

HEIGHTS HOTEL WILDLIFE BREAKS

Friday December 7th – Sunday December 9th 2018



Little Bunting (photo by Brett Spencer)

Saturday December 8th

Weather: Mostly dry but very strong winds from the west; wet later in the afternoon

Chiswell, 0900

The weekend got off to what must be the most dramatic start ever when we found a gorgeous Little Bunting on the edge of Chesil Beach. This very rare Russian vagrant was well out of its range and habitat but seemed very happy to feed on the ground at the edge of the track running along the side of the beach. We left it before any other birdwatchers had appeared, but many of them did manage to see and photograph it later. One of them was Weymouth birder Brett Spencer who provided the photo above.

Portland Castle, 1000

Leaving our star find before the hordes arrived we had our first look at Portland Harbour. Plenty of Red-breasted Mergansers could be seen but not much else, although we did get the chance to compare Cormorant and Shag in close proximity.

Ferrybridge, 1100

The small flock of Brent Geese here turned out to be mostly dark-bellied but with three or four very smart pale-bellied birds. A flock of five or so Skylarks were briefly seen on the shoreline before they flew off. The mudflats held an impressive six species of gull including a single Lesser Black-backed and several Mediterranean Gulls.

Castle Cove, 1130

Our second look at Portland Harbour revealed very little at first but we persevered and in the end managed to find two Black-throated Divers and a single Slavonian Grebe. One of the divers was performing a strange "dance" on the surface of the water, the purpose of which is still very much a mystery.

Radipole RSPB Reserve, 1200

No sign of the Ring-necked Duck here but plenty of other birds including a Great White Egret and a lovely male Marsh Harrier. A very grey Great Tit seen here may well have been of the continental race. A Reed Bunting gave us an entertaining display as it clung onto its dinner blowing around in the wind (see below).



Lodmoor RSPB Reserve, 1400

This excellent reserve produced a huge list of birds including the first waders of the weekend, mostly Lapwings and Snipe with a few Black-tailed Godwits and Dunlins. A Sparrowhawk flashed past us briefly and another Marsh Harrier was seen, this time a female.

Portland Bill, 1530

Our final mission was to look for the Short-eared Owls that have been seen recently hunting over the Admiralty Slopes near the Bill. The conditions proved too windy this afternoon but we did add Kestrel, Pheasant and Gannet to a very impressive day list of 62 species.

Sunday December 9th

Weather: just as windy as yesterday but dry and sunny most of the day



Portland Castle, 0900

A quick stop at the southern corner of Portland Harbour revealed no more than the same collection of mergansers that we saw yesterday.

Ferrybridge, 0930

A tour of the car park failed to turn up the Whimbrel that had been seen on Friday so we drove across the road to Hamm Beach where we found three Black-necked Grebes fairly close inshore.

Castle Cove, 1000

Hoping for a Great Northern Diver we repeated yesterday's stop-off at Castle Cove, but today there weren't even any mergansers to see.

Radipole RSPB Reserve, 1030

Just a quick pit-stop here but only after we checked the car park for gulls and found a French-ringed Mediterranean Gull. More details here later. *Update: The French ringers have reported that our bird was ringed in 2017 on the west coast of France, spending its first winter on the north coast. It returned to its nest site briefly in the summer of 2018 and then arrived in the UK in June, where it has been ever since.*

Maiden Castle, 1100

As soon as we arrived an enormous flock of Golden Plovers flew over, literally filling the sky with birds. The exact number was impossible to estimate but we decided in the end that two thousand was near enough. A walk round the field next to the car park produced a single Corn Bunting and a flock of Redwings with a single Fieldfare feeding on Hawthorn. The route to our next stop took us past the Hardy Monument where the herd of Belted Galloway cattle did their best to prevent us reaching the coast!

Abbotsbury Beach, 1230

Primarily a lunch stop this beautiful spot (pictured above) did enable us to add Buzzard to the list.

Abbotsbury Swannery, 1330

At first it looked as if the Cattle Egrets had moved on but eventually we found that they had just moved further down the road. We spent some time trying to get an accurate count of all the birds hiding behind sheep and ended up with at least 25. Back at the swannery itself we could see where the Dipper must have been seen but there was no sign of the bird itself.

Portland Bill, 1500

We finished the weekend with another search for owls in what was still very windy conditions. Finally we did manage to find a distant Short-eared Owl and enjoyed watching it hunting over the fields for several minutes. After this we assumed it was all over for the weekend but the drive back to the hotel produced first another Short-eared Owl and then a Barn Owl, both hunting at the side of the Bill road. An excellent end to a superb weekend!

Looking forward to the next time,

Bob

The weekend list:

Black-throated Diver	Portland Harbour
Little Grebe	Radipole, Lodmoor, Abbotsbury
Black-necked Grebe	Portland Harbour
Slavonian Grebe	Portland Harbour
Great Crested Grebe	Portland Harbour
Gannet	Portland Bill
Cormorant	Portland, Radipole
Shag	Portland
Great Egret	Radipole
Little Egret	Ferrybridge, Abbotsbury
Cattle Egret	Abbotsbury
Grey Heron	Radipole
Mute Swan	Radipole
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	Ferrybridge
Pale-bellied Brent Goose	Ferrybridge
Canada Goose	Lodmoor, Abbotsbury
Shelduck	Radipole, Lodmoor
Teal	Radipole, Lodmoor
Mallard	Radipole, Lodmoor
Shoveler	Radipole, Lodmoor
Gadwall	Radipole, Lodmoor
Wigeon	Radipole
Tufted Duck	Radipole, Abbotsbury
Pochard	Radipole, Abbotsbury

Red-breasted Merganser	Portland Harbour
Kestrel	Portland
Buzzard	Abbotsbury, Portland
Marsh Harrier	Radipole, Lodmoor
Sparrowhawk	Lodmoor
Pheasant	Portland, Abbotsbury
Coot	Radipole
Moorhen	Radipole
Oystercatcher	Portland Bill
Lapwing	Lodmoor, Abbotsbury, Maiden Castle
Golden Plover	Maiden Castle
Snipe	Radipole, Lodmoor
Dunlin	Lodmoor
Black-tailed Godwit	Lodmoor
Black-headed Gull	Ferrybridge etc
Mediterranean Gull	Lodmoor etc
Herring Gull	Ferrybridge etc
Great Black-backed Gull	Ferrybridge etc
Common Gull	Portland etc
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Radipole, Ferrybridge
Short-eared Owl	Portland Bill
Barn Owl	Portland Bill
Wood Pigeon	Portland etc
Feral Pigeon	Radipole
Skylark	Ferrybridge, Abbotsbury
Meadow Pipit	Maiden Castle
Rock Pipit	Chiswell
Pied Wagtail	Chiswell
Wren	Portland, Radipole
Duncock	Radipole
Robin	Portland etc
Stonechat	Radipole, Maiden Castle
Song Thrush	Radipole
Blackbird	Portland etc
Redwing	Maiden Castle
Fieldfare	Maiden Castle
Chiffchaff	Lodmoor
Long-tailed Tit	Radipole, Lodmoor
Blue Tit	Radipole, Lodmoor
Great Tit	Radipole, Lodmoor
Magpie	Portland etc
Jay	Weymouth
Jackdaw	Portland
Rook	Abbotsbury
Carrion Crow	Portland etc
Raven	Portland Bill
Starling	Lodmoor
Goldfinch	Radipole, Maiden Castle
Linnet	Maiden Castle
Chaffinch	Portland Bill
Reed Bunting	Radipole
Corn Bunting	Maiden Castle
Little Bunting	Chiswell