

**WHERE TO FIND BIRDS
IN THE REGENT'S PARK**

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TONY DUCKETT

Introduction

The area that is now The Regent's Park lay at the southern edge of the ancient Middlesex Forest until the early 16th century. Then an ageing Henry VIII decided that he was in need of a hunting area closer to his Palace, so an area of 500 acres named Marylebone Park was created. On the death of Charles I in 1649 and the seizing of Crown land, major deforestation took place and by the time the Crown was restored very little woodland remained. It was in 1811 that the creation of the present-day Regent's Park was undertaken following plans drawn up by John Nash. The only major changes to Nash's original plans were the establishing of the Zoological Gardens (now ZSL) and the Botanical Society which developed the area that is now Queen Mary's Gardens.

Habitats

The Park up until the mid-1980s was typical urban parkland, with areas of formal garden; Queen Mary's Gardens, Avenue Gardens, English Gardens, St Johns Lodge (Secret Garden) and the flower borders by Clarence Gate. There are two lakes. Boating is allowed on the first one but rowers are restricted by chains or fencing to about half of it. The chained-off area gives waterfowl and the occasional wader somewhere to retreat into. The fenced-off sections at the northwest, southeast and northeast arms

Kestrel. (Tony Duckett)



also act as refuges for the birds on the lake. The northeast area, Longbridge Sanctuary, houses the Park's ornamental Waterfowl Collection. There are also six islands on the lake, the two on the main part of the lake being home to the Park's heronry. The second and much smaller lake has recently undergone a dramatic change from being an ornamental duck pond with some very large fish: it has now been made into an environmentally friendly lake with areas of marginal plants and a boardwalk.

There were large areas of amenity grassland which was kept short and offered very little to wildlife. The Park hosts a variety of sports throughout the year in the wide open areas, south of London Zoo, east of the Broadwalk on Gloucester and Cumberland Greens, with another area, Marylebone Green, bordering the Park's southern boundary. There is a small wooded area, 'Leaf Yard Wood', which was once part of the garden to the large but now demolished Holford House. The wood is not open to the public except on certain occasions: such as on April 30th 2011 when a Wryneck - the second Park record - spent a day there; and again on September 21st 2014 when the Park's first Yellow-browed Warbler spent the afternoon there.

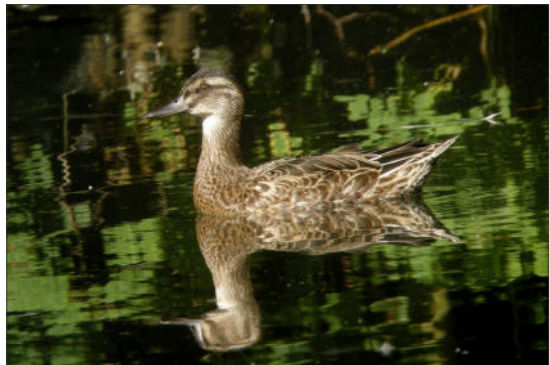
My work, projects and observations in the Park

I joined The Royal Parks in 1977 as one of two assistants to the Senior Wildlife Officer in Regent's Park. At that time part of our duties involved looking after the Park's ornamental waterfowl, collecting and hatching their eggs and rearing ducklings, goslings and cygnets. In the autumn some of these juvenile birds were then swapped with aviculturists to help create what was at that time the best free-to-view collection in the United Kingdom with at least 90 species. Unfortunately the breeding has ceased but there is still a small collection of ducks and geese in the northeast arm of the lake. The presence of this collection has helped to attract other species of waterfowl that would not normally be expected on a park lake in the middle of the city. Species such as Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Eurasian Wigeon - once nervy but regular visitors - are now reasonably tame, with the Shovelers feeding within two metres of people walking around the edge of the lake. Of the scarcer visitors that have turned up, we have had Ring-necked Duck (1978), Lesser Scaup (2003), a Greater Scaup that spent 15 years with the Scaup in the collection, Goosander, and a Smew that spent two winters with the birds in the collection. A drake Garganey summered with the birds in the collection,

Garganey in May 2009; this bird turned up in April 2009 and stayed throughout the summer. Amazingly, the same bird returned in April the following year. (Tony Duckett)

Editorial note:

Some records mentioned in this paper are new to the LNHS and have not therefore appeared in earlier LBRs.



