NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND BIRD CLUB

Annual Dawn Chorus at Ford & Etal

Tindal House – Saturday 3rd May 2014

The first hour of the 21st annual Dawn Chorus at Ford & Etal was more akin to a January morning than to early May. The temperature was hovering either side of 0°C and the grass as we walked down the steep bank to the River Till was pure white. Those of us who had met there once before recalled the thick mist with which we had been confronted – a morning when birdsong meant everything because it had seemed that we would never see a single thing…

But the sun slowly rose and its rays became stronger. With the light behind us we were able to stand for several minutes and watch – in amazement – a young male Crossbill and two females at the top of a few Scots Pine trees, in an arable landscape and far away from the thick pine woodlands in which they are normally seen. Perhaps Crossbills send out small foraging parties in spring, to investigate every remaining tree in an area that might still bear cones after they have run out of supplies in larger woods? They flew off as we eventually moved to go past them, only to sit on a distant ash tree until we had passed and then fly straight back again.

Down on the river, a male Grey Wagtail gave a wonderful display of dancing at the edge of the rushes, whilst above him a Great Spotted Woodpecker foraged almost upside down under a branch. Further up the steep bank, in the bluebells (and in the sunshine) two Roe Deer made a lovely picture. Two Curlew flew overhead. Linnets, Bullfinches, Greenfinches, Yellowhammers and Goldfinches were busy in the thick gorse bushes beside us and a Dipper flashed past.

Moving up the river, we finally emerged into the sunshine ourselves, stopping to study the scolding ‘chuck’ of two male Blackcaps arguing with each other at a corner of the wood. Looking across the river there were great views of Blue Tits darting in and out of a nest box and a cacophony of Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers. Another view of a Grey Wagtail was possible and a Long-Tailed Tit bounced past. One or two people were intent on identifying the breed of sheep on the bank behind us.

Walking back up to Tindal House Farm, a Garden Warbler’s song burst from a patch of blackthorn and a Whitethroat scratched his song in the bushes below the farm. We finally saw a Swallow – and a fine patch of Yellow Archangel growing on the edge of the wood.

It was a real delight to sit down in the Granary Tea Rooms at Heatherslaw where an unending supply of Bacon, Sausage and Egg Rolls were soon on our plates. Twenty-first birthdays are of course also an occasion for a glass of something celebratory, with or without the orange juice, and a suitable toast was proposed to the next 21 years of the Ford & Etal Dawn Chorus.

The total number of species recorded (43) was a little disappointing; there were some notable absentees. A few members spent went to explore other corners of the estate after breakfast; their results are shown below in an additional list.

*Seen/heard:* Mallard; Tufted Duck; Pheasant; Grey Heron; Lapwing; Curlew; Common Gull; Herring Gull; Rock Dove; Woodpigeon; Great Spotted Woodpecker; Skylark; Swallow; Grey Wagtail; Pied Wagtail; Dipper; Wren; Dunnock; Robin; Blackbird; Song Thrush; Blackcap; Garden Warbler; Common Whitethroat; Chiffchaff; Willow Warbler; Goldcrest; Long-tailed Tit; Blue Tit, Great Tit; Coal Tit; Jackdaw; Rook; Carrion Crow; House Sparrow; Chaffinch; Greenfinch; Goldfinch; Linnet; Crossbill; Bullfinch; Yellowhammer.

*Additional species reported: Buzzard; Moorhen; Meadow Pipit; Raven; Lesser Whitethroat; Tree Sparrow; Reed Bunting;*

*JJ*