

WATERGROVE RESERVOIR AND VALLEY

A Site Guide and History 1993 to 2006

by Steve Atkins



Above photo by Roger Kennedy

Watergrove Reservoir is a grade A Site of Biological Importance (SBI) and came into prominence on 21st May 2005 when a Broad-billed Sandpiper was found feeding along the shoreline. The reservoir lies approximately 3 miles to the north-east of Rochdale in a south facing moorland valley, 240 metres above sea level. Enclosing the valley is a spectacular horseshoe shape ridge of hills, the summits of which are approximately 400 metres above sea level. It is the largest of the Rochdale reservoirs, covering 96 acres, and was constructed between 1930 and 1938. The surrounding moorland comprises unimproved grassland, grazed by sheep, cattle and horses, with significant areas of rush, and a few mature Sycamores growing next to the ruins of the former farm buildings. There are small groups of stunted Hawthorn trees along the slopes of Higher Slack Brook Clough and elsewhere on the moor. A major transformation of the habitat around the shores of the reservoir took place between 1986 and the early 1990's when over 100,000 native trees were planted, including Alder, Ash, Beech, Birch, Oak and Rowan. It will be a long time before the plantations reach maturity, but they are already providing a new habitat for many species that did not previously occur in the area.

Since 1993 a total of 155 species has been recorded at the site, which includes not only the reservoir, but the valley and moorland ridge as well. This figure is based on records submitted to the Greater Manchester Bird Recording Group. Since June 2005 Gadwall, Red-Crested Pochard, Red Kite, Stock Dove, Sanderling, Little Gull, Treecreeper and Crossbill have been added to the list. Historically this appears to have been an underwatched area with very few references to Watergrove in the Manchester Ornithological Society Reports covering the years 1971 to 1992. I would be interested to hear from anyone who has records from the reservoir and valley during this period or earlier. Currently there are probably only five people that regularly watch the site.

Spring

This is undoubtedly the season when the largest variety of species occurs and is marked by the return of Curlew, Skylark and Meadow Pipit to the moors, with the first individuals arriving as early as February in mild weather. Generally, the main influx takes place during March, with 3 to 4 pairs of Curlew breeding in the valley. This is also an important area for Skylarks with a minimum of 30 territories. The best time of the year to see/hear Grey Partridge is in February/March during the half hour after sunset, when the males can be heard calling to advertise their territories.

Although the shoreline of the reservoir is mainly rocky and sandy, 21 species of wader have been recorded. The north shoreline between the windsurfer's club house and the hide is the best feeding area for waders. Species seen on spring passage include Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Ruff, Jack Snipe, Whimbrel (during May), Spotted Redshank, Redshank, and Turnstone.

There have been two April records of Kittiwake between 1997 and 2002, involving 3 individuals, and a single in March 2005. This species undoubtedly occurs more frequently.

The first Wheatears arrive on the moors during the last week of March; the earliest recorded date being 16th March 1995. Whilst a few pairs breed in the old dry stone walls, many also pass through on passage with peak counts during April and May of up to 10 birds.

The new plantations come alive with the song of Willow Warblers during the second week of April, with the occasional bird arriving as early as end March. The numbers singing have increased significantly as the trees have matured, from 6 birds in 1995 to 22 in 2006. Blackcap and Chiffchaff also occur and a Garden Warbler was singing for the first time during May and June 2004. Grasshopper Warblers have been heard reeling, and sometimes seen, in the fields around the reservoir, as recently as 2005. The presence of this species in May and June may indicate possible breeding. Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler have also occurred, the latter breeding for the first time in 2005.

As the spring migrants arrive from the south, winter visitors such as Fieldfare, Redwing and Brambling pass through the valley on their way north. Flocks of up to 200 Fieldfare and 50 Redwing have been recorded in April, with the latest record for Fieldfare being 5 birds on 2nd May 1995.

Dotterel were seen on the hilltops in four years between 1995 and 1999, in the date range 4th to 18th May. The former United Utilities ranger, Roger Kennedy, was treated to the splendid sight of a trip of 14 birds on 10th May 1997. These were on Crook Moor (SD 918194), which is probably the best location to find this species, although they have also occurred on Rough Hill along the northern ridge. The absence of records since 1999 may simply be due to few observers seeking out the birds, as the species has been observed elsewhere in the Rochdale area as recently as 2004.

