

THE 'HORWICH' MOORS

Site overview

by Ian McKerchar (including all location photos and maps)



Looking over towards Southport across Wildersmoor. On a clear day, you could swear to be able to pick out flocks of waders on the mudflats of the Ribble Estuary!

The 'Horwich Moors' actually comprises a number of small moors and woods, criss-crossed with a plethora of paths and tracks. The whole area affords some of the best birding in the county, at the right time of year and in the right conditions! At other times it can be typically bleak and birdless but even on these days there is usually something to see and the views are amongst the very best available anywhere in the county.

To enable easier reference to the various areas comprising the 'Horwich Moors', this site guide has been split into four main parts as can be found on the maps at the end of this guide. Note that there are many more areas not covered though as it only attempts to highlight the most regularly visited and hence productive of them. I would always recommend trying other areas, especially those to the north of Coal Pit Lane which are less regularly visited. A full day could conceivably cover all the areas but is very tiring and can involve little time spent really searching and fully appreciating them. It must be borne in mind that weather conditions on the moors are incredibly susceptible to rapid change, usually for the worst. Dress appropriately and never underestimate just what you might expect, I have been up there in excellent visibility one minute only to be shrouded in thick fog the next and even for someone who knows the area very well, the disorientation that presents can be troubling. The area can be busier during weekends and bank holidays, especially if the weather is good but it rarely, if ever, reaches the busy proportions of the lowlands and you can always find yourself some isolation if that's what you seek.

The views from the moors during the right weather cannot be bettered anywhere in the county and rival most places in the north west. On a clear day from, particularly an area along Deans Ditch, one can see from a single spot the North Wales mountains, Snowdon and Anglesey to the south plus the entire Morecambe Bay and peaks of the Lake District to the north with the Isle of Man also visible and the view across Lancashire to the north east and Yorkshire beyond breath-taking.

Birds

There is no bad time to visit the moors above Horwich, to be fair, even the poorest of weathers has produced some great birding from time to time. I've been up there wondering what the heck I was doing in such a howling wind just before two Hen Harriers sped past and continued out west. I fondly recall an evening finding the field at the bottom of Mast Road completely devoid of birds, whereupon an absolutely torrential rainstorm engulfed the moors which after clearing had dumped three Twite, 11 Wheatear, three Whinchat, 60 Meadow Pipit and two Tree Pipits onto an area no larger than half a football field! That said, it is the spring and autumn migration periods which produce the finest moments and visible migration is perhaps more prominent and rewarding here than any other location in the county. Some of the very best birding days ever encountered in Greater Manchester (and even perhaps the north-west of England) have occurred up here with maximum daily autumn counts of 37 Spotted Flycatchers (with a maximum single flock of 11!), eight Whinchat, 51 Willow Warbler, 15 Tree Pipits (included a flock of 10), 1690 Meadow Pipits and 83 Wheatear.

Red Grouse are resident and often very observable as are Raven which can attain double figure counts. Stonechats occasionally

breed and be found all year round as with Coal Tit in the conifer woods. Migration both ways brings a superb variety of species which is only bounded by your own energy, enthusiasm and optimism whilst flogging the area. Ring Ouzel have become something of an early spring attraction, particularly around Burnt Edge Moor but late autumn can also produce the species, more often mixed in with Fieldfares and Redwings over the fields along Georges Lane, north of Wilderswood. The latter location is also favoured by Redstart, particularly in autumn but Whinchat can be found anywhere including on the high heather moors themselves. The moors are often alive with Meadow Pipits and have produced surprising numbers of Tree Pipits which now appears to be a regular though sparse autumn migrant and once even a Richards Pipit. The moors have become something of a magnet for Spotted Flycatchers particularly in autumn and on fine warm days when the usual hoards of flies (or indeed flying ants) emerge their numbers can be impressive to say the least. Raptors can feature heavily and besides the often double figure numbers of hunting Kestrels, the area has amassed two records of Red-footed Falcon, annual migrant Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Merlin, several Ospreys and Hobby's and at least one Goshawk. Dotterel have been found on three occasions and further concerted effort at peak times would surely pay dividends. Visible migration observation has proved extremely productive by the small number of dedicated watchers with superb passage often observed, occasionally including good birds such as Twite, Snow Bunting and on a couple of occasions at least, Lapland Bunting. Winter can bring good numbers of Brambling to the Beech woodlands and although the moors tend to be bleak and birdless, a determined effort would surely produce more Snow Bunting records?



Ring Ouzels on Burnt Edge (Bill Aspin)



Male Snow Bunting, Winter Hill (Andy Isherwood)



Wheatear, Burnt Edge (Peter Turner)



Raven over Wildersmoor (Dean MacDonald)



Spotted Flycatcher, Georges Lane (Ian McKerchar)



Lapland Bunting, Winter Hill (Mark Rigby)



A section of heather moor in full bloom is a sight to behold.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the photographers who supplied their avian images and to Andy Makin, the site's regular moorland moocher for his assistance and insight into the entire area during our occasional visits together.

Ian McKerchar, December 2009 (revised October 2010)

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