

Rainham Marshes RSPB Reserve 16th January 2016

I've never been to Oare Marshes so don't know what we missed but I was delighted with my day's birding at the substitute destination for the January MBS Local Outing. The cost and inconvenience of the train service having made it impossible to get to Oare Marshes by public transport, the committee had decided just two weeks earlier to switch to Rainham. We announced the change of plan by email, on the website, on Facebook, Twitter, LoveCamden, ProjectDirt and at the Indoor Meeting the evening before.

I travelled on the 9.40 from Fenchurch Street with just 3 others but we knew there were another 4 or 5 of our group also on the train... in fact it was rather more than that. Two of the train people were whisked away in a car from Purfleet Station and the rest of us started on the short walk to the reserve.



On route we saw Cormorant, Shelduck, Lapwing, Teal, Mallard, Wigeon, Heron, Little Egret, Curlew and Redshank and, on arrival over the bridge, we had Starlings, Magpies and that rarity for some of us Londoners House Sparrows.

With 2 people arriving on a later train, several people arriving by car and some confusion about where and when we were starting we didn't go round as a single group. Andrew's core party grew and diminished as the day progressed, peaking at 23 at the Dartford Warbler and Barn Owl spot and again in the large hide where we had lunch.

The weather was bitterly cold and there were many patches of frozen water but the sunshine and scenery were superb and we saw some good birds largely thanks to our leader Andrew and also Ian and others who shared their scopes.



In the Cordite Store we noticed a magnificent Bug Hotel and saw Chaffinch and Longtailed Tit.

We reached the point from which to see the Barn Owl box and many of the party (but not me) were able, with the help of one of three telescopes, to make out the Owl's face.

While our scopes were trained on the Barn Owl box to the side, people from another group looking over a gate in front of us were calling "Dartford". These birds had been seen in recent days but the RSPB man in the Visitor Centre hadn't been very optimistic about them having survived the cold night. But we were in luck. We had several good views of a Dartford Warbler. Definitely one of the day's highlights.

3 of us decided that we had a more pressing need than food and we'd walked past the hide to the picnic tables, classrooms and loos further on. On our way back to the hide I stopped on seeing a bird settle in a bush right in front of us. Earlier we'd struggled to see a distant Stonechat through the scopes but now we had a wonderful close view of a sunlit Stonechat. Most of the group had similar good views from the hide as one wended its way along the fence post by post the whole length of the hide. Thanks to Andrew we also saw Snipe from this hide and some saw Kingfisher and Skylarks.

Moving on Andrew identified a Meadow Pipit flying over and probable Linnets and we saw a Reed Bunting settle in the top of a tree.

We'd gone beyond the Ken Barrett Hide before we saw our first raptor of the day – a Kestrel perched on the side of a pylon. We saw several more Kestrel later and a Marsh Harrier from the large hide. A Sparrowhawk was also spotted.

We also saw a distant perched Short-eared Owl – or rather those who were tall enough to see over the reeds did. This sighting made us eager to do as Andrew suggested – leave the reserve by the turnstile and walk back towards what is apparently called the Serin Mound. This was a first for many of us and certainly proved a good vantage point. From here we saw, in addition to Goldfinch, Blackbird, swans and lots of Pheasants, no fewer than 3 Short-eared Owls – perched and flying. The highlight of the day!

As we'd gone round we'd also seen, in terms of duck, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Shelduck, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Pochard and Pintail. We also had Coot, Moorhen, Swans, Heron, Canada and Greylag Geese. We saw Redwing and later one Fieldfare on a fence with its back to us. We heard several Cetti's Warbler and Lynette told me at lunchtime she'd seen one – so it could go on the ticklist as seen as well as heard.

We eventually made our way back to the Visitor Centre where we exchanged tales of our various sightings over a cuppa before returning to car park or station in twos and threes. The consensus was that everyone had enjoyed the day – birds, weather, scenery and company – including a newcomer and novice birder who appreciated the shared expertise and the friendliness of the group. Good to know the Marylebone Birdwatching Society is maintaining its reputation!

