

U3a BIRDWATCHING GROUP Report and photos by Andrew Lapworth

FIELD MEETING AT RSPB SALTHOLME & NORTH GARE 16 October 2023

Our group visit on 16 October proved to be well-timed to see some special birds visiting our region. Starting in the RSPB's panoramic cafe, eleven of us enjoyed cakes and coffees while watching some interesting birds, including the smallest wading-bird in the UK, the appropriately named **Little Stint** (*Calidris minuta*). This little wader (slightly smaller than a Sparrow) breeds in high Arctic tundra in Scandinavia and central Siberia, and stops off on our coasts, and muddy edges inland, en-route to Africa, south of the Sahara. It is tiny and we needed our 'scopes to see it. There were the usual Redshanks and Little Egrets, numerous duck species, and some flighty small flocks of Common Snipe. At the feeders we enjoyed close-up views of Goldfinches, Greenfinches and Tree Sparrows, with Moorhens (and a rat) picking-up the spilt seeds.

We had reports that a **Spotted Redshank** was showing well from Phil Stead hide, and sure enough the long-lens brigade in the hide were soon helpfully pointing-out this elegant bird, subtly different from the Common Redshanks.

Next stop was the Wildlife Watchpoint hide; we stopped to hear a Cetti's Warbler scolding near the path, and one or two of us glimpsed this skulking wren-shaped warbler. In the hide we didn't have to wait long before we all got good, close views of the shy and generally elusive **Water Rail** (more often heard than seen): slate grey, browns and a bright orange bill plus beady eye).

After lunch in the cafe we moved off the reserve to the coast and North Gare. It was warm and windless as we walked out to the Gare, seeing several Stonechats, ideal weather for a spot of sea-watching. The tide was coming in and before long we had lots to see: a murmuration of Knot, plus Oystercatchers, Sanderling and Turnstones; offshore: gulls, distant Gannets, Eiders, Common Scoters and a large flock of Great Crested Grebes plus one Red-throated Diver (perhaps only seen by me). In the Tees estuary were lots of auks bobbing about: most likely Guillemots and Razorbills but we couldn't distinguish them at such a distance. A seal occasionally showed itself, but we didn't see any Dolphins. In the distance inland we saw a skein of Pink-footed Geese high overhead. A small flock of Wigeon landed in the rough grass by the roadside.

We all enjoyed this delightful spot, with the waves crashing on the beach and lots of fresh sea-air! Overall we saw nearly 50 species during the day.

There is not a field meeting in December but we will have an indoor meeting to plan our future outings.



Spotted Redshank



Water Rail