

Winter Wildlife and Song, 8th – 10th January 2011

3 days discovering wildlife, landscape and music from Aberystwyth to the Dysynni Valley.

Saturday 8th January – Machynlleth, Dyfi Estuary and Broadwater

Our break began in Machynlleth, as the Cambrian Coast train pulled into the station at lunchtime, on time as usual. We met, greeted, and made our way around the corner to the warm and welcoming Wynnstay Hotel, which had a table laid out for us in front of a roaring fire. After a fabulous and warming lunch, we set off along the Dyfi Estuary, as the weather brightened, and the sun showed the estuary at its best. Our first stop was just outside Aberdyfi, at the mouth of the estuary. As we made our way across the small bridge down to the sheltered and secluded bay, we were greeted by a confiding robin and blackbirds, which abound in the wooded area alongside. The view up the estuary, with the Cambrian Coast railway line running alongside, was spectacular – this must surely be one of the most beautiful railway lines in the UK. As we descended to the bay, we could hear the piping of oystercatchers, and the calling of gulls in the distance. Scanning the estuary, we saw great black-backed and herring gulls, busy probing oystercatchers, and caught sight of two goosanders – as we watched, they took off and we followed their flight up the estuary.



Confiding robin



View up Dyfi Estuary

Broadwater and Dysynni Valley

We continued through Aberdyfi and around the coast to our next stop, Broadwater, the large area of water at the mouth of the Afon (river) Dysynni, just before it flows into the sea north of Tywyn, a habitat favoured by many winter waders and wildfowl. As we started our walk, we were greeted at the gate by a family of mute swans still with two of last year's cygnets. We headed towards the shoreline, where we immediately saw shelduck, and shortly after, feeding in the reeds, a small group of teal. Carrion crows were feeding around the margins, and there were a good number of cormorant coming and going across the water, with a number spreading their wings in heraldic fashion on the edge of the water. Further across Broadwater, heading up the valley, we could see a large mixed gull roost of well over a hundred gulls, and as we continued around, we came across a large group of widgeon, beaks down, feeding in the water. With dusk approaching we took a final look out across the water, spotted a single Canada goose near the gulls, and made our way back, pleased with our first day's wildlife watching.

We drove to our base, the Ty'n y Cornel Hotel, by way of the narrow lane running alongside the Afon Dysynni. With dusk falling, and Craig yr Aderyn (Bird Rock) looming as a massive dark shadow and with Cadair Idris presiding in the distance, the valley was even more evocative than usual. As we drove slowly along, a large brown hare crossed the road in front of us, and disappeared into the undergrowth, adding to the magic of the evening. We stopped briefly at the foot of Craig yr Aderyn, and tried to imagine the scene thousands of years before when the ocean lapped at the base of the rock. Then we went back via Abergynolwyn to the warmth and comfort of Ty'n y Cornel to check in and relax before dinner, when we went over our plans for the rest of the break, and talked about what we might see.

Ynys Hir

Sunday dawned a beautiful bright sunny day, with the surprise of the wonderful views of the Talyllyn Lake from our rooms. After a sustaining breakfast (kippers!!) we set off for our first port of call, the Ynys Hir RSPB reserve on the southern side of the Dyfi Estuary. Approaching the reserve past the small pond teeming with mallard, we stopped to

see all the small birds (and large squirrels...) attracted by the large seed feeder outside the welcoming Visitor Centre. In a very short space of time, we saw: blue tits, great tits, coal tits, nuthatches, chaffinches, siskins, dunnocks, robins and blackbirds. As we began our walk through the Ynys Hir woodland, we honed our ears as well as our eyes, and heard the high pitched 'see see' of long-tailed tits all around us, and straining our eyes, we caught a glimpse of their acrobatics high in the tree tops. We heard the call of a group of jackdaws, crows and the occasional lone raven, kronking high above us. After a quick visit to the Treetops hide, and a magnificent view across a sunny Dyfi Estuary to Aberdyfi, we continued down to the wetlands and along the path through the reeds to the hides overlooking ponds and estuary. Along the way, we saw a small flock of linnets disappearing into the reeds, and the unmistakable 'pee-wit' call and flight of a lapwing over the pasture. The ponds were still frozen over, and the carrion crow sentries pecked morsels out of the ice by the Covert Du Hide.



