

ASTLEY MOSS

by Ian McKerchar



Typical mossland habitat on Astley Moss (Ian McKerchar)

Astley Moss is one of the few remnant lowland mosses remaining in the county. It has undergone much management and restoration work by Lancashire Wildlife Trust to re-wet the site and to remove the 'invasion' of birch trees.

The actual mosses themselves (Astley and Bedford Mosses) can appear rather poor bird wise but support a small but significant population of important breeding birds. At other times of the year they can startlingly bird less but the peripheries of the mosslands, the arable fields, hedges and small birch woodlands provide all year-round interest and some very good birding indeed. Unfortunately, the 'winter raptor-fest' of days of old are long gone and days of three or four Hen Harriers and half a dozen Short-eared Owls patrolling the mosses are all but a distant memory. The occasional Hen Harrier still glides through on passage and more often, Marsh Harrier is a more regular visitor. Osprey has been recorded flying through at tree top level, Buzzards are a seemingly 'ever-present' and can often be found in double figures and Great White Egret has utilised the mosses airspace!

A visit to the Astley Moss area would not be complete if one were to ignore the area around Rindle Road (itself actually in the Astley Moss boundary by rights!) and a thorough peruse of the Rindle Road site guide on the Manchester Birding website site guides is advisable.

Access

The area is accessed via the track heading west near the railway crossing end of Rindle Road. There is parking for several cars opposite Rindle Cottages but care must always be taken to park sensible and to provide access for the large farm machinery and frequent heavy goods vehicles which use Rindle Road. This track used to be seeded and as such attracted large numbers of birds such as Yellowhammers and Tree Sparrow but placing seed on the track has now ceased and as such both the latter species are much less prominent in the area.

It must be stressed that visitors must adhere to the footpaths and not stray onto the mosses themselves. Not only are they strictly access by permit only but they are a very delicate ecosystem not well suited to disturbance and can be very dangerous too.

Map and location photographs



Above: Map of the Astley Moss area. Rindle Road is visible running up the right-hand side of the image; parking opposite Rindle Cottages is marked P and the railway can be seen running across the bottom of the image. The lettered red pointers relate to the images below. The footpath, followed either through Rindle Wood or via Rindle Hedge continues in a circular route bordering the mossland itself and can be taken in either direction.



A

Rindle Road (ex-feeding station) track. At the top of the track the fields beyond are very attractive to many bird species. To the left is Rindle Hedge and to the right Rindle Wood. Walk past the gate and up the track, make sure not to park your car at the top of this track as access is required at all times.



B

Rindle Wood. A slender length of deciduous woodland. The track running along it eventually bears round to the left and towards the fields and the SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). In winter Woodcock can be found and the Chaffinch/Yellowhammer flocks which frequent the area often utilise the wood, often with Bramblings in tow if one is lucky enough. The commoner woodland species can usually be found year-round, including Treecreeper.



C

The path which divides the arable fields from Astley Moss SSSI. The tree lined border of the fields and moss prove valuable for passerines such as Willow Tit, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Meadow Pipit. The path can be seen along the left of the picture and there is a small information board half way along. This path can be followed along the edge of the fields until it reaches the scrapes where visitors must veer left

towards the second information board close to the railway. Cuckoos in spring often like to use the trees in this image.



D

Astley Moss SSSI. A rather unique habitat, there is no access onto it but there are points at which it can be viewed over. In summer, the moss usually has breeding Meadow Pipit, Willow Warbler, Reed Bunting, Linnet, Lesser Redpoll, Willow Tit, Buzzard and Cuckoo. In other seasons, it can be startlingly

bird less although it has maintained a wintering population of Snipe and the large quantity of dragonflies in late summer and autumn attracts passage Hobby to the area.



F

Astley Moss scrapes. Once nothing but a damp and overgrown carrot field it has now been furnished with several ponds and a small area of reed courtesy of the Lancashire Wildlife Trust. Grasshopper Warbler has 'reeled' in the area from time to time and the scrapes have attracted small numbers of Snipe, Teal and Mallard plus the odd passage Green and Common Sandpiper. Well worth a look.



G

The fields behind Rindle Wood. These three fields have developed into a general star attraction for birding in the area and are often ploughed in early spring which leads to them being very attractive for passage migrants. Around mid-April small flocks of Whimbrel occasionally appear and feed on the fields, increasing towards late April-early May and

currently afford the easiest, most reliable and best viewing of this species in the county. Care must of course be taken not to disturb these flocks but utilising the footpaths will not usually disturb them in any way. Other birds around this time include Wheatear, wagtails (including Yellow), pipits and thrushes being evident. In other seasons, particularly in winter, the fields harbour small flocks of Meadow Pipits, Skylark, finches, buntings and winter thrushes which can of course attract the odd Merlin.



H

Rindle Hedge. In winter especially, the hedge is usually busy with Yellowhammers, Chaffinch and Tree Sparrow (latter unfortunately declining), often in large flocks. Brambling can often be found here and unusual visitors have included Kingfisher, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and occasionally Corn Bunting. Willow Tit is also often seen here and in spring/summer, warblers abound and have included Garden Warbler.



Cuckoo is something of a mossland speciality but other than in spring when their calls resound around the area, they can be highly mobile and elusive. (Ian McKerchar)



Tree Sparrow used to occur in large flocks during winter, attracted to seed placed along the feeding station track but the ceasing of feeding the track, along with the general decline of the species means it is much less commonly encountered in the area. Listen out for their characteristic calls as they fly into the hedges and trees. (Ian McKerchar)



Yellowhammer is an Astley Moss forte with regular flocks which have exceeded three figures. They usually favour Rindle Hedge but can be seen anywhere in the area and their song is highly prominent in spring. (John Tymon)



The fields behind Rindle Wood (along with occasional other fields in the Rindle Road area) have become a spring magnet for Whimbrel and small flocks can occasionally be seen feeding in them, affording great views for observers. (Ian McKerchar)



A late May Osprey glides low over Astley Moss. (Jonathon Platt)



A spring Ring Ouzel shows what the fields behind Rindle Wood can produce and with seemingly increased passage records within the immediate vicinity they are perhaps being overlooked? (Ian McKerchar)

Combining Astley Moss with a visit to the Rindle Road area and perhaps Chat Moss south of the railway will provide a great day's birding at any time of the year. It is often devoid of other birders and can afford a serene birding experience, a good selection and variety of species and of course, always the chance of something out of the ordinary.

Ian McKerchar, May 2010

www.manchesterbirding.com