

Keeping It Local - Brian Sumner

After 50 years of birding I suppose you could say I've been a local birder all my life having never been out of England and never venturing more than 200 miles from Queensbury where I was born and bred.

The start of my birding career at 12 years of age was mostly around the village with Shibden Valley, Queensbury Station and Ogden as my three main venues with my lifelong buddy Howard Creber as my birding companion. This gave me an excellent foothold to local birding in later life still remembering the hotspot areas to watch and the areas that failed to produce, but although the venues had hardly changed the birds had changed considerably. As an example, Yellowhammer, Redstart and Lesser Whitethroat were a common sighting and we all know the position of these species today.



Greenshank at Oxenhope photo: Brian Sumner

In later years, with a new driving license and my own car I did as we all have and chased around a wider area looking for new species making regular visits to the East Yorkshire coast, Norfolk and reserves such as Blacktoft and Fairburn on a weekly basis but once I had got this out of my system I settled back to true local birding which has been my passion ever since covering an area of up to 5 miles from my home in Queensbury.

Local birding is by no means an easy task and involves a lot of footwork in all weather conditions throughout the seasons and is not for the birder wanting a high score on his annual tick list, but the rewards, seldom as they may be, are great. The word rarity takes on a different meaning when you find a bird in your local area that may be common elsewhere but could be a mega tick for your patch.

Over the years you build up a picture of your area knowing what should be where and when so anything unusual, such as displaced birds or high numbers soon stand out

and start alarm bells ringing. Several trips out can produce nothing more than wet clothes and an empty camera but I rarely get disillusioned as I set off with an open mind and a low expectancy and more times than not something turns up to make the trip worthwhile. As I always remind myself, if you don't get out there you'll get nothing.

The blogsite I started **West Yorkshire Birding** <http://birderbri.blogspot.co.uk/> has been a great inspiration to me giving me a jolt to find something to update it on a daily basis so on my walk to and from work and lunchtime dog walking I'm constantly on the lookout gazing skyward and I make a point of going nowhere without a camera in my pocket.

I suppose you could say it's bordering on an obsession but it gives me pleasure without affecting others so to me that's all that matters. I have very little time to myself through work and family commitments so I look forward all the more to the times when I can shut out the world and concentrate on birds.

Through my blogsite I get great help from the locals with people ringing or texting me, calling in at work or stopping me in the street with local bird news and of course reports through B.O.G. and Calderdale Birds as well as other local birders all help to keep the records flowing.

Queensbury is not the best of birding areas being 1150ft above sea level and usually in the fog or gales but the advantages are great. Up here in the gods you can see for miles in all directions, even being able to see coast



Firecrest at Ogden Reservoir photo: Brian Sumner

to coast with the Humber Bridge to the east and Southport to the west visible on a clear day. This of course is a great advantage during visible migration time in the autumn. Having said that, as with any local area, anything can turn up like the Avocet that dropped into a local empty reservoir staying a few days back in 1995, not a rare bird but to get one in this area, now that is mega! I was going to put a list of good local bird sightings but looking back at records they are far too numerous for this article. Admittedly many have been seen as fly overs during visible migration watch but numerous birds rare to the area have been found to drop in over the years.



Snipe on Shelf Moor.

Photo: Brian Sumner

I remember the April morning in 1998 when I walked up Soil Hill looking for Little Ringed Plover which I had spotted the previous weekend. As I got to the summit a wader, with a call that was unfamiliar to me, flew up landing about 30 yards ahead. As I got it in the bins I gasped to find it was a Dotterel which luckily stayed the next day allowing a hoard of birders chance to see it.

Two years prior to that, in the same area, I spotted the dark figure of a wader at last light as I was leaving the hill, this turned out to be a Purple Sandpiper which fortunately, despite a howling gale stayed the next day for all to see. There's been Gannets, a Yellow Browed Warbler, a December Greenshank, Snow Buntings, Black Redstarts, Yellow Legged Herring Gulls, Ospreys, Red Kites, Shore Larks, Shrikes and Phalaropes to name but a few. Who needs to go away birding when the birds eventually come to you? All you need is to get out there and have plenty of patience.

I'm not knocking birders travelling away for birds, this has to be done to cover all the species available to us, but save a little time to check out your local area, you'll be amazed just what it can produce and the rewards are great. There's no better feeling than finding a mega bird a mile or so away from your own home.



A male Common Scoter and a pair of Shelduck, occasional visitors to Ogden Reservoir



photos: Brian Sumner