

## Birding in Nederland 14/02/09 – 19/02/09

Peter Dean

This was the first foreign trip Mike Briggs had organised for the 'Obs'; unless you count Wales as foreign! He started off with a financial coup by negotiating a 20% discount on Trans Europe Ferries from Ramsgate; not just for us, but for any members of the observatory on production of a membership card. Pete Findley used his IT skills to ably support the venture by producing the information sheets.

**Sat. 14<sup>th</sup> Feb.** – After watching the dawn break over Ramsgate, all 27 of us embarked ½ hour late and went out on deck for the 'pelagic' part of the trip. We were rewarded with good and prolonged views of a large flock of adult and 1<sup>st</sup> winter kittiwakes feeding in our wake (photo, below, by Mike Vurley).



Also spotted were Great Crested Grebes, Red-throated Divers, feeding Gannets, Little Gulls, Guillemots and Porpoises. On the road trip from Ostende to Sneek [pronounced 'Snake'], we were struck by the abundance of buzzards, often perched by the roadside. From the car, we also saw: skeins of geese, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Wigeon and a good but fleeting view of a pair of Smew. As chief navigator for our car, I had to get to grips with my new sat. nav., as well as roads that could have 3 numbers attached to them [European, Motorway and National] and it seemed to be a lottery which one[s] appeared on road signs! We arrived at the StayOkay Hostel, Sneek without any unplanned diversions. After checking in, we found our rooms, with their en-suite facilities, a definite upgrade from the British Youth Hostels to which we are more accustomed. After a satisfying evening meal, we sampled the local beers,

contributed to a group tick list for the trip and planned the itinerary for the following day. It was decided to arrange the day to include a chance to see a Red-breasted Goose to the West of Lauwersmeer.

**Sun. 15<sup>th</sup> Feb.** – Most people selected a continental-style breakfast, which relied heavily on cold meats and cheese; we then discovered that our packed lunch was to be made from the same selection of foods. Having resolved to stick to cereals and rolls for tomorrow's breakfast, we headed for the little village of Anjum and the R-b goose. With the help of Dutch birders, we not only found it but also saw a drake Red-crested Pochard. It is amazing how such a distinctive goose can hide so effectively in a large flock of Brent Geese. During the day, we got used to seeing fields carpeted with Brents, Barnacles, Whitefronts and of course Greylags. Most people were surprised at the large numbers of Egyptian Geese to be seen, including one group of 29; the weather certainly wasn't Egyptian! From Anjum we went on to a café on the Lauwersmeer causeway, this proved to be a good spot for Goosanders, Eider, Common Scoter [in the distance] and, of course, coffee. As we made our way clockwise around Lauwersmeer, we saw Bewick and Whooper Swans, Pochard, Buzzard, [probable] Rough-legged Buzzard, Little Grebe and Goldeneye. Lunch was taken in the cars watching the rain fall over a windswept lake, there were some water birds to see, but the appearance of a Bearded Tit did most to keep morale high. On the way home, we had our best views yet of a Smew (photo, below, by Mike Vurley).

**Mon. 16<sup>th</sup> Feb.** – Our route for the day was Zurich [no not that one!] → E. bank of the Ijsselmeer → Lemmer → S. of Tjeukermeer → Joure → E. side of Sneeker Meer → Sneek. The more memorable birds from the start of the day were: so many Smew that we were almost becoming blasé about these iconic birds; large flocks of pochard and tufted duck; most of the commoner geese already seen plus Canadas and Pinkfeet and a big Barnacle flock that swirled around starling-like before landing in a tiny, green field that became a solid carpet of black, grey and white. Later we had brief stops to see Great [White] Egret, Tree Sparrows, White Storks at nest sites, ♀ Scaup, a pair of Gadwall and 2 Great Crested Grebes in courtship display, even though one had yet to develop full breeding plumage. As in Britain, we encountered a lot of dodgy Mallards of mixed, wild/domestic parentage and a Greylag x Canada hybrid goose.



The evenings were evolving into something of a pattern, with groups developing to pursue their interest in [or obsession with] crosswords and cribbage. Others planned the following day and some even went to bed before midnight.

