

PENNINGTON FLASH

by Peter Alker and Ian McKerchar



Pennington Flash, an aerial view to the west (Photo courtesy of [WL@CT](#))

Pennington Flash is a large subsidence flash approximately a mile long and is situated just outside Leigh, it is undoubtedly the jewel in the county's birding crown and remains one of the top birding locations in the north-west of England. Its large variety of habitats can produce an excellent number of species to see at any time of year and provides genuine day-long birding. It affords supreme viewing thanks to its good network of paths and comfortable hides around the nature reserve area and the site is ideal for disabled persons as all hides have access for wheelchair users and paths are well surfaced. Toilets are available (including disabled toilets) and there is an information point with a recent bird sightings board located by a large pay and display car park (a small fee for all day parking is required and annual passes are also available). Pennington Flash can offer birders anything from a brief 'whistle-stop' flying visit to an all-day major 'mooching' affair and everything in between. The location of the flash is well signposted off the A580 East Lancashire Road and the main entrance is opposite Leigh Fire Station on St. Helens Road.



Pennington's crowning glory. The 1994 first British record of Black-faced Bunting (Photo by the late Roger Wood)

By March 2009, 243 species had been recorded, including no less than seven county first in the last decade but the site is undoubtedly most famous for the discovery of the first Black-faced Bunting in Britain in 1994, which obligingly stayed for seven weeks. A feeding station at Bunting Hide provides excellent views of Willow Tit, up to 30 Bullfinch, occasionally Water Rail and many other common woodland species. Recent rarities have included Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Whiskered Tern, White-winged Black Tern, Great Northern Diver, Temminck's Stint, Spotted Crake, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup and Brent Goose. The evening gull roost in winter is vastly under-watched and is crying out for attention as are other evening gatherings such as wader and wildfowl roosts on and around the spit from Horrocks Hide and dedicated observation would definitely produce excellent results. Similarly, the wooded areas are generally very under-watched, especially on the south side of the flash and these hold breeding Garden Warblers in summer and have held Wood Warbler, Redstart, Spotted and Pied Flycatchers on passage and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. A walk encompassing a complete circuit of the flash can produce an impressive day list of species and is very highly recommended, it is approximately three to four miles long and can take anything from two to four hours depending on how much stopping is involved. Lastly, don't be put off by the often large number of human visitors as the trees by the play area have held up to five Spotted Flycatchers and a Hobby has hunted dragonflies between people on the picnic field in autumn! It's also worth bearing in mind that the flash is susceptible to sporadic high water levels which may occasionally impact on your birding here.



Above: Pennington Flash is the site in the north-west of England to encounter such regular close range views of Bullfinch and Willow Tit, both of which can be viewed down to only a few feet in the feeding station, which also provides superb photographic opportunities and especially in winter demands the attention of birders such is the wonderful array and amount of birds utilising it. (Photos: Bullfinch by Mike Baron, Willow Tit by Paul Hammond)



Above: Ignore any areas of Pennington at your peril! Both the above birds occurred in less than expected areas with the Cattle Egret (left, photo by Andy Makin) occurring on the flooded golf course and the Ring-billed Gull (right, photo by John Tymon) spending all it's time in or around the main car park!



Hobby (left, photo by John Tymon) has become a more recent feature at Pennington with an increase in sightings which has been much appreciated but surprises are never far away, like this Red-necked Grebe (right with Tufted Duck, photo by Judith Smith) which appeared on the lagoon on Ramsdales Ruck.



This flock of 28 Brent Geese (photo by Ian McKerchar) which spent the majority of a day at the flash goes to prove just what outstanding sightings it can produce but rarities aside, it is its general variety and quantity of species combined with the ease of viewing them which continues to set Pennington Flash apart and ensure a great visit.



Spending time in Horrocks Hide is essential, especially with an absolute 'spit-full' of birds such as here is a real highlight of any visit (Photo Peter Alker). The aerial view of the spit shows that it was once part of a railway line but is now the focus for much of the site's birding attention (Photo courtesy of WT@CT).

