

## Stodmarsh Fifty years on

22<sup>nd</sup> October 2016 marked the fiftieth anniversary of my first visit to Stodmarsh. I was a mad keen schoolboy birdwatcher and naturalist, a refugee from South Wales washed up in the alien environment of a North Surrey Grammar school. The school had a Natural History Society (remember those?) and excursions by ramshackle coach or minibus were the highlight of the year. We had made a trip to Cliffe and High Halstow in my first autumn (1965) but I had never heard of Stodmarsh when we set out on the appointed day, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1966.

We left Purley in the twilight of an early morning and in the pre-M25 era it was a longish journey across Surrey and Kent, such that we arrived at Stodmarsh by mid-morning. In the manner of schoolboys at the time we had eaten all our sandwiches as soon as we got on the bus, so it was straight down to birdwatching after we had split into three groups. Much of my memory of that day is episodic – I remember the bright sunshine, cool breeze and trees largely devoid of leaves. We walked the familiar path following the Lampen Wall alongside the Alder wood and out towards the River Stour. There were a good number of ducks on the water, but I was already a confirmed 'duckoholic' and I found nothing new amongst them, but soon we encountered a group of Bearded Tits showing quite well along the path. In many ways, these were the highlight of my day and a new species! We saw Heron and Great Crested Grebe, a couple of Kingfishers and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Flocks of Lapwings flew over accompanied by a couple of Redshanks. We wandered back to the coach and followed the road past the church and out to the stubble fields south of the village. Here there were large numbers of Redwing and Fieldfares, along with several Mistle Thrushes. The stubble held a big mixed flock of finches and buntings, perhaps 400 bird in all, containing lots of Chaffinches, Linnets and Greenfinches, but also gems like a fine Brambling, dozens of Tree Sparrows, several Yellowhammers and a confiding group of Corn Buntings which gave excellent views and even flew with dangling legs, just as the 'Peterson' guide said they did! To the west of the village the road dropped down to a boggy stream in the bottom of a flooded valley fringed with Alder trees. In this magical, wet secluded place we found Water Rails feeding out in the open while the trees held a gang of tame and approachable Redpolls and Siskins feeding avidly. We wandered back to the village and our coach. One of the other groups had met another birdwatcher who had pointed out a Rough-legged Buzzard overhead. Needless to say, it was an early lesson in the frustration and disappointment which can be part of birding and which gives our hobby its 'edge'.

Our departure was delayed slightly as we stopped alongside a patch of woodland on Stodmarsh road and found more Bramblings and a pair of Willow tits. My day total of 56 species was very satisfying, especially as six of those were new to my list.



*Bearded Tit by Terry Laws*

This year I made the pilgrimage to a site which has become part of my wider 'local patch'. Weather conditions were pretty similar to fifty years ago, but a long dry autumn meant that the trees were still clothed in leaves and the ground was dry underfoot. I arrived at 07:15 and spent three hours pootling around the same areas visited all those years ago. It would be tedious to list all the birds seen in a total of 62, but perhaps it is worth considering the "losses & gains" revealed by this crude comparison. Species seen in 1966 but not this year included Redshank, Golden Plover and Grey Wagtail, all of which were probably in the vicinity somewhere. More significantly, no Brambling, Redpoll and Siskin were recorded, possibly due to the prolonged mild weather over the near continent. The remaining species are Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow, now all rather rare and localized birds in Kent and the Willow tit, gone from our woodlands, probably for ever.

On the plus side, a number of species which are fairly typical of an autumn visit today would hardly imagine back in 1966. Both Cormorant and Grey Lag Goose were very scarce birds in those days and Gadwall was also much less common. Raptors were equally unlikely; we had only a Kestrel in 1966, but this year I added multiple Marsh Harriers, a couple of Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk. Another bird notably absent was Collared dove (imagine!!); it was only about ten years since the first record of the species in Britain and it was still rather localised and uncommon.

A Stonechat on the reed tops is not unusual today, perhaps overlooked along with the Goldcrest, Treecreeper and Bullfinch, by noisy schoolboy birdwatchers. A Firecrest this year was a bonus, but not totally unexpected these days. Surely they are much more numerous nowadays in our autumn and winter countryside.

And finally – Cetti's Warbler! Not there in 1966, a species first recorded in Kent in 1968 at Dungeness. It first bred at Stodmarsh in about 1972-73, then died out in the hard winters of 1987-88, subsequently recolonising to become a typical bird of lowland Kent.

Two final thoughts. One of the teachers who organised that trip and guided my youthful interest is still around and contributing to this issue of KOS News

My gratitude to Tony Holcombe for his patience and encouragement all those years ago knows no limits.

Also... retrospectively that Rough-legged Buzzard! The KBR for 1966 does not record one present for the day of our visit, but in subsequent weeks one was present from 14<sup>th</sup> November to 31<sup>st</sup> December, so perhaps my friends really did see it! I had to wait another few years to finally see one, on an NHS trip to Sheppey!.

**Norman McCanch**