Summer

Despite the creation of a wetland scrape in 1996, which can be viewed from the bird hide on the north shoreline, waders still attempt to breed along the shoreline itself, where they are subject to much disturbance from dog walkers and windsurfers. A pair of Oystercatcher laid eggs in 2004, but no chicks were seen. Up to five pairs of Lapwing nest with varying degrees of success, as do one or two pairs of Common Sandpiper. A Snipe was displaying high up over the moors in 2005 and 2004, and a pair was seen with young in 2003. One or two pairs of Redshank were suspected of breeding in 1997 and 1998. However, sightings of this species have reduced significantly since 2001.

Tufted Duck bred for the first time in 2000 and again in 2003, 2004 and 2006, when a female was present with 5 ducklings on one of the ponds. Great Crested Grebe bred in 2006, the first successful attempt since 2001. Other wetland breeding species include Canada Goose, Mallard, Moorhen and Coot.

The moors provide ideal nesting habitat for two red data species, Grey Partridge and Reed Bunting. There are probably a minimum of 6 territories of both species around the valley. A pair of Stonechat fledged young for the first time in May 2005. Whinchat bred during several years in the 1990's (2 pairs in 1997), but unfortunately the species now only occurs as a less than annual autumn passage migrant.

Green Woodpecker is seen frequently enough in the plantations to suggest resident status, and is actually far more common than Great Spotted Woodpecker. Bullfinch and Lesser Redpoll breed in the plantations and a few pairs of Linnet probably nest in the bracken covered slopes close to the reservoir.

Common Scoter stop off on the reservoir during their overland summer passage, with a flock of 23 recorded in July 1982. In recent years the maximum has been only 5 birds seen during the period 27th May to 29th July.

Autumn

Additional species such as Yellow Wagtail and Spotted Flycatcher pass through on autumn passage. The former has not been observed since 2004, although the latter is annual. Others such as Common Tern, Arctic Tern, Black Tern and Kittiwake have also been recorded during the period July to September. Ring Ouzels occur almost annually in September or October, with 4 different birds being present along Higher Slack Brook Clough during the last few days of October 2005. They usually associate with flocks of Fieldfare or Mistle Thrush, the latter numbering up to 38.

Waders observed during autumn passage are: Oystercatcher (including 16 birds on 1st August 1996, the largest flock ever recorded in the Rochdale borough), Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover, Golden Plover, Lapwing (up to 160 birds), Dunlin, Whimbrel, Redshank, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, and Common Sandpiper.

Small numbers of Wigeon and Teal are seen from September through to April, with site records of 33 Wigeon on 9th September 2006 and 60 Teal in April 1981. The maximum number of Pintail being 14 in September 2000 and 4 Shoveler in October 2004.

Skins of up to 200 Pink-footed Geese pass over the valley on their way to or from the Lancashire coast. The first flocks are normally seen in early October and the movements continue into February.

Winter

Snipe have occurred in double figures around the wetland pools by the hide, from 2000 to 2002 and again in 2004, with the maximum being 23 in November 2002. Single Jack Snipe have also overwintered with two recorded in April 2005.

From October to March Woodcock roost in the plantations during the day and can be seen at dusk flying out to feed on the fields beyond the boundary fence. The maximum recorded being four in December 2001. Roding birds were seen for the first time in March 2006.

Stonechats were first noted in the winter of 1989/1990 and this species can now be found regularly in the area during winter. 16 species of duck have been recorded in total, including one record each of Scaup and redhead Smew in 1994, and four records of Red-breasted Merganser. Common Scoters have put in an annual appearance from 2001 to 2005, with flocks of 23 in November 2001 and 27 in November 2002. These numbers have only been exceeded at three other sites in Greater Manchester since 1991. The depth of the water, maximum 87 feet, should make it ideal for diving ducks. Pochard numbers have declined from a maximum of 20 in 1983, to single figures during the 1990's, to less than annual occurrence since 2000. Maxima of 17 Goldeneye (1996) and 12 Tufted Duck (2004) have been seen. A windsurfer club has been based at Watergrove since 1985, and the high level of disturbance prevents large flocks of duck from forming. This factor may also account for the absence of a gull roost, although up to 500 Black-headed gulls, 60 Common Gulls, and smaller numbers of Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Great Black-backed do occur in the winter and on passage.

