

## Water treatment works: A haven for insectivorous birds in cold weather. Brendan Ryan



I recall reading an article many years ago in *British Birds* about wintering Chiffchaffs at water treatment works in Cornwall. Since then and with the prospect of finding a wintering Yellow-browed Warbler or Siberian Chiffchaff, checking local sewage works has always been on my “to do list” but somehow I never seem to get round to it. This year with its associated foreign and local travel restrictions has created new opportunities for me to explore new sites closer to home.

In recent months I visited local water treatment works along the Stour Valley at Wye, Chartham, Newnham Valley, Westbere and Minster. I also visited the works at Herne Bay but couldn't find a way to view the works or their surroundings, although I did flush four Woodcock while attempting to find a viewing point.

A Yellow-browed Warbler had spent at least a week at the Wye treatment works in the late autumn and so this was my starting point and I made a couple of visits in the early part of winter. Sadly the warbler had not stayed on and I was never able to find more than a single Chiffchaff on subsequent visits.

Then, as the weather turned cold, I was alerted by fellow Canterbury birder John Cantelo to a concentration of Grey Wagtails at a small treatment works at Chartham. This is an area that I had occasionally birded during lockdown one, but I wasn't even aware that the works even existed. I visited the site with John and encountered an amazing 24 Grey Wagtails feeding on the filter beds along with 53 Pied Wagtails. The surrounding bushes held four Chiffchaffs and two Firecrests.



Knowing from an informal survey I had done during lockdown one that the area along the Stour Valley around Canterbury supported at least 14 pairs of breeding Grey Wagtails, I set about visiting all the other local treatment works in the valley in the next few days to see if they also held Grey Wagtails. This coincided with the onset of the snow and freezing conditions. The table provides a summary of the peak counts seen during these visits.

	Grey Wagtail	Pied Wagtail	Meadow Pipit	Chiffchaff	Reed Bunting	Other notable sightings in surrounding area
<b>Wye</b>	2	6	2	1	2	Jack Snipe Hen Harrier
<b>Chatham</b>	24	53	24	4		Firecrest (2)
<b>Westbere</b>	2	5	2	3	4	Green Sandpiper
<b>Newnham Valley</b>	2	21	18	22	3	Green Sandpiper (2)
<b>Minster</b>	1	20		5	4	Firecrest. Dusky Warbler

Apart from Minster where it is not possible to view inside the works, the counts shown mostly refer to birds feeding on the filter beds during the cold weather.



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I only visited Minster during the early part of the winter as the lockdown restrictions put it outside what could be considered local. It is interesting that the Dusky Warbler that was over wintering at the site was reported to have disappeared with the onset of the cold weather. I suspect that along with the local Chiffchaffs, it simply moved onto the filter beds to feed.



Dusky Warbler Minster Sewage Works- Brendan Ryan

As well as the species highlighted in the table, other species seen feeding on the filter beds during the cold weather including several Robins, Song Thrushes, Blackbirds, Wrens, Dunnocks and Chaffinches.

I visited the Newnham Valley site on three occasions between 11<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> February during the period of freezing temperatures and snow and saw 19, 14 & 22 Chiffchaffs on the respective visits. I returned to the site two days after the thaw and not a single Chiffchaff remained. Presumably they had returned to their preferred winter habitat of sallow in the nearby Great and Little Stour Valleys.

One of the main problems with birding at water treatment works is that there is no access to these sites and one is usually restricted to staring through gaps in the fence. Occasionally the gates are open when an operative is on site and there is an opportunity to sneak in for a better view but there is the associated risk of being thrown out or even worse being locked in! These sites are surrounded by fences that would keep out even the most determined birder. The old style sewage farms had pretty much been phased out by the time I started birding and their loss was much lamented by the older generation of birders. Places like Wisbech and Perry Oaks were part of the folklore of birding at the time. In the same way that these traditional works were phased out, the treatment works with open filter beds with which we are now familiar, have an uncertain future. A number of smaller local works have been abandoned. I visited one marked on the OS map at Hoath only to find that it was long gone and had reverted to scrub. While local plants are disappearing, larger plants are being modernised using activated sludge processing, doing away with traditional clinker filter beds. So make the most of these threatened habits while they remain and check your local sewage works in the next cold snap.

