



Scottish Ornithologists' Club
Scotland's Bird Club
Established 1936

Clyde branch outing to Tay Reedbeds and Scone Palace

18th January 2026 (0800-1600)

Weather: 1-3 degrees, fog lifting through the morning before turning to drizzle.

Leader: Donald Wilson

Participants: 12

When we are planning the programme of outings, it can be a tough task to think of new places to visit that provide good birding, easy access and good facilities. Winter months can be tricky too once you take the weather into consideration (although winter birding can be great!)

When planning 2026 we considered lots of options but decided once again, for January, to organise a trip to Errol (Perthshire) where the Tay Reedbeds are situated. If a tried and tested outing works, then why not go again? This year we planned the trip for a Sunday, allowing the Monday to Friday workers, or those otherwise unable to join the previous midweek trips to Perthshire, an opportunity to join us.

The Tay Reedbeds are the largest in Scotland and with a visit to Scone Palace thrown in, just a twenty-minute car drive from Errol, so not too far out of the way, it makes for a good trip.

As usual, I checked the forecast the night before and it all looked good apart from a bit of mist and fog so it was full steam ahead. The majority of the group met at Hogganfield where we sorted out the car sharing and off we trundled. We left Hogganfield at 8am and with it being a Sunday morning the traffic was very light so good progress was made. As we traversed eastward a thick low-lying winter mist and fog followed us all the way with poor visibility meaning we needed to put our fog lights on. I was starting to fear the worst!

After the eighty or so minutes drive we arrived at Gas Brae, Errol. A couple of the group met us there having travelled independently. Introductions were made and I gave a quick rundown of the plan and off we set.



Group outing – fog starting to lift © Donald Wilson

At the village I started my eBird recording with one to two others Bird-tracking, and we were clocking usual countryside village species such as **Greenfinch**, **House Sparrow**, **Jackdaw**, **Blackbird** etc. As mentioned before, they all add up!

With the still foggy conditions, but lifting slightly, we could only view within thirty metres or so of the path and as such the adjacent fields were a wipe out. However, a nice **Fieldfare** made itself known and then a fly-over, calling, **Lesser Redpoll** with another one alighting at the top of a tree, allowing a decent view in the binoculars.

This trip is always about quality and not quantity in terms of species and at the reedbeds the jackpot bird is Bearded Tit or Bearded Reedling as it is also known.

The name of the game upon entering the reedbeds is to move very slowly, keeping equidistant from both edges of the reeds and to be very quiet. These are good tips for all birding.

As we moved into the cleared area another two (**Lesser**) **Redpolls** gave themselves up and soon we were seeing and hearing lots of **Reed Buntings** but in amongst them there was the unmistakable call of **Bearded Tit**.

We slowly walked through the clearing stopping and scanning and despite the generally misty conditions good views were had of twenty or more **Reed Buntings** actively feeding on the reed seed-heads. One or two of the group had brief flight views of the **Beardies** but frustratingly most of us, including me, just couldn't get onto one.

The birds were definitely aware of our presence for as we slowly walked through the clearing the birds were mostly flicking ahead of us. We walked around eighty yards or so and eventually stood on a mounded area, giving a slightly better elevated view, but frustratingly we were still being given the run around. I decided to track back leaving the group where they were as there was a stocked grit tray located in the reeds, very visible, back nearer the start of the reedbed.

During the winter months Bearded Tit feed predominantly on seeds and need to ingest fine grit to help with their digestion. As the year wears on and particularly during the breeding season they switch to an insect diet. In order to assist them with this digestive requirement at supported reserves, grit trays, (a flat wooden table as in the photo below) is supplied with the correct fine grit. As well as helping the birds, it also provides a perfect opportunity to get your eyes on these sometimes elusive birds.



Bearded Tit © Donald Wilson

I moved very slowly back and as the grit tray became visible, I had lovely views of three male birds and one female. I signalled to the group with a soft whistle (shouting "OVER HERE!" is never a good idea in the field!)

The group gathered and the birds behaved beautifully allowing all the group great views! "Phew!"

We enjoyed a great show for at least five minutes - perhaps more - before they flew off.

When birding I quite often get the sensation that a bird gives itself up, of course not always, and then departs and I'm left with the feeling that the show is over and it's time to press on and this was one of those times. With all the group happy that we'd had good views of the target species we headed back to the cars.

As we walked back, in trees near the villages were three stunning male **Bullfinches**.

It's a twenty-minute drive to Scone Place from Errol and for those who don't know the target bird here is the rare Hawfinch with the palace grounds undoubtedly the best place in Scotland to connect with this species, the largest finch in the UK.

At the carpark my heart sank, again, as it was almost full. There was a 5km fun run event on but fortunately it had just finished, sigh of relief, again!

A quick cuppa, a bite to eat and then we split up into a few groups. I find this strategy here is a good one, as the more eyes that are looking, the better - divide and conquer and all that!

My group soon had a very confiding **Nuthatch** and a **Jay** was heard then seen distantly as we headed towards the main avenue archway, a good spot to start looking for our quarry. To find Hawfinch generally you have to scan the very tops of the trees as they can usually be seen perched and here the trees are tall so it involves a bit of neck straining!

Within twenty minutes or so I had a call to say "We've got one!" So I ushered my group together and moved smartly in the direction. I could see the other group looking and pointing and so I was thinking, 'This is a shoe-in!' Of course, what happened? As soon as we got to the spot, it flew off! I walked around in the general direction of where it went and soon I had it within my sights. Then another bird seen by a different group member, and for the next twenty minutes or so we all had great views, including scoped views. I was delighted as last year we dipped (missed) them!



Hawfinch © Donald Wilson



Hawfinch © Donald Wilson

Whilst watching the **Hawfinches** (we estimated six in total) we were joined by a lovely little **Treecreeper**, four **Yellowhammer** (unusually in my experience) and a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

The group were all delighted – the target bird ticked off again - and so we headed back to the cars.



Outing group, Hawfinch watching © Donald Wilson

As it was now about 2.30pm and we had connected relatively quickly for both species I offered the group an opportunity to drop into Broadwood Loch in Cumbernauld on the way home to try for the drake Smew. Most of the group were happy with that plan so we headed off. We pulled into the main car park, a quick scan, and one of the group picked up the **Smew** mid-water, another great quick find. Job done!

We parted company with everyone happy. A great day's birding in what would normally have been considered tricky conditions, but we got away with it! I love it when the birding gods play ball.

Donald Wilson

Species List (Errol, Reedbeds + Scone Palace + Broadwood Loch) - Total 50

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Pheasant | Common Gull | Starling |
| Canada Goose | Herring Gull | Blackbird |
| Pink-footed Goose | Cormorant | Fieldfare |
| Mute Swan | Buzzard | Mistle Thrush |
| Wigeon | Great Spotted Woodpecker | Robin |
| Mallard | Jay | House Sparrow |
| Teal (heard) | Magpie | Dunnock |
| Pochard | Jackdaw | Chaffinch |
| Tufted Duck | Carrion Crow | Greenfinch |
| Goldeneye | Coal Tit | Bullfinch |
| Smew | Blue Tit | Hawfinch |
| Goosander | Great Tit | Redpoll |
| Woodpigeon | Bearded Tit | Goldfinch |
| Moorhen | Goldcrest | Siskin |
| Coot | Wren | Yellowhammer |
| Little Grebe | Nuthatch | Reed Bunting |
| Curlew (heard) | Treecreeper | |



January Snowdrops, Scone Palace © Donald Wilson