

# 24 Hours in May - Dylan

An account of my non-motorised listing attempt – 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> May 2007

## Introduction/explanation

Ever since I moved to Kent, in 1993, I have spent a day, during the month of May, attempting to see/hear (thus identify) as many species of bird as possible. There have been some memorable days out, often in the company of other like-minded souls. The common theme through all of these events has been the insistence that they were conducted without the aid of motorised transport. Pedal power has been the usual mode of transport; however, when Geoff Burton and Mike Gould undertook a walk from Church Woods RSPB Res. to Oare Marshes KWT Res. (recording 109 species) I became intrigued by this purist form of day listing. As a result I have undertaken some fairly arduous walks attempting to equal Geoff & Mike's achievements – always ending in disappointment. Circumstances in 2007 dictated that I had to bend the rules – “slightly”? My 24 hours had to be spread over two days. My starting time was 17.00hrs on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May, thus the finish being 17.00hrs on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> May.

## The Journey

I'm sure that when Bev dropped me off at the gates of King George VI Park she was already questioning the wisdom of my decision to go ahead with my planned effort. It was cold, the strong NE wind blowing through the sycamores making so much noise as to make it difficult to hear each other speak! Stubborn soul that I am, insisted that I'd be OK – so at just before 17.00hrs on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2007 I entered the park and made my way towards the café. I stopped at a small clump of trees and at the stroke of 17.00hrs started my list. **Rose-ringed Parakeet, Robin, Greenfinch, Blackbird, Blue Tit, Song Thrush, Goldfinch, Herring Gull, Wren, Starling and Collared Dove** all made it into my notebook before I made it out of the park just three minutes later. A look from the clifftop path soon revealed a passing **Fulmar** whilst at the bottom of Winterstoke Steps I added **Lesser Black-backed Gull & Bar-tailed Godwit. Carrion Crow, Feral Rock Dove, Great Black-backed Gull, Pied Wagtail, Cormorant and House Sparrow** being seen as I walked along the seawall towards the harbour.



17.06hrs - Bar-tailed Godwit on the beach below Winterstoke Steps

I arrived at Ramsgate Harbour at 17.24hrs immediately recording **Turnstone** and adding a flyover **Whimbrel** and the target species – **Rock Pipit**, before making my way towards the Western Undercliff. I had my first stroke of luck, as I walked towards the Port Entrance. A **Black Redstart** suddenly appeared on the perimeter fence, too quick for me to grab any pics; it disappeared into the Port complex shortly after I'd focussed my bins! **Oystercatcher, Dunnock & Swallow** were recorded as I walked the undercliff before ascending the Chine to reach Pegwell Village. Almost an hour had passed. **Wood Pigeon, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Black-headed Gull** and **House Martin** as I passed through the village and made my way along the clifftop to the Hoverpad and Pegwell Bay beyond. My initial scan over the bay revealed the amazing spectacle of masses of Bar-tailed Godwits. I estimated that there was a minimum of 1,300 in the bay with others across the river in Sandwich Bay. (I was only made aware of the events at Dungeness after I'd finished my effort, but this does help explain the huge numbers present) I had to continue down on to the Hoverpad before I added **Curlew, Magpie, Shelduck, Grey Plover** – several splendid summer plumaged birds being seen and 6 **Knot**, again resplendent in their newly moulted breeding attire.

Pegwell Bay Country Park and Stonelees NR proved to be a bit of a let down. **Redshank, Linnet, Blackcap, Chaffinch, Grey Heron, Common Gull** (4 x 1<sup>st</sup> summer birds), **Meadow Pipit, Kestrel, Turtle Dove, Sedge Warbler, Pheasant, Mallard, Garden Warbler & Willow Warbler** saw my list race past the 50 mark, yet I wasn't happy about some of the missing waders. Dunlin and Sanderling being particularly obvious omissions. I then made my way to the Weatherlees NR, a strip of land besides the Richborough Power Station that sadly has no public access. I had been granted permission to access this site by the Stour Valley Project and English Nature and was able to record **Cetti's Warbler, Rook, Chiffchaff, Stock Dove, Moorhen, Coot, Nightingale, Little Grebe, Reed Warbler** and **Cuckoo** (all species that could, and were, recorded at other sites along my route)

