

BILLINGE HIGHER ENDS

by Dave Broome

Billinge Higher Ends, the most westerly part of Greater Manchester, is an area of high ground near to the south end of the Billinge-Parbold Ridge. The most southerly of the main summits along this ridge is Billinge Hill, 179 metres above sea level. Unfortunately, this hill 'migrated' from Wigan in to St Helens during local government boundary changes in the 1990's (nearby Kings Moss also being 'lost' from Greater Manchester at the same time). However, there is still a sizeable chunk of high ground still within our recording area at Billinge Higher Ends.

This area is undoubtedly a first-class site for visible migration, as good numbers of migrants can be seen to follow the line of the ridge. Limited observation in autumn 2007 gave some decent counts of Meadow Pipits and finches moving south in the mornings. Major movements of winter thrushes have been observed passing Ashurst Beacon (in West Lancs) and onwards past Billinge. More regular coverage of visible migration in this area would be certain to produce a good series of counts.

There are records of Dotterel from the area. One of these was, at the time, in Greater Manchester, on the summit of Billinge Hill when it was still part of Wigan. Another published record is more vague, so may also refer to a location now outside our recording area. There must, however, still be potential for future occurrences of this species in the fields left to us by the Boundary Commission. Another 'speciality' of the area is Ring Ouzel, though not in the numbers which can be found in the Horwich Moors/Pennine areas there has been a decent set of records. Again, some of these were around the actual summit of Billinge Hill, but they have been found quite widely around Billinge. For example, the species has occurred in both spring and autumn at nearby Orrell Water Park, so there should be potential for finding this species anywhere in the Higher Ends area.

The best viewpoint for visible migration watching is along public rights of way north of Crank Road. There is a very limited area of roadside parking before the bend at the summit of the ridge, near to the masts. A right of way runs north from the road, along the access track to Mill House, before sweeping to the right along the field boundary. The footpath passes by a small plantation of mainly conifers, which can hold decent numbers of migrant Goldcrests. This public footpath actually runs along the Wigan, i.e. Greater Manchester, boundary for nearly two kilometres to the north of the Billinge Brickworks lake. An alternative access with more extensive parking is at the end of Smethurst Road, then walking the public footpath past the brickworks lake to the ridge. There are plenty of hedgerows and areas of scrub in the general vicinity of the brickworks pool (the actual former brickworks was demolished in autumn 2007). A number of public rights of way means that this area can be easily covered. The large woodland at Bispham Hall in the centre of this area doesn't have any access, but Billinge Plantation, or Billinge Plants as it is usually known, does have access. This Woodland Trust site is nowadays only half in our recording area due to the boundary changes. A Pied Flycatcher held territory there in 1997 and Hawfinch bred in the 1980's.

If migration is slow, the views from the ridge across the West Lancashire plain and in to North Wales are decent enough as compensation. This can be a useful spot from which to locate the feeding areas of Pink-footed Goose flocks in West Lancs, if you are planning to venture beyond our area. Buzzards and Peregrine are often present, using the updraft from the slopes on the west side of the ridge. One point to bear in mind with these and any passing migrants is that you will need to make a honest assessment of whether birds are in Greater Manchester 'airspace' or not! The alignment of the boundary means that if you are watching from the public right of way north of Crank Road, then the overflying birds are mostly passing through our area, however briefly and whether they are aware of it or not.

**Billinge Higher Ends
site map**
scale approx 1:20,000



Footpath off Crank Road by county boundary (Dave Broome).



The sheep on the right hand side are in Greater Manchester but the left of the picture is in Lancashire! (Dave Broome).



Plantation west of Brownlow Farm on county boundary (Dave Broome).

Dave Broome, July 2008

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