Common Scoter; this pair spent a few minutes on the lake in mid-April 2015 before a rowing-boat came too close for comfort. (Tony Duckett)



going into eclipse plumage before departing; he even returned the following year for a much shorter stay. The most surprising visitor in recent years was a pair of Common Scoter that dropped down on to the lake one sunny morning, April 12th 2015.

In 1980 I became the Senior Wildlife Officer and with my interests in birds and nature I started improving areas of the Park that either came under my control or that I felt offered the potential for encouraging more species into the Park. I was very lucky that the Park's management teams over the years have believed in me and my ideas that at the time went against much of how the Park was maintained. The areas that I targeted were normally in fenced-off areas with no public access, such as the Longbridge Sanctuary, Leaf Yard Wood, Cricket Pen, Wetland Pen and Chat Enclosure. These areas may have no public access but they are either quite open, or have plenty of gaps that allow easy viewing, or have a particular area (sun trap) on their edge that attracts birds.

I was able to have the mowing relaxed in areas bordering the sports pitches. We now have rough grassland linking the enclosed areas; this allows invertebrates, small mammals and amphibians the opportunity to spread into areas they would otherwise never have reached. Before this Kestrels had ceased breeding in the Park, largely due to the demise of the House Sparrow and the fact that there was no alternative food supply. The rough grassland areas have over time been colonised by insects, some small mammals and amphibians. This has resulted in the Park now hosting two pairs of Kestrel and one pair of Little Owls.

Below left: Common Snipe; this is one of four birds that dropped down into the Rail Ditch at the end of December 2010. Below right: Water Rail; this caged feeder allows the birds to feed without being disturbed by other birds. (Tony Duckett)





Above left: This is one of two Kestrel nest boxes that are successfully used in the Park.

Above right: Little Owl; a pair have been breeding in the Park since 2007 and winter in an area of the Park where the male was first seen in 2003. (Tony Duckett)

Certain species of shrubs and trees were planted with the hope of enticing particular species of birds: alder and silver birch for Siskin and Lesser Redpoll; gorse out on the open spaces with the intention of attracting Stonechats. This bird was a scarce visitor to the Park, but now the 'Chat Bushes' (area shown on Bird Sightings Guide map) attract them annually.

In the past 13 years several small reedbeds have been constructed. The earlier ones were quite small, not very long, narrow, and positioned behind sheet piling. The Park's management were concerned that, because of the vigorous nature of phragmites, they might spread too much. This has not been the case and we have made bigger and better ones since at the northwest end of the lake. Our first substantial reed bed was constructed where the boathouse once stood (now on the opposite side of the lakes). The cost of constructing these beds has meant that the work is often spread over a couple of years. This first one has a section of reeds cut down every autumn in the hope of attracting Water Rails, which until this reedbed's construction had only been recorded twice before. They are almost annual now with up to three birds wintering; the occasional bird turns up also in the Wetland Pen but viewing is restricted.

These next two areas are to the north of the Park and are under-watched but well worth a look. The Regent's Canal between Charlbert Street Bridge and London Zoo is a mixture of mature trees and elm scrub. The sides are quite steep but it does attract a variety of parkland birds, migrants and the odd Kingfisher during the autumn and winter. To the north of the zoo lies Primrose Hill; habitat-wise it is not the best, but from its summit there are fantastic views over the capital. It was a favourite location in the 1950s and 1960s to watch visible migration over London. The area to the southwest of the view-point and bordering the underground reservoir is reasonably quiet and has some mature hawthorns and apple trees that attract migrants.

