

## Chicks, Lakes and Lagoons: Early Summer Wildlife of the Gwent Levels, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2011

*Short walks for people and dogs around Goldcliff Pill and around Magor Marsh – from waders to warblers, including avocets, oystercatchers, lapwings and dabchicks.*

### Goldcliff Pill

People often ask me if they can bring their dog on a wildlife walk. To avoid disturbance, many reserves, understandably, do not allow dogs around most of their site. However, there are still some great wildlife-watching locations where you can take your - well-behaved! - dog, and Goldcliff Pill is one of those. Spectacular it is too, especially in early summer as wader chicks are just hatching. The pools or lagoons by Goldcliff Pill are shallow water, ideal for waders, and complement the deeper waters at the RSPB Newport Wetlands reserve. The lagoons are viewed from the top of the bank, from behind wooden viewing screens, which also provide good resting and people-viewing places for hot dogs!



*By Goldcliff Pill*



*Jack, people-watching, at Goldcliff Pill*

On a beautiful sunny morning, setting out from the comfortable and welcoming Brick House Country House Hotel in Redwick, we began our walk at the small car park by the Pill (or stream, from the Welsh 'pwll'), just past Goldcliff Common. Sheep were newly shorn, and all the way along the reens there had been loud song of chiff chaffs, with the occasional kestrel hovering over the pastures. Approaching the lagoons we could hear the goldfinches' tinkling bell-like call, and the sound of sedge warblers' mimicry and scratchy song. Butterflies abounded, feeding on meadow thistles flowering by the reen-edge, the beautiful but poisonous hemlock water dropwort was in full flower, and there were large clumps of teasels promising the bees an abundant food source later in the season.



*Meadow brown butterfly on meadow thistle*



*Hemlock water dropwort*

We walked up to the first screens with anticipation – would there be anything there at all? A first view showed a reasonable number of ducks and wildfowl on the pools, and although still quite early, a shimmering heat haze was already starting to be noticeable across to the other side of the pools by the sea wall. Shelduck were evident, a single godwit could be seen, and a shoveler duck further away. But, as we looked more closely, all sorts of treasures started to emerge. On the island in the centre of the pool were ten or more avocets, clearly nesting, two oystercatchers and a lapwing, as well as more shelduck. Then a very small figure emerged just at the end of the spit,

in the shallow water – although a way off, through the scope it was clearly a very young oystercatcher chick, showing its independence already!



*Oystercatcher chick*



*Avocet*

As we watched, we started to be aware of different behaviour patterns – one of the avocets was very ‘flighty’, flying up to mob a very distant gull, chasing a godwit off and generally showing considerable aggression – but returning to the same place on the bank. As we peered through the scope, we suddenly noticed four tiny pale grey shapes – avocet chicks, probably among the earliest to hatch! The avocets are notoriously predated by crows and other birds at the lagoons, so we hoped that this avocet’s aggression might help the chicks’ survival prospects this year.



*Avocet ‘seeing off’ a gull*



*Two pale grey indistinct avocet chicks*

Returning later in the morning to the lagoons, with the heat haze increasing, there was still a lot of movement over the water. Shelduck were flying in, and a lapwing was displaying considerable aggression, chasing off a godwit (fair game to all, it seemed!). As it alighted on the shore, closer inspection revealed 3 tiny fluffy lapwing chicks close by, as well as an adult oystercatcher by its chick.



*Oystercatcher and chick*



*Shelduck alighting*



*Teasel by the ditches at Goldcliff*

Before finally leaving Goldcliff, another small drama played out to watching eyes..... A quick look over by the bridge at the far side of the lagoon showed a grey heron sitting quite still – a common pose in a favourite cool spot! Sheep were cooling off beneath the bridge, and a lamb was trotting towards the bridge from the other side. It suddenly noticed the heron, with great trepidation, which continued impassive. The lamb took a final look, thought better of it and retraced its steps. Game set and match to the heron!



It was difficult to leave the Goldcliff lagoons, with so much activity and new life buzzing, but time was moving on, and there was Magor Marsh to visit!

### **Magor Marsh**

Magor Marsh is a hidden gem of a reserve, directly adjacent to Magor village. At 90 acres, it is relatively small, but it is the last relatively natural area of fenland on the Gwent Levels, and is now designated an SSSI. Managed by the Gwent Wildlife Trust, it was its first reserve. It has extensive boardwalks, a lake with a viewing hide, large reed beds and its ancient wildflower meadow is magnificent. The network of reens makes it potentially an excellent habitat for water voles, but at the moment it still has mink present on the site, although these are gradually being eradicated. As we entered the reserve, we could hear a chiff chaff calling, and as we walked along the boardwalk, past the fantastic clumps of mistletoe growing on a huge poplar tree, we soon heard our first scratchy song of a sedge warbler in the reeds. As we stopped to listen, we noticed the ragged robin and the clumps of pink hemp agrimony in its prime at the edge of the reeds.

As soon as the boardwalk went into the trees, it was like entering a different world. The twisted shapes in the half-light under the canopy seemed to take on lives of their own, and all the while the noise of woodland birds was almost deafening, with young blue and great tits calling and chasing their parents in a mad race to be fed, and blackbirds chinking alarm calls as we walked past. We approached the hide, and peered through to see what surprises the lake might hold. We saw an ugly young moorhen chick first with its protective parent close by.



The reeds were alive with scratchy sedge warbler songsters, and every so often we'd hear an explosive burst of sound from a Cetti's warbler. As our eyes got accustomed to looking at the reeds, we began to see sedge warblers everywhere as they popped up and down and flitted about like jack-in-the-boxes. We realised that one had a nest close by the hide and was feeding young – but even so we only caught glimpses of it, mainly through the reeds.

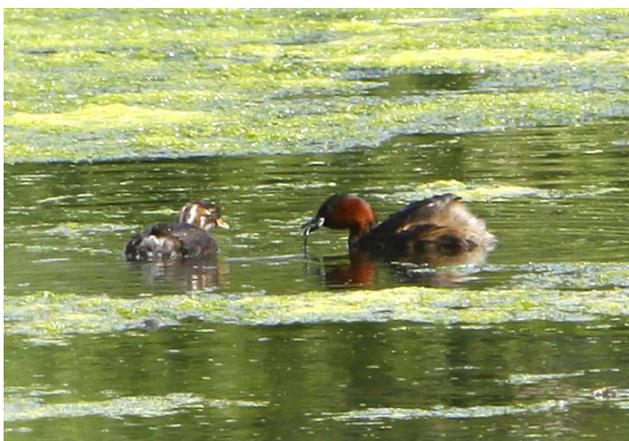


*Glimpse of sedge warbler through the reeds*



*Gawky mallard ducklings*

Mallard ducklings had reached the 'gawky' stage, and we noticed a dabchick, or little grebe, also had a chick, which she was attempting to feed. Initially, the chick approached, interested, but as the fish suddenly flicked, the chick seemed to recoil in horror, and started to beat a hasty retreat with its parent with fish following in close pursuit. A moment later the parent was nowhere to be seen, and the chick had a fish in its bill!



*Oooh, a fish!*



*Ugh, it's moving.....*



*Don't want it, it's wriggling.....*



*Well, maybe it's not so bad after all!*

We eventually tore ourselves away from the lake and the hide, and carried on around the reserve, still ringing with birdsong under the trees. The hay meadow was at its best, massed with wildflowers and alive with butterflies and insects. An extremely curious herd of cattle found us unmissable company, but skilfully skirting around them took us to the far path along the reed and back towards the car park, encountering some beautiful common blue damselflies, stopping in mid-air, hovering and darting on.