

Our first visit for 2019 was to Hurworth Burn Reservoir, an initially misleadingly named stretch of water nearer to Trimdon than Hurworth. If, however, you have sharp eyes and an OS 1:25,000 map you can discover that the River Skerne flows out of the south end of the reservoir and wiggles a tortuous course to join the Tees very close to Hurworth on Tees

The Castle Eden walkway runs beside the reservoir and provides not only good watching points over the reservoir, but plenty of shrubs along its length in this section. These, along with set-aside plantings in some fields, provide excellent cover and food for tits, sparrows, buntings and winter thrushes. They, in their turn, can attract raptors in search of lunch. A group of enthusiastic birders have hung feeders at certain points along the way and these are kept well stocked by dedicated volunteers. Birds of interest here are willow tits, less than common in most of our area, but easily seen from one of the watch and feeder points. They are very similar in appearance to marsh tits and usually distinguished more by call than appearance. Both these birds present a grey/ brown appearance with black crown and head but careful observation can find a diagnostic pale panel along the secondary feathers of the willow tit (basically along the side of the bird when the wings are tucked into a non-flight position.). We were lucky enough to get good clear views for a length of time whilst the birds tucked into new offerings on the discretely placed feeders.

This is a good spot, too, to find groups of geese, sometimes with a white fronted goose or a bean goose amongst their number. On this occasion, disappointingly, although we found pinkfooted geese amongst the grey lag geese and Canada geese, we couldn't find either of the two rarer species.

Our second visit of 2019 was an all-day visit to the Lower Derwent sites up in the Gateshead area. After a drive up in wet, unpleasant conditions, the weather decided to follow the met office forecast and roll back the clouds. From the Lamesley Pasture hide we got off to a good start with 20 species. Parking is in the carpark of the Ravensworth Arms, an Inn claiming association with Lewis Carroll and with Catherine Cookson. Ignoring any literary associations we went to find the birds. On a recce we had bumped into the local birders who suggested it was a good plan to leave the door of the hide open whilst watching so that the feeders beside it can be observed as well as the wetlands beyond, through the opening windows. They described too, how, on occasions a sparrowhawk had whipped through the hide, after grabbing a luckless small bird from the feeders and then making its escape through the door, into the hide and out of a window. We left the door open whilst we were there but the sparrowhawk failed to materialise. From the hide we had excellent views of a flock of a dozen curlews, a larger and more restless flock of over 100 lapwings plus the usual winter waterfowl. These included shoveler, wigeon, teal and mallards. Smaller birds included chaffinch, greenfinch, blue tit, great tit and coal tit, treesparrow, house sparrow and dunnock plus a pair of stock doves.

From here we went to Shibden Pond. There's a hide here and the opportunity to take a 1 mile trail through woodland habitat and then continuing on a board walk through bull rushes and reeds. Here the heron crouched motionless watching for something to eat. We were in search of the reported flock of over 100 redpolls but drew a complete blank. The pond itself was still partly frozen, confining the shelduck, mute swan, coot and geese to a small patch of open water from which they could skate unsteadily towards the bordering field or the island. By then we were quite chilled but the staff of the Blaydon Community centre and swimming pool most kindly allowed us

to use one of their rooms for lunch and offered fresh tea and coffee for which we had to force them to accept payment.

The next spot for us was the Thornley Woods hide. The Visitor centre here is an excellent starting point for walks as well as a birdwatching spot and in the past it has always been very productive of woodland birds. On this occasion we had one good sighting of a bullfinch but apart from that there was nothing.

Our last hide was down the road at Far Pasture, a place which in the past has yielded little but on this occasion luck was with us. As we left the cars, we could hear contact calls from a large party of long tailed tits and they were easy to see. Mixed in with them were added bonuses: some tiny, very pretty birds called goldcrests plus a pair of tree creepers climbing steadily up and down picking items from the bark of the trees.

From the hide itself we recorded the only red kite of the day, plus a jay initially well hidden by small branches at the top of tall trees. That sent our day's total to 37 species and although we strained our eyes and ears for 10 more minutes we could not push that number up to a nice round 40

Anne Harbron

Details about our future visits are sent to group members by email.