IMAGES AND A WALK AROUND THE FLASH

These images illustrate a clockwise walk around the nature reserve section of the country park and then a clockwise walk around the entire flash itself.



Ignore the area around the car park at your peril for it attracted the county's first ever record of Lesser Scaup and is often beloved by spring Black-necked Grebes. The gulls that gather to feed on the scraps intended for the geese, ducks and swans around and even in the car park have included Kittiwakes, Yellow-Legged Gull and on more than one occasion Ring-billed Gull, including one very confiding first winter in the car park that was more than happy coming to bread! Other interesting sightings on this part of the shoreline have included a Ruff that chased breadcrumbs one severe winter. Rock Pipit and Spotted Redshank have also been found between the rocks on the shore. (Photo John Tymon)



The view from Horrocks Hide (named after Pennington Flash and county birding legend Frank Horrocks) overlooking the 'spit' (centre), Horrocks Scrape to its right and 'mini-spit' at the right of the scrape (with the tree on it). This is the most productive location especially if you can give it some time and it is well worth starting and ending any visit to Pennington at this hide. The direction post on the left of the picture gives a handy compass bearing and is often utilised by gulls and terns. The small scrape in front of the hide (at the very bottom of the picture) can be excellent for waders (including a 2007 Red-necked Phalarope) and wildfowl (especially Garganey). The spit itself remains the focus for much of the site's attention and with good reason as this small strip of stone and shingle continues to attract most of the site's scarce and rare birds. The area in the centre background is Ramsdales

Ruck, once a huge colliery spoil heap and recently landscaped to very good effect. (Photo John Tymon)



The main path in between the Kidney Pond (on the left) and Pengies (on the right) with the Tom Edmondson hide (renamed as such from New Hide 9th June 2009) in the distance at the top of the track. Recent birds along here have included Firecrest and those of old include a once regular large Long-eared Owl roost, a singing Marsh Warbler and of course the astonishing British first record of Black-faced Bunting! (Photo Ian McKerchar)



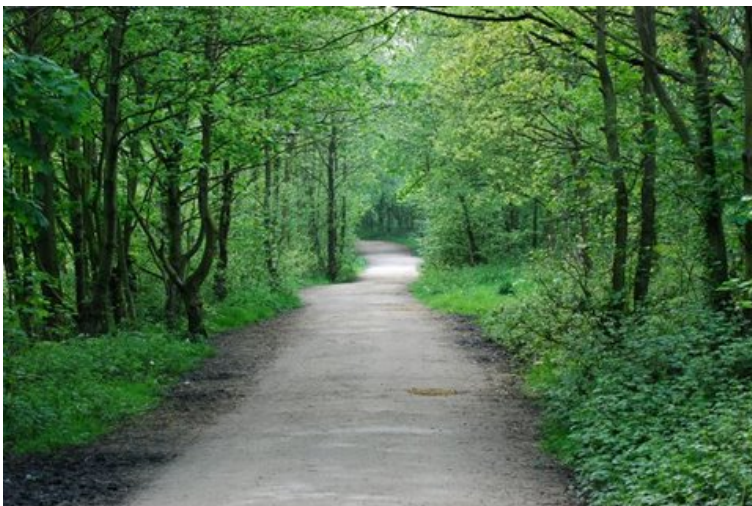
The scrape viewed from New Hide (to be renamed in Spring 2009) is a very productive spot and worthy of spending some time at. The roosting Long-eared Owls can often be found in the trees and bushes on the very left of the image on the island, the central area and scrape to its right attracts various wildfowl and waders including Garganey and Green Sandpiper. Kingfishers are a regular feature here and county rarities have included Spotted Crake (and it remains perhaps the best location to attempt to find one for yourself), Great White Egret, Little Egret, Spoonbill and Water Pipit. (Photo John Tymon)



The scrape as viewed from Ramsdales Hide (opened July 2009), much beloved by wildfowl (especially autumn Garganey) but also attracting waders, particularly Little Ringed Plover. The trees and bushes around it produce an array of passerines at any time of year which once included the site's only record of Nightingale. (Photo John Tymon)



