



Scottish Ornithologists' Club
Scotland's Bird Club
Established 1936

Clyde branch outing to Tay Reedbeds, Scone Palace & Broadwood Loch

30th November 2023 (0845-1600)

Leader: Donald Wilson

Weather: Bright blue skies, sunny, no wind and max temp 6 degrees.

Participants: 13 (7 SOC members, 6 non-members). For 8 people, it was their first outing with the Clyde branch.

Whilst flicking through Twitter or X as it's now known, I came across a post from an east coast birder showing some stunning photographs of **Bearded Tits** at the Tay Reedbeds.

I have been involved with the outings group for the SOC Clyde Branch for a few years now and the reason for getting involved was to help with leading and organising of outings. They had dwindled somewhat and there was a lack of people willing to lead. Furthermore, when I joined the SOC for the second time, I read the mission statement which highlights a key function of the organisation, "to encourage people to get out and enjoy birding and birds." I thought, I can help with that.

For those who know me, and put up with me, understand that I love birds and birding. From the age of about 24, in a more serious way, I have steadily built up that passion and of course knowledge and therefore felt it would be good to do what I could locally and pass on what knowledge I have.

Coming back to the Beardies, after reading the X post, I thought, "I wonder if anyone would fancy a wee day out to try to see these stunning birds?" I contacted Ania who has now volunteered to take on the "outings organiser" role from David Palmar after David let it be known after many years of taking on that role, that he wanted to pass on the mantle so to speak. Ania thought it was a great idea so after she kicked me a wee bit (not literally of course!) I got my finger out, looked at my shifts and decided on the 30th November, St Andrews day. We sorted out the details and Ania put the details out on the branch website etc (definitely not my strong point), and so it was a done deal.

November 30th was a Thursday, and I was off (I'm a shift worker) and as such I wasn't sure if there would be much of an uptake, however, my mantra has always been that even if one person wanted to go out on an outing, I would do my best to accommodate them. Soon I started receiving messages from folks wishing to go and I was delighted as I was fairly confident, we would connect with the Beardies. How was I so sure? Well although I had been to the site before I had never been in winter and having not been for a while, I felt it prudent to do a wee recce. So, I contacted Harry Revel and Scott Black as I knew they sometimes can bird through the week and asked them if they fancied it.



Waxwings © Billy McKellar

In short, we got superb views and even had them in the hand as the local ringing group were set up and ringing (which we didn't know until we arrived). My past visits were always early to late spring and although I had seen Bearded Tit there before, I had never had great views. I then learned that winter was a better time as they change their feeding from insects to seed and to aid their digestion they require fine grit which is provided from grit trays strategically placed within the reed bed and as such they can be viewed frequenting these grit trays. We had in the region of about twenty birds flitting about and feeding on the reed grass (*Phragmites*) seed heads. For those that don't know, the Tay Reedbeds holds the largest Bearded Tit colony in the UK and the ringers mentioned that they believe that up to 250 pairs breed at this site and last year they ringed approximately 1,000 birds!

In line with trying to be as environmentally friendly as possible we arranged to meet up at Hogganfield Loch which was felt to be reasonably easily accessible for those travelling by public transport. By 09.00, car sharing sorted; off we went on a stunning sunny winter's morning.

An easy drive up with plenty of chat with Hannah Mathers and Ian Graham in my car. This was Ian's first Clyde SOC outing, the main reason being that he can only make mid-week field trips, and so that is something I hope we as a group can provide more of. After a quick pit stop at the petrol station we headed into Errol, a small village off the A90 between Perth and Dundee, with decent traffic about an hour and fifteen-minute drive from Hogganfield. We parked sensibly at Gas Brae so as to keep the locals on board (always a must wherever possible), gear sorted and off we headed down the obvious track towards the reed beds.



Bearded Tit © Mark Hartshorn

I'm a serial BirdTracker and another key element for me in birding and a key function of the SOC is the recording of birds. Also, in order to make the most of a birding day I like to record every species, and where possible their numbers as this can make a not so great day, as we all have them, into a more interesting day. In fact on many occasions by recording every species whilst out birding I have been blown away by the number of species I have actually seen whilst thinking it was a very non birdy day!

