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Situated 12 miles from the urban conurbations of Glasgow and Paisley, Lochwinnoch RSPB Nature Reserve remains one of the finest remaining wetlands in the south west of Scotland. The reserve is part of Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, comprising two shallow lochs fringed by marsh and fen vegetation which, in turn, is fringed by areas of scrub and deciduous woodland. There are two trails leading to three hides, an observation tower which gives a panoramic view over the reserve and a shop selling a wide range of RSPB goods and specialising in books and optics.

The reserve is regionally important for breeding and wintering wildfowl populations and holds good numbers of passerines such as Sedge and Grasshopper Warbler and Reed Bunting.

Over 100 species are recorded annually on the reserve with the 'list' currently standing at 184. Rarities such as Purple Heron, Spoonbill, Black Duck and Black Tern have been recorded, with an Eye-browed Thrush in 1978 being only the second Scottish record. East coast specialities such as Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike and Yellow-browed Warbler have strayed west while Marsh Harrier and Osprey are occasional in spring and autumn. In recent years the reserve has been somewhat neglected by birders which has resulted in birds being under-recorded and rarities no doubt missed!

Plates 77 & 78. Views of Lochwinnoch RSPB Nature Reserve (RSPB).



Numbers of wintering wildfowl have fluctuated over the last few decades with species such as Shoveler and Pochard showing marked declines from the heady days of the 1970's when up to 2,000 Pochard were recorded. Up to 50 Whooper Swan, and 300 Greylag Geese roost regularly on the reserve with up to 160 Wigeon, 200 Teal, 130 Goldeneye and 80 Goosander present throughout the winter months. Smew is an annual visitor with Long-tailed Duck and Scaup seen occasionally.

Breeding birds include 12 pairs of Water Rail, over 200 pairs of Sedge Warbler and 30 pairs of Reed Bunting. Several pairs of Great-crested Grebe breed annually. Management work on the reserve has contributed to an increase in the number of breeding waders with nationally declining species like Lapwing showing an increase in recent years. Over 20 pairs of Common Snipe breed with up to 100 present in autumn. Jack Snipe have recently been recorded after an absence of a decade on managed areas of the reserve while redshank made a welcome return as a breeding species in 1998. A Spotted Crake called throughout May in 1996.

The RSPB reserve and the surrounding landscape bear testimony to over two centuries of drainage schemes and agricultural improvement. At one time the area supported what was reputed to be the largest reedbed in Scotland. Bitterns bred here as mentioned in a poem by Alexander Wilson, the pioneering 18th century American ornithologist of Wilson's Petrel fame, who lived locally before emigrating to America. Before the area became permanently flooded in the 1950's at least six pairs of Black-necked Grebe bred along with 10,000 pairs of Black-headed Gulls. Another historical record of note relates to Corncrake that last bred at Lochwinnoch as late as 1983.

Proposed habitat management at Lochwinnoch could herald a very exciting period in the reserves' development. Since the early 1960's, the possibilities of restoring the Barr Loch and Aird Meadows to an area of wet grassland have been investigated. Recent studies have identified how restoration of the meadows could be achieved through an integrated approach to floodplain management. The conservation benefits to breeding waders such as Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe and Curlew and a wide range of other wetland wildlife would be significant. Who knows, with the establishment of a sizeable reedbed perhaps Bittern could once again be heard booming at Lochwinnoch!

Information

Lochwinnoch Nature Reserve can be found just off the A737 Glasgow-Irvine road on the A760. Lochwinnoch railway station is adjacent to the reserve which is open at all times with the visitor centre open 10am - 5pm daily. A programme of events runs throughout the year.

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