

# THE PIETHORNE VALLEY

by Bill Myerscough



## GENERAL INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND ACCESS.

The Piethorne Valley is a very picturesque and relatively secluded and quiet location situated reasonably close to the old industrial and mill towns of Rochdale and Oldham, which lie to the west and the south of the valley respectively. The M62 runs to the north and west of the valley and the valley can very easily be accessed via junction 21 of this particular motorway. From this junction follow the A640 which runs towards Newhey and in the centre of the village take the left turn (Huddersfield Road) which heads towards Denshaw. Follow this road, which climbs gently uphill, for approximately one mile before a turning on your left (Ogden Lane) will take you into the western end of the valley and this is the best place to start any leisure activities.

So, what facilities are available? Well the valley itself holds just a few small settlements – Spring Mill, Lane Bottom, Higher and Lower Ogden, with a small purpose built car park (free!) and toilets (also free! – at least the gents are, not sure about the ladies though!!) at SD952122, situated adjacent to the houses at Spring Mill. At Lane Bottom there is a pub – the Bulls Head (01706 847992) at SD951120 and for those with the time and energy to climb up to the upper elevations at the extreme south-eastern end of the valley, there is another hostelry - The Rams Head Inn (01457 874802) at SD977119. Ring the appropriate number for opening hours. Piethorne is relatively under-visited when compared with say the local tourist “hot-spot” of nearby Hollingworth Lake. The valley is usually at its quietest during weekdays during school term times and can sometimes get moderately busy at weekends, especially on Sundays and Bank-holidays but a short stroll away from the car park should be sufficient to leave any of the crowds (mainly ramblers, dog walkers or anglers) well behind!

From a bird watching perspective the valley covers a relatively large geographical area and comprises a suite of 6 reservoirs of differing sizes, farmland, moorland, woodland and several small settlements. The stone-lined reservoirs – Ogden, Kitcliffe, Piethorne, Hanging Lees, Norman Hill and Rooden – are fed by extensive catchments, all of which are managed by United Utilities. The areas that are farmed are primarily given over to the grazing of sheep and there is the beautiful backdrop of the Pennine moorland, consisting mostly of rough grassland, with just small areas of heather. At the eastern end of the valley there are two small cloughs feeding water into the valley’s water collection network – Piethorne Clough and Cold Greave Clough. There are several plantations of varying sizes located across the valley – a mixture of coniferous and deciduous trees. Rough Bank Plantation is mostly coniferous and is situated along the north-western edge of Ogden Reservoir. Piethorne Plantation, Knowsley Plantation and Old House Ground Plantations are mostly but not exclusively deciduous and are situated to the south of Kitcliffe Reservoir, to the south of Piethorne Reservoir and to the north of Piethorne Reservoir respectively. Additionally, in 2008 there was a joint initiative in the valley, funded by the RSPB and United Utilities, which went under the name of “SCaMP” - Sustainable Catchment Management Programme - that was "a ground-breaking project that will benefit water and wildlife". At Piethorne this joint project involved a programme of extensive tree planting, with the specific objective of establishing clough woodland in the

upper reaches of the valley, including both Piethorne and Cold Greave Cloughs, but obviously many decades further into the future! All of the planting of saplings was completed in a very short space of time, with minimal disruption and these areas are now fenced off and free from any “pressure” from grazing sheep. From a birdwatchers outlook this will hopefully eventually bring the western upland woodland suite of birds (Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler) into this area. Who knows the planting might even attract Tree Pipit and other target species in the early successional stages of tree growth?



#### BIRDWATCHING AT PIETHORNE

By the end of 2008, the year on year grand total for the “all-time” species list at Piethorne had climbed to 156 species. All species that could reasonably be found to have had “previous history” at Piethorne are listed at the end of this site guide. Naturally, without having access to every single historical record one can never be certain that such a list is totally accurate but it is at least a starting point for future reference! In any typical year, a realistic total of over 100 species might well be recorded in the valley. This total will usually comprise a “pot-pourri” of regular resident species, supplemented by the by now expected passage, summer and winter visitors, with just a very small smattering of vagrants or genuine scarcities.... if you are extremely lucky! The valley is aligned roughly on a fairly narrow west to east axis and it is thought that it is maybe this particular orientation that is one of the reasons the valley has a relatively poor record for turning up any of the scarcer passage waders. Surprisingly, there does not appear to have ever been any records for species such as Sanderling, Turnstone or even Ringed Plover! Any of the upper elevations of the valley might however be excellent spots for visible migration watching, although this theory has yet to be tested to any great extent! As the valley covers such a large surface area it might not always be ideal for those birders who like to be bird watch through a telescope and tripod – unless of course they actually enjoy carrying large, heavy and cumbersome objects long distances and sometimes up steep elevations! There are of course opportunities at Piethorne for a more “sedentary” type of bird watching but with the obvious proviso that you may miss out on many of the species that inhabit the outer reaches of the valley.