The reservoir held important numbers of Goosander in the winter of 1996-97, when there was a large influx into the county during very cold weather. The peak counts were 60 in December 1996, 76 in January and 65 in February 1997. Only four other sites in the county held higher numbers at the time. Somewhat surprisingly the highest count since has been only 37 birds in December 1997, with a maximum of 13 in winter 2005/2006. Whooper Swans whilst not being annual visitors have been recorded in four of the last six years, with the maximum being 13 in March 2004.



Above photo by Roger Kennedy

Raptors

The only resident diurnal raptors are Sparrowhawk and Kestrel. However Hen Harrier, Buzzard, Osprey (2 records 1989 and 1995), Merlin, Hobby and Peregrine have all been seen with varying degrees of frequency. Hobby may have bred somewhere in the area in 1996, as there was a series of sightings of an adult from late July into September, with two fledged juveniles seen in late August. 2005 was an excellent year for Hen Harrier with five sightings of an adult male between end February and April, and a ring-tail in October.

County Rarities

Whilst Watergrove cannot lay claim to being a rarity hotspot a few species have been observed. 1995 saw a Brent Goose on 1st February and a Wryneck on 16th September, which flew into the top of an Alder before disappearing into a gully full of bracken. A Black-throated Diver was present on 8th March 1997 and a Ring-billed Gull on 30th May 1997. In 1998 a juvenile Shag, originating from Bardsey, was rescued from Rochdale town centre, where it had been in a collision with a taxi. It was released at the reservoir on 27th October, where it remained until 7th November. A Great Grey Shrike took up residence on the west side of the reservoir from 7th to 14th April 1999. On 21st May 2005, a Broad-billed Sandpiper was found close to the hide, feeding with 5 Dunlin.



Above: Broad-billed Sandpiper, Watergrove's finest hour! Photo by Chris Johnson

Conclusion

Hopefully this article may encourage more birdwatchers to visit Watergrove Reservoir and valley. Increased coverage would almost certainly lead to more interesting records, as we discovered in May 2005. The area does face threats, particularly from off-road motorcyclists, who are causing significant damage to the moorland and disturbance to the wildlife. An 11 turbine wind farm has been proposed for Crook Moor, with the test mast erected in September 2006.

Access

Parking at Trap Farm car park (SD911176) is free of charge. Excellent views over the reservoir and valley can be obtained from the top of the dam. Climb the steps from the car park.

Access to the hide is along a path which runs west from the windsurfer's car park, on the west side of the club house. Follow the track from Trap Farm car park around the east side of the reservoir.

There are 2 circular waymarked routes:

The Watergrove Trail is 2 miles and follows the shoreline of the reservoir. Allow 1 hour 30 minutes.

The Hades Trail is 4 miles and takes you to the top of the valley (not onto the ridge). Allow 4 hours.

My preferred route – follow the Hades trail as far as the Steward Barn ruin (SD910187), then take the left-hand fork downhill to Higher Slack Brook nature reserve. Follow the path alongside the brook back to the reservoir, and turn right to re-join the Watergrove trail along the west side of the reservoir.

Distance – 3 miles. Allow 2 hours.

Public Transport

The nearest train station is Smithy Bridge. Bus service 456 (Bu-Val Tel. 01706 372787) runs to the top of Wardle Village. You can then walk (1/4 mile) to the reservoir. Alternatively train to Rochdale then bus service 458 (Bu-Val Tel. 01706 372787) from the bus station in Rochdale town centre.

Website: www.gmppte.com

By Car

Leave the M62 at junction 20 (Rochdale). If travelling east-bound take first exit off roundabout onto A627 (M) (direction Rochdale), if travelling west-bound, third exit. Move into outside lane and turn right at lights. Take 1st exit at roundabout onto Queensway. Straight ahead at next 4 sets of lights. After approx. 2 miles at roundabout take 2nd exit onto A58 (signposted Halifax / Littleborough). After ¼ mile turn left at mini-roundabout (signposted Watergrove / Wardle Village) into Wardle Road. Follow the road for 1.5 miles to the village square and continue straight ahead to reach the car park.

References:

Hill, P. 2001: Birds of Rochdale Metropolitan Borough, Rochdale Field Naturalists Society

Holt, A. 2002: Watergrove A History of the Valley and its Drowned Village, George Kelsall, Littleborough

Manchester Bird Report: 1971 – 1975, Manchester Ornithological Society

Birds in Greater Manchester: 1976 – 1992, Manchester Ornithological Society

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www.manchesterbirding.com