Crow on ice



Ynys Hir, view from Covert Du Hide

Moving on down to the estuary hide, there were good sized adjacent flocks of redshank and curlew by the near shore, as well as widegeon, shelduck and great black-backed gulls. Reluctantly, as the morning moved to lunchtime, we made our way back up through the woodlands. Back through the Visitor Centre, and hot from our walk, we shrugged off our coats and had a very enjoyable picnic – yes, in January!

Nant yr Arian

We continued our drive south to Nant yr Arian, arriving 10 minutes before kite feeding time, getting ourselves in position for an excellent view – and it was! 80 or more red kites swirled gracefully, and then sped downwards to grab the food, fly up and eat it on the wing. Opportunist crows waited on the frozen lake for tit-bits dropped by the kites, while buzzards and more crows hunkered down to eat the food irrespective of competitors. As the food diminished, appetites were sated and the kites began to wheel more lazily, we spotted tits, blackbirds and other birds coming out of the undergrowth by the remaining food for pickings. Walking back up to the Visitor Centre, we enjoyed a good cup of tea with bara brith to chase any chill away.



Picnic lunch, Ynys Hir

Red kite at Nant yr Arian



Aberystwyth and Starlings

In Aberystwyth, we parked on the picturesque promenade, and explored the castle and the learned about the history of the university while waiting for the starlings to 'do their turn' – and they did! Around 20,000 of them returned from feeding on fields and marshes to roost on Aberystwyth pier, flocking and swirling into amazing shapes and patterns. In the still air, we could hear their wings as they turned, and the cacophony as they finally landed and squabbled for position on every strut and joist of the pier. Finally, as the air became chilly and the sky turned vermilion, we made our way up the hill to Aberystwyth's fabulous Arts Centre, for a delicious dinner, a great exploration of the Craft Fair there, and anticipation of the evening's Special Concert featuring the world famous Bryn Terfel. And a Special Concert it was..... With the wonderful relaxed Bryn Terfel, renowned local singer Gwawr Edwards, two Dyfi Valley choirs and fantastic accompaniment, all introduced to a packed house by TV and radio's Nia Roberts, it was truly an evening to remember, rounding off an unforgettable day.



On Aberystwyth promenade with old university behind



Starlings flocking on Aberystwyth Pier

Monday 10th January – Dolgoch Falls and Centre for Alternative Technology

Another hearty breakfast heralded a damp misty day, showing us the Talylyn Lake in another of its guises. We decided to brave the drizzle and, with a quick view of the Lake's group of tufted ducks, we set off for Dolgoch Falls. Spectacular from recent rain, we explored the Dolgoch ravine and its mining relics, stopping to admire each fall with its different character as we ascended. We walked slowly back through the mossy green of the ravine, spotting robins, blackbirds, and tits as we went down, but unable to hear much over the musical tumult of the torrent. Finally, as we reached the bottom, we saw a heron slowly flapping its way up the falls. A quick change into dry clothing and a coffee at the hotel, and we were ready for our final lunch at the newly renovated magnificent Cross FoXes bar and grill rooms.



Heading up Dolgoch Falls

We chatted to the owners who had put so much work and commitment into the renovation, had an excellent restorative lunch, and started our final journey back to Machynlleth station via the shop at the Centre for Alternative Technology, for some last minute purchases and advice on sustainable construction projects. Then on to Machynlleth station, where we finally bid each other goodbye, now all firm friends. We all agreed that we'd had a fantastic time and learned so much about not just the wildlife and landscape, but history, culture and way of life. A fun and fulfilling few days!

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