

MAY-HEM MADNESS; 24 HOUR BIRD RACE

By Mark Rigby

On Tuesday 13th May, Myself and Mike Chorley took part in the Manchester Birding May-hem Madness 24hr bird race. Careful planning had taken place and several locations had been staked out during the previous week.

Mr Chorley had made up a list of birds that, with a bit of luck on the day, we would have a chance of seeing-this being around the 119 mark. We felt a more realistic total would be around the 105 mark.

The day began bright and early (and very windy) at 0400hrs. We arrived at our first location, Etherow Country Park at 0420hrs and were greeted by our first birds of the day, Blackbird and Robin. The Egyptian Goose was quickly bagged in semi darkness along with some of the more common water birds. Mandarin and Dipper, 2 of the target birds were also seen easily. The woodland species proved more difficult in the strong easterly winds and in fact we dipped on Pied Flycatcher despite being told were to look but Lesser Whitethroat was an unexpected bonus.

We departed Etherow at 0620hrs.

Next stop was the first of 4 moorland locations with a guaranteed site for Wheatear (from the car). As we arrived at this site expecting to see the Wheatear sat on 'the usual wall' like it had been on 2 separate occasions the previous week. Alas-no Wheatear! After a quick phone call from Simon (Warfy) Warford requesting a total update, we left the car to look for said bird but gave up after 10 minutes (as it was bloody freezing and more like a New Year's Day than the middle of May!) with only Curlew, Meadow Pipit and Skylark added to the list. Another guaranteed site was just up the road.

The second guaranteed site for Wheatear were we had seen 10 separate birds the week before also proved fruitless and as time was getting on we moved on to Castleshaw Reservoir. Another few species were added including Raven and Stonechat before we went for Red Grouse at a site were I have never failed. Perhaps our luck was starting to change! Red Grouse was seen without having to leave the car.

The time was now 0945hrs and time for a change of habitat. Irlam Moss was the next port of call where we added Tree Sparrow, Corn Bunting and Yellowhammer to the list as well as some of the more common birds.

Next stop on the agenda was Astley Moss. A bit of a disappointment really. We managed to dip on both partridges and the Cuckoo that had been seen well the week previous and the Wheatears and Whimbrel had also done one!

We arrived at Pennington Flash and the total started to rise fast with Common Tern, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper, Wigeon, Ringed and Little Ringed Plover,

Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Ruddy Duck and an obliging Little Gull that was sat in full view on the spit from Horrock's Hide.

Next stop was Dover Basin and Lightshaw flash. A few more species bagged including Black Tailed Godwit and Teal but there was no sign of the previous days reported Dunlin. The usual Little Owl on the roof of the farm buildings at Lightshaw wasn't playing ball either!!

Wigan flashes added Pink footed Goose and Cetti's Warbler and another update request from Warfy.

Realising time was getting on and we still had several sites to visit, a quick drive to Holcombe produced Spotted Flycatcher (nice one Warfy) and Goosander was added at Ashworth Moor Reservoir.

Another update request and list check showed we had not seen Sand Martin or Grey Wagtail, the latter another guaranteed bird at several sites we had visited.

Ashworth Moor Reservoir to Elton Reservoir in 20 minutes (this must be some sort of record) and Sand Martin was quickly added thanks to 'The Warfords' but still no Grey Wagtail.

The final site of the day produced Grasshopper Warbler and our only owl of the day up to now.

As we got home, a Tawny Owl called and was added to our list.

We finished the day on 95 species. A good days birding and very enjoyable but the final total was a little disappointing. We managed to miss some very easy birds which we tend to take for granted and would see on most visits to the above sites. These including Rook, Grey Wagtail, Little Owl, Wheatear, Grey and Red legged Partridge, Peregrine and with a bit more luck on another day we could have added Cuckoo, Pied Flycatcher, Whimbrel, Kingfisher and Pochard. These alone would have pushed the total up to 107!!

Lessons learnt on our first 24hr bird race-Don't spend too much time on one species and don't take the more common birds for granted as they may turn round and peck you on the bum!

Roll on next year. On a positive note-we were the only team that entered and with a list of 95, WE WON!!!!

As I left the house for work the following morning-a Grey Wagtail was feeding on my drive! Funny how it all pans out!

Mark Rigby, June 2008

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