

Harrold Country Park

If one's time is short and a quick top-up of 'wilderness' and 'wildlife' is needed on a brief winter's day then head for Harrold Country Park. This used to be a favourite location of mine but largely avoided now because of the sheer volume of people. A few visits this winter, however, have reassured me that this can still be a very productive site. The main focus is, of course, the readily-seen wildfowl (and not so wildfowl) on the larger lake. Numbers have declined since the winters of 1997 and 1998 but the variety and interest remains, particularly in observing the various feeding stratagems of the ducks.

Two visits in December were notable for the intense concentrations of both dabbling and diving birds in just a few flocks. One such flock numbered 150 individuals of at least five species: the Coot and the Tufted Duck were doing the diving whilst the much larger number of Wigeon, and Gadwall, with a few Shoveler, were doing the dabbling. My guess is that this is a form of commensal feeding where the former



are bringing up the weed whilst the latter are cashing in on their work, or it could simply be that water levels were low enough to expose the weed for both divers and dabblers. Interestingly there were no swans taking part.

After Christmas the pattern changed, perhaps because of higher water levels, and this time the birds were gathered in a larger number of smaller flocks several of which had swans at the centre pulling up the weed. The local Mallards, I'm afraid, were mostly waiting for scraps from kind, or not so kind, human beings. Other ducks came and went over this series of visits: a few Pochard, Goldeneye and Great Crested Grebes being present at the beginning but perhaps moving elsewhere as the weather hardened. Both the latter returned as the hard weather moved on in January. Teal were also absent for a short time but are easily overlooked. Several Goosander also put in an appearance including two magnificent males, with two females, on 22nd January. These are fish-eaters which have now started nesting nearby: their normal range being towards the north and the west in fast flowing rivers. Two Egyptian Geese were also present on this day and could well stay to breed. These are an introduced species, like the many Canada and Greylag geese we already have, and are definitely on the increase.

Other highlights of these short visits included two Kingfishers locked in combat – both indeed falling into the water of a small pond before separating. This was in the area of 'carr' or wet woodland in the centre of the Park which is banned to dogs and well-worth exploring. I have memories of a Short-eared Owl here resting in an open patch many years ago. Coming back to the present, a Great White Egret was easily visible from the car

park feeding on the margin of the smaller lake throughout December. This could be mistaken for the now regular Little Egret but is much larger, the size of a Grey Heron, and has a distinctive yellow bill in winter and paler legs. When last seen it was beginning to show signs of the breeding plumage with wispy aigrettes on its breast and back. The Great White Egret is a recent colonist to Britain from the south and east, as with several other herons, perhaps because of increasing summer temperatures but also because of reedbed restoration in places such as Somerset and East Anglia.

Other recent colonists which have occurred at Harrold include Cettis Warblers which are easily heard but not near so easy to see. They have a sudden explosive call which one field guide describes as 'Listen!...What's my name?..Cetti – Cetti- Cetti _ that's it!' Cettis have also moved in from the east and the south while we now have Buzzards from the west and Peregrines from all over. So it's not just global warming at work. And lastly, the Cormorants which now nest in the Park may not be of coastal origin but some at least are of the sinensis race from the river valleys of west and central Europe, told by their markedly whiter heads. Some older adults of the native race also have this so it is hard to differentiate. But their fresh-water habits fit the bill.

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