese. We add a few more species to the day list with Cormorant and Shag sat nicely for a good comparison. A Whimbrel flies by uttering its distinctive trilling call and we spot several Grey Heron nests on the far shore among some tall trees. It's a lovely place to just wander around but with the day pressing on we must head back to the car for the short drive to the hotel.

### Day 3

The weather for the rest of this week is predicted to be changeable, but today until at least lunchtime it appears it should be dry. Armed with this knowledge we head north in the car to a steep sided valley brimming with lush green mixed woodland where we can take a nice walk.

On foot we walk up the valley, a young Dipper makes a brief appearance on a rock in a fast flowing stream as we set off. A distant Cuckoo is calling and a couple of Buzzards soar overhead. A few Garden Warblers are singing close to the path but we only manage some brief views of this typically elusive species. As we pause for a breather Simon picks out the Cuckoo that we have been hearing, it's sat high in a tree in the distance. We walk on with so much bird song including Robin, Blackbird, Blackcap and Willow Warblers all around. An obliging Chiffchaff stays long enough to get it in the scope and we see it very well as it sings its heart out.

The path climbs steadily through fields of bluebells and trees full of fresh spring colour it's very beautiful. A Nuthatch which lands on the ground on the path is a bit unusual and great to see so well. The waterfall at the top of the walk is very dramatic after some fresh rain last night and a stunning end to the hike.

We wander slowly back down the valley from here as the forecasted weather starts to arrive, it's only drizzle so no need to rush the walk back. We have lunch back at the carpark which is actually quite sheltered and dry under the trees.

It's a very short drive to the RSPB reserve at Conwy after lunch where there are a few hides for us to shelter in as the weather is still a bit drizzly. The wetland reserve is really nice and despite the weather there's still a lot of birdsong. Sedge Warblers sing from the reedy scrub with the sounds of Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Reed Warblers too. It's great to hear the first Swifts of summer screaming overhead here.

From the first screen we are looking out over some large lagoons so we quickly add a few new birds for the trip with really nice looks at Great Crested Grebe, Coot, Little Grebe, and many Gadwall. It's great to watch multiple Sand Martins skim low over the water looking for insects in the breezy conditions.

From another hide a gentleman already in there points out a Common Sandpiper on the near shore. Some Lapwings, Oystercatchers and a White Wagtail are nice additions to the days list here too.

We walk a little further around the reserve getting some nice looks at a Greenfinch and a Sedge Warbler in full song. We feel like we've earned a coffee and a biscuit after all today's walking and with the weather continuing to be a bit challenging we head to the café for a hot drink.

Driving back to the hotel from Conwy doesn't take too long but the heavens really open up with some torrential rain on route. Back at the hotel carpark we pause briefly in the rain to enjoy looks at a male Goosander sat on a rock in the middle of the river just beside the road.

#### Day 4

This morning the weather is good and set to be best in the direction we are heading which is south a reasonable distance to another famous RSPB reserve at Ynys-hir.

The drive is good and the countryside scenery is beautiful. Arriving at Ynys-hir we chat with the warden at the visitor centre to glean some local information before setting off on a walk. Simon soon finds a male Pied Flycatcher which shows well on a power line, singing out in the open which is handy for some great telescope views. We get glimpses of a Garden Warbler here too and a Four Spotted Chaser dragonfly that settles in the grass beside the track.

We continue to follow a trail from here and a short way through the woodland we pause to listen, another Pied Flycatcher is singing, along with Goldcrest and Blackcap but the extensive green canopy of the trees makes it tricky to find them.

Continuing on foot around part of the reserve we get some nice looks at a Mistle Thrush and a singing Sedge Warbler. The path continues along a woodland edge then up a little hillside with a view over the Dyfi estuary. A Garden Warbler is singing from deep cover and a Brimstone butterfly flits by in the warm sunshine.

