

Marshside & Hesketh Out Marsh 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018

Thirteen members braved the knifing, icy wind near Southport as we visited these RSPB reserves. A clash of dates pushed this meeting out to the fifth Wednesday of the month, which allowed some of the avian winter visitors to gather in the area, thus providing a great backdrop to our field trip. We were barely in the car park, pulling on jackets, when a Hen Harrier was spotted hunting the salt marsh. The ghostly grey male, an appropriate plumage for Hallowe'en, allowed all members good views, though one carload unfortunately arrived just too late.

The sky was full of small skeins of Pink-footed Geese, going about their winter holidays, and any close survey of the marsh revealed similar numbers feeding among the reeds and long grass. The day was overcast, with the aforementioned lazy wind, and a blue sky/cloud line that was a couple of miles inland. A small number of Meadow Pipits flew overhead as we headed towards the Visitor Centre (otherwise the Sandgrounders' Hide). There we quickly added wildfowl to our list – Gadwall, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted and a single Shelduck, and more geese in the form of a couple of Canada and four Greylag. Waders were in evidence too, with Black-tailed Godwits and Lapwing scattered across the reserve. Birds at the rear of Sutton's marsh started to flush, and a raptor was picked out high above them, which came bulleting down through the flocks, executing a smart left turn before pitching on to a fence post – a female merlin, which all members were able to enjoy.

Leaving a rearguard in the VC, we moved on to the Junction Pool viewpoint, where Shoveler (showing at several angles) and Pintail (4 upending) were identified. As we walked along to Nel's Hide, a small flock of Golden Plover came inland over the road at medium level, an airborne Snipe was picked up from the hide and Redshank were dotted about Rimmer's Marsh. All five of Britain's usual Gull suspects were bathing in small numbers, making comparisons between them relatively easy. And our attention was drawn by a local birder to the herd of cattle at the south end of the reserve. Careful watching of the intermittent long grass revealed Cattle Egrets playing hide and seek as they followed first one then another of the small herd, feeding on disturbed invertebrae. We managed to see five out of the eight present..

As we left Nel's hide, Long-tailed Tits called from the bushes just above our heads. A couple of Linnets flew over the road junction, while back at Sandgrounders, our rearguard had only one bird to add, but what a bird – a Peregrine Falcon! We ate our lunch there enjoying typically erratic views of Little Grebe, before moving on.

Hesketh Out Marsh was our next stop, where large numbers of wildfowl, particularly Wigeon, had taken up residence. In amongst the thousands of European Wigeon was reputed to be a drake American Wigeon, for which we searched in vain. An arriving local birder picked out the bird quickly and was about to show it to our group when the whole flock flushed! Nevertheless we can console ourselves with having been in the presence of this scarce vagrant. We added a few farmland species to our list including half a dozen Skylark. The final notable bird was Whooper Swan, perhaps filtering down from Islay, with a herd feeding a little to the west, and family groups moving around the area. We totalled 45 species for our late autumn visit despite the wind.

Richard Howells