

A personal report of Marylebone Birdwatching Society's trip to Thursley Common

with a [#30DaysWild](#) slant! Marion Hill was taking part in the Wildlife Trusts' challenge to "make room for nature" during the 30 days of June. [Day 18. Proper Wild.](#)



I spent Saturday 18th June in the "proper wild" of Thursley Common National Nature Reserve in Surrey. Don't get me wrong – I really appreciate the amount of wildlife in my day to day urban setting. In the 5 minutes it took me to walk to the tube station 7.15 Saturday morning, I noticed a Herring Gull atop a chimney pot, a Blue Tit bursting out from a garden hedge only to make a quick U-turn when it saw me and a young Blackbird apparently gathering nesting material (!) from the base of a tree. 20 minutes later I was at Euston ready to board the Marylebone Birdwatching Society coach to Thursley Common.

This Nature Reserve is probably wilder than many of the sites we visit on our birdwatching coach trips. Most now have Visitor Centres, hides and are well sign-posted even if they don't all have the excellent cafes and shops of some of the RSPB reserves. The coach dropped us off at the Moat Car Park 10.15am and was there ready for us when we returned about 3.45pm. On most of our coach trips, although many people like to go around with our expert leader Andrew, we usually disperse into small groups meeting up occasionally in or between hides to compare notes and share sightings. And some of us will make sure we get back in time for cuppa and cake! No such lure away from the birds on this reserve. And many of us would have been too worried about losing our way to leave the group. There may well have been a map in the car park and we did see a few on route along with the occasional post marking the Heath Trail, but it was easy to lose one's bearings.



We always take packed lunches on our field trips but often eat them sitting on benches or in a hide. Here we had an early lunch stop when we found this lovely spot with seating at various levels.



Heading back to the coach at a fast pace, our leader did nearly manage to lose half the group! I was fortunately stopped from going straight ahead when I saw a few people on the board walk to the right who still had the advance party in their sights. I made sure the next pair of walkers knew where to turn but, as I hastened to keep up with the people immediately ahead, I soon lost sight of anybody behind me. But I was perhaps the only person with such directional difficulties as all 24 of us returned to the car park ahead of the 4pm deadline, some having taken different routes.

The most noticeable flowers for we birders were Heather, Cotton-Grass and Orchids. Many people commented on the Cotton-Grass – actually a sedge – some asking what it was, some saying what it was or giving it another name e.g. Bog Grass. I noticed a single orchid and took a quick pic from a little bridge over a pool before rushing on to catch up with the people ahead. Back on the coach, when the group sightings list came round, it seems that others had seen even more orchids and the consensus was that they were Southern Marsh.



Our outing would have been even wilder in stormy weather. We were lucky in that, though (or because?) some did walk round with waterproofs on, we only got the lightest and briefest of showers. But we didn't have the sunshine we needed for the butterflies and dragonflies for which Thursley Common is a nationally important site. One person saw one unidentified dragonfly and, as a group, we saw a couple of small white moths, one Common Blue and one Orange Top butterfly.

As for birds – just 29 species altogether when we might expect to see 70+ at some multi-habitat RSPB reserves. But it was always going to be “quality not quantity” at this site. We had to work hard for our birds and I relied largely on our leader’s ears and his and other good spotters’ sightings. Most of the birds spotted on the tops of bushes or on skeletal looking branches were Stonechat – lovely birds which we Londoners don’t see that often but we were seeing so many it became “just another Stonechat” when we were hoping for Dartford Warbler. One or two “Dartfords” were seen but I just got one identifiable silhouette. I couldn’t see the identifying marks on the Woodlark I was shown through a telescope and certainly couldn’t hear its song as the “descending scale” our leader described – though I have now checked the BTO website and definitely did hear the song. We also saw and heard the more familiar – though not as common as before – Skylark. I did eventually see the Tree Pipit in its characteristic parachute flight. There were a number of sightings of Common Redstart but it took me quite a while to get a good view of one. It didn’t help that the people who were describing “the horizontal log with a thin branch coming down across it” didn’t realise there was another such combination immediately to the left of where they were looking! We saw a few Swifts and Swallows and eventually saw just one Hobby. We at last spotted the Curlew whose atmospheric calls had punctuated our walk. And we heard a Cuckoo. Other birds included Linnet, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Goldcrest, heard Willow Warbler, heard Chiffchaff, heard Green Woodpecker and heard Blackcap.



It would have been even better with a bit of sunshine such as we had 27 June 2009 when we saw 35 bird species +5 heard only and identified 20 species of insect – butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. But it was great to be able to spend 5 hours in the wild in good company and with lovely scenery and quality birds ... and, despite a 20 minute stop at a small service station (usually only on the outward journey), be back at Euston before 6pm.