A boardwalk over some boggy ground leads up to a large hide which looks out over some shallow pools on the edge of the saltmarsh, here we take some time to look out and to have our lunch. There is a pair of Swallows nest building in the back of the hide so we shuffle along the benches to make sure they can fly in and out uninterrupted, it's amazing to watch them swoop in through the open window. There's a pair of Lapwings with several small chicks on the edge of the muddy pools and many Canada Geese with goslings. Time is flying by, so we make a move leaving the hide to wander back on a slightly different path to the carpark.

A short drive further south we arrive at an established Red Kite feeding station. We are just in time but a short sharp rain shower holds us at the car for a couple of minutes but even from here we can see many kites circling over the hillside. We walk the short distance to the lake shore to view the area where food is thrown out for the birds, the skies are filled with this spectacular raptor of which there must be over a hundred individuals in view now. The feed is put down and it doesn't take long for the birds to react, swooping down and skimming the ground to pick up the morsels. We enjoy watching the birds acrobatic skills for some time and to think how rare these birds were just a few decades ago.

There's time for a quick look at the bird feeders here that are covered in Siskins and a few Lesser Redpolls before it's time to head for the hotel as it's a fair drive back from here.

## Day 5

It's rained in the night but it's clearing in the morning as we leave the hotel. Driving to Anglesey looks the best bet for us staying dry today and the skies do brighten as we arrive at a little RSPB reserve about half way across the island. We take a walk along a good path around the edge of the reserve where we scan over an open marshland with a few shallow lagoons. There are many Lapwings with chicks, several Shoveler and Gadwall dabbling in the pools. A distant Marsh Harrier glides over the marsh but unfortunately doesn't come any closer. We get some nice looks at Little Egret and a Skylark dust bathing on the track as we wander on.

From a raised viewing spot on a bridge over a canal we can hear several skylarks singing and find a Buzzard sat in a dead tree. Simon spots a drake Garganey flying low over the marsh and it lands on one of the far pools, it's a long way off but in the scope it's a pretty good view. Three Black-tailed Godwits drop in at an equally distant pool but they are unfortunately lost to view in the long grass.

Retracing our steps we locate a Reed Bunting which we heard singing earlier it's a dapper male and he's still singing away. We check the pool where we had seen the Garganey from a distance and relocate this stunning summer duck dabbling about it's a great view of what is a pretty scarce species.

Leaving the reserve we drive a short way for a cuppa and comfort break in a nearby Garden Centre before continuing our drive across Anglesey to the north coast at the Cemlyn Bay nature reserve. We have our picnic lunch in a nice sunny sheltered spot near the carpark where already we can see that the air is busy with many terns flying back and forth to the nesting colony nearby. A couple of birders returning from the walk along the beach tell us that there is a pair of Roseate Terns on one of the islands today.

We wander the short distance along the shingle beach to look over the lagoon where a couple of little low islands have masses of nesting terns. We start looking over the smaller of the islands where the Roseate Terns had been seen earlier and luckily they are still present. This site was many years ago a regular nesting place for this species but is now just a rare visitor so we are incredibly lucky to see them.

The majority of the rest of the terns here are Sandwich Terns with their noisy raucous calls reverberating out. Common and Arctic Terns are here too and we spend a little time getting views of each to compare these similar species. Simon picks out a pair of nesting Mediterranean Gulls in summer plumage with their striking black hoods. It's lovely to just absorb the sights and sounds of the comings and goings of all the seabirds.

Doubling back along the beach we pause at the car and some of the group decide to rest here while the rest of us take a walk along the road to look at the nearby farmland. We see a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers resting on the lagoon and there's a pair of nesting Mute Swans right beside the road. We bump into a chap who we'd spoken too earlier in the day and he tells us that he's just seen a Little Owl on a stone wall, it's just visible from where we are but we wander on a short way and get some better telescope views of this diminutive owl. A Red-legged Partridge is another new bird for the list as we double back to return to the car.

