

CHAT, IRLAM AND BARTON MOSSES

by Ian McKerchar



Above: Irlam Moss, field 24 looking north-east (Ian McKerchar)

Chat Moss as it is often collectively known actually covers Chat, Irlam, Barton, Little Woolden and Great Woolden Mosses. The area is generally made up of arable fields and peat workings, the largest of which at Croxden's is now a desolate wasteland of flat, featureless, over excavated peat moss. Amongst the arable fields there are many horse paddocks, birch copses (many overrun with Rhododendron), the occasional 'genuine' remnant peat moss and a more recent use of the land has also included turning it over to the growing of turf. There are many roads criss-crossing the area, most of which are *extremely* pot-holed but footpaths are plentiful whereas parking areas are generally not! The roads are lined with bushes and trees (not to mention deep ditches!), in places including impressive stands of Beech.

The area is excellent for 'farmland' bird species and these include many important county species often difficult to see elsewhere such as Corn Bunting, Tree Sparrow, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Partridge, Lesser Redpoll and Yellowhammer. Lapwing, Skylark and Buzzard are reasonably abundant but frankly anything is possible. To prove the point Bean Goose, Common Crane, Red-footed Falcon, Lesser Kestrel, Red-backed Shrike and Desert Wheatear have all been recorded. Some species are now all but a distant memory though, such as Nightjar and Turtle Dove but back in the 1940's Twite used to be a breeding species, Hooded Crow was a regular visitor and Dipper was occasionally found on the dykes after the breeding season! A speciality of more recent years though has been male Blue-headed Wagtail particularly on the 'potato piles' and Quail which can often be heard in the arable fields primarily along Astley Road or Twelve Yards Road.

Little Woolden Moss is now owned by Lancashire Wildlife Trust and is undergoing a process of redevelopment and rewetting. The site has rapidly become one of the county's premier wader attractions but has so much more to offer. It is covered within its own site guide on the Manchester Birding site guides.



Anything is possible out on the mosses, including from 2007, this magnificent Desert Wheatear (Judith Smith)



This herd of Whooper Swans enjoyed one of the often flooded fields in winter and Pink-footed Geese too often stop, with a particular liking for potato fields (Steve Nelson)



Tree Pipit is now only a rare visitor although this particular bird sang from telegraph poles on Twelve Yards Road for a few days (Steve Collins)



Wheatear can be found in prolific numbers when 'falls' occur during spring and the many bare earth fields at this time of year regularly attract double figures per field (Ian McKerchar)

Access to the mosses is usually made via two main entry points;

- From the north by crossing the railway level crossing at the southern end of Rindle Road (Astley Moss). Once across the railway continue to the T junction, turn right travelling past the fishing lodge to another T junction where you then bear left onto Astley Road.
- From the south by turning up Astley Road, off Liverpool Road in Lower Irlam.

There are occasional parking spots along the roads throughout the mosses but access for farm vehicles and the many heavy goods vehicles that utilise the narrow roads should be provided at all times. The best practise is always to find a suitable parking location and then to walk around the roads, or alternatively park at Moss Farm Fisheries, Cutnook Lane, Chat Moss and for the price of a cup of tea and maybe a cake, you can leave your car and wander around the entire area for hours. Traffic is quite uncommon and due to the terrible state of the roads is generally always slow.

As there are so many fields on the mosses, pin-pointing your observations can be a nightmare and so to ease that pain the field numbers map was produced by site guru David Steel. The map can be found within the site guides on the Manchester Birding website. All bird record submissions, either to the County Bird Recorder as annual records or via the Manchester Birding forum should ideally include the field numbers as a reference.



Chat Moss field 18 looking east. A mixture of arable land and horse paddocks is especially attractive to Yellow Wagtails. The stand of Beech trees along the right of the picture is western end of Twelve Yards Road (Ian McKerchar)



Chat Moss field 62 looking north-east. In the winter months, the fields can become very wet and are susceptible to sinking slightly causing pools as can be seen here. In the summer, they become great swathes of arable crops or Oilseed Rape and this particular field has proved a favourite with Quail (Ian McKerchar)



A genuine mossland wood, near field 11 on Irlam Moss. Birch is predominate with an undergrowth of bracken as can be seen here and Rhododendron can be prolific but the latter is unfortunately rather unproductive for birdlife. Lesser Redpoll breed in these copses plus a host of other commoner species and Willow Tit can also be found (Ian McKerchar)



Irlam Moss field 20 looking west. Another arable field favoured by Yellow Wagtail (photo taken in March though!) and used to be by Corn Bunting too but unfortunately it is becoming increasingly difficult to find out on the mosses. In the distance is Little Woolden Moss, just beyond and to the left of the line of conifers (Ian McKerchar)



Irlam Moss field 44 looking north across Twelve Yards Road and into the distance where Winter Hill is visible. The open aspect of the mosses affords a spectacular vista in good visibility and the skies should be checked for passage raptors and skeins of winter geese especially (Ian McKerchar)



The 'potato piles' on field 44 Irlam Moss, looking east. As their name suggests, they are indeed piles of old rotting potatoes but their attraction for pipits and wagtails (amongst others) is prolific and they have become one of the best locations to find Yellow Wagtail on the mosses, including near annual Blue-headed Wagtail (Ian McKerchar)



A cracking male Yellow Wagtail on the 'potato piles', that rotten and often stinking pile of old spuds which harbours a magnitude of insects which unsurprisingly becomes a magnet for insectivores (Steve Nelson)



Twelve Yards Road on Irlam Moss looking west with field 12 on the immediate left and 14 on the immediate right with the greener field 52 just beyond. The fields to the south (left of photo) are often left rough and have attracted Quail in summer plus can be good for Merlin on passage and in winter but both sides are a magnet for Wheatear in spring (Ian McKerchar)



Barton Moss field 55. These wet fields are often left rough and usually attract little coverage from birders due to their extremity but their value is considerable and all the scarcer mossland species occur including on this particular field occasional winter Jack Snipe and Stonechat (Ian McKerchar)

In short, the lowland mosses are worthy of a visit any time of year but time should be set aside for thorough exploration as often things appear very quiet on first glance. A good day on the mosses is extremely memorable though and you are unlikely to meet another birder such is their under watched nature, so if you want to get away from it all without going too far from home, with the chance of seeing plenty in the process, perhaps including something really good (Desert Wheatear anyone?), then take a trip across 'Chat Moss'.

Ian McKerchar, March 2010

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