

The birding year at Dinton Pastures, Lavell's Lake & Lea Farm GP

January - March

Since 2002 more than one **Bittern** has wintered at two lakes on Dinton Pastures - Lavell's Lake and White Swan Lake (WSL), with WSL eclipsing Lavell's since 2005, with **3 to 4 birds** visiting in 3 out of the last 5 years, implying our numbers are increasing steadily.

Quite simply, the best time for **Bittern** is at dusk, with **1 to 4 birds** coming to roost at dusk on WSL's Northern Phragmites reed bed and **1 to 2 birds** at Lavell's main island. At Lavell's you can simply take a 5 minute stroll from the car park along the tarmac track, which takes you directly to Bittern Hide.

Alternatively, to view WSL's Phragmites reed bed, you need to get to the North East fishing swim nearest to the wooden bridge between Black Swan Lake (BSL) & WSL, at the junction of Middle Marsh.

To get there from Lavell's car park is a 20 minute steady walk, anti clockwise around BSL, accessed via the sailing club. Walk approximately 600 yards with BSL on your left, as you turn right into a narrow bay you will notice a wooden bridge crossing to WSL, the swim is ahead to your left 50 yards.

A much shorter and quicker route involves parking in the layby nearest to Sandford Mill, then walking into Sandford anti clockwise with lake on left and back water on right. Follow path round and take right in Heron's Water, before reaching Sandford's new hide. Carry on ahead and take the path split left, continue for 120 yards look West to North West across the lake at the reed face. Views are a little distant, but up to **4 birds** can roost here, so are nearly guaranteed and they often stay until late March.

Lavell's has become fantastic for **Water Rail** under our feeders, but occur in ditches and reedy gullies anywhere on the park. They are mostly very secretive, but **3-5** winter on Lavell's, **2-3** WSL, **1-2** Middle Marsh, 1-2 along the Loddon, 1-2 Sandford, 1-2 BSL main island, probably at Mungell's Corner and other unwatched pools, so I would imagine our true wintering population is at least 16-18 birds.

The first week of the month, get there early and check BSL, Sandford, Lavell's and along Loddon for **Smew** and **Goosander**, both are shy and are often morning birds only, keep looking up as Goosander do fly just fly over. **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Bewick's Swan**, **Slavonian Grebe** and **Long-tailed Duck** are mythical rarities from the eighties, so far unrepeated.

Little Egrets are around Lavell's and Lea Farm GP, but get into surrounding ditches and the balancing pool which is viewed from the North East corner of the car park field, they are also seen most evenings flying North to roost at Land's End GP. **Little Grebe** tend to only winter at DP, highest numbers are usually Lavell's, then Sandford & Lea Farm GP, but have also gathered balancing pool

The feeding station attracts the three common tits, **Greenfinch**, **Goldfinch**, **Chaffinch**, a few **Siskin**, the odd **Lesser Redpoll** and sometimes **Brambling** too, best time is March in to April. Not forgetting **Bullfinch** near the benches, 6 or more is not uncommon, but look anywhere Blackthorn is established.

Dusk at Bittern Hide, also offers a small **Starling** roost and can bring 1-2 **Sparrowhawk**, which often try to take starlings, or birds on the feeders quite near dark, but do drop in throughout the day.

A pair of **Barn Owls** usually spends winter roosting in the Lavell's nest box, peering out at the doorway prior to dark. The last species to look for in near darkness is **Woodcock**, they can be sometimes be seen briefly as they flying fast and generally East over Jerry's & John's benches, viewed from the tarmac path half way toward the hide - looking West.

Peregrine have also been seen in the area at dusk too, they occur with fluctuating frequency, despite them breeding in Reading & Bracknell. Over Lavell's and Lea Farm, they can be seen any time of day, dive bombing Lapwing and gulls loafing on Lea Farm lake edge.