**Tue. 17<sup>th</sup> Feb.** – Today's itinerary was to birdwatch from the 30 kilometre causeway separating the Ijsselmeer from the Waddenzee and then to visit the area SW. of Den Oever, where a second Red-breasted Goose had been reported.

From the causeway, we saw some nice birds, but in many cases it was the awe-inspiring numbers that for many of us will be the lasting memory. There were massive numbers of Scaup, mixed with Pochard and some Tufted Duck; rafts of Coot and great waves of Oystercatchers, Curlew and Knot pushed up by the rising tide. There were also the nice little touches of displaying Goldeneye and small groups of Black-tailed Godwits. The highlight of our coffee and loo stop at the 'Monument' was a ♂ Common Scoter close inshore and giving unprecedented views for everyone.

We had our packed lunches at a tiny reserve between Den Oever and Hippolytushoef. Groups wandered off in different



directions and one group found the Red-breasted Goose feeding with Brents on the mudflats (photo, on left, by Phil Smith). The flock flew off before everyone had a chance to see the R-b. G, but, in the mean time, we all had really good views of 2, possibly 3, Short-eared Owls flying around the area of the reserve. The Brent flock was tracked to a nearby field and everyone in the group then saw the target bird. Later we had good views of some elegant Pintail and the first close views of Wigeon.

**Wed. 18<sup>th</sup> Feb.** – The plan for today was to go straight to Den Helder on a 'twitch' to see an Iceland Gull that had been feeding on bread in Churchill Park for some time. A nearby Rose-coloured Starling hadn't been seen for 3 days, so it looked like a lost cause. Our bread attracted lots of local gulls but not the special one. Having 'dipped' on the gull and buoyed up locals who had just seen the starling, we started to haunt the back-alleys of Den

Helder, peering in to back gardens. The suburban birding had an uncomfortable feel to it and, as we 'dipped' again, it was not long before we headed off to a seafront café for a coffee. From the café, we had excellent views of a drake Eider showing off the characteristic apricot/pink flush on its breast. The rocks also yielded Dunlin and Purple Sandpiper and a tiny strip of sand was just big enough for 1 Sanderling.

Then it was south, along the coast, to just to the south of the village of Petten, where a flock of Lesser White-fronted Geese had been seen. These were duly located and everyone had the opportunity for a prolonged comparison of them with the White-fronted Geese among which they were hiding. As we watched them in the flat open fields, a local Sparrowhawk hunted through the area, flying very low and using the ditches as cover, instead of the more usual hedges. Near the car parking area, a shallow lake yielded Avocets and a Spotted Redshank standing next to a Common Redshank; comparing the two has never been easier! On the way back to Sneek, we saw Grey Partridge and Rough-legged Buzzard.

The plan for the journey back to Ostend on Thursday, included a stop in Belgium to see a Snowy Owl, that had been there for 3 months. Our evening session focussed on a pooling of sat-nav expertise, so that we could all enter the relevant co-ordinates and find the owl, without travelling in convoy, which it was agreed is both difficult and dangerous

**Thu. 19<sup>th</sup> Feb** – Our first stop, on the way home, was the huge reserve area SW of Lelystad; there were comparatively few birds to be seen in the reserve or in the Markermeer, so we did not linger long. The sat. navs. were reset and took us to within sight of the Snowy Owl on the outskirts of De Haan. Everyone was able to get good views of the bird especially through the 'scopes. It was seen preening, coughing up a pellet, being mobbed by Magpies and being approached, to within a few metres, by grazing Greylags. It was a great curtain call for the trip. We still had plenty of time for coffee and cake in De Haan, before arriving in plenty of time at the ferry port, by which time we had clocked up around 950 miles in the car. We were ½ an hour late leaving Ostend and the light was fading too fast for any pelagic birding, so it had to be eating, drinking and reminiscing all the way home.

Finally I must offer special thanks to all of the following:

- ☺ Mike Briggs for organising the trip and making a small profit for the observatory,
- ☺ Pete Findley for the technical backup and leading the 'convoys',
- ☺ John Hollyer for his encyclopaedic knowledge of the area,
- ☺ The drivers of the 9 cars for their stamina and patience
- ☺ The Dutch people for being so helpful and speaking such good English.