However, today was about quality not quantity! I also knew Zul was attending and he also likes to record every species and uses [BirdTrack](#) heavily. Oh and by the way, by entering your records on BirdTrack, no matter how common or few birds it is, all records count, are important and make producing bird reports and giving a picture of the state of our birds so much easier.

So if you don't already, please start recording and use [BirdTrack](#), it's so easy! The more the merrier and it's all about lots of people doing a little!

Sorry for the diversion, back to the trip! The walk down to the reed beds is easy and only about ten to fifteen minutes. Apart from a very sociable **Fieldfare** along the track, the only other notable sighting was a pleasing flock of around one hundred **Golden Plover** in the adjacent field. The group was spread out, but it wasn't a problem as there is a wide clearway through the reeds that lasts about one hundred metres with a much wider cleared circular area at the end of the track.

At first there was no sign of any birds but soon I picked up the metallic "ping" of a male bird but frustratingly no sight of one. I feared the worst although we had only been in the reeds a few minutes. My trepidation was based on the fact that we had limited daylight and I had a plan to try and catch up with another one of Perthshire's specialist birds at another site.

Another few minutes went by with the odd **Blue Tit** and **Reed Bunting** flitting about. I was about halfway down the track, I turned around to my right and saw some of the keen photographers in the group with their lenses raised at the open area at the end of the track, and of course that means only one thing, they are on to something! I walked down towards them, raised my bins and bingo! I immediately turned to the rest of the group and vigorously (and quietly of course) gestured to them to get down towards me pronto! One member was casually blethering to a couple of other birder/photographers who didn't seem to understand the urgency, and oh by the way that person admitted they had never seen a **Bearded Tit** in Scotland! Mmmmm, I wonder why?



Bearded Tit © Dougie Edmonds

It seemed to take an age to get the rest of the group down to a point where they could view the birds but eventually we all got crippling views. Five birds including three cracking males were feeding mostly at the top of the reeds, quite the thing, for at least twenty minutes. Then boom, off they flitted and we waited another ten minutes or so, but there were no further signs.

For me and just a suggestion, when you are going to make a significant effort to go and see a particular bird, focus on everything you should do to guarantee success such as;

- Go at the right time of year.
- Check the weather forecast, especially rain and wind.
- Make sure you go at the right time of day and give yourself as much time as possible.
- Do some homework of the site such as favoured viewing points, sites where birds have been seen etc.
- When you get to a site, focus on getting yourself as quickly as possible to the best location and use all your field craft skills.(subject of another topic perhaps?)
- Do not get distracted by other people, once you've seen what you came for, then you can chat & socialise.
- Do not get distracted by common birds you've seen hundreds of times before and will see again, focus on the target bird!

Everyone was delighted and so I gathered the troops and then put out the suggestion of trying for **Hawfinch** at Scone Palace, some twenty minutes' drive back towards Perth. I discussed that during the recce we had tried along the reed edge, through the adjacent woodlands etc with little reward and so Scone would be the best bet, everyone agreed and so off we went. We were soon at Scone although split up. I contacted Dougie Edmonds, Mark Hartshorn and Zul to keep in touch and to make contact if anyone saw anything.



Hawfinch watching © Donald Wilson

Dougie headed for the Palace itself and myself with Ian, Hannah, Heather Kerr (my sister) and her husband Mitch headed for the mature woodlands off the main Avenue. I wasn't sure where Zul & Mark were but we were in phone contact as mentioned. It was a case of divide and conquer, which proved to be a great success! I gave an explanation of what we were looking for and where to look and soon I, and those with me, were scanning the tops of the trees. We soon had **Mistle Thrush**, **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** but no sign of our target **Hawfinch**.

We then came out into an open area, we saw some birds flying and then alighted in some nearby silver birch and we were delighted to see a flock of around 20 **Waxwing**! They then flew off to our right and raising my bins I said, 'It looks interesting over there'. So off we went and then parked ourselves with good 360 degree vantage point and again we were watching **Waxwings**. Mitch then turned around to his left, looked up and spotted a **Hawfinch** - get in!



