

Thornton Moor Reservoir Comes Up Trumps

By Chris King

I regularly visit Thornton Moor Reservoir to go birding. It is often cold, bleak and windy and bird-less for what seems like weeks on end but over the last month, it has delivered some real gems.

On 6th April I arrived early, got out of the car and trained my bins on a couple of Mistle Thrushes up on the telegraph cables. I noticed a movement out of the corner of my eye and a small, dark Dunnock sized bird flitted up onto a drystone wall and shimmered its tail. I knew before I had even raised my binoculars that it would be a Black Redstart just from that tail movement. Sure enough, only 10 metres away was a female Black Redstart. Then the panic sets in. Should I just continue watching through my binoculars in case it flies off or should I get the camera out (it was still in the rucksack in the car) and risk losing sight of the bird? Plumped for the camera option and fortunately the bird hung around the old Water Treatment Works buildings for about 10 minutes while I got a few good shots. All the time it was flicking its tail showing the rusty red feathers.



It then flew up the embankment onto the reservoir wall, still in view but a long way off. I retrieved my scope and rucksack from the car and then took the long walk round and up the track onto the embankment but there was no sign of the bird when I got there. A quick scan revealed it though... back on the wall near my car. Weather was a bit overcast and not brilliant for photos so I decided to carry on along to the hide. I spent a couple of hours watching the reservoir and then

walked back. The Black Redstart was still around the old buildings and now the sun had come out. Unfortunately the bird would not come close enough for any more good photos but I wasn't disappointed. I'd not seen a Black Redstart for several years in the UK. The old treatment works at Thornton Moor Reservoir does seem to be a good spot for them though. I saw one on the very same building back in 2006 and I know other birders have also seen them around there too.

On 19th April, I went up to Thornton Moor again specifically hoping so see one of the Ring Ouzels that had been turning up in the area. I spent ages scanning all the drystone walls and patches of short grass



around the reservoir but no luck so I gave up and went to the hide to see if there was anything good on the water at the south end. Nothing much about for the next hour so I gave up.

On the walk back, right at the end of the embankment, a 'Blackbird' hopped into view. It was a long way off and hard to make out much even with bins. It was a bit brown so definitely a female but there was no sign of a white crescent on the chest. The wings were long though and it didn't

look quite right for a Blackbird. Scope up then to get a better look. Sure enough, there were pale, silvery patches in the wings and it had the 'scaly' looking feathers on the belly. It was a Ring Ouzel but it only had the merest hint of a pale patch on the chest. I had thought that the chest crescent should still be easily seen even at some distance on the browner females.

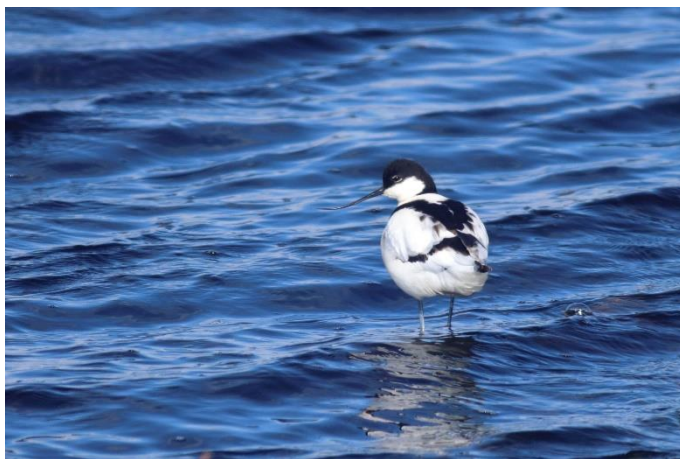


I managed to get a few photos off before it flew off into a Hawthorne bush, miles off and obscured from view. Later when I had a proper look at the photos, I could better make out the chest crescent at high zoom. At home when I looked it up in the book, it turns out that first year Ring Ouzels, particularly the females may have hardly any trace at all of the crescent. So, I saw what I wanted to see and learnt something too. Marvellous.

Then on 4th May, Thornton Moor Reservoir turned up what is arguably the rarest find at least in terms of what has been seen before in the Bradford area since the Group has started keeping records.

I woke up early with a plan to go up to Thornton Moor Reservoir to look for the cuckoo which had been heard a couple of times recently just down the track towards Ogden. The wind was howling outside the bedroom window so I turned over went back to sleep and nearly didn't bother getting up at all. The sun then rose a bit higher so eventually at about 8.30am, I thought I'd go for it and drove up to the reservoir. The wind was still blowing a gale from the north and temperature was only 5 degrees. I decided to go up to the hide even though it is a bit of a walk from the car because at least I could get some shelter from the wind. I was frozen by the time I got to the there and was glad to get inside.

Before I'd even closed the door, I saw a largish white bird on the shore not 5 metres from me. 'That's a funny looking Black-headed Gull with long legs' I thought to myself before my brain caught up. 'Hang



on... It's an Avocet!' The usual panic then ensued. Should I keep watching with binoculars or get the camera out? I really should carry my camera on my shoulder rather than in my rucksack. Went for the camera and again was lucky to get a decent photo through the glass in the hide windows. Unfortunately I had spooked it when I when I unlocked the hide and it soon flew off and I lost track of it. Oh well, Avocet was a new BOG area bird for me so really happy.

I put out the news to local birders on 'Whatsapp' in case it turned up again at Fly Flatts or some other reservoir close by. About 10 minutes later though, I relocated the Avocet down the far south end of the reservoir. There it stayed until a crow got too close and it flew out to the middle of the reservoir and swam about. I didn't know that Avocets could swim like phalaropes...r possibly their legs are telescopic and they can actually wade in very deep water. It soon returned to the shore line and this

time a bit closer to the hide where I could get a few more good photos. It didn't seem to be going anywhere and I got bored and left before it did. Never did see the cuckoo that I had gone up for though.

I didn't know it at the time I actually saw the Avocet just how rare they are in the Bradford Recording Area. There is only a single previous record from 1995 when one stayed for a few days at Horton Bank Top when they drained down the old reservoir.



(Please note that Thornton Moor Reservoir is a Yorkshire Water private site and access is only by permit for Bradford Ornithological Group members)

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