

U3A BIRDWATCHING APRIL 2024 FOXGLOVE COVERT & BOLTON-ON-SWALE & SCORTON NORTH LAKES: REPORT BY ANDREW LAPWORTH

Gentle April showers? No, Monday 15th had gale force winds and when the group met outside the Bowes Museum it was already raining; en route to Richmond the car temperature gauge warned it was C3. It did not bode well.

Chris had expertly planned and organised our visit to Foxglove Covert nature reserve on the edge of Catterick Garrison. Once through the security barriers at the gates we drove in convoy through the camp; we reassembled on the parade ground but had to move on quickly because there was...a parade. Eventually we parked, and booted up and had a welcome talk from the reserve manager Karl, clearly very proud of this wonderful reserve of diverse habitats: lakes, pine woods, mixed woods, heaths and bogs and ponds, all connected by boardwalks (rendering our wellies and boots largely unnecessary). Rain? No, it held off most of the day and we had blue skies but it was extremely windy, which makes birdwatching tricky: birds stay low & out of sight and we get cold and our eyes water.

From the first hide over the lake we had nice views of a pair of Bullfinches; the male's bright pink chest really standing out in the sunshine. All around us Willow Warblers were in song; Chiffchaffs were there too. Two Little Grebes on the lake showed well. In their well-equipped Field Centre, with respite from the cold wind, we watched the seed feeders which were covered in Lesser Redpolls, until a Sparrowhawk blasted through and all the birds temporarily went to cover. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was also seen. Outside again we found a bush with more Lesser Redpolls, the males displaying their gorgeous pink breasts; for some of us these were the best ever views of these little streaky finches; a male Siskin looked smart too. From the hide overlooking the gorse-covered heathland area we saw feral geese and watched a hovering Kestrel until it was chased off by 2 Jackdaws; later a Buzzard floated overhead. Foxglove Covert is a fantastic place for nature, and well worth the rigmarole of entry for a visit; there is much to see, including interesting plants and insects, especially dragonflies.

Most of us reconvened at the excellent Ellerton Lakeside Cafe for lunch and coffees and cakes. Chris then took us to YWT's Bolton-on-Swale lakes; before entering the little hide to escape the wind we had brief views of Tree Sparrows, and Reed Buntings along a hedge; a couple of us were startled to get an all too brief view of a Common Redstart. From the hide we saw large numbers of Sand Martins swooping low across the lake surface, over Tufted Ducks and a single Great-Crested Grebe. Jim found a perched female Kestrel; Charlotte pointed out a Reed Bunting feeding at the water's edge. Island trees were full of roosting Cormorants (+ a single Little Egret). Finally a large flock of Curlews settled obligingly on the opposite bank so we could 'scope them and compare the shorter-billed males from the longer-billed females.

Thanks to Chris for planning and organising a memorable day and to Roger for the bird list.

Andrew



Male Siskin

