

20 March 2023 Field meeting: The River Tees

We revised our plans for March and did a birdwatching walk from the Green bridge by Thorngate Mill in Barnard Castle to the Abbey bridge and back. Seven of us met in Thorngate on an initially overcast and drizzly morning.

Firstly, we looked at the various Gulls on the Tees, and were soon identifying the differences between Black-headed, Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls. The LBBs were adept at finding and eating the invasive American Signal crayfish. Next, we walked along the Demesnes to the Mill, all the while accompanied by a handsome drake and duck Goosander pair, hunting as they drifted down river. Dippers were found at the Mill (they nest in the race below the mill). Beyond the cottages there were the common birds such as Wrens, Robins and Blackbirds, Blue and Great Tits, but very noticeable were the lots of Chiffchaffs (a “little brown job” warbler, just arrived from southern Europe and Africa): a real sign that Spring had arrived. Chiffchaffs are one of the earliest and most numerous summer visitors in the Dale. This is a bird best found and identified by listening out for its jaunty “chiff-chaff” song. Along the river we saw several delightful Grey Wagtails; these are smart grey-and-yellow birds of becks and fast flowing rivers. People often mistake them for Yellow Wagtails, but these are now scarce in the Dale and are birds of grasslands and meadows.



Photo: Chiffchaff

We walked back along the higher path through several fields; Oystercatchers and Curlews were seen and heard. We also enjoyed good views of a party of Long-tailed Tits. Along the tree-lined walls nearer the Bowes Museum we saw and heard a Song Thrush, and finally found a male Greenfinch, “wheezing away” at the top of a tree. The clouds lifted as we got back to town; all in all we saw 26 species of birds.

Our next field meeting is on 17th April in Deepdale, where we will be listening for various summer migrants which should have newly arrived by then.

PS Many U3a members went up to Bowes on some evenings to see the mesmerising murmuration of Starlings: one of the great winter birdwatching spectacles.