

The Northumberland Coast in Winter - Shaun Radcliffe

For us, Northumberland is a beautiful county, (almost better than Yorkshire, some might say). In the middle of November, Julia & I travelled up to stay at a small rural settlement called Fenham-le-Moor which is situated between Bamburgh & Holy Island. We were self-catering at a cottage only half a mile from the mudflats adjacent to the causeway leading to Holy Island at Beal.

Overlooking the mudflats is a small public hide which we visited daily to see what birds were about. The position of the tide was important as birds could be distant if the tide was fully out but the view alone was worth a walk down. In the hedges we saw Yellowhammers and Tree Sparrows with occasionally, a visit from the



Brent Geese on Holy Island

photo: Shaun Radcliffe

local Sparrowhawk. On the first day, we had a great view of a fox.

On the mudflats, we recorded many of the waders you would expect eg Dunlin, Curlew, Black-tailed & Bar-tailed Godwits, Turnstones & Oystercatchers. Ducks seen were Shelduck & Wigeon with just a few Pintail. The male Wigeon looked brilliant as they grazed in front of us. The only species of geese were the Brent. When the tide was full, they patiently floated on the water, staying in one spot. As the water subsided, the birds started up-ending for food so it was obvious that they knew where to wait for the conditions to be right for feeding.

With the weather definitely on our side (dry all week), we spent days out walking along the coast but still staying local. One such outing was to Goswick & Cheswick, small farming communities just north of Beal. We walked along a path through the sand dunes with poor grass fields holding cattle. In the fields were some ditches draining the fields and it is where we saw three Little Egrets feeding & also three Teal. Although we returned to the car using the same path, on our way back we flushed a Woodcock & watched it fly over the fields & into cover. It may have been a bird from the continent that had just arrived.

A favourite bird watching site near Bamburgh is Stag Rocks and we walked from there to Budle Bay as the tide went out. Amongst the sea-weed were plenty of Turnstones & Purple Sandpipers searching for small insects swept up on the tide. Eider Ducks can be guaranteed to be seen here so we were not disappointed but also enjoyed recording 62 Common Scoters plus a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers. Budle Bay held the same species we had seen at the hide at Fenham-Le-Moor.

Another lovely day gave us the opportunity to go over to Holy Island. We decided to walk the full circumference of the island as there are some lovely large sandy beaches behind an area called The Snook. It was here we had great views of Bar-tailed Godwits & Sanderlings feeding on the water's edge. As we continued round the island, we came to Emmanuel Point. At this time, the tide was fully in so we were properly on an island surrounded by the sea. We had a superb view of a male Long-tailed Duck as it flew past, going north. Just a few yards along the path, a small dark bird was struggling in the waves near the shore. We expected it to be an auk because of its size and shape but it proved to be a Water Rail! What a surprise. The bird was exhausted but as it did not appear to be injured & can swim, we moved on hoping it would recover. Again, was



Little Auk

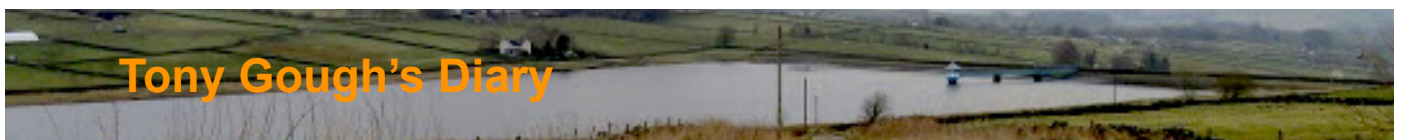
photo: Shaun Radcliffe

this a bird arriving from the continent as this species does visit here in the winter from northern & eastern Europe. On the lake on a small reserve on the island, we saw Shovelers, Wigeon & Teal. Finally, we finished up behind the Abbey overlooking the shore, facing inland. Here we heard the clicking of pebbles as the Turnstones busily searched for food. Walking back towards the carpark in a quiet part of the island, a Twite perched on a fence in front of us. Further on, we flushed a Woodcock (again!). What a great walk with good birding.

Some years ago, we walked along the headland near Spittal. This is almost next door to Berwick-On-Tweed. On that visit, we were fortunate to see a couple of Snow Buntings so we tried the walk again. No luck this time but to compensate, we saw (close in), seven Red-throated Divers (& the bird of the holiday), a Little Auk flew low past us going north.

Our final day (still dry weather), we walked from Beadnell to the small reserve at Newton-by-the-Sea and back again. The beach areas provided more sightings of Sanderlings feeding with Ringed Plovers.

On route, we saw three pairs of Stonechat. This species was recorded on every walk we did. The single hide at Newton-by-the-Sea, overlooks a lake with some rushes on the fringes. As we opened the shutter, right in front of us were 17 Whoopers, including five juveniles. It was a perfect way to end our week's holiday in the area.



Tony lived for many years in the village of Tong Park, on the edge of Baildon. In this issue, we concentrate on his 'home patch', an area known as Gill Beck which includes the local reservoir and the woodland to the north of the picturesque cricket ground.

Saturday 8th March 1986 Gill Beck Valley, Baildon 12.50 p.m. to 3.10 p.m.

Fine and mainly sunny with broken/scattered cloud. Clear with excellent light. Wind moderate SE veering to light S by evening. The thaw came at last this week, starting last Tuesday, and snow disappeared rapidly. Still, a frost last night. Little ice on pools at home but plenty on reservoirs of Washburn Valley and some bits of snow still lying around Timble Ings and adjacent moors. Not so cold as of late.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – A male seen near ford in High Spring Wood in an oak tree. Very good view for five minutes.

Tawny Owl – Two flushed from usual holly at NW end of High Spring Wood by mistake. They had picked a different piece of foliage from normal in which to hide and not seen till too late.

Yellowhammer – A group of four at top of field overlooking Tong Park Reservoir from SW

Baildon

Collared Dove – a pair in our back garden for c. ½ hour this morning. First time and not often seen in vicinity. Feeding heavily on breadcrumbs put out and ignored us staring at them through the window – came to two or three feet from window at times.

Saturday 19th April 1986 Gill Beck Valley, Baildon 9.10 a.m. to 2.55 p.m.

Clear, sunny and very cloudless till 10/10.30 a.m. when gradually clouded over till overcast by late a.m. and stayed so or virtually for rest of day. Cold. Wind light NW. Light rain after c5.20 p.m. Light and visibility good. Water everywhere, especially noticeable in Gill Beck Valley, after much rain during the week, particularly on Wednesday/Thursday, Gill Beck a raging torrent and pools and rivulets where seldom seen before.