



# Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory

## Trip to Holland February 2011



### Monday 14<sup>th</sup> February

A select band of 18 in 6 cars met at Ramsgate at 6.15 for the 7.00 ferry to Ostend. We were almost the only cars on the 'Larkspur', and there were hardly any lorries. The sea was very calm, pleasing most of us, but not Mike and a few of the others who reckoned worse weather means more and better birds.

Most of us spent the bulk of the 4 hour journey on the rear open deck, only occasionally having to move as the helipad was painted. It was not too cold, and visibility was good. We saw quite a few Divers (all the identifiable ones Red-throated), a few Guillemot and Razorbills, many Gannets - mainly adult, the usual gulls and just one Bonxie.



Once ashore we decided against a stop en route, but to aim to get to the hostel early. A few bits were seen on the way – a couple of cars saw Great White Egret, very few saw Starlings and none managed a House Sparrow.

On arrival at the 'Stayokay' hostel we were allocated to 'houses' – two storey apartments with bathroom downstairs and 6 beds up, with a precipitous staircase. Each of the couples were given one of the houses, but the other 7 men and 5 women each had to share one – and share one shower. Mike was soon complaining, and arranged for us to also have a number of apartments which were on one floor – a great advantage for those among our party who needed to leave their beds during the night.

A few of us gathered, once sorted, in the hostel grounds beside the playpark, and had a promising start – within a few minutes we had Crested Tit, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper and Siskin, as well as Chaffinch and Blue and Great Tits. Joined by others we then walked out into the woods which surrounded the hostel, but found them comparatively quiet, adding little apart from Greater-spotted Woodpecker.

The evening meal gave us hope we were going to eat better than on our recent trip to France.

### Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> February

Those in the party who had been on the North Holland trip were unsurprised by the breakfast: various breads and rolls with ham, cheese and hardboiled eggs. We made our packed lunches from the same – it was good the first day.

We set off for the Brouwersdam. After the great floods of 1953 the Dutch decided to tame the sea by building dams to join the islands between Rotterdam and the Belgian border, enclosing a lot of what was formerly sea as huge lakes with limited tides. The Brouwersdam is one of these, enclosing an area called the Grevelingenmeer.

On the way we crossed the Zandkreekdam across the Veerse Meer (2 on map), a comparatively narrow strip of water. There were a good number of birds there, but unfortunately we only realised they were there after passing the only car park, so put this site on the list for another day.

Beyond Zierikzee, towards Serooskerke (3 on map) all but the leading car stopped for a flooded field beside the road where there was a large flock of Barnacle Geese, with other geese including

Egyptian, and ducks and waders. On searching carefully a Bar-headed Goose was found among some distant greylags on the sea wall.

We then went to the sea side of the Brouwersdam (4 on map). In a bay here there were a few Knot with Oystercatchers on the beach, and in the sea Red-throated Divers, Great Crested Grebe, Goldeneye and several Red-breasted Mergansers. A little further along was a sluice, with a number of Grey Seals cavorting in the whirling water. On the wall were Purple Sandpipers and Turnstone. The leading car, which we had lost, then arrived, telling us they had investigated the area of the flooded fields more widely and had news of goodies (Smew, Merlin, Spoonbill) to be found there. We decided to make another visit on the way home.



*Knot with Oystercatchers*



*Goldeneye*



*Merganser*



*Purple Sandpiper*



We got a café on the lake side of the dam to open early so we could all have coffee and chips to augment our rations, then walked down to the water's edge, but found nothing but Brent Geese and a vast number of coots. We lunched in the open air there, collecting a large gathering of gulls, and an even bigger one of Jackdaws, who all enjoyed the Stayokay food.

A drive to the north to see the area of the next dam (the Harengvliet Dam, 5 on map) produced a Sparrowhawk seen by some, but little else, so we soon made our way back to the flooded fields (3 on map). A small road leads to the sea wall, giving an excellent view of a number of lagoons, apparently all recently flooded. Among a lot of ducks, geese and waders we found a number of Pintail, Spotted Redshank, a pair of Smew, a Spoonbill and a Peregrine. The latter was first spotted on a small mid-lagoon island - it then flew low over the area causing chaos amongst the ducks and waders, but had no success.



*Spotted Redshank*



*Redhead Smew*

As we started to make our way back the rain started. After dinner Mike got the hostel to go online to check the weather forecast. We were told the great news that Wednesday would be fine in the morning, wet in the afternoon, and that Thursday would be wet all day. We decided to get out early the next morning.

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> February**

We set off for the Zandkreekdam (as missed yesterday – 2 on map) and this time were ready for the car park. A good number of waders were being driven closer by the tide (so the Eastern Schelde is still partially tidal). These included a few Avocet and a good number of Dunlin among the Oystercatchers, Curlew and Redshank common everywhere. On the stone walls we saw Turnstone and Purple Sandpipers.

