

Wildlife Diary No. 20 Once Bittern 24th Dec 2009



Lucky strike

On a miserable, cold grey day last week, we visited [Potteric Carr](#), the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's flagship reserve near Doncaster, an hour up the M1 from Derby and close to the M18 (in truth a bit too close)! The original reserve is a series of lagoons surrounded by wet woodland but it has been extended to include a large area of farmland, now converted to wetland. In total there are 500 acres to walk round and 14 hides



bittern © Tim Stenton

to visit and – most welcome on such a day – there's a café out among the trees, open daily until 4pm (but note; the whole site is closed 24-27th December). This reserve was known best for being the only site in the UK where a pair of **little bitterns** have nested. Nowadays its reputation rests on its capacity to provide visitors with excellent views of one or more (common) **bitterns** during the winter....though sightings can never be guaranteed.

Our first little excitement once on the trail was to find several **earthstars** (the reserve boasts three species). We then walked round the extension where, in summer, **avocets** have started to breed and where new reedbeds have been planted to entice bitterns and **marsh harriers** to nest. The more distant lagoons and banks were noisy with some **3000 golden plover** and **1000 lapwings**.

After lunch we headed for Piper Marsh hide where we gathered that fleeting views of a bittern had been obtained during the morning. Miraculously the sun appeared, bathing the reeds and surrounding woodland in a warm winter light.

Entering the hide we quickly realised that a bittern was stalking fish among some cut reed, right in front of us. The bird behaved impeccably, showing itself for at least fifteen minutes. What striking plumage it had and what a strange way of hunting too! Plodding very slowly among the reeds, the bird held its head down at the surface of the water, twisting first left and then right to peer below the meniscus. It made two **rapid strikes** into the water with its rapier beak, on both occasions catching fish, albeit tiny ones, before it walked off into the reeds and out of sight, the whole performance carried out in ultra slow motion.

UK bittern numbers dropped to an all-time low of **11 booming males** (in 1997) from a population of about 70 pairs in the 1950s. With careful management by a number of owner organisations (re-wetting and opening up dried out old reed beds), bitterns had increased to **55 booming males** by 2004.

In winter, numbers are augmented by an influx of birds from the continent, setting up winter territories at places such as Potteric Carr and our own **Willington** and **Carr Vale** reserves.

When, as now, water bodies ice over, bitterns, like **kingfishers** and other fish-eating birds, cannot feed and quickly become emaciated. I remember seeing one standing forlornly by the side of a snow-bound main road in Norfolk during a very cold winter in the 1970s. Several had to be taken into care year.

Roost boost

A series of long, cold nights such as we are enduring now threatens the survival of many small birds whose bodies may weigh no more than a few grams. **Wrens, long tailed tits, goldcrests** and **treecreepers** are species that have real difficulty keeping warm throughout the fourteen hours of darkness.

However, some of these species do have a survival tactic that helps them come through this ordeal. They **huddle together** in communal roosts, often finding sheltered places such as nest boxes in which to hide away. The record number of wrens counted entering a nestbox at dusk some years ago now (and in Gloucestershire) was **47** as I recall. Some squeeze that!

Treecreepers have developed another ploy. They carve out depressions in the thick, soft bark of **Wellingtonia** trees and as many as eight or ten then roost together in it, with only their tails sticking out.



Next time you are in a park or formal garden with old wellingtonias, inspect the trunks and look for these depressions. A circle of white droppings just below the rim indicates that a depression has been in recent use. I have seen treecreepers roosting like this in wellingtonias in the grounds of **Elvaston Castle** and found evidence of this behaviour at **Osmaston Park** and, more recently, at **Ashe Hall** near Etwall, now a Buddhist Centre where anyone can walk in the grounds at will (their café does very good soup by the way).

treecreeper
© Neil Aldridge/Wildnet



treecreeper roost hole cc NB

Toughing it out

A few fungi fruit very late in the season and are quite capable of coping with sub zero temperatures. Among them are **oystercaps** and **velvet shanks**. Both grow on tree trunks, are widespread and easy to recognise – so keep your eyes open for them through into January. Oystercaps have a blue grey caps, hence their name. Velvet shanks are a warm orange on top and the lower part of their stems have a dark velvet covering.



Flammulina velutipes - velvet shank fungus cc N Brown

Garden Visitors

If you have a garden and you feed the birds, keep a look out for more unusual visitors during this cold weather especially



Put out apples and you may well get **fieldfares** as well as plenty of **blackbirds**. Scatter seed on the ground and you might attract **brambings**, **pie wagtails**, even a **reed bunting** or a **yellowhammer**.

On the hanging niger or sunflower seed feeders watch for **siskins** among the **goldfinches** and even **lesser redpolls**. In our garden we've just seen the first brambling of the winter. Last year numbers of this northern finch reached 27 - far exceeding any flock we had previously seen here.

Male brambling © Ray Purser