## THE FOUR SEASONS

### **Spring**

This is usually the time of year when the most species might be recorded in any given month at Piethorne, when the resident species are joined by both the lingering winter visitors and the early spring/summer arrivals. The extensive areas of rough moorland and grassland throughout the valley are attractive to breeding Meadow Pipit, Lapwing, Skylark and Curlew. Other regular spring arrivals include Wheatear, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper and Linnets – all generally remaining in the valley and attempting to breed in suitable habitat but with varying degrees of success. Blackcap and Willow Warblers are by some considerable margin the two commonest warblers at Piethorne and generally arrive late April or early May. Garden Warbler has been recorded pretty regularly in recent years and whilst Chiffchaff and Whitethroat are usually recorded annually they are usually just noted as passage species. Lesser Whitethroat, Grasshopper Warbler and Sedge Warbler are all genuine scarcities here and each species has only had a handful of records each at Piethorne.

### **Summer**

The valley can appear to be rather quiet at this time of year. In addition to all the earlier mentioned species, a good look around can however generally reveal many of the resident species going about their breeding duties. Grey Partridge are usually present in small numbers all year round, although it is frequently more often a question of good fortune if you should be lucky enough to stumble across a good sized post-breeding covey. Tawny and Little Owl are always present, although they can be hard to see. Water levels on the valleys reservoirs can fluctuate considerably dependent on that particular year's weather and this underlying unreliability affects several species – Moorhen, Mallard and Great Crested Grebe - all usually attempt to breed but with erratic results. Swallow, Dipper, Stonechat, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Grey Wagtail, Bullfinch, Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Reed Bunting and Coal Tit can all usually be seen throughout the summer months and in most years succeed in producing young. Tufted Duck has occasionally in the past bred here but it is thought very few, if any, young have made it to adulthood. In most years both Whinchat and Spotted Flycatcher can be seen on passage during the late summer and very early autumn periods but both will require a bit of effort on behalf of the observer to find. Whinchats have been known to linger, sometimes in reasonable numbers, through into September, generally favouring the large patches of mature bracken in the upper valley. Indeed, Piethorne currently holds the record for the largest count of this species reported in the county – 11 on 27th August 2003. Common Redstart (infrequently) might put in an appearance in late August but it again will probably take a bit of "digging out".

## Autumn

Swallows, which breed in good numbers in the valley, usually assemble in three figure numbers in September and can sometimes be joined by slightly lower numbers of House Martins. Birds tend to amass on telephone lines in the lower valley prior to their departure date. In recent years, if you are going to see both Little Grebe and Buzzard at Piethorne, early autumn is perhaps the best time to catch these species, as birds move out in their post-breeding dispersal. The local Canada Goose flock tends to increase in numbers in the autumn and winter months and scanning through them, has in the past, produced the very occasional and unexpected reward and excitement leading to a few "goose bumps"! These very infrequent bonuses have included – White-fronted Goose, Barnacle Goose, Greylag Goose, Brent Goose and Pink-footed Goose, although the latter species is more frequently seen flying over in large skeins heading in a south-easterly direction at this time of year. Time spent visible migration watching may be rewarded, in addition to any sightings of the aforementioned geese, by notable movements of gulls, hirundines, Meadow Pipits, Starlings and migrant thrushes.

## Winter

Of all the duck species - perhaps the best represented at Piethorne in the winter months (other than Mallard!) is the Goosander. Numbers tend to increase as the winter progresses and the "redheads" are joined later in the season by the more striking males. Other sawbills - Red-breasted Merganser and Smew have both been reported in the last two decades. Goldeneye has also usually been a "decent bet" – although numbers and reliability appear to have declined in the last few years. Hunched up, brooding and frozen looking figures seen standing around for hours at the edges of any of the valleys reservoirs at this time of year may be either Cormorants or members of the local fishing clubs! Most species of dabbling and diving ducks are not common sightings at Piethorne, possibly due to lack of suitable feeding habitat but also probably equally due to the altitude and harsher winter weather conditions. An analysis of past records would seem to show that if you are lucky enough to come across any of Pintail, Shoveler, Wigeon, Pochard or Gadwall that they can turn up at any time but usually but not exclusively either side of the deepest winter period. Winter thrushes can be numerous but with Fieldfare much more likely than Redwing....equally of the winter finches, Siskin is much more likely than Lesser Redpoll. The winter months are the best time to plan to visit later in the shorter daylight hours to observe the corvid roost in Old House Ground Plantation – when large numbers of Carrion Crows and Jackdaws can be seen making their way to their nights sanctuary. Additionally, Ravens have become much more visible at Piethorne in the last few years and they and other corvids have been observed interacting with wintering raptors.

## Piethorne rarities!

Piethorne is typical of many sites in Greater Manchester where good bird watching is anything but guaranteed! You may have a very rewarding time or you may visit on one of those days when there seems to be more people about than birds! But just to show that anything can turn up at Piethorne, here are a few highlights from the most recent past: - Black Tern (26/8/97), Red Kite (26/7/98 & 2/8/99), Firecrest (31/3/99), Honey Buzzard (28/9/00), Bewick's Swan (6/11/03), Osprey (7/7/04), Scaup (4/4/05), Black Redstart (21/3/05 & 4/8/06), Bar-tailed Godwit (29/4/07), Kittiwake (2/11/07) and Long-tailed Duck (21/10/08).



### References

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