

Winter Wildlife Valentine Break – 13th February 2011

Wet but wonderful - Welsh Wildlife Breaks goes to the Newport Levels in February - Magor Marsh, Goldcliff Pill and RSPB Newport Wetlands.

Magor Marsh

After a great night's sleep and good breakfast at Brick House, our first port of call was Magor Marsh, just south of Magor village, and about 5 minutes away. However, we hadn't gone more than 200 yards, when we had our first good sighting of the day – a hen harrier, flying over the fields towards the estuary, across a group of pheasants. With an excellent start to the day, we continued on to Magor Marsh.

At 90 acres, Magor Marsh is quite 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 an ancient wildflower meadow. We started along the boardwalk, passing some magnificent clumps of mistletoe on willows and a poplar. Although very common in the Gwent Levels, nowhere is it more abundant than Magor Marsh. A misty rain started, so we were pleased to walk into the shelter of the trees, and enter what seemed to be almost an alien world of knarled trunks, moss and dim light.



Mistletoe at Magor Marsh



Boardwalk through an alien world

We made for the cover of the hide, and looked out over the lake expectantly. With the dim weather, many of the overwintering ducks proved elusive, sheltering in the reeds, but through the scope, we got some close-up views of a busy moorhen with its spectacular yellow and red bill, a quick view of a dabchick, or little grebe, the ubiquitous mallard, some tufted duck and a single cormorant in its customary position in the willow close to the railway line.

Continuing around the boardwalk we came to a clearing in trees where there was charcoal-making equipment with some recent evidence of use.

One of the highlights of a trip to Magor Marsh in the winter is the diminutive scarlet elf cup, a small bright red fungus, *sarcoscypha coccinea*, which is cup-shaped and up to 4cm across. Its upper surface is a brilliant scarlet red, fading with age to orange, with an underside paler and downy. It favours a damp environment and is found on decaying sticks and branches buried in leaf litter or moss in damp places on the woodland floor – and there is no shortage of moss at



In the hide at Magor Marsh



Dabchick, or little grebe at Magor Marsh



Scarlet Elf Cup, sarcoscypha coccinea, Courtesy Jan Mills

Magor Marsh! One of our group spotted and photographed this excellent example, with a herb Robert leaf to provide scale.

Goldcliff Pill

Moving on from Magor Marsh, we drove back past Brick House to Goldcliff Common on the outskirts of Goldcliff village. As we pulled off the road, we noticed some early flowering plants by the roadside, a welcome sight for the dark days of February – even though they were the rather invasive winter heliotrope, *Petasites Fragrans*, introduced from north Africa in the early 1800s. It gets its name from the mauve vanilla-scented flowers that appear from November – February.



Winter heliotrope, Petasites fragrans, by Goldcliff Common

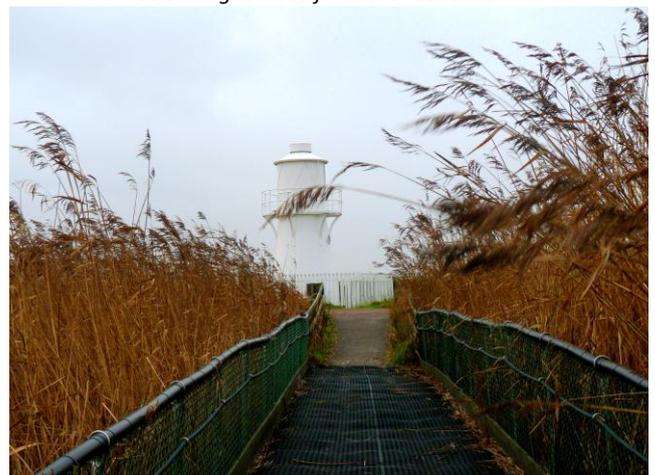
We walked along to the banks along by the shallow lagoons, ideal for waders, and which complement the deeper waters at the RSPB Newport Wetlands reserve. The lagoons are viewed from the top of the bank, from behind wooden viewing screens.

Peering through the screens, there were many ducks on the pools, including shelduck, teal, widgeon, shovellers and mallard as well as oystercatchers, curlew and lapwings. In fact, teeming with bird life as usual. However, the wind was blowing towards us at the screens, and this combined with some light rain meant it was difficult to use binoculars, scope or camera. So reluctantly, as this is such a fantastic birdwatching site, we moved down the road to the nearby RSPB Newport Wetlands Reserve.

Newport Wetlands Reserve

The Newport Wetlands Reserve was created in 2000 as mitigation for the loss of mudflats of Cardiff Bay. It is over 1000 acres in extent, and is managed by the RSPB in conjunction with the Countryside Council for Wales and Newport City Council. It contains a range of diverse habitats including deep water pools, reedbeds, shallow scrapes and grazing meadows, and has established itself very quickly. It also has a very welcome visitor centre and café, with excellent views out across ponds to the reserve and the estuary. After a quick lunch, we made our way directly out past the deep pools, through the reedbeds and East Usk Lighthouse at the estuary, as high tide was in the early afternoon, and we wanted to get the best view of waders coming in.

East Usk Lighthouse from the reedbeds



As we walked along the shore, we had our second great sighting of the day – a short-eared owl flying towards us! We continued walking to a good viewing point to see waders. The rain had eased so we were able to watch in relative comfort, as we saw several large flocks of dunlin and good numbers of curlew as well as the numerous shelduck and black-headed gulls, with Flatholm Island visible in the distance.



Curlew at the estuary



Flatholm Island and lighthouse

Walking back towards the visitor centre, the deep pools were teeming with waterfowl, with the aggressive behaviour of spring setting in, especially with the ‘thug’ of the pools, the photogenic great-crested grebe, busy intimidating the tufted duck, and with spectacular fights setting in between rival coots.



Watch out, tufties!

A pair of swans was sitting well away, watching all the antics, and gadwall swimming through the throng apparently unscathed!



Gadwall with tufted duck

Reluctantly we eventually tore ourselves away from the viewing screens to let others have a good view of all the activity, and made our way back to the visitor centre for a welcome cup of tea. As rain started to set in, we settled ourselves in front of the huge viewing windows for birdwatching in comfort, seeing a kestrel, various wildfowl on the pond, and finally, waiting with baited breath as the starlings began their evening gathering. Despite fewer numbers than earlier in the season, it was still a treat to watch their whirling displays while hugging a hot mug of tea!



Starlings at Newport Wetlands