

Harrold Country Park to the Three Shires Way

Though just beyond our boundary this is a walk quite possible from Turvey via Cold Brayfield and Snelson or Great Oak Farm and Carlton.

On 8th February I attempted the shorter version from Harrold Country Park via Park Wood and Three Shires Wood, which culminates in a magnificent walk downhill into Harrold along an asphalted track, passing Middle Farm and Manor Farm. It's over twenty years since I first walked this route and it still has a sense of isolation and 'wilderness' lacking in walks nearer home. This is partly because it follows a ridge of uninhabited land bordering three counties – a walk on the margins – and also because the woodlands here, though still gamekeepered, are relatively large and remote, and not yet overtaken by windfarms.

It also begins and ends at the Country Park where the wildfowl boost the variety of species often into sixty or more in the winter and up to seventy in the summer. This particular walk produced 61 species with most of the expected candidates but also a few new to the area in recent years and several notable absentees. Of the former, Buzzard, Raven and Little Egret were present, Buzzard not being regular until the 1990's, Raven only since 2008 and Little Egret sporadically since 1994. Buzzard are now indeed the commonest bird of prey with both Kestrel and Sparrowhawk in decline. So I was glad to find three Kestrel en route to match the five Buzzard but sad at the lack of Sparrowhawk. Red Kite can usually be expected now also but not this time.

Tawny Owls were calling from one of the woods but it's a long time since I've seen a Little Owl on this walk, or indeed around Turvey. They too seem to be in decline. Also lacking was a flock or two of Skylark but the recent cold spell may have driven them further afield. There were, however, a few in song. There were Chaffinches, too, already in song but again no notable flocks of this or any other finch or bunting except for a rewarding flock of 250 Linnet with a mix of other birds attracted to a grain spill on the long road back into Harrold – a linear bird table of epic proportions! At least ten species were in attendance including six Bullfinch and a Marsh Tit.

Best sighting of all has to be seven Woodcock in one small area of woodland, the most I've ever seen together. These will probably be continental birds here for the winter and usually hard to come by. Other birds which seemed thin on the ground were House Sparrow, Starling and

even Collared Dove, usually found in the housing estates bordering Harrold. Greenfinch too have all but disappeared but a Grey Wagtail and six Grey Partridge were some compensation.

This is a walk that also produces a regular herd of Fallow Deer along the Three Shires Way. This time twenty were present including several fine stags with full antlers and, for the first time, three or four white deer including one of the stags. Muntjac and Chinese Water Deer completed the set, the former present now for several decades and the latter since at least 1995 – often sitting out in the centre of the larger arable fields.

The final meander around Harrold Country Park produced not only Little Egret but Kingfisher too and a modest selection of waterfowl, markedly fewer than in some years. This again could have been because of the recent covering of ice and now the relatively high water levels. In the past I would have expected several hundred Coot and Wigeon, up to a hundred Gadwall and fifty or so Teal, with the occasional Goosander and Smew. This time I had to settle for a pair of Goldeneye and a few Gadwall and Tufted Duck. But, all in all, it was a fascinating walk.

Br. John

