

24 Hours in April – Non-motorised listing 2008 14.45 hrs Friday 18th – 13.25hrs Saturday 19th

Dylan Wrathall

I won't bother to explain just why I ended up attempting my annual 24 hr lunacy in April – it's far too boring! Suffice to say that I'm old enough to have known better! I realise that by spreading the 24 hours over two dates it is not strictly "day – listing" but as it is my game I can do as I like. The weather was against me from the start. Friday afternoon seeing the skies brightening, but the brisk ENE wind keeping the temperatures low. Overnight there was light rain with dawn breaking still and grey. As the light intensified, so the wind picked up, the remainder of my session was conducted under heavy grey cloud cover and a moderate NE breeze. Another couple of factors that didn't aid my cause were the state of the tide and my decision not to carry a scope. Choosing to take my camera instead may have cost me a couple of species at Pegwell Bay, where the tide was out. However, as you will see, I don't think it would have made enough of a difference to see me reach the 110 tally that still eludes me.

I had already been awake for nearly 10 hours, having completed a full shift at Sericol, before Bev dropped me off by the Maritime Museum in Ramsgate Harbour at 14.45hrs. A male **Pied Wagtail** greeted me, as I stepped from the car, followed by **Feral Rock Dove** (they all count!), **Turnstone**, **Rock Pipit**, **Herring**, **Great Black-backed & Lesser Black-backed Gull** as I made my way to the Harbour Lights Café. I endured a 35-minute seawatch, adding a lone **Fulmar** and 4 **Oystercatchers**! If I had half a brain, I would have quit then, but no. Stubborn (or optimistic?) as ever, off I went towards the Western Undercliff. **Cormorant**, **House Sparrow** and **Starling** on the list before I reached the harbour limits.

Walking along the coastal path, of the Western Undercliff, I was able to locate 3 **Purple Sandpiper** feeding on the marine chalk reef. The first time I have recorded this species on my various, non-motorised, forays!



The undercliff also provided views of **Curlew** before I ascended the Chine, where a male **Wren** serenaded me from the adjacent shrubs. My walk through the park and Pegwell Village allowed me to add **Blue Tit, Carrion Crow, Dunnock, Mistle Thrush, Collared Dove, Blackbird** and **Song Thrush**. I had been listing for over 90 minutes and my total was a paltry 22 species. The cliff-top path towards the hoverpad was reasonably productive with **Wood Pigeon, Grey Partridge, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Kestrel, Shelduck** and **Robin** being recorded in little more than 15 minutes.



Arriving at the Hoverpad I quickly added **Redshank** and **Greenfinch** – my total now on 30 with 2 hours having elapsed! A scan across the bay revealed a **Peregrine** to be present on the cooling towers of Richborough Power Station. Through binoculars, not the most satisfactory of views! (I was fortunate that it remained on its perch long enough for better views as my walk continued) A pair of **Ringed Plover** were on the apron of the hoverpad whilst a **Green Woodpecker** called from the direction of the Viking Ship. I crossed into Pegwell Bay, via the saltmarsh, and found a single **Whimbrel** feeding close to the spartina by the garage. A **Little Egret** was at the back of the “Garage Pools” **Mallard**, **Grey Plover** and **Magpie** being the only other additions as I made my way towards Stonelees. I can never know what I missed. Dunlin, Sanderling, Knot, Sandwich Tern, Black-headed Gull and Brent Goose would have all been useful additions, if present. Would a scope have enabled me to find them?

Stonelees provided some, much appreciated, shelter from the strong breeze. **Great Tit**, **Chiffchaff**, **Blackcap**, **Moorhen** and **Pheasant** added in quick succession.



I won't dwell on my route to the Minster Marshes, as it involves crossing several areas with no public access. I do have the permission of the landowners that allows me to use this particular route. There are access points, via public rights of way, but they involve particularly lengthy detours. **Rook, Goldfinch, Cetti's Warbler, Long-tailed Tit and Chaffinch** are hardly worth mentioning, as they were all seen at other points on my sojourn, so they are un-likely to incite mass trespass? I had deliberately chosen a route, along the northern side of the River Stour, based upon my recent encounters. It proved to be complete folly. Between Minster and Pluck's Gutter I only added **Sedge Warbler, Meadow Pipit, Common Snipe, Swallow, Common Whitethroat, Mute Swan, Gadwall, Linnet, Yellow Wagtail, Reed Bunting, Green Sandpiper and Grey Heron**. My watch decided to stop, thus I was unable to record the correct timings of my sightings. I do know that it was 21.05hrs when I walked into the Dog & Duck with my total on exactly 60 species.

I blew the froth off of a couple of "Light Ales" before, once again; I headed out into the elements on the next stage of my journey. I won't divulge the exact route to Grove Ferry. Nothing illegal, just I visited a few sites that are best left "un-disclosed" Before I reached the entrance track at Grove I had managed to add (1) **Barn** and (3) **Long-eared Owls** to my list plus an indignant **Lapwing**, that I inadvertently disturbed, as I wandered around the marsh in the darkness.