Status of the birds

Resident or breeding

The Park supports a healthy population of birds, with 50 species breeding within the Park's boundaries and a couple of others that breed every now and then. There are also

species that breed near by but feed in or over the Park: Peregrine Falcon, Common Tern and Grey Wagtail.

Annual passage migrants

Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Osprey, Common Sandpiper, Whinchat, Stonechat, Northern Wheatear, Common Redstart, Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher.

Vagrants

Cory's Shearwater (recorded in 2016), Gannet, Common Crane, Black Kite, Hoopoe, Wryneck, Melodious Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler.

Birds: when and where to look

Being slightly further north than most of London's tourist attractions, the Park gives visitors the chance to get away from the hustle and bustle of life in the capital. The Park's position - you would think - is not ideal for attracting migrants; not being close to a river system or the large reservoirs and gravel pits that surround parts of London, we rely on birds following the large green parts of the capital. Predominantly in spring, birds fly from southwest London over Richmond Park, WWT Wetland Centre at Barnes, Hyde Park and then over the Park and on towards Hampstead Heath and Alexandra Palace before reaching the Lea Valley and a much richer eco-system. In the autumn it is a reverse of this for our earlier migrants - the warblers, chats, flycatchers, hirundines and raptors. This changes slightly when it comes to finches and thrushes: these families tend to head more east to west.

Yellow-legged Gull; birds of varying ages are seen on the lake during the year. (Tony Duckett)



As with most birding, the first two or three hours after day-break is normally the best time to visit. This is when our pair of Little Owls are slightly easier to see, particularly when they are feeding their young. They frequent the area east of the Ready Money Drinking Fountain, but have different roost sites during the winter period. Birders, some sceptical, are surprised when told that the list of birds recorded in the Park stands at an impressive 214 species.



Osprey. (Tony Duckett)

During the winter months a period of cold weather is needed to force the birds wintering in the United Kingdom or even on the continent to move in search of food, without which things can be very quiet in the Park. The Park is well known for its Grey Herons: this species has been breeding in the Park since 1968 on the two islands on the main lake. They will take advantage of the mild winters and in some years will be on eggs in early January. It is worth checking the gulls: four species are regular, and Yellow-legged Gulls are seen more frequently than Great Black-backed Gulls. Scarce waterfowl tend to be seen on the quieter part of the lake in the chained-off section.

The first sign that spring is on the way is when the first Meadow Pipits are seen and heard heading north in early March. Skywatching during the passage periods has shown that there are on occasions good numbers of raptors passing over London. In March, on days when there are plenty of warm updrafts, Red Kites from the Chilterns start to move and are seen a handful of times each year; on these days also, it is possible to see groups of Common Buzzards in the sky. Peak spring migration runs from early April through to mid-May. Things then slow down when the summer visitors - Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs, Reed Warblers and now almost annually Common Whitethroat - settle down to breed.

We start to see signs of departing passerines in late July with the first fresh-plumaged Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs turning up. The Park used to turn up Wood Warblers regularly in the autumn but the decline in their population has meant you have to look really hard to find any. From August, as well as raptors from the UK, birds from the continent boost those numbers with Osprey and Honey Buzzard being recorded annually.

There are times during the autumn, if the weather is favourable, when the true spectacle of migration can be observed. It involves Swallows and House Martins in the hundreds, sometimes thousands, heading south. Looking through binoculars, birds can be picked up as they approach Primrose Hill in the north; they then drop down, skimming low across the grass of the open spaces before departing to the southwest and over Baker Street.

The Redwings, Fieldfares and finches are the next groups that allow you to witness migration as it happens. The first couple of hours after sunrise on a cool crisp morning in late September or early October are the best conditions for seeing this. These birds will have left continental Europe in the dark and are looking for somewhere to drop down and feed. In the 1960s, birders such as Ian Wallace would stand on the top of

Primrose Hill, from where you can see more of what is going on over London. I find it is best to stand in the middle of the Park, possibly by the Hub (café and changing room) looking towards the BT Tower. The movement can be on quite a broad front and stretch across the width of the Park and beyond. The end of the year can be a quiet period but cold weather can change all that: on January 24th 1978, at least 1,200 Skylarks were seen heading west - a phenomenon that is never likely to happen again.

