

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN MARCH AND APRIL

March and April are the months when birding activity quickens as birds start to move to breeding grounds.

We all like to keep a record of our first summer visitors. **SAND MARTINS** will appear from mid-March at lowland sites such as Thrybergh CP, Orgreave Lakes, and Rother Valley CP; **LITTLE RINGED PLOVERS** are typically a bit later, with records not just from the “usual” lowland wader sites, but also water bodies on the uplands such as Redmires and Middleton Moor. **WHEATEARS** are often seen first on the uplands; any warm day from the third week of March could see a male on fence posts or short grass at Barbrook Pools and Middleton Moor, as well as sites further north such as Peat Pits and Ewden Height. Finally, **RING OUZELS** will have arrived by the end of March, with sites such as Burbage Rocks, Stanage Edge and Cutthroat Bridge most likely to pick up the first record.

The first two weeks of March has, traditionally, been THE time to see parties of **WHOOPEER SWAN** passing through the area. Birds can be seen anywhere flying over, but upland waters to the west are particularly favoured resting sites, and those on the 2015 Derwentdale field trip will always remember the site of 50+ of these magnificent birds heading north-west over Howden Res.

March and April are good months to look out for some of the unusual “close relatives” of commoner species. Any flock of redpoll is worth checking for **COMMON REDPOLL** amongst the “Lessers”. These birds are typically larger and paler than “Lessers”, more buff above and white below, with streaked whitish rumps and more pronounced pale lines on the back.

The fringe of any reservoir or lake could hold a “littoralis”, or Scandinavian **ROCK PIPIT**. Rock Pipits usually announce themselves by call; a loud “feest”, rather than the weak “sip sip” of Meadow Pipit. Birds passing through our area in Spring are likely to be the northern sub-species, with a blue-grey tone to the head and nape, creamy- white supercilium, and yellowish/pinkish breast.

Finally, the nominate race of our Pied wagtail, the **WHITE WAGTAIL**, is most easily identified in March and April. Any group of “Pieds” at a sewage farm, reservoir or even cricket pitch should be examined closely. Some birds are difficult to positively separate, but classic males, with sharp demarcation between black crown and nape, and grey mantle, together with clean white flanks without the “scruffy” appearance of most Pieds, are pretty distinctive.

If you are going to see a **LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER** in our area, March and April are your best chance. Trees have few leaves at this time, and the birds are at their most vocal, the kestrel-like “kee kee kee” is often how they are picked up. These birds are small; look for them on the branches, rather than trunk, of tall trees, often near water. Woodlands to the north of Sheffield in the Don Valley, such as Beeley Wood, are

worth a look, Wentworth Park is a frequent haunt, but odd birds can, and do, turn up almost anywhere in the area,

Another late March-early April scarcity is **GARGANEY**. Twice in the last few years, a pair has taken up residence in late March (at Elsecar Res and Carr Vale) raising hopes of a first breeding attempt since 1999. Lowland waters with suitable habitat are worth checking for this beautiful duck. Records in late April/early May are almost invariably one day records of males moving north.

Middleton Moor is best known in recent years for its starling roost, but it has long been the site of a build-up of **CURLEWS** in mid-March, as birds return from the coast before dispersing to breed. Numbers have declined a little in recent years, but counts of 50+ are made most years. More recently, Redmires has become perhaps the best site to observe this phenomenon, with an amazing 134 birds on 30 March 2013, in extreme weather, the highest count in the area for nearly thirty years.

Late March and early April is a classic time for fly-through **OSPREYS**. Virtually any area of water can attract this species, although sites such as Carr Vale, Chatsworth Park and the Derwentdale chain of reservoirs get records most years. These are likely to be Scandinavian birds heading for breeding grounds, and do not hang around. Birds in May are more likely non-breeders, and more likely to linger.

Lowland sites to the east could hold that rare, but almost annual, visitor, **BLACK NECKED GREBE**. Pairs have been found in early April in recent years at Thrybergh CP, Silverwood Lagoon and Orgreave Lakes, although, sadly, none has remained to breed, the last such occurrence being in 1985.

Keep a look out in late April for returning flocks of **FIELDFARE**; this time often sees some of the largest flocks of the year, particularly to the west at sites such as Middleton Moor.

Recent years have seen April become the best month to see **LITTLE GULL** in the area. Periods of poor weather in mid-month often produce records, with Carr Vale the most regular site, but other lowland sites such as Thrybergh CP, Rother Valley CP and Orgreave Lakes also worth a look in such conditions. Interestingly, Middleton Moor had April records in both 2018 and 2019, so it is always worth checking through the Black-headed gulls here.

Finally, mid-April is probably your best chance of seeing **YELLOW WAGTAIL** in the area. This once regular breeder is now, for most, a passage migrant, with sites to the east such as Orgreave Lakes, Rother Valley CP Thrybergh CP and Carr Vale NR the most productive sites. However, birds are recorded on passage in the uplands each April, so keep listening for the characteristic, high pitched "psit", quite unlike Pied and Grey Wagtail, from an overhead wagtail at sites such as Barbrook Pools, Redmires, and Middleton Moor