

Wildlife at Pickerings Pasture ~ Winter 2009-10

Contributed by Rob C (photos Carol C)
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December to February

By the first week in December large numbers of blackbirds (around twenty eight and mainly males) and at least seven song thrushes were out feeding on the pastures. These were almost certainly visitors from Scandinavia. At the same time a mistle thrush was heard singing, proclaiming his territory! A massive flock of 150 finches were frequenting the meadow by the information centre.

Chaffinch

On a high tide, in early December, good numbers of waders were using the marsh to roost. Small numbers of duck continued to use the scrape pool but, unfortunately, part of the screen by the bird hide came down in the wind and it was difficult to get into a position behind the screens to see the birds on the pool, without flushing them. In addition, during this period, trees and shrubs from the compartment in front of the screens were cut down or trimmed, causing a great deal of disturbance. The massive clearance gave the birds a better view of the approach by humans, thus causing the birds to take flight. Out on the marsh 1750 Canada geese and a few shelducks were feeding. On one occasion a flight of 130 pink-footed geese came over but did not stop, as they headed towards Frodsham Hill.

Just before the freezing weather started, a kingfisher and a little egret were regularly on the scrape pool, though they disappeared as soon as the pool froze over; no doubt onto the estuary to feed from the salt water, which remained clear of ice. With the very cold spell towards the end of December, larger numbers of birds were using the feeders by the Centre and the hide. The ranger had also scattered food in the cornfield area and this was also well used. On Christmas Eve, small numbers of redwings and a fieldfare had joined the mistle thrush, song thrushes and numerous blackbirds that were trying to find food in the frozen ground. Large numbers of gulls were gathering, most afternoons, on the sand banks, prior to their departure to the Mersey mouth, to roost out the night. An adult Mediterranean gull was found on Boxing Day.

Gulls on the sandbank

The hard frosts continued well into the New Year, with night temperatures dropping to minus 6°C, on at least one occasion. Redwings and a few fieldfares were still attempting to find food from the frozen pastures and were joined by at least nine song thrushes and over twenty blackbirds. By this time, with the weather being so cold, the birds were emptying the feeders on a daily basis. Counts were made of over one hundred and fifty birds: consisting of eighty greenfinches, thirty chaffinches and twenty five goldfinches. These were joined by the usual tit species, including at least eight long-tailed tits. House sparrows had found the feeders by the Ranger's cabin and up to fifteen were seen on several occasions.

Grey squirrel

Grey squirrels were again pilfering the bird food by the hide and rabbits had damaged a lot of the trees; nibbling at the

bark at the base of the trees.

On the 2nd January a high tide flooded the marsh and filled up the scrape pool, but unfortunately it froze over again, on the same night. Feeding on the weed seeds, washed onto the scrape, were a reed bunting and several meadow pipits. A male pheasant was walking about looking for food. In one of the wooded compartments, three bullfinches have been seen.

Male pheasant

A flock of twenty six pink-footed geese almost landed on the marsh but were flushed by a low flying aeroplane. The Canada goose flock has again increased, with regular counts of around 1,450. The snow fall, early in the New Year, remained for over a week, with the night frosts, and a pair of bramblings was seen, at the feeding station by the bird hide. The female was seen on several occasions.

By the 10th January, huge numbers of birds were at the feeders, including a flock of thirty collared doves. Forty three fieldfares were feeding on the frozen meadows, with eight lapwings, which, whilst common on the marsh and sandbanks, are really unusual on the pastures. Compared to before the snowfall, the numbers of blackbirds and song thrushes were quite low. Several very weak redwings were noted trying to feed on some exposed ground under the bushes and one was found dead towards the white bridge. Other birds also suffered from the severe weather: several redshanks were seen in a weak condition and one of them was knocked into the water by a great black-backed gull and swallowed whole. Also, in this period, a woodcock was seen flying about the pastures by the Ranger; no doubt flushed by someone elsewhere in the area. There was another light fall of snow, on the 13th January, before the thaw slowly set in, although the scrape pool remained frozen over.

On the 16th January, three male and three female gadwalls were found on a pool on the marsh. By now the scrape pool was clear of ice and about thirty mallards and twelve teals were about. The kingfisher was back again and seen regularly from the hide through to the month's end. On the 26th January, a stoat was observed playing around the scrape pool, much to the annoyance of the few mallards and teal still using the pool.

In early February, a very high tide covered the marsh and scrape pool and consequently large numbers of waders roosted and fed on the marsh, including 1200 lapwings, 650 golden plovers and a flock of about 320 dunlins. By the 6th February three reed buntings, at least five pied wagtails and several stock doves were feeding around the edge of the scrape pool. The kingfisher entertained the visitors, while catching several shrimps. One hundred and fifty pink-footed geese flew North, attracting us with their usual light "wink-wink" call, unlike their raucous Canadian cousins.

Reed bunting

On the 12th February a work party from the BTCV repaired the hide screen and cut down the small reed bed to encourage better growth during the coming spring. The following day mallard, teal and Canada geese were back on the scrape and a mute swan was on the river. Eight hundred lapwings were on the marsh and three male ruffs were a lovely surprise. While we were there, a shelduck arrived on the pool, joining a lone black-headed gull. Five reed buntings were joined by the pied wagtails, feeding around the scrape pool before being scared off by the rabbits.

On the 23rd February, Friends of Pickerings Pasture members cut back branches and filled in gaps in the screen and hedges by bird hide. An adult Mediterranean gull was amongst the many black-headed gulls on the river. Two snipe were present, although difficult to see, in the area of cut reeds. The stoat attacked the kingfisher, by leaping up at the bird which was perched in the reeds. The kingfisher narrowly escaped. The stoat fell into the pool. It emerged wet and bedraggled; looking extremely annoyed before shaking the water from itself and leaving the scene. Within minutes the kingfisher was back on its perch.

On the 26th, another unusual gull put in an appearance: an adult yellow-legged gull was found on the sand banks. On the scrape pool, a flock of thirty-one teals were noted, while two stock doves and fifteen linnets fed around the pool edge. Back near the car park , four siskins were feeding with the goldfinch flock, in the alder trees.

Fieldfares & Shelduck