How to get here and where to start

As parking can be expensive in the capital, a large number of people visiting the Park use public transport. The nearest Tube stations are Baker Street, Regent's Park and Great Portland Street. Baker Street is the best station to disembark from, and then a quick five-minute walk north along Baker Street sees you entering the Park through Clarence Gate. Starting from here you can take a circular walk that takes in all of the Park's key areas. Birds can turn up almost anywhere; however there are certain locations that are more favoured. This is because they offer the birds a chance to either feed, drink or shelter, but mainly they are in areas to which the public have no access (behind chains or fences). It does not mean that they are hidden; some enclosures can be walked around and can be looked into.

The map below is an aid for those people who follow @parksbirdlondon on Twitter or www.regentsparkbirds.blogspot.co.uk. On these two sites, details of bird sightings in the Park are often followed by an area number; for example, Common Redstart in the Chat Enclosure, area 39. (Courtesy, The Royal Parks)



A short walk

As we all know, birds can turn up anywhere. What follows is a short walk around the Park that takes in those areas that seem to attract our so-called less-common birds. (Birds that we might label as less common may, however, be common away from central London.) We will start the walk as if you had got off a bus or train and entered the Park at Clarence Gate.

I am sure that Grey Heron will be the first bird your eyes will be drawn to when you enter the Park at this point. That, and the large gatherings of Coot and Feral Pigeons, are all attracted to this spot for bread and similar types of food handed out by ill-informed members of the public. Grey Heron is a flagship species for the Park and one of the reasons why we have improved the habitat in some areas around the lake. We will not dwell here but make our way to Area 9, passing the Bandstand Island (Area 7) which in spring holds at least 14 pairs of herons, several of which have nests that are almost at eye level and allow you the opportunity to follow the life in the nest, from the pair bonding to when the young eventually leave more than 70 days later.

Area 9

Standing here on the edge of the lake, looking towards the Central London Mosque, gives you a chance to scan the lake for less-common species of waterfowl that visit the Park, eg Wigeon, Teal and Pintail. They are attracted to the area closer to 'Heron Island', opposite (herons first nested here in 1968), as it is far enough away from human activity to allow them to feel more relaxed. It is a good place to see our feral Mandarin Ducks and Red-crested Pochards. They both now breed in the Park, numbers increasing during the winter period to around 90. In spring at least one pair of Common Terns arrive, resting on and mating on the posts in the lake. They do not breed here, choosing to breed at Brent Reservoir (five miles north-west of the Park) but they fish the lake daily until any young have fledged. After heavy showers in May, August or September, it is worth checking the banks of these islands for any Common Sandpipers. At this point it is easier to go through the gulls, looking for something out of the ordinary: Mediterranean Gulls are scarce but Yellow-legged Gulls occur at certain times of the year. Vagrants seen here include Red-breasted Merganser, Lesser Scaup, Common Scoter (pair), Kittiwake and Black Tern.

*This Kittiwake
dropped in during
March 2014,
spending a couple
of hours on the
lake.
(Tony Duckett)*



Leaving the lake we head up the hill; the shrubbery on the left behind the fence is very good for common migrants, and Firecrest is fairly regular here. We then reach the Inner Circle, with Queen Mary's Rose Garden across the road. This walk does not take in the Rose Garden but - if you have time - it can be worth a look. A European Nightjar spent the day here on May 9th 2010, and it does attract migrants - particularly during the autumn when the shrubbery on the western side of the rose wheel can hold the commoner warblers and the odd Spotted Flycatcher. Follow the Inner Circle to the left, entering the Park at the next entrance. Turn right immediately and follow the path until you come to a small enclosure - The Cricket Pen.

