

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

The early part of the year can be a quiet time, but there is plenty to keep birders occupied if you know where to look.

This is probably the best time to see **BITTERN** at the traditional site of Pit-house West. The best time to visit is the hour before dusk, when the bird, or birds, fly to roost. You need to wrap up warm and concentrate; views are often fleeting, and, once lost in the reeds, birds are difficult to pick up.

Pit-house West, together with other lowland sites such as Poolsbrook Marsh, Bolehill Flash and Carr Vale NR are also the best sites to see (or, more likely, hear) **CETTI'S WARBLER**. An addition to the SBSG recording area as recently as 2009, these birds usually give themselves away with their distinctive call, and song, in the early months of the year. If the weather turns cold for a long spell, these sites are also a good bet for **WATER RAIL** which are forced to venture further out of the reedbeds to feed.

January and February are also, traditionally, the best months to visit gull roosts. In recent years, the premier site has been Broomhead Res for sightings of **GLAUCOUS** and **ICELAND GULL**. Twenty years ago, "Glaucs" were the regular visitor, with "Iceland" thin on the ground. Recently, the roles have reversed, although both are much scarcer inland due to changes in landfill practice, and milder winters not driving the birds south.

Views at Broomhead can be distant, and Poolsbrook Country Park is always worth checking, as big gulls often wash off here in early afternoon, and views here are much closer. A roost sometimes builds up at Orgreave Lakes, and here it is particularly worthwhile sifting through the small gulls for the slightly larger **MEDITERRANEAN GULL**.

January and February usually see the start of the return movement of **PINK FOOTED GEESE** over the area. Birds are moving back from North Norfolk to the Morecambe Bay area, prior to migrating back to Iceland, and so most birds are flying North-West, with movement often later in the day than the passage in November.

If unusual waterfowl are to be found in the area, it will probably be in January and February. This is the best time to see **SMEW**, with Orgreave Lakes and Rother Valley CP the most likely sites. Although redheads are most common, there is always the chance to find a stunning male of this species.

An interesting feature of recent years has been the increase in records of **RED CRESTED POCHARD**. Although the credentials of these birds may be dubious, the males in particular add a bit of the exotic to a winter's day. Orgreave, Rother Valley and, increasingly, Thrybergh CP are the best sites for this species.

Birding the uplands can be a pretty birdless experience at this time of year, but, provided the weather is not too severe, can turn up good birds. **ROUGH LEGGED BUZZARD** is sometimes found at this time, although a hovering common buzzard with pale underwings is a potential trap for the unwary. The traditional site was Derwentdale, and birds are still occasionally seen there, but the moors above Agden

and Ewden have been more productive in recent years. If you are very lucky, you may also see **HEN HARRIER**. In the last ten years, in line with its decline throughout the country due to persecution on grouse moors, sightings have become very scarce, but any of the moorland areas from Leash Fen in the south to Langsett in the north could turn one up.

Lastly, depending on the weather, this can be the best time to see one of the great birding spectacles in the Sheffield area; the **STARLINGS** at Middleton Moor. Early snowfall on the uplands often drives the feeding parties of birds from the limestone plateau, and then numbers do not build. However, if the weather remains mild, and you get a relatively calm, dry evening (in my experience, a relatively unusual phenomenon), then you could be treated to a “murmuration” of perhaps 100,000+ birds; even non-birding spouses are impressed!

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