Ramsdales Hide as viewed from the scrape. As Pennington's newest hide, it took only one day after it's official opening to record its first (then) county rarity; an excellent Little Egret. (Photo Peter Alker)



The path 'around the back' of the nature reserve on the way to Teal Hide and running parallel to the canal, often overlooked as simply a route to and from the hides but is much more and is a terrific area for spring, summer and autumn warblers including Grasshopper Warblers in the rough grassland and Garden Warblers, both of which can often be difficult to connect with elsewhere in the area. The site's first Wood Warbler was also found here in 1996. (Photo John Tymon)



Teal Scrape from Teal Hide is a highly productive location, affording very close views of wildfowl and waders. This man-made scrape has attracted some quality county birds such as Little Egret, Spotted Redshank, Curlew Sandpiper and wintering Bittern but none more so than the initial finding of the 2002 drake Canvasback. (Photo John Tymon)



Pengies pond from Pengies Hide. The old Pengies Scrape which used to be on the very right of this image has long gone but the reeds here hide a multitude of wildfowl and once a very confiding Spotted Crake which given the favourable annual autumn reed trimming, must surely be due a re-occurrence. (Photo John Tymon)



The south side of the flash is extremely under watched and has many wonderful habitats, including this large horse paddock surrounded by trees which is highly attractive to winter thrushes and finches and with increased coverage would surely prove even more productive. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



'Eric's Hump' on the south side of the flash, affectionately named after one time Pennington Chief Warden Eric Staniforth and is in fact the site of an old refuse tip and forms part of what is more commonly known as Bradshaw Leach. It is now a worthy spot for birder's attention (although the old tip did attract a Long-tailed Skua!) and is a good place to connect with various woodland species but as with other locations on Pennington's south side it too cries out for more attention. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



Some of the south side meadows (this one at 'Eric's hump') are managed for their wild flowers which include bee orchids. (Photo Peter Alker)



Another of the paths on the south side of the flash, this one on Aspull Common, which is nearly entirely overlooked or ignored by visiting birders but offers terrific birding with the bushes and trees hiding large tit flocks, finches, woodpeckers and warblers and has contributed some excellent site records of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler and Siberian Chiffchaff from its scant coverage. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



The track to Liptrot Farm was once an annual site for Redstart each spring but does their lack of recent records indicate that they have vanished or is it that we never check the track anymore? The latter is certainly true but the area still deserves at least the occasional coverage as the grazing fields and hedges along its edge are a prime site for several potential species; Great Grey Shrike anyone? (Photo Ian McKerchar)



Whittle's Fields form the largest area of grazing grassland mixed with mature hedges and trees around the flash and should always be worthy of a good scanning. When once better watched, Little Owl were occasionally found roosting in the hedgerow trees. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



Sorrowcow Farm pond, perhaps most famous for its 1977 spring singing Great Reed Warbler but highly inviting to a host of species especially with its particularly productive scrubland surrounding it and recent observations have found Redstart, Cetti's Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat. The area at the right-hand top corner, now largely inaccessible, is known as 'Back o Billies' which during the 1970's and 80's, and due to its almost unique flash habitat at the time (now replicated throughout the flash!), attracted such quality site species as Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Turtle Dove, Firecrest and the county's only record of Tawny Pipit. The view over the flash from opposite the pond is excellent and can be very good for viewing the nightly winter gull roost. (Photo John Tymon)



Looking down Green Lane from Sandy Lane, the yacht club is on the left and cottages on the right at the bottom. The grass edges to the flash in front of the yacht club are attractive to the occasional waders and the hedges along the lane here hold a resident flock of House Sparrow and the grassland around it the often have Grasshopper Warbler in spring whilst the trees by the cottages once attracted a Crossbill, a very rare flash species indeed. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



The footpath down past Mossley Hall Farm viewed from Byrom Lane, the wooded areas around the farm itself can be very productive and have held Tree Sparrows but they suffer from a lack of coverage. The horse paddocks either side of the path here are very attractive to winter thrushes. (Photo Ian McKerchar)



