

# Wilmslow Guild **BIRDWATCHING** *Group*

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## NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2018

### TONIGHT'S MEETING (Friday 19th October)

Tonight we welcome the return of Mike Roberts with a talk entitled "Plains, Cranes and Autovians".

Mike currently works as the Trees and Woodlands Officer with St Helens Council and has worked within the environment for many years, including with the Mersey Valley back in the Eighties. Through all of that time he has been a wildlife photographer and has photographed a wide range of wildlife especially birds. He says that he has been lucky to travel to many places, including Nepal, India, Costa Rica, Uganda, and Canada but in recent years has concentrated his efforts in Spain. Mike has visited us on several previous occasions, the last being in November 2015.

Please join me in welcoming Mike for what I am sure will be a very entertaining evening.

### FIELD TRIPS

Our first coach trip is this weekend on Sunday 21st October to Spurn nature reserve on the Yorkshire coast, departing from the Guild at 7:30am.

Over the years Spurn has proved to be a very successful destination for our first trip because this reserve can be exceptionally good at this time of year - just about anything can turn up here while migration is in full swing. A good variety of seabirds, waders and wildfowl can be found on the coast and pools, while migrating passerines can be found on the extensive scrub and bush area. There are toilets and a café available on site.

The next coach trip after that is on Sunday 25th November to Attenborough reserve near Nottingham, departing from the Guild at 8am.

Book your seat for both trips at the desk.

## CAR TRIP TO WOOLSTON EYES – 7th JUNE 2018

Nine members met up at the barrier to the Woolston Eyes reserve waiting for the warden to let us in. The summer heatwave was in full swing so we had a lovely sunny and warm day for our visit. After crossing the bridge over the old River Mersey (now an ox-bow lake) the warden pointed out several of the dragonfly species found on the reserve.

As we crossed the field towards the first hide a Whitethroat was singing from its perch on a bush. There was a good variety of wildfowl on the reserve including Mallard, Teal, Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Gadwall, Pochard, Shelduck, Greylag Geese, and Canada Geese. The Black-headed Gull colony provided a raucous background, and we also had Lapwing, Coot, Moorhen, Great Crested Grebe, and Little Grebe present.



But what we were really here for was the breeding colony of Black-necked Grebes. The warden informed us that the grebes had experienced a successful breeding season so far, with several pairs hatching chicks, thanks to the good weather. Initially we just had distant views of the grebes and their chicks but best views were obtained when we moved round to the Warrington Rotary hide. Here, an adult Black-necked Grebe was feeding 2 chicks close-in in front of the hide giving us really good 'scope views of this delightful bird.



We concluded our visit here early afternoon so we decided to use the rest of the day to visit another local reserve, Risley Moss, only a few miles distant on the other side of the M6 motorway. The main attraction here is the Hobby, which visits during the summer months to hunt the abundant dragonflies. We had quite a while to wait but 1 bird eventually showed up and gave quite a spectacular display as it swooped across the reserve in pursuit of its prey.

A good end to a good day's birding.

**ROBERT D**

## **BIRDING FROM LA MANGA (SPAIN) – APRIL 2018**

Our latest trip took us to another new destination, La Manga, on the south east coast of the Spanish mainland. This essentially holiday resort is located near the ancient Moorish city of Murcia and near to Roman Cartagena, once reportedly the home of Hannibal and now the base of the Spanish Mediterranean fleet.

The area has lots of fantastic beaches, a famous golf course, and many interesting buildings and history, but it also has a number of quality nature reserves, particularly on or near to the coast. So with the migration season in full swing, we had high hopes of great birding too. We were not to be disappointed – recording 96 species in our two week stay.

La Manga itself (English translation “sleeve”) is a curious narrow strip of land 22 kilometres long and only 50 yards wide at its narrowest. It largely separates a vast salt water lagoon called the Mar Menor (minor sea) from the Mediterranean. This lagoon is reportedly the largest salt water lake in Europe – over 700 km<sup>2</sup>.

Very few birds were to be seen on the lagoon itself, apart from ubiquitous Yellow-legged gulls and hunting swifts (mainly Pallid and a few Common). But the gardens of four rows of posh villas (and intervening plots of waste-land) between our hotel and the lagoon beach proved a surprising magnet for small birds. Here we saw the usual Blackbirds fighting for territory, Spotless Starlings bathing in villa pools, Chiffchaffs, noisy Monk Parakeets, lots of Collared Doves and Woodpigeons, and House Sparrows. Yes, House Sparrows, not Spanish Sparrows. Those are to be found further inland apparently.

Even more surprising towards the end of our stay was the arrival of a male Iberian Pied Flycatcher, which liked to use wire railings for its perches. The Spanish version differs slightly from our UK species – having more white on its forehead and wings.

Also seen at our hotel were a pair of Linnets in full breeding plumage feeding in the waste ground, a Whinchat, a Sardinian warbler, a Wheatear which perched on a roof, Greenfinches constantly calling, a passing Kestrel, and a Hobby. The latter floated past our balcony at a slightly lower level so that we had a good view of its upper side.