Next stop was on the Schelde Dam, where we looked at the beach and the scrub on the dunes with a total score of two gulls, but had a very good cup of coffee sitting outside in the bright warm sunshine. Then to Veere, an old, rather Sandwich like, town on the Veerse Meer, about half a mile wide at this point. From the car park we saw Grebes in the water, Little and Slavonian close in, and Black-necked further out. Some large white birds which flew in to the far bank were called as Bewick's Swans, but the telescopes downgraded these to farmyard geese. Some of the telescopes saw Black Swan on the far shore, but they did not shout loud enough so most of us missed it. Cloud and cold mist then came in. Some among us visited a shop in the car park, where the shopkeeper told us of a brilliant birding spot nearby. Leaving Veere we visited a nearby pool, where we saw a pair of Mandarins and a Sparrowhawk.



*Veere overlooking Veerse Meer*

Back to the Schelde Dam, where there was a visitor centre half way across. We drove up, but on finding they wanted over 6 euros just to park, we had our lunch a little way along by a mussel farm, where items of interest were:- the only Dunnock of the trip for most of us, a group of Brent Geese working through the floats in the mussel farm grazing the weed growing on them, some nice close Mergansers, and no less than 12 hopeful Magpies watching us eat. Mike then went off to investigate the visitor centre, where he cleverly negotiated free parking for us all. They told us about a hide at the centre, and an excellent reserve nearby. However, on looking at the map they gave us, we found that the hide was a mile walk out along the breakwater to a misty and apparently bird-free spot, and the sites recommended by the shopkeeper and the centre both proved to be the flooded fields we had visited the day before (3 on map).



So we visited a reserve we found on our own map at Westenschouwen (8 on map) at the northern end of the dam. This was an area of sand dunes, partly open with small deciduous trees in the wet slacks, and partly conifer woodland. The sun came out again, but all we saw of note were seven Crossbills in one of the small trees, and a Buzzard. We climbed a tower in the wood, good for raptor watching if there had been any.

On the way home some of us visited the pools at Ouwerkerk, west of Zierikzee (9 on map). A good number of ducks and waders, a pair of Egyptian Geese, but nothing new. The cars took different routes home, one saw a Great White Egret, and others saw a very accommodating Short-eared Owl. A car which did not visit the pools reached Grevelingendam (10 on map) while the light was still good enough to add Grey Plover, Ringed Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit to our list. No rain for any of us.

When we went through the list that evening Mike announced that we had passed the hundred, which caused an immediate demand for a recount from one of our number whose personal score was only 80, and couldn't believe he had dipped out on so many. The recount, however, actually raised the number by a couple.

Later that evening we all went out of the hostel door to listen to two Tawny Owls calling, but no sightings.

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February**

This day, forecast as 'rain all day', began warm and still, with and a totally cloudless sky. We decided it was the local day, and set off in three groups of 6 in various directions into the woods. We again found that the density of birds in the woods were considerably less than in the hostel

grounds. Expectedly Blue and Great Tits, Chaffinch and Greater spotted Woodpecker formed the bulk; Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal Tit, and on the clearings Redwing and Fieldfare were also seen.



When we all got together for lunch we learned that one group, who mainly walked along the road, had not only seen a Greenfinch (another surprisingly hard-to-find bird), had not only had a very good view of a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, had not only seen a Woodlark flying over, but had also seen TWO BLACK WOODPECKERS, from different parts of the road. Jammy devils!

In the words of the Kearsney Birder: *“a large dark woodpecker was seen briefly flying away calling, the mythical Black Woodpecker!.....at the road junction ? left or right? luckily left won as soon another black woodpecker was seen, this time it was just visible through the undergrowth on a tree trunk, before disappearing from view again, however at this point a buzzard started wheeling overhead, which must have spooked the woodpecker and it flew right over our heads into the woods the other side of the road!”* Unfortunately neither posed for Phil’s camera.

That afternoon most of us retraced the steps of the lucky group, but all we had were a lot of Greater spotted Woodpeckers, a few Crossbills, and the call and drumming of a Black Woodpecker which remained determinedly hidden.

One of our number got into conversation with a local who told us of a reserve site worth a visit on the edge of Bergen, only a couple of miles away (11 on map), so two cars went for a look after admitting defeat with the woodpecker. Here there was a hill with a climbable tower next to the (closed) visitor centre which overlooked an area of marsh and reedbed on the edge of what was once the sea, but is now enclosed water. Across the marsh was a hide. We saw a female Bullfinch on the way to the hide, from which we had a good view of a Grey Heron and a Great White Egret together, providing a size comparison. As we left a hint of cloud was appearing, ending a day of entirely blue sky.

### Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February

A change today, cold, damp and somewhat misty, but luckily no wind or rain. One car went off to explore the old towns of Willemstad, Zierikzee and Veere.