In the early 1980s, both partridges used to be resident in the fields that are now Lea Farm landfill, but now we are down to random visits of only **Red-legged Partridge**, always around Lavells and most recently near the aviation museum. March to early April would seem the likeliest time.

The odd **Pintail** is possible on any of the lakes, but most sightings come from Sandford, Lavells or Lea Farm and local flooding can bring them into the area. The same can be said of **Mandarin** early in the year. **Teal** favour Lavells all winter, but Lea Farm has recently eclipsed maximum counts, with over **110** in 2008, **200+** in 2009 and **262** in 2010. Typical numbers of **150 to 300 Wigeon** concentrate on BSL, or Lea Farm when sailing is on, but now also head further on to Hurst Green GP.

Goldeneye often gather together on BSL at sunset and give a good chance to get an accurate count, the maximum numbers have risen quite sharply since 2002, 20+ becoming typical in March, during sailing they take refuge on Sandford Lake, where they are even easier to count, the record being **43/10th Jan 2003**.

Gadwall are found on about every lake, prefer WSL and BSL, where **150-200+** is normal, but often spread 50-70 on Sandford, Lavells & Lea Farm GP, where 1-3 pairs breed. **Pochard** and **Tufted Duck** like BSL and move to Sandford during sailing, **40-100 Pochard** and **160-250 Tufted** are normal counts and it is worth checking all the lakes for **Red Crested Pochard**, **Scaup** and **Ruddy Duck**.

Large raptors never used to feature much prior to 1999, but these days **Red Kite** and **Common Buzzard** are here in numbers. **Sparrowhawk** patrol the reed beds at dusk and can be seen anywhere over DP, **Kestrels** are more local, mostly keeping to the grassier areas, such as Mortimer's Meadow and Lea Farm landfill.

The tip at Lea Farm once attracted quite a good number of gulls, but even though the numbers are not huge, we still get the occasional **Yellow Legged Gull**. If you want any chance of **Mediterranean Gull**, it is important to check through the **1000-3000 Black-headed Gulls**, that visit BSL, **30-50 Common Gull**, get on the lake and just 1 or 2 **Great Black-backed Gulls** occur in February.

If it is **Kingfisher** you are after, either keep to the Loddon, or wait it out at either hide, but I would say Teal end gets the most daily visits. **Tawny Owl** is resident and you only have to visit an hour before the any daylight hits the sky and you will hear them, seeing them is a lot trickier. **Little Owl** is rare and not resident on DP, again a pre dawn walk will up the chances of hearing one, best spot is probably near Bader Way, or Lavells car park.

Look for finch and tit flocks along the Loddon, **Siskin** and **Lesser Redpoll** love the Alders, walk from WSL to Lea Farm, as this stretch is best for **Treecreeper**, **Goldcrest**, the occasional **Nuthatch**, **Bullfinch**, lots of **Long-tailed Tits** and **Coal Tit** from Sandford Copse to the green bridge, **Mistle Thrush** can often be seen just here too and **Green & Great Spotted Woodpeckers** are always been seen along this stretch, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** is now almost extinct and despite some claims, do not visit the feeders. In recent years **Ring-necked Parakeet** have been seen along the Loddon near Sandford Copse too.

Winter thrushes can fly over anywhere, the landfill East and North East of Lea Farm GP, does get small flocks of **Redwing** and **Fieldfare**, with low numbers roosting on Lavells main island and sometimes on BSL islands. Small flocks of **Linnet** do like the NE corner of the lake edge as do **Meadow Pipit** and **Skylark**, which also hosts several hundred **Lapwings** and with colder weather numbers grow further, occasionally bringing small flocks of **Golden Plover**. **Green Sandpipers** are now very uncommon and generally prefer Lea Farm GP, but do still visit both scrapes.

