

BIRDING IN THE BUFF

Report of the members' weekend at Portland Observatory, September 18, 19 and 20, 2015 as seen through the eyes of Bob Lyle

Day 1, Friday

We left Upper Bucklebury aiming to meet up with fellow birders at Lodmore at 11.30. Traffic was light and we made good time and so we left the Dorchester route to take a more scenic route past Bovingdon Tank Tracks. Five minutes on, Debby announces that her online Bird Guide states there is a Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Dorchester. Thank you Debby, we've just left that road! 5 minutes later and "oh, it's not at Dorchester, it's at Winfrith". This time, it's welcome news as that is on our route. After a little while we are further informed it's at White Nothe. Great! But nobody knows where that is. Jean's satnav won't play ball but Debby's Google Maps comes up trumps, so we turn off about 7 miles before Weymouth onto a single track road, which becomes a dirt track, which eventually leads to a stunning cliff top, with magnificent views of Weymouth, Chesil Beach and Portland. The sun is out, neither wind nor cloud to spoil the breathtaking view. Officially at Ringstead Bay, all seems well with the world except we can't find this elusive little rarity, and there are no obvious birders to ask. So whilst the views are stunning, this is not what we came for so we head off once more to Lodmore, meeting Lesley et al, who know exactly where at White Nothe the B-bS has been sighted. So after a coffee stop and comfort break it's here we go again, back to White Nothe, where this time we do see other birders who give us precise details of where we should head for. We're so keen in our car to see it, we don't bother to put boots on so guess who got muddy feet! We didn't take waterproofs either ...

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper is a lovely plover-looking bird, very well camouflaged against the newly ploughed field, but active enough for us to watch it for a half-hour. This bird summers in the prairies of North America and flies south for the winter through the centre of the country down to the pampas of Argentina. According to my book on American Birds, the adults fly down the middle of the country but a few of the juveniles follow the east coast, which suggests our bird was a juvenile.

It was mentioned that a dark rain cloud was in sight about 10 miles away. "No need to worry" said Lesley (Michael Fish) Staves "the wind's blowing it away from us". We relax – almost no-one has a coat on and no waterproofs. We head back slowly stopping at a lovely stone barn with a thatched roof and see, scuttling around in the bushes, stonechat, blackcap, robin, meadow pipit and house sparrow. We head back towards darkening skies but soon a gentle pitter patter rain arrives. No matter, our Secretary has spoken, we are safe. But then, plip-plop becomes splat! splat! as we walk towards the cars where it is raining heavily. Soon the wind is up, we are running, binoculars and telescopes bouncing, arriving damp but not soaked. Pat and Greta, who didn't do the walk, beg to be allowed to shelter in our car until Lesley arrives. We should have set off 10 minutes earlier – isn't hindsight wonderful!

After a lunch stop in steamed up cars, we return once again to Lodmore, where we walked the western path, to rack up amongst many others, gadwall, teal, shoveller, kestrel, water rail (heard only), black-tailed godwit, snipe, green sandpiper, dunlin, Mediterranean gull, common tern, swallow, Cetti's warbler (heard). The highlight was bearded tit, seen mostly only for a few seconds as they whisked across the top of the reeds, although I did manage a one minute viewing of a male, tucked away in the reeds.

With five o'clock fast approaching we headed off to Portland Bird Observatory, our lodgings for the two nights, where after unloading, check-in and a quick cuppa we set off to seek the wryneck, which has been reported earlier in the day, in the fields to the north-west of the Observatory. It looked dry underfoot, so most of us without

boots, end up with muddy trainers, as it starts to rain. It would all be worth it if we see the elusive wryneck. Sadly, we don't, but do catch glimpses of peregrine, pied and yellow wagtails and many wheatear, which we went on to see everywhere.

Back at the Obs, the beer and wine are opened and rapidly disappeared before dinner! Jean had prepared a lasagne and veg, so whilst that's in the oven, we talk about our day, with the noise level rising as the drink gets drunk. Everyone has seconds, followed by Debby's fresh fruit salad, , and a third bottle of red is opened – not great preparation for a bright and early start at 7 am the next day! But a great way to finish off a good birding day.