Driving back, in the distance we can see the mountains of Snowdonia and so we enjoy the stunning roadside scenery once again.

## Day 6

It's an early start this morning as we are up and leaving the hotel at 5.30am because we've got a reasonable drive to look for Black Grouse on a display lek. At this time of morning the roads are really quiet and in the still air there are pockets of mist along the way with the low morning sunlight lighting the landscape beautifully. The journey seems to go quickly and the mist has completely cleared as we approach the moorland.

After passing a noisy quad bike on the single track road we are the only vehicle at the site and just yards from the windows are nine male Black Grouse in lekking display. We stay in the vehicle but with the windows down they are close enough to hear their incredible wheezing and cooing sounds, it's a fantastic experience. It's actually quite late in the year for males to be displaying but a couple of the males are still pretty active as they "fluff up" into full display. A few of the Black Grouse take flight to disperse and as the quad bike from earlier passes by several more decide it's time to go too. Then someone on foot walking the road causes the last two males to fly off the lek site.

From the car as we drive we find a nice Red Grouse sat very still in the heather and many Meadow Pipits flit alongside the road. We find a suitable layby where we can stop to get out and enjoy the views over the moorland. It's very calm and the sunshine is warming the cool morning air, the only sounds we can hear are those of birds. Simon finds a male Whinchat which show really nicely and we find a few more distant Black Grouse too. Another stop a bit further along the road and we can hear a Cuckoo calling in the distance, we get a very close look at a singing male Stonechat and a couple more Red Grouse. It's already been a fantastic start to the day and we've still got breakfast to look forward to! So we drive back to the hotel.

After a hearty breakfast we are back into the car to drive a short way south and up onto some open heather moorland. There are a few places along this road where we can park up by the roadside to scan over the moors. At first all is quiet but Simon suddenly spots a male Hen Harrier, unfortunately it stays quite distant but we get some reasonable scope views. We try and drive closer but we lose sight of it from this different angle. Turning round we park up again and are rewarded as the harrier pops up again and this time it's quite a bit closer.

We decide to drive down towards the coast and call in at the Glaslyn Ospreys. The little visitor centre and large new hide looks across to an Osprey nest and our timing is good as both of the birds are present at the nest with a reasonable view with a telescope. This year's nesting pair are currently sitting on eggs.

We drive back to the hotel from here as the early morning start is catching up with our energy levels and decide to call it a day, this and the fact the predicted weather front has arrived and it's raining pretty hard as we get back to the hotel mid-afternoon.

## Day 7

We say goodbye to Dorothy after breakfast who is leaving early today by train and shortly afterwards we are on the road driving a short way to a very scenic spot at Cwm Idwal. There's an atmospheric mist hanging over the hills but it's calm and dry so it's pleasant as we walk up the trail. The rocky well-made footpath climbs slowly but steadily from here so we take our time. A Grey Wagtail flits across the path as it crosses a little foot bridge over a tumbling mountain stream. Continuing on up the landscape opens up ahead of us as we walk on towards the mountain corrie, a Wheatear flies ahead of us and disappears into the mist.

The lake Idwal is tranquil and still as we reach the top it's a beautiful place. Simon spots another Wheatear so we follow it along the shore to try and get a better view. We do get a nice view in the scopes of the Wheatear and Simon can also hear a distant Ring Ouzel singing so we try and walk in the direction of the song to go and look for this scarce mountain thrush. We scour the rocky slopes and shrubby vegetation but no luck finding the Ring Ouzel but Peter finds a Dipper which is nice as it swims around on the calm waters of the lake.

Having walked back to the carpark there's a very handy coffee kiosk and we make the most of this. Refreshed we take a walk though some woodland just beyond the car park where a Spotted Flycatcher is calling from the tree tops, Simon glimpses it a few times but as it falls silent we don't have much of a chance of spotting it anymore. Walking on beyond the trees here we get a fantastic view right down the Ogwen river valley. A Redstart starts to sing somewhere in the woods that we have just walked through so we double back to look for it. Unfortunately a bit like the flycatcher it stops singing and we can't locate it.

