



Reservoir birds

If you're lucky you'll see a great reservoir favourite, such as Great Northern Diver



They're working industrial sites, covering a significant part of the surface area of the UK, yet they're loved by birdwatchers. Matt Merritt looks at reservoirs, and how they can be a boon for honing your ID skills...

Lapwings can truly be appreciated when you spend a while studying them





hotspot for waders, such as this obliging Redshank



Pictures by Craig Jones

IT'S the Sunday after New Year's Day, and I've dragged myself from under my duvet long before first light to head up into the snowy hills of Derbyshire. The car's thermometer reads -6°C.

But, although heavy snow on the roads makes for a slow, slippery last five miles, blazing sun and a sky the colour of a Bombay gin bottle make me glad I made the effort.

For four years now, the first Sunday morning of every month has seen enthusiastic groups of birdwatchers, keen to learn more about the craft, walking round Carrington Water, one of the UK's largest reservoirs, in the company of volunteer ranger David Bennett and his colleagues.

We've got perfect viewing conditions, although the heavy snow that has fallen overnight makes prospects uncertain. But even as David, photographer Craig Jones and myself wait in the courtyard of the visitor centre, we enjoy our first birds – tame Robins, Pied Wagtails and House Sparrows are no surprise, but the conditions and the need for food have made a Song Thrush fearless, too, picking around our feet. If you're just starting out as a birder, it helps when the birds are this obliging!

Our luck continues. Overlooking the water, David and guide/tour leader Christopher Hall

explain that while we'll see lots and lots of Black-headed Gulls (familiar to the new birders in the group), other gulls might be present. A quick, clear explanation of the whole Lesser Black-backed / Herring Gull complex is capped by a Yellow-legged Gull dropping in right on cue, even posing on the rails of a jetty to show off those diagnostic yellow legs.

A little further on, we find one of our target birds. Carrington has become a good site for Great Northern Divers, and although the bird in its winter plumage isn't as immediately charismatic as in summer, there's a ripple of excitement through the group as we point it out to each other, share scopes, and compare notes on its looks (the group quickly picks up on the way it sits so low in the water).

Perhaps it's the snow again, but a Redshank, normally so highly strung, feeds along the water's edge less than 20 yards from us. On another day perhaps, we'd be looking for a wider range of waders, but this is a good start, and the sight of hundreds of Lapwings lined up along one of the far shores helps build our group's knowledge a bit more.

Then we're back past the visitor centre for a comfort break, and on to the feeding station, where, among the bickering finches and sparrows, several pairs of Bullfinches delight us

all. The male's gloriously red breast is set off superbly by the snow, and it's easy to see why David says this species is most frequently voted Bird of the Week by the visitors.

Finally, there's the hole (mercifully heated), from where we enjoy a quick duck ID session (a couple of Gadwall waders close to show off their understated beauty), pick out a distant perched Buzzard, and realise that several Scaup are standing at the water's edge. One zooms in close but, unable to land, veers away again, but for some of our group it's another first. In just about two hours, we've all learned something – for me it's a revelation to see the different species reacting in their own way to the sudden blanket of snow.

And that's where this event, and others like it, score so highly. They're a reminder that a lot of the fun of birdwatching is in learning new things, and that the best way to learn is always out in the field, however valuable scotching up in field guides can be.

Paul and Chris Markwell, of Collastou, near Donfield, have come along to learn more after joining the RSPB at Blacktoft Sands recently. Chris explains: "We did a course on birdwatching years ago, and we've been out on our own, so it really helps to be able to birdwatch with people who know a lot more ▶"

than you.

"We have found that the birdwatching fraternity is always very willing to pass on advice and knowledge."

At the end of their day, they leave, like another local birder, David King, with the intention of coming back at some stage, both to see how the reservoir's birdlife changes with the seasons, and to build their expertise.

David says: "I live about midway between here and another good site – Ardsborough – and it's good to have something like this to let you learn from other birdwatchers."

For David Bennett, meanwhile, it's been another encouraging day. Although he'd always like more returns, numbers on the walks were up in 2009, and there's now an intermediate walk, on the third Sunday of the month, taking in some of the other hides and aimed at the slightly more experienced birdwatcher.

He says: "If people come back even once, that's a good thing, because they start to get more confident and point out birds themselves."

And his most embarrassing moment?

"Telling 20 people to look carefully with their binoculars at the communal Tree Sparrow nesting box on the wall behind the storage yard, and not noticing the lady who had found a quiet place to feed her young baby just below!"

■ For further information, or to book on the free Carrington Water walk, call 01429 540 096. For other guided birding days out, see our events listing, starting on page 6.

Turn over for more on birding at reservoirs ►

There's a wide range of wildlife at our reservoirs, such as these Tufted Ducks



Paul and Chris Maxwell are getting back into birding – and find a reservoir a great place to start