The western (Slag Lane) end of the flash, here viewed from Mossley Hall Farm. The reedbed at this end and bushes within it are productive for warblers (particularly Sedge and Grasshopper) but could easily attract something altogether better. This end of the flash is fairly shallow and is where Hey Brook enters, which attracts good numbers of *aythya* that quite often can include one or two Scaup. Other species found here have included Long-tailed Duck and Blue-winged Teal. Low water levels here expose a large sandbank which is not surprisingly attractive to waders at the right times of year and is well worthy of the short walk over Ramsdales Ruck from the nature reserve to check it out. The area on the far right of the picture is the wooded area around the Slag Lane car park and deserves an amount of any birders time for it annually attracts Lesser Whitethroat, Spotted Flycatcher and Mealy Redpoll (the latter with a run of records in March) whilst

it has also managed to draw in Arctic Redpoll with four records in this location during the 1996 influx! (Photo Ian McKerchar)



Ramsdales Ruck, now landscaped and unrecognisable from its original bare, grey and desolate coal mining spoil ruck of old. The new grassland attracts good numbers of Skylark and Meadow Pipit with Whinchat, Wheatear and White Wagtail during passage (spring especially for the latter two) whilst Stonechat is occasional and the area has attracted a Richard's Pipit before now.



The spit and Horrocks Hide and scrape viewed from Ramsdales Ruck and looking beyond towards the car park. The water at the extreme lower edge of the photo is 'the lagoon' and despite often considerable disturbance has attracted Red-necked Grebe. (Photo John Tymon)



The main path bisecting Ramsdales Ruck and connecting the nature reserve side to the western end with Ramsdales Flash (Rammies) beyond. To the south of the path it is landscaped, rough grassland (see above image) but to its north is the remnants of what the old Ramsdales Ruck used to look like and is good for warblers, redpolls and tit flocks not to mention more than the occasional Woodcock and Green Woodpecker. (Photo John Tymon)



Ramsdales Flash or Rammies as it is known locally was formerly separated from the main flash by a railway line, the remnant of which now forms the spit. The reedbed here holds Water Rail, Reed and Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting and often a Bittern in most winters. The section of the flash itself is good for wildfowl, affording protection from the weather and yachts and offers good viewing. Great Crested Grebe often gather in good numbers (especially on Sundays when the yachts are out) and the annual summer flock of Tufted Duck can usually be found loafing here and is always worthy of careful scanning for something 'better' amongst them. The smaller gull species also often have a pre-roost gathering here in winter. (Photo Peter Alker)



The full extent of Rammies reedbed. Water Rail and Bittern favour here because water in parts of the reed bed never freezes even in the hardest winters. (Photo Peter Alker)



A skein of Pink-footed Geese flying east. Birders should always keep an eye on the sky at the Flash as it can be a good site for visible migration and soaring species. Up to five (may be more?) Buzzards have been seen in the air together and Ospreys usually pass through very quickly although Marsh Harriers have been known to linger including one bird which roosted in Canary Grass at the western end of the flash. Large raptors almost invariably cause Lapwing and gulls to take to the air but these species sometimes also spook Carrion Crows for no apparent reason at all. Divers have been seen circling and frustratingly moved on rather than settling on the flash. Most records of Tree Pipit and Raven involve fly-overs and Swifts, that most aerial species, often gather over the flash in huge numbers coming down to low levels in poor weather. (Photo Peter Alker)



Pennington Flash is undoubtedly worthy of birders attention at any time of year, not least as its collection of species is unrivalled in the county. Enjoying the often stunning sunset, especially combined with the winter's evening gull roost as can be seen here, makes a fine end to a great day's birding. (Photo John Tymon)



Not everything at Pennington Flash is birds though. There is so much more to see and do, such as appreciating other wildlife like this Bee Orchid (Photo Peter Alker)

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the photographers whose photographs have been utilised in this guide, to Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust and to David Wilson for those early 1980's days which encouraged Ian McKerchar's long-term relationship with the site.

Peter Alker and Ian McKerchar, March 2009

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