Hawfinch © Dougie Edmonds

This was another new bird for the group with me, and to be honest I wasn't very optimistic as Scott, Harry and I dipped them during our previous visit a couple of weeks ago. Scott also mentioned that according to the logged records there were very few November records of **Hawfinch** at Scone despite up to ten to fifteen pairs breeding within the Palace grounds. I quickly called the others but it was difficult to give a

precise location and then of course disappointingly the bird flew off. We were about to head in the direction of the bird's flight when Dougie called me, "I've got a **Hawfinch**", I said "Is it still there", "yip" So off we marched and on the way I contacted Zul & Mark.

We all rendezvoused at the end of the main avenue after Dougie popped out to give us a clue of exactly where he was situated. Soon we were all scanning the tops of the trees and we all got good views and Ian even managed to get his scope onto one. It was difficult to tell as the birds weren't flitting about but there were at least four or five birds, maybe more.

With everyone very happy and some needing to make tracks, I discussed dropping into Broadwood Loch to try for the drake **Smew** which had been located there a few days before. It would have been rude not to look in as it was only less than ten minutes from the motorway on our way home.

Myself, again with Ian & Hannah, arrived at Broadwood and instead of heading for the stadium end we headed for the main car park and on the way down I recognised a local birder, Gordon Shaw on the side of the main road with his good lady. I dropped my window down and said, "Hello" with the reply, "Crossbills". Magic, so out we popped and there, on the top of the pines, we saw a female **Crossbill**, a bird I never tire of seeing and a UK first for Hannah. Gordon had mentioned he had seen about a dozen birds but we had to content ourselves with the single female.

We parked up and the search began for the **Smew**. Upon arriving at the loch side, I had a scan with the scope there was no joy. I did see Mark on the other side so I gave him a bell. "Any joy?" I said, "We've just had it but it's just been spooked by a **Goosander** and disappeared. We walked further round with the light fading fast and then Mark called me, "It's further round and you won't see it from there". So we agreed to head back to the car and drive around to save time with the rapidly fading light, half way back to the car my phone rang again, "It's flown back to where you were!", "Cheers, we'll head back". It was only a five minute walk or so to where we were and Ian picked it up with his bins. I got the scope onto it and we all eventually got decent views on and off, what a cracking bird!



Smew © Dougie Edmonds

All in all a superb day which surpassed my expectations. I believe everyone else on the outing was very pleased with how the day turned out, all I can ask. I thought about heading this article as the Bearded-Hawfinch-Cross-Smew Day but decided against it! I'm sorry for those who couldn't make it for one reason or another but I hope this article inspires you to go up and check out these sites for yourself or maybe join the next SOC outing there or elsewhere!

Donald Wilson, December 2023

Zul Bhatia note: Of the 51 species recorded, four were new to the outings list (**Scaup, Bearded Tit, Waxwing and Hawfinch**) taking the total number of species recorded on our outings to 166 sp. When putting the report together, I was spoilt for choice for photographs receiving some great ones, especially of Bearded Tit from Billy McKellar, Heather Kerr, Dougie Edmonds, Mark Hartshorn and Donald Wilson. It was so hard to choose which to use to illustrate the report. Stuart Milligan kindly shared his bird list with me too.

51 species of birds were recorded on the SOC outing to Tay Reed Beds, Scone Palace & Broadwood Loch on 30th November 2023

Mute Swan	Water Rail	Bearded Tit
Whooper Swan	Moorhen	Long-tailed Tit
Pink-footed Goose	Coot	Waxwing
Greylag Goose	Golden Plover	Nuthatch
Wigeon	Black-headed Gull	Wren
Gadwall	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Starling
Mallard	Herring Gull	Blackbird
Pochard	Feral Pigeon	Fieldfare
Tufted Duck	Woodpigeon	Redwing
Scaup	Kestrel	Mistle Thrush
Goldeneye	Jackdaw	Robin
Smew	Carrion Crow	Dunnock
Goosander	Raven	House Sparrow
Pheasant	Goldcrest	Pied Wagtail (yarrellii)
Little Grebe	Blue Tit	Hawfinch
Great Crested Grebe	Great Tit	Yellowhammer
Buzzard	Coal Tit	Reed Bunting