

U3A Birdwatching Group

Visit to RSPB St Aidan's nature park Monday 14th April; report & photos by Andrew Lapworth

Black-necked Grebes are rare breeding birds in the UK and St Aidan's RSPB managed reserve near Leeds has a small but significant breeding population. As few as 50+ pairs breed in the UK and St Aidan's has perhaps a third of them. This was one of the reasons for 8 of us to go there (and a first time for the group) .

As we parked we heard the distinctive explosive song of a **Cetti's Warbler** in the bushes and while some of us were still parking, early arrivals found an obliging **Little Owl** sunning itself in full view on one of its favoured perches: a good start. After checking in with the very helpful RSPB volunteer we set off in the cool breeze on the c3 mile circuit of the large lowland site in the flood plain of the River Aire.

The wide and gravelly footpath network gives uninterrupted views over the fields and ditches and we soon added **Canada** and **Greylag Geese** and **Lapwings** to our list; newly arrived **Willow Warblers** sang from the hillside birches. A **Kestrel** gave great close views and **Marsh Harriers** showed distantly before we arrived in the main wetland complex, where a Cetti's Warbler seemed to sing every few hundred yards. We soon saw a whole variety of ducks: **Pochard** and **Tufted Ducks** in good numbers and **Mallard** and **Shovelers**; before long we heard the subliminal call of a booming **Bittern**. **Little Grebes** were soon heard and seen and then **Great-crested Grebes** in their finery, but no Black-necked Grebes. All the while we had the cacophony of the large **Black-headed Gull** breeding colony. We were getting hungry for lunch and at our picnic spot we added a couple of lonely **Redshanks** and a welcome flock of **Sand Martins**. We continued our walk, but still no Black-necked Grebes. Overhead we saw a rather distant **Red Kite**, and then in the foreground we counted quite a few **Grey Herons** on their nests on a distant wooded island.



At the very farthest point of our walk from the reserve we were checking out the ducks when Linda spotted and asked me to check out a bird hidden behind some reeds: a **Black-necked Grebe** at long last! We soon realised we had struck lucky and in fact there were 2-3 pairs of the grebes showing remarkable breeding behaviours as they paired-up and jostled with each other. They were fast movers and it was tricky to get them in the 'scopes for closer views but eventually we all had good views of them in their breeding finery. They're a little larger than a Little Grebe and from a distance look almost black (like a Coot); but in close up they have coppery red sides and a drooping yellow-fan behind their vivid cherry-red eyes; quite stunning! The lower mandible of their black bills is slightly upturned. Checking in the literature afterwards I learned that they often choose to breed in Black-headed Gull colonies.

A week before our visit I had done a recce and saw a lone long-staying Slavonian Grebe that had wintered at the site (they don't breed there). We didn't get to see this bird but making our way back to the reserve centre another rare duck was pointed out to us: a drake **Garganey** with its lovely white crescent over its eye. Garganey are rare and shy summer visitors to the UK and favour freshwater wet meadows and areas of flooded vegetation.

Back at the on-site cafe we enjoyed warming hot drinks and cakes and checked our list of about 45 birds seen or heard during the day.