Day 2 – Saturday

Reveille at 6.30 for a 7 am start. Our first stop was "The Pulpit Inn", about 100 yards away, meeting up with Keith Pritchard, an ex-club member who now lives near the Bill. The Pulpit is always a good spot to check out the tops of bushes and true to form, there are plenty of wheatear, whinchat, stonechat and goldfinch. We see peregrine, buzzard, kestrel overhead and hear raven nearby.

Moving slowly towards the lighthouse and MOD buildings, we see small flocks of goldfinch, siskin, linnets, meadow pipit and white wagtail. On the coastline there are shag, cormorant, gannet, common scoter and on our return past the quarry, we spot a little owl, sitting on the edge of its hole. It disappeared as soon as the cameras appeared. Jim and I thought we saw a nightingale briefly and indeed it was reported as seen by someone else later.

After breakfast, the hunt for the reported wryneck continues, without success, but we get stunning views (and photos) of hovering kestrel and buzzard. We see a flock of yellow wagtails pecking away in the grass around the heads and feet of grazing horses, but still no wryneck, so we move onto the cliffs on the east side of the Bill.

In the first quarry we see whitethroat and other passerines, and walking along the headland Jim cornered the market in wheatear photos (we maintain he "shot" every wheatear on the island this weekend). Rock pipit, herring gull, and great black-backed gull appear before we return to the Obs for lunch. Jean opted for a lazy afternoon, having started a good book and spent a few hours in full sun outside on the terrace. Others went to the field opposite to check out the birds in the sunflowers and closed nets, seeing goldcrest, sedge warbler and spotted flycatcher amongst the passerines.

We adjourned to a local restaurant with Keith joining us for our evening meal, with more red wine being consumed by certain (nameless) members, before retiring early to bed. We had been blessed with lots to spot and warm, sunny weather but still no wryneck. Perhaps the bird has flown?

Day 3 – Sunday

Reveille at 6.30 for 7 am start, where a quick, long distance look at the quarry yielded the little owl for those who had not seen it previously. At the Pulpit, we again saw whinchat, meadow pipit, stonechat, wheatear, long tailed tits. Moving over to the west cliffs we find raven, fulmar, shag, oystercatcher, cormorant and gannet off the Bill. The little owl was still at the quarry as we passed on our return for breakfast. Jan produced a superb breakfast/brunch single-handed, comprising eggs, bacon, sausage, black pudding, tomato, mushroom, beans, potato cakes, followed by toast and home-made jam. The other birders looked on rather enviously.

Our next port of call on the return home was at Ferry Bridge where we found ringed plover, sandwich terns, turnstone and bar-tailed godwit. WE called in to the RSPB Centre at Radipole, where we had coffee and cake. Much to our surprise, the

long-staying hooded merganser was still resident and many photos were taken. As well as the usual ducks, we saw black-tailed godwit and snipe near the centre, and later great black-backed gull, kingfisher, and heard Cetti's, but the best bird was a close up view of a bearded tit, perched on a reed close by, who stayed long enough for good photos. Finally, a quick call at Lodmore again, yielding nothing new, but an increased number of Mediterranean gulls.

A great birding weekend with 80 odd species, helped by good weather and great company.

It seemed to me that the women had eyes like hawks. I would point out a long distant bird, pronouncing e.g. whinchat, (expecting to be 90% accurate). A millisecond later, one of the ladies will say "no, it's a 2nd cy., third moult, recently toiletted lesser whitethroat". So now I am wondering why I carry a heavy telescope (ending up with a dented, aching shoulder) good binoculars (sore neck) and camera round my waist (sore back) when all I need when I see a speck on the horizon is a woman able to name it accurately first time. Why carry the weight around? Or, I could even stay at home and read the write up in Field Views. But there's nothing quite like seeing birds for yourself, increasing your knowledge and benefiting from help from more experienced (and sharper eyed) birders and all with convivial company. So do join us on our field trips, whether a day out or a weekend – you'll enjoy it, I promise.

Many thanks to Lesley for organising it.