

NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND BIRD CLUB

Dawn Chorus 2024

Slainsfield and Watchlaw, Sunday 12th May 2024 - 05.30-09.15

A record number of people (27), including some welcome non-members, arrived at Slainsfield on a bright sunny morning. We were soon up onto Slainsfield Moor from where the views back to the Cheviots were a little opaque in the haze, despite a stiff south-easterly wind. Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs were everywhere as we climbed up to the gate and a Cuckoo was calling from the woodland on the other side. On the moorland itself, pairs of Stonechats whistled and clacked as we walked past and a beautiful male Reed Bunting flew over the reedbed. But are times hard for Yellowhammers on Slainsfield Moor these days? One poor specimen was only expecting us to give him a Little Bit of Bread ... No talk of any cheese. But perhaps he was vegan?

Having persuaded a bunch of cows and calves to allow us to cross a corner of their field, and quickly too, we negotiated a muddy gateway to safety. We were immediately greeted by loud song from the veteran pines close by – a magnificent male Redstart flew onto the topmost branch and gave us great views. The Redstart is often overlooked so we were delighted to enjoy this.

Then we were truly amongst something different. The estate is half way through a woodland creation programme at Watchlaw Farm, adjacent to the moor. It has been severely delayed by the bureaucratic processes involved and by the horrendous wet weather. However, by the time it is complete (in 2025/26), about 50,000 trees will have been planted, five kilometres of deer-fencing erected and over a mile of new roadways built. The first stage was completed this past winter and tubed saplings are everywhere, as far as the eye can see. These are protecting the mixed-species biodiversity section of the plan and – at the command of the Forestry Commission – the estate has to erect tubes and stakes for each. For compartments planted with commercial conifers (Sitka and Norway Spruce), however, deer-fencing is permitted. Happily, the mixed saplings planted in the next stage of the biodiversity plan can be deer-fenced, though nobody is quite sure why ...

This will fundamentally change the landscape at Watchlaw. In years to come, a wide sweep of wooded upland will stretch from Slainsfield as far as Doddington and beyond. It's not only the visual character that will change; so too will all aspects of wildlife in that area. The estate is keen to record these latter changes as they occur.

Whilst we completed our customary circuit of the woodland garden at Etal Manor, in which we added other species such as Greenfinch (much less common than it once was), Bullfinch (a flock of them are to be seen every winter in the bushes outside Etal Church) and Treecreeper, and admired a splendid Peony and the almost black 'Queen of the Night' tulips, Harriet's activity and work rate in the kitchen outdid that of McDonalds at rush hour as she prepared a delicious Bird Club breakfast during which Fiona read out the rollcall of the 42 species seen.

Harriet thanks everyone very warmly for the generous donations (£207) towards Hospice Care North Northumberland. She appreciates it so much.

JJ

Species seen / heard: Mallard, Pheasant, Sparrowhawk, Moorhen, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Cuckoo, Skylark, Swallow, House Martin, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Redstart, Stonechat, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Grasshopper Warbler, Blackcap, Common Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow, Starling, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Bullfinch, Reed Bunting.