I reached the Ash Levels shortly before 19.50hrs, my total already on a surprising 62 species. **Grey Partridge, Greenshank, Yellow Wagtail, Reed Bunting, Common Sandpiper** and **Mistle Thrush** were seen as I made my way towards my rendezvous with my only stake out of the entire sojourn. No sooner had I sat down and poured a coffee from my flask than the male **Barn Owl** appeared, carrying food back to the nest box. Despite the windy conditions, the owls seemed to be able to find plenty of food and I saw both parents in the 15 minutes I spent at the site. Break over, I continued my journey, adding **Mute Swan, Tufted Duck, Lapwing, Common Snipe & Shoveler** before I reached Pluck's Gutter and the comfort of the "Dog & Duck" PH. A very enjoyable hour ensued before I, once again, faced the elements and made my way across to Grove Ferry.

I arrived at the reserve entrance shortly before 23.25hrs. The wind had subsided and I was able to hear the calls and songs of various waterfowl and warblers as I made my way towards the Marsh Hide. I had an extraordinary stroke of luck when I flushed a **Ring Ouzel** (23.40 hrs) from a hawthorn hedge. It flew off into the darkness calling indignantly as it went. I can only assume that it had arrived in the dark and not been able to find sufficient cover? Two **Little Owls** responded to my whistled imitations as I passed Undertrees Farm and a **Tawny Owl** "hooted" distantly as I approached the Reedbed Hide. One of the benefits of a previous existence as an angling "specimen hunter" is the ability to rough it! I grabbed a couple of hour's kip in the hide recording **Water Rail** and **Bittern** (00.45 & 00.46hrs) whilst I was there. My plan was for a dawn start in Trenley Park Woods, thus I left the relative comfort of the Reedbed Hide and ventured out into the strengthening NE wind at 03.25hrs.

I slowly walked up the hill, away from Stodmarsh Village, the wind becoming stronger as I reached the exposed fields that overlook Collard's Lake. I made Trenley Park Woods in good time, even having the luxury of being able to spend a while getting **FIVE** (a family party?) Tawny Owls to react to my whistled imitation calls. I had great views in the semi-darkness, this being the only occasion when I wish I had my Fuji Finepix S9500 camera with me. As the dawn broke, the wind intensified and the woodland birding became a nightmare. The noise of the wind through the trees made audible records almost impossible. I managed to record just 4 new species in an hour, those being **Treecreeper, Great, Coal & Long-tailed Tit**. My return walk to Stodmarsh included a couple of detours, as I attempted to locate **Goldcrest** – eventually succeeding near Cow Corner. **Canada Goose, Jackdaw, Greylag Goose** and two, flyover, **Hobby** were my only other additions. As I walked along the entrance track to the reserve a **Lesser Whitethroat** sang from the hedgerow and I found a pair of **Bullfinches** feeding in the carpark, my total had now reached 90 species and it was only 07.10hrs. I spent the next 3 ½ hours trudging around the reserve circuit. The reward for this effort was pitiful, the howling NE wind and heavy grey skies proving too much for my avian quarry and me. **Common Tern, Great Crested Grebe, Marsh Harrier, Little Egret, Sky Lark, Teal, Gadwall, Pochard, Sand Martin & Bearded Tit** bringing up the 100 species at 08.38hrs.



**Great Crested Grebe from the Turf Fields (Green) Hide**

Although I had planned to remain in the Grove/Stodmarsh area until 11.00hrs, I didn't feel that there was much to be gained from standing around on the ramp staring out across the windswept reedbeds. I made the decision to walk back to the Marsh Hide. Almost immediately I flushed a **Green Sandpiper** from the newly cleared area besides the track and a scan over the pool beyond revealed two sleeping drake **Ruddy Duck** – result! Optimism returned and I headed over to the Marsh Hide, via the Harrison's Drove Hide, finding summer plumaged Greenshank at both sites. A Hobby cut a rather forlorn figure as it huddled in the top of a distant Hawthorn, looking thoroughly fed up! Somehow, I knew how it felt. There was no let up in the howling wind and leaden grey skies. An hour and 40 minutes passed without another addition to my list. I paused for one final scan from the ramp. Reports of a Ruff causing me some anguish, although a brief view of a, superb adult, **Wood Sandpiper** helped recover the situation.