A narrow road winds down the valley and driving this direction we stop after a short way at a layby and pause to have our picnic lunch, it's a spot where we have seen Ring Ouzel on previous trips so we keep our eyes and ears open. A Linnet shows nicely and a Cuckoo is calling across the way. Simon sees some movement high on the rocky cliffs and with the scopes we can see it's a male Ring Ouzel, it stays long enough for us all to take turns and see this smart mountain bird through the telescope.

Close by along the same road we pause again near some old farm buildings with some small enclosed slate fenced fields to look and listen out for Twite. They are a scarce localised breeding bird here and some seed feeders do have some birds hanging around them but it's just some Redpoll, Linnet and Siskin, so after a while we decide there's no sign of any Twite today.

We are actually not that far from the coast now so we drive a little way to a small nature reserve by the shore. The tide is well out when we arrive but there are quite a lot of birds on the expansive mudflats. Many Shelduck, some distant Eiders and a couple of Little Egrets, a single Black Swan is a bit of a surprise here too. We make a walk along the shore to check through the gulls and visit a small woodland pool hide on the reserve where we see some Mallard and Moorhens both with several young chicks in tow.

Time is pressing on and we are not that far from the hotel so we return there so we can do a final local walk in the woodlands along the river. The path leads to a river confluence with a wide open rocky riverbed it's a lovely afternoon but a little quiet for birds until we have almost got back to the hotel and we find a family of Grey Wagtails jumping between rocks on the river with the constant begging calls of the chicks wanting to be fed.

Before dinner we get together for a drink at the hotel and a chance to share with each other our favourite bits of the holiday. It's nice to hear what everyone enjoyed the most and the early morning trip to see the displaying Black Grouse was particularly memorable for everyone. Hen Harriers, Pied Flycatchers, Cuckoo and Little Owl feature as favourite species of the trip while the Cemlyn Tern Colony, and the beautiful walks in the woodland and hills are recalled as favourite places we visited. There are many highlights to remember on what has been a varied and bird filled trip.

## Day 8

After our last breakfast together we all head off in different directions to find our way home, taking with us some fantastic lasting memories of this stunning part of Wales.

## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Shoveler  
Teal  
Garganey  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
Red Grouse  
Black Grouse  
Red-legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Little Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
Fulmar  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Little Egret  
Grey Heron  
Osprey  
Red Kite  
Marsh Harrier  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Sparrowhawk  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Avocet  
Ringed Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Dunlin  
Common Sandpiper  
Redshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Whimbrel  
Black-headed Gull  
Mediterranean Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Sandwich Tern  
Common Tern

Arctic Tern  
Roseate Tern  
Puffin  
Black Guillemot  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Feral Pigeon  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Cuckoo  
Little Owl  
Swift  
Kingfisher  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Skylark  
Sand Martin  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Rock Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Dipper  
Duncock  
Robin  
Redstart  
Wheatear  
Whinchat  
Stonechat  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Blackbird  
Ring Ouzel  
Garden Warbler  
Blackcap  
Whitethroat  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Sedge Warbler  
Grasshopper Warbler  
Reed Warbler  
Cettis Warbler  
Willow Warbler  
Wood Warbler  
Chiffchaff  
Goldcrest  
Wren  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Pied Flycatcher  
Great Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Long-tailed Tit

Nuthatch  
Magpie  
Jay  
Jackdaw  
Chough  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Redpoll  
Goldfinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Reed Bunting  
Black Swan

#### **MAMMALS**

Grey Squirrel  
Bank Vole  
Rabbit  
Stoat

#### **REPTILES**

Common Lizard

#### **DAMSEL & DRAGONFLIES**

Four Spotted Chaser  
Large Red Damselfly  
Common Blue

#### **BUTTERFLIES**

Small White  
Orange Tip  
Brimstone