Snipe do like Tern Scrape reed bed, numbers vary, often 1-2, 3-6 quite regularly, **8-15** is a good count, 20+ excellent, but cold weather snaps have brought flocks of **30-40**, **43** being the record for Lavells. Winter 2009/2010 brought record numbers on Lea Farm GP landfill and lake edge, **50-100** in snowy conditions. **Jack Snipe** do turn up when conditions are right, but March is the best month to find a passage bird hiding in the short cut reed.

Lea Farm takes a lot of the attention in March, with 1-2 **Shelduck** and 1-6 **Redshank** turning up in February, but historically mid February to March has also produced rare wildfowl, **Red-breasted Merganser, Brent, Bean and Pink-footed Goose, Common Scoter** and **White-fronted Geese** have all been seen on, or flying over BSL - All but the last two species have not been seen since the eighties.

Little-ringed Plover, Wheatear & Sand Martin, all arrive early to mid March, with **Chiffchaff** turning up all over DP from around 15th.

Despite the first wave of arrivals, it often goes quiet before any new summer migrants arrive, or pass through, so keep checking the wildfowl, gulls and if there are any, the finch flocks too, there could be a **Mealy Redpoll** with the Siskins, or a **Firecrest** could be hiding amongst the **Long-tailed Tits**.

Late March can bring early **Willow Warbler, House Martin, Swallow, Common Tern** and **Sedge Warbler**. If you check the dense hedgerows you might find a **Black Redstart**. **Ringed Plover** can pass through in March, keep an eye on Lea Farm GP.

Water Pipit used to occur along the lake edges of White & Black Swan and Mortimer's Meadow, but it would appear they are too overgrown now, so Lea Farm GP seems the most likely place for them to occur, though they haven't so far. **Rock Pipit** could still occur here too.

April to June

April is the month that always witnesses **100+** species, you can watch all the winter species leave and most of the summer species arrive and get to see passing ones too.

First week April . **Swallow, House Martin** and **Willow Warbler** arrive, **Redstart & Water Pipit** pass through, whilst **Lesser Redpoll, Siskin, Redwing & Fieldfare** depart.

Second week - **5-7 Nightingale** sing at Middle Marsh, the WSL/BSL & Sandford/BSL hedgerows, **Whitethroat, Reed & Sedge Warbler** arrive, **Yellow Wagtail, Marsh Harrier, Osprey, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper** pass through, whilst **Teal, Shoveler, Pochard, Wigeon & Goldeneye** depart.

Third week . **Garden Warbler, Cuckoo, Common Tern, Lesser Whitethroat, Swift & Hobby** arrive, the last **Brambling, Snipe** and **Meadow Pipit** leave.

Fourth week . **Black Tern, Garganey, Arctic Tern, Black-tailed Godwit & Greenshank, with Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Curlew, Whinchat & Grasshopper Warbler**, can all pass through.

May can be an anti-climax, but early the first week of the month has brought various good waders, excellent **Arctic Tern** and **Little Gull** passage and very good **Hobby** numbers. Previous Mays have brought **Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Curlew, Spotted Redshank & Ruff**, the best waders are often very short stay, or just fly over, so it is important to arrive early.

By June, about everything is settling down to breed, the more scarce resident ducks like **Gadwall** and **Mandarin** often appear with young mid month. June is not good for passage, so if you do see a **Common Sandpiper, Black Tern, Garganey, Common Scoter**, then it is a rare month to see one. The first real migrants are returning **Green Sandpipers**, which usually turn up 2nd to 3rd week.

July to September

July usually brings **2-5 Common Sandpipers** and **1-3 Green Sandpipers** and the numbers of both fluctuate until early September, the odd single of both can linger if conditions are right and it is always worth keeping an eye out for **Wood Sandpiper**. **Raven** are increasing quickly in the county, so always be on the lookout, they come in from the North, usually calling.

Large flocks of tits are already gathering and **Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Garden Warbler & Whitethroat**, can all be present, **Nuthatch** often turn up amongst them, do checking thoroughly for **Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher & Wryneck** all through to the autumn.

Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Black Tern are almost annual right through the autumn, Whimbrel records tail off by mid September. August brings the first returning ducks, **Teal** and **Shoveler**, then **Wigeon, Pochard** after that. If it gets warm and muggy, with thunder storms potentially groups of **2-6 Black Tern** can turn up, **Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, Wheatear & Yellow Wagtail** are all likely too.

August gets busier, more of the same waders, plus getting out early to BSL can bring fly thru **Arctic & Sandwich Tern, Marsh Harrier & Osprey. Garganey** have often turned up on Sandford amongst the Gadwall, or Teal and for that reason, Lea Farm GP is becoming good for them too.

Checking the older hedgerows all month could turn up **Redstart, Wood Warbler, Pied & Spotted Flycatchers**, all are rare visitors, but you never know what you'll find.

The first return Snipe can occur in August and keeping an eye on the scrapes can produce early **Water Rail** and if you are lucky **Spotted Crane**. The Swifts all vanish by the end of the month, which heralds peak migration for **Wheatear & Whinchat**, which continues into the first week September.

September can really busy, keep checking for waders and terns, **Arctic & Sandwich** may go through early in the mornings every year. Keep checking the tit flocks for late warblers, crests, **Coal Tit**, more Treecreeper & Nuthatch and keep looking for our first ever **Yellow Browed Warbler**.

The Common Sandpipers have generally gone thru by early in Sept, but waders like **Black-tailed Godwit & Greenshank** have arrived late and stayed into November. **Meadow Pipit** move SW early in September, **Tree Pipit** must still go through early in the mornings and the first **Redwings** turn up about 3rd week, as do some **Siskin**, passing all the departing warblers.

October to December

The last **Sand Martin** go early October, **House Martin & Swallow** move off slightly later, with **Hobby** following with them. Wildfowl numbers build quickly, as do Black-headed Gulls, which should be checked for **Mediterranean Gull** til year end.

Bittern has shown up in July, August and September, but more often late October and early November, so it is always worth checking the reed beds at dusk. This is the best time for **Stonechat**, either at back of scrapes, or in the car park field and **Ring-necked Parakeet** do fly along the Loddon.

Pintail, Ruddy Duck & Scaup can turn up in October, **White-fronted Geese** flocks have been seen flying over and **Jack Snipe** often show up in the cut reeds of Tern Scrape. **Rock Pipit** may be along open areas of lake edge, **Short-eared Owl** is still possible on passage, as are **Brambling. Meadow Pipit & Skylark** winter on Lea Farm landfill and a few **Golden Plover** get in with the **200-1500 Lapwings** that gather.

December can be very exciting, at dusk multiple **Bitterns, Barn Owls & Woodcock** over Lavellø, **Little Egret** flying over to roost, **Sparrowhawk** patrolling the reeds to grab a Starling, or Redwing. A **Peregrine** may make a late overhead pass at Lapwing or corvids, meanwhile **Water Rail, Snipe** and maybe even a **Jack Snipe** are to be found on the scrapes.

In frozen conditions during the eighties, **Bewick's Swan** flocks went over, but none since 1996, but they could, stay vigilant in looking up, checking the geese flocks and as the year draws to a close, 1-2 **Goosander** and 1-4 **Smew** are can visit BSL, Sandford or Lavellø briefly, or just fly over.

Don't forget to check the Tufted Duck and Pochard flocks for **Black-necked Grebe, Red-crested Pochard, Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Ferruginous Duck, Slavonian Grebe or Red-necked Grebe**, whilst all are very uncommon to rare, anything can happen.

Search the tit flocks, **Firecrest**, whilst very rare with under 10 records ever, could still be hiding, the Alders have flocks of 30-300 **Siskin**, with just a few **Lesser Redpoll** with them, if you are very lucky indeed a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** may still pass through, so keep looking and happy birding.