It was just after 23.30hrs when I reached the ramp at Grove Ferry. It was eerily quiet; I added **Coot, Greylag Goose and Teal**, on call, but no sound from Sedge or Cetti's Warbler, Water Rail or Nightingale. What was going on? I made my way to the Reedbed Hide, recording my first, of seven, **Little Owl**. A pair were calling from the buildings at Newborns Farm. The wind had subsided and there was a hint of rain in the air as I reached the hide. I opened several shutters and had a coffee. Apart from the odd Moorhen the reserve was silent! I spent a

couple of hours dozing on the bench, my camera bag a pillow – not a lot of difference to the comfort of a bed in the Olympic Holiday’s Sea View complex at Benitses on Corfu! (See my September 2007 Trip Report) By 03.45hrs I had given up on recording Bittern and Water Rail, already resigned to the fact that an April date was not likely to result in my target 110 total. A can of Red Bull did the trick – amphetamines in a tin, well the same effect. I ventured out into the stillness, just a few spots of rain as I passed through the sleeping village of Stodmarsh. Walking up the hill to overlook Collard’s, which I couldn’t see because it was still dark, my thoughts turned to dim and distant schooldays and a passage from Rachel Carson’s classic “Silent Spring” that had been part of an English exam. The “cawing” of the Rooks, at their nests in the roadside trees, once again concentrated my mind with **Jackdaw** also heard before I reached Cow Corner.

“Glory be!” 04.20 hrs. Somewhere from the Heresden/Westbere area the wonderful sound of a male **Bittern** “booming”. What a relief and a much-needed boost to my total. The bird was calling irregularly, yet the sound was carrying for a huge distance, I could still hear it when I was in Swanton Lane wood, later in the morning. With dawn beginning to break, I did a circuit of Trenleypark and Swanton Lane woods. The dawn chorus being rather predictable, yet allowing me to record an amazing 13 **Tawny Owls** plus **Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Nightingale, Treecreeper, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Sparrowhawk, Stock Dove** and **Willow Warbler**. I was also fortunate enough to see and hear **Common Buzzard**, a real bonus species. My tally was now 79 species and I knew that my 110 target was unrealistic. I decided to cut my losses and return to Stodmarsh instead of making my way to Fordwich where I had planned to connect with Grey Wagtail. A mistake?

I was in surprisingly good spirits, probably because I had thrown in the towel as far as my target was concerned. A **Jay** flew across the road as I approached Cow Corner where a

Yellowhammer and 35, then 2, **Fieldfare** were watched flying south, calling loudly as they went. A scan from Cow Corner revealed a pair of **Canada Geese** to present on the water meadows besides the River Stour, but I failed to note any Common Terns over Westbere – would I have seen them if I'd been carrying my scope? A **Skylark** was singing from high above the cereal crop as I started my descent into Stodmarsh.

It was now 08.00hrs and I still had six hours until my arranged pick-up at Pluck's Gutter. The weather had deteriorated, a moderate NW wind and grey skies, ensuring that migrants would be at a premium. The Stodmarsh NNR (Grove Ferry) proved to be a massive let down. I managed to add **Bullfinch, Great Crested Grebe, Shoveler, Reed Warbler, Water Rail, Sand Martin, Marsh Harrier, Tufted Duck, Pochard** and **Ruff**. What happened to the Bearded Tit, Garganey and Little Ringed Plover? Was it too much to hope for a Cuckoo or Hobby?



Male Marsh Harrier

Whilst at Stodmarsh/Grove I was fortunate enough to bump into Ian Harding, Martyn Wilson and a “vertically challenged”

Tipper driver – with attitude! Everyone agreed that the birding was abysmal and that I must be in need of medical attention to attempt such an undertaking in the prevailing conditions.

Guilty, as charged!

I had a wander around, missing a Lesser Whitethroat that was present in the paddocks, getting a few pics of common species in an attempt to add interest to this poor account of Kent birding.



Left – Blue Tit on Greater Reedmace
Below – Cock Chaffinch

I slowly made my way over to Pluck's Gutter; I had plenty of time, although a blister on my right foot was proving to be a little uncomfortable. A **Little Grebe** along the Little Stour proved to be my last addition (No. 95) although further interest was provided by a huge falcon sp. that was stooping at Woodpigeons over by Sarre. Through my binoculars I was unable to make out much detail, yet it certainly wasn't a Peregrine – there was no clear facial markings, the under parts were distinctly dark and the wing movement was particularly elastic and flexible. Size-wise it had a wing span approx twice that of the male Kestrel that briefly attempted to mob it. My guess is a falconer's hybrid – it certainly didn't have the bulk to be a pure Gyr!

With more than an hour to waste, I had a quick look around the Pluck's Gutter area, seeing a few more Yellowhammer and another Common Buzzard. Alas, my spirit was broken and the lure of a San Miguel's was too much. I ended the session on 95 species at 13.25hrs – tired, but not disappointed, it had been rather good fun.



Distant Common Buzzard

My thanks to Bev, as always, for her constant support and encouragement. The staff of the Dog & Duck at Pluck's Gutter – A warm welcome, good beer & food plus a timely break in proceedings.

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