The rest of us went up to by one of yesterday’s spots to try to entice a Black Woodpecker to appear by playing a recording of its call and drumming. Early on we seemed to be getting a reply, but we presumably scared it off as despite a wait with a few more tries we heard and saw nothing more.

We then went down to the local reserve that some had visited the day before (11 on map). After climbing the tower we walked out to the hide – on the way groups of both White-fronted



*No Black Woodpeckers*

Geese and Bewick's Swans flew over. There were also some possible Bean Geese, but not everybody was convinced and a later search of the fields where they landed did not show any. Nothing new at the hide, so on our way.

One of the cars went back to the Brouwersdam where they saw a large raft of Common Scoter offshore, and managed to find both a Bean Goose and a Pink-footed Goose by the roadside at the flooded fields.



The rest of us went to the 'Drowned Land of Saeftinghe' on the Western Schelde (12 on map). The Western Schelde is the estuary leading to the port of Antwerp, and is the only one in the area with no barrage separating it from the sea. Although Antwerp itself is in Belgium, both banks all the way up to the edge of the port are in Holland. The 'Drowned Land of Saeftinghe' is on the southern bank immediately downstream of the port. It was drained in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Saeftinghe became a prosperous city. However the land was partly lost to the great All Saints Day flood in 1570 (attributed by local legend to the holding captive of a mermaid caught by a local fisherman), and the rest, including the city itself, lost to the sea in 1584. Various attempts at re-draining the land have not been fully successful.

The area now consists of polders, a high green sea wall, and a huge area of saltmarsh beyond, We could see the busy traffic of ships to and from Antwerp, but not the far bank a couple of miles away. We climbed the wall in a number of places, saw a good number of ducks and waders – Sanderling and Bar-tailed Godwit were ticks for most of us, and there was a nice flock of Avocets. Highlights were the Harriers – good numbers of both Hen and Marsh Harriers. Lunch break was at a



bird hide (2 storey) in the midst of a construction site on top of the wall – our presence there attracted the attention of the local police, but stalwart Mike convinced them we planned no harm.

Later we had coffee in a local café – an amazing place, over 100 years old, and apparently always inhabited by collectors of anything interesting who never threw anything away. The proprietors were caricatures of just what a Dutch café owner and his wife should be. While drinking a shout went up – for a

pair of House Sparrows in the hedge outside the window, amazingly our first of the trip. There were also half a dozen moorhen in the café car park, another strangely elusive bird during the week.

We stopped the cars for one further climb of the sea wall, where the raptor we saw gliding over the saltmarsh was not a harrier, leading to the quote of the week from one of the ladies:- "Do you mean I got my legs out for a Buzzard?"

In the evening the non crib players were entertained to a quiz by Margaret.

## Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> February

Despite another cold misty day, our final breakfast, a monotonous repeat of the first, second, etc, was brightened by a Short-toed Treecreeper on the trees only just outside the window – an excellent view even for those who did not take their binoculars to breakfast.

After packing we spent about half an hour frightening off any Black Woodpeckers by playing the CD again, then all made our own ways to Ostend. Contrary to rumour the ferry port was not hard to find, there is now even a big road sign to 'Ramsgate'. Actually, finding our way out of Ramsgate port at the end of the journey was more difficult. The 'Gardenia' was a smaller ship than the one we

came out in, with little seating space, but this time with a vast number of lorries which were put on before the few cars; we were 20 minutes late leaving by the time they were all on.

By the time we left it was raining lightly and visibility was poor, but with only a light wind it was reasonably comfortable on the starboard side, though none of us stayed out long. Close to the port there were a couple of Red-throated Divers, then a good close Razorbill, a Fulmar and a Starling. For most of the rest of the trip the birds which occasionally appeared out of the mist (visibility perhaps half a mile) were all either Gannets or a variety of gulls, mainly Kittiwakes.

The best sightings came close to Ramsgate; a huge flock, running into hundreds, of Common Scoter flying low in a wide V-shaped formation, and a single Shag which circled the ship no less than five times. It was just getting dark as we arrived in Ramsgate.

Many thanks to Mike for yet another enjoyable and successful trip.

Thanks to Phil Smith for all the pictures (except Woodpecker hunt on P5 and Hide on P6).

Bob Hinge



1. Bergen-op-Zoom Hostel and Forest
2. Zandkreekdam over Veerse Meer
3. Flooded fields at Serooskerke east of Zierikzee
4. Brouwendam enclosing Grevelingenmeer
5. Harengvliet Dam
6. Veere Town on Veerse Meer
7. Dam and sluice enclosing Eastern Schelde
8. Dune and wood reserve at Westenschouwen
9. Pools at Ouwerkerk west of Zierikzee
10. Grevelingendam and Philipsdam
11. Saltmarsh & reedbed at Bergen op Zoom
12. Drowned Land of Saeftinghe