**Hobby, looking totally dejected by the conditions, and a Greenshank at Stodmarsh/Grove.**

At 10.48hrs I left the reserve and began the long slog across to Reculver. As luck would have it, I approached the railway crossing, at Grove; the red light started flashing and down came the barrier. I had to stop to wait for the train to pass and with that a **Jay** flew from the mature trees and landed on a trackside post. I can't ever remember being so pleased to see such a common species before. May be there is a God after all? (No offence meant to anyone – it's just how I felt at the time!)

I descended Nethergong Hill, headed towards Chislet, when I spotted two Cuckoos. I spent a few minutes watching them noting that the female was a splendid rufous morph "hepatic" type. She perched briefly, just long enough to focus the scope, but didn't remain for the camera – shame!! A passerine flew into a roadside Elder bush proving to be a female **Yellowhammer** (11.11hrs) and, five minutes later, a **Common Swift** was watched as it battled into the ever-increasing gale. I stopped to ring Bev in the public phone box next to Chislet C of E Primary School. The conversation revolving around my sanity. I had to admit she definitely had a point. I strode out towards Marshside. A small blue car pulled up, containing the Hindle posse. Once I'd explained why I was wandering about on their "patch" information was exchanged. Corn Bunting, Wheatear and Shore Lark all seen this morning – Oh deep joy! I needed to walk the marshes all the way to Coldharbour Lagoon. Not something I'd planned for. I've completed three London Marathons, yet this walk was beginning to hurt more than anything I can ever remember. A Little Grebe in the roadside dyke by the Hog & Donkey, provided an excuse to stop for a while and play with my digi-scoping gear. I was sorely tempted to have a quick pint, but resisted, knowing how easily I could have given in to a second!

So on I walked. The wind had now reached such a strength that I feared branches would be torn from the row of Poplars as I passed near to Brook Farm. Two more Common Swifts battled the conditions as I made my way across Reculver Marshes to Coldharbour Lagoon. I flushed a couple of pairs of Grey Partridge and enjoyed superb views of Yellow Wagtail and Marsh Harrier, but it was over two and a half hours since I had seen a new species. Fatigue was really starting to gain the upper hand. It was at this point I glimpsed a small rail/crake, as it ran across the concrete path in front of me. It disappeared into the crop and was lost; despite the fact that I was at the point it entered the field within 5 seconds. What was it? I'm 80% sure it was a Corncrake, but in my state of tiredness I couldn't be positive – the one that got away!



**Little Grebe in the roadside dyke at Marshside**

I arrived at Coldharbour Lagoon finding **Ringed Plover** at 13.57hrs and the two **Shore Larks** a couple of minutes later. My total now stood at 108 and there was still three hours to go. Surely a seawatch would produce the desired result. I walked the seawall, via the Oyster Farm, to the Towers. The wind continued to howl across the marsh, but the sun broke through and, finally, I sought shelter in the lea of the Towers, intent on a seawatch. At 15.45hrs a 2<sup>nd</sup> summer **Gannet** flew east – species 109 and equalling the total of Geoff & Mike. I continued to stare out to sea, but it was a completely pointless exercise. Hence my total remained at 109. Under the circumstances I should be happy – but I ain't. I must thank Bev for her support and the manufacturers of Red Bull & Lucozade for the energy drinks that fuelled my body around this ridiculous journey.



**One of the Shore Lark (13.59hrs) at Coldharbour and a Whimbrel at the Oyster Farm**

Birds that should have been recorded, under normal circumstances, include Dunlin, Sanderling, Woodcock, Sparrowhawk, Kingfisher, Sandwich Tern, Corn Bunting, Garganey and Little Ringed Plover. Any of these would have made all the difference.

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