

This is the record of a walk made on Tuesday 8th February just at the beginning of the first really cold spell this year. Bright blue skies and a hard frost with a little snow lying from the night before made a long walk absolutely compulsory and the scenery as near as it will ever get to a wild Scottish moor. There were birds in abundance right from the very back door - with 80 Fieldfare on the set-aside by the pony pasture and a lone Mistle Thrush standing sentinel among them. What immediately caught the eye was a line of Lapwing beating steadily south-westwards, a foretaste of the many more to come as the morning progressed, some five or six hundred in all in flocks of up to one hundred, all fleeing from the bitter weather further north and east. Two swans in the middle of a field near Cold Brayfield made an incongruous sight but unfortunately failed to materialise into a pair of wild ones. The target of the walk was Harrold Country Park, via Harrold Lodge Farm and 'Piccadilly Circus' - a meeting of several paths near Nun Wood - and then a return via Carlton, Great Oak Farm and Abbey Park, a distance of some twelve miles.

The wintry scene was made complete by a small falcon flying up to an isolated tree and looking for all the world like a Merlin. A closer approach set it moving again, the jizz was certainly different from that of a Kestrel, but with a sudden jink it was gone and the Merlin remains a might-have-been. A real test of nerves during all this was the sound of a flurry of wings directly overhead accompanied by a single plaintive peep. With the 'Merlin' gone, but the heart still thumping, there was a chance to look up and see a small flock of Golden Plover storming away westwards. These were to be followed by several more small flocks throughout the day, totalling some 74 birds.

It was still bitterly cold and one's head was down as much as up keeping an eye out for icy stretches - no chance of rescue here, the nearest mountain rescue team is miles away. It's time for a refuelling stop as the blood-sugar level is obviously getting dangerously low! Coffee and a sandwich in a secluded spot conjures up a flock of 25 Yellowhammer, always an exciting find today. And so for the gentle slog down into Harrold with magnificent views over the Ouse valley.

The Country Park is always interesting, despite the continued chopping down of trees (heaven knows why!). But, although there are fewer wildfowl now than before Christmas, there are still lots of Wigeon and Gadwall dogging (or is it ducking) the diving coot in the hope of a few scraps from the table. It's obviously time for another visit to the lunchbox. The highlight here is a pair of Goosander on the river, the male looking extraordinarily white (where has the pink flush gone?). There is also a male Red-Crested Pochard present, but this is old hat now as it was first seen in December.

Now for the psychologically most demanding bit, 'over the Alps' to Turvey (rising to almost 300 feet in one place). A chattering to the right and I stand motionless as a pair of Kestrel come hurtling over the hedge to within 25 yards, the male grappling briefly with the female before falling to the ground, and then both taking to their separate fence posts. There's lots more, 58 species in total, but it's time to go.

Br. John