Near the start of the La Manga strip were old salt flats (a common feature of the area). Now largely unused, many were filled with water too deep for most birds. But not for a few Black-winged Stilts, Avocets, Shelducks, Little Egrets, and the Greater Flamingo. Here is an image of 4 adult Flamingos having a nap, but showing off their lovely pink legs and wing flashes (left).

Also at the start of the strip there was a small peninsular - the Cabo de Palos - surmounted by an enormous lighthouse. This almost enclosed area is now a wildlife reserve called the Islas Hormigas.

As to the birds, a few visits to this area produced our first Barn Swallows, a flock of Spotless Starlings, a Kestrel, a White Wagtail, a single European Robin, and some interesting warblers. Here we tracked down only my second ever sighting of a Western Bonelli's Warbler (like a Willow Warbler but more greenish and with a pure white breast), as well as Chiffchaffs and several Sardinian Warblers.

The small birds were too active to get any decent photos. So I had to be content with this image of a Collared Dove posing for me, unusually, on a cactus (below).



The area at the end of the La Manga strip (where it descends into mud flats and tiny rocky islands) proved great for nesting gulls, terns (mostly Sandwich and a few Common), waders, and birds liking the scrub behind the shoreline. Here we saw also, for only my second time, a few Slender-billed Gulls, this time in breeding plumage with lovely pink tinged breasts, a most unusual sight in a gull. The area is apparently one of the few breeding areas in the Mediterranean for this relatively scarce species.

Other birds present were 6 Grey Herons (which landed briefly on a sandbank and then took off again), a single female Curlew (with a very long bill), a couple of Whimbrels, a group of Redshank, the odd Spotted Redshank and an amusing Greenshank. The latter was extremely active rushing about frenetically in quite deep water, apparently chasing small fish.



The scrub areas behind the shoreline also proved rewarding. Whinchats flew from the top of one spindly bush to another, Iberian Chiffchaffs and the odd Willow Warbler hunted insects in the bushes, and a Spectacled Warbler suddenly appeared on the top of one bush (a seemingly miniaturised version of our Whitethroat). Then a Subalpine Warbler conveniently flew into a nearby bush (only the second time I have seen one of these) and I got this close-up (right). Note the distinctive orange eye and the white moustache.

A handsome male Common Redstart flew on to a branch of a tree, a pair of Hoopoes flew across and a noisy group of Monk Parakeets clambered about in a palm tree overhead. One pair was particularly lovey-dovey, preening each other in the photo below.



For a birder, another great place to visit in the area is the Calbanque regional park. Boasting some of the best beaches in the south of Spain (almost deserted at this time of year) it is a scrubby wilderness, dotted with trees, full of wild flowers, clumps of bamboo, and contains some disused Salinas. It is surrounded by tall hills suitable one would have thought for raptors.

But no raptors! Our best sighting here was a Green Woodpecker, though not surprising really, given the number of ants we came across. From down near the beaches, we heard it calling continuously. Finally we spotted it, on a rock at the top of one of the hills and silhouetted against the skyline. With a telescope you could clearly

make out the red crown, black eye cover, and the yellow rump. As we watched it began to preen.

Also spotted here were two Woodchat Shrikes, a pair of Greenfinches, Fan-tailed Warblers, and a number of larks. As well as the usual Crested Lark, here we saw a Thekla Lark, with its crest lowered.

Two hides overlooking the salinas were somewhat disappointing – too much water again. But we did add a pair of Audouin Gulls, several Ringed Plovers, a Cormorant, and a single Kentish Plover to our list.

The park has other wildlife too. A tall hare scurried away through the scrub, the white showing well on its long ears. Then this lizard appeared (right). The pretty Spiny-footed (aka Spanish Fringe-toed) Lizard is apparently indigenous to Iberia and North Africa and is reportedly one of the most agile of its species – gone in a flash.



The villages along the western edge of the Mar Menor also provided some good birding. Here is a pair of ungainly Black-winged Stilts foraging in the stagnant marshes of Los Narejos (below right).



In the harbour area at Los Urrutias we watched a Grey Plover and this pair of Wood Sandpipers (above left) - no doubt refuelling on migration from Africa to the Arctic.

South of Los Alcajares in the scrub area opposite an abandoned military zone we watched a splendid male Stonechat and a Red-legged Partridge which flew past at speed. And on the road back to La Manga a grey male Marsh Harrier emerged from some reeds to quarter the field next to our car.

However, the best birding experience of our whole trip was, undoubtedly, two visits to different parts of the El Hondo reserve, accompanied by local guide, Graham Critchell. This huge reserve (2387 hectares) is located an hour and a quarter north up the motorway from La Manga towards Alicante. It is particularly known as being one of the very few places in Europe to see Marbled Ducks (aka Marbled Teal) in the wild (a globally threatened species) and for its successful breeding program for the Red-knobbed Coot (a species in Europe restricted to southernmost Spain).

Here is my shot of one of the ducks at the reserve – which I have only previously seen in a zoo (below right).



And here is one of the Coots (with a band round its neck to denote one of the “starter” birds). Note the two weird red knobs on its head above the white frontal shield, and the blue bill (above left). A Common Eurasian Coot is swimming in the foreground for comparison. I was told that the two species get on well together. But I also read that the Red-knobbed Coot is even more aggressive than its cousin – even towards its own young, few of which are normally expected to survive to adulthood.

Apart from these two lifers, our greatest treat was a flock of 200 or more resident Collared Pratincoles (a summer breeder/visitor) lazing on a small island in the reserve. Conveniently one flew across the water to stand by the shrubs in front of the hide. Here is the image I took (right).



Only the third time I have ever seen one and never so close. Note the red at the base of the bill and the neat black throat-surround (which is lost in the winter). As readers will know, this species is classified as a wader though its primary source of food is catching insects on the wing. We also watched several in flight, showing long wings and tail streamers and behaving very agilely in the air like a lake Tern or Swallow.

Another treat was a pair of Purple Swamphens (Europe’s largest Rail) foraging on the edge of the reeds, accompanied by two very tiny chicks. Here one of the parents broke cover for my camera (below right).



Another good sighting was this pair of Glossy Ibis foraging in the cut reed bed (above left).

Other birds at the reserve that we added to our growing list of sightings included my second only close view of a Moustached Warbler displaying on top of the reeds in front of a hide, a group of 6 Black-necked Grebes with breeding ear-tufts, Little Grebes, Great crested Grebes, Moorhens, a Purple Heron, a Squacco Heron, several Whiskered Terns in flight, one Gull-billed Tern, White-headed Ducks, a male Garganey, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Northern Shovellers, Teal, Mallards, groups of Curlew Sandpipers and Black-tailed Godwits, a group of Little Stints, Dunlins, Ruffs, a brilliantly coloured Yellow Wagtail, two Iberian Grey Shrike, a pair of Peregrine Falcons sitting in a tree, one Booted Eagle, and briefly a Common Cuckoo.

After the reserve Graham took us to another reserve with a hide closer to the coast – Santa Pola and thence to a large pond at his local golf course, La Finca. En route and at the reserve we added Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls and Serin to our list. We also saw a pair of Slender-billed Gulls facing up to each other close, and stretching up their unusually long necks and long beaks in what seemed to be a courtship display.

At the golf course, we watched a huge colony of Cattle Egrets in full breeding plumage in a thick reed bed (along with some nesting Glossy Ibis), a small charm of Goldfinches, a Great Tit singing away, a pair of Black-necked Grebes doing a courtship ritual, several flocks of Jackdaws, and finally a White Stork which flew overhead, feet outstretched.

For more photos and the full commentary on this trip please visit Peter's Page on the Group website at <http://wgbwcopy.wikidot.com/peter-s-page>.

**PETER M  
May 2018**

### **CAWOS INDOOR MEETINGS 2018 – 2019**

All meetings are held in the hall at St Vincent's Roman Catholic Church, Tatton Street, Knutsford, WA16 6HR on the first Friday of the month, **unless otherwise stated - please check the programme**. There is a large and free car park off Tatton Street close to the hall.

An entrance fee of £2.00 to members and £4.00 for non-members will be charged at all meetings except the AGM when there will be free admission. A coffee break is taken halfway through the evening. The doors open at 7:30pm for a 7:45pm start.

Details of the next meeting are as follows –

## **2nd November 2018**

### **'SCILLY PELAGIC MAGIC' by Jim Almond**

Jim is now officially a 'veteran' of pelagic trips from St Mary's on the Isle of Scilly! With 44 trips under his belt (33 of them during the August seabird passage season!) he has plenty of images and stories to tell from his time on MC Sapphire. A heavy sea in a small boat is not to everyone's liking so sit back, relax and enjoy. From the ever present Gulls, Fulmars and Gannets, the interest notches up a gear with Skuas, Petrels and Shearwaters. It's not just about the birds either with Dolphins and Sunfish on offer, plus some of the Blue Sharks landed for tagging studies. Find out how the birds are attracted, the magic of 'chum' (without the smell) and some of his most exhilarating birding moments ever, including an epic encounter with a Fea's Petrel.

### **CHRISTMAS LUNCH REMINDER**

This year's Christmas meal will be at the Rope and Anchor, Paddock Lane, Dunham Massey on the 15th December for 12:30pm following the morning car trip to Pennington Flash [apparently our favourite venue at Pennington Flash, The Raven, is closing down!].

The cost is £23.00 for 2 courses or £28.00 for 3 courses

It is a £15.00 deposit per person which is due to be paid at the October meeting with final full payments being due at the meeting on the 23rd November.

Copies of the menu will be available at Friday's meeting.

**ANNETTE R**

### **NEXT MONTH'S MEETING**

Our next indoor meeting is on Friday 23rd November at 7:30pm when our speaker will be Paul Hobson with a talk entitled "Africa – Namibia, Rwanda, Kenya & South Africa".

Hope to see you all then.

### **NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS**

Still required – your articles for the newsletter. Tell us all about that birding holiday of a lifetime or that unusual visitor to your garden bird table.

Deadline is the Friday before the meeting.