Area 31 'The Cricket Pen'

This was the Park's first small enclosure, with its mixture of trees: pine, birch, alder and hornbeam. At the time it was not planted and fenced for the benefit of the Park's wildlife; this has happened in recent years. Resident parkland birds are drawn to the bird-feeding station that is sited here during the winter: Siskins, Brambling, Reed Bunting and Blackcap can sometimes be seen using the feeders. These birds in turn attract one of two pairs of Sparrowhawk that breed in the Park. The blackberry bushes - apart from encouraging Common Whitethroat to breed here - supply plenty of food for migrant warblers particularly during the autumn. Apart from the common species, Garden Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat are seen in small numbers and the trees

Clockwise from top left: Common Whitethroat. Common Redstarts find the hedges protecting the enclosures a great place to look for insects. Whinchats and Stonechats are drawn to the areas where gorse has been planted, particularly the 'Chat Bushes'. (Tony Duckett)





Clockwise from top left: Sometimes hard to see, the Park's second Yellow-browed Warbler was present for 11 days in October 2014. Pied Flycatchers in spring are very scarce, but autumn normally sees at least three birds turn up. Firecrest; this was one of up to four birds that were present during the winter of 2015-16. At the end of April 2011 this Wren was the last thing I was expecting to find in the Leaf Yard Wood. (Tony Duckett)

themselves regularly attract Common Redstart, Pied and Spotted Flycatcher and, if you are lucky, Wood Warbler. In the southeast corner of the pen, an elm thicket has proved a draw to resident and passage migrants. It can, if the weather has been bad, provide areas for birds to bathe and drink. In October 2014 the Park's second Yellow-browed Warbler spent 11 days here. The reedbed fringing the nearby island has breeding Reed Warbler, and another pair can be seen or heard by standing by the set of double gates looking into Area 32 (The Wetland Pen). This area, though not open to the public, has produced Green Sandpiper and Jack and Common Snipe as well as Water Rail.

Leave Area 31 by following the path round the end of the lake and cutting across the area of rough grassland, avoiding the wildflower patches. There are a couple of large gorse bushes (The Chat Bushes) that were planted to attract our rarest chats, the Whinchat and Stonechat. I am pleased to say that they are both now regularly found here.

Now we will head for the Hub (café and sports changing room) in area 37; this is a good place for some refreshments but mainly (weather permitting) a great place to scan the skies for diurnal bird movements, particularly during the autumn when large numbers of Swallows pass overhead. It is also a good spot for raptor-watching as you have 360-degree views. The sports fields close to the hub, particularly the Cricket Squares, is the best location for seeing Northern Wheatears, and occasionally wagtails and pipits. The latter two groups tend to move on quickly due to the disturbance from people and dogs.

Area 39 'Chat Enclosure'

Once refreshed, walk northwest to the small enclosure that was once part of a tennis and golf school. The area was left to regenerate and, over the past six years, has turned into a great place to see virtually all of the Park's top passerines: Tree Pipit, Whinchat, Common Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, and Pied and Spotted Flycatcher. On September 29th 2016 the Park's third Yellow-browed Warbler spent two days in the area. There is a small drinking pool that helps draw the birds in, plus the fruit from blackberry bushes and the insects on the coppiced willows and the tall lime trees that are in and adjacent to the enclosure. There is an avenue of small fruit trees on the western edge that attract good numbers of thrushes during the autumn, sometimes joined by Redwings and Fieldfares, and on more than one occasion Ring Ouzels have been with them.

Area 40 & 41 'Leaf Yard Wood'

A short walk west brings you to area 40 and 41 (Leaf Yard Wood), not open to the public but once a top spot for migrants. It attracts a similar range of species to the 'Chat Enclosure' but being an area of mainly mature trees it can be harder to see the birds. Just before dawn or at dusk there is a chance of seeing and hearing Tawny Owls, and during the winter Woodcock can sometimes be seen leaving the shelter of the wood to feed in the rough grassland. There is a holm oak by the fence that regularly attracts Firecrests, with at least four birds being seen here in 2015. The open area with some small clumps of gorse can be good for migrants, feeding in the scrub by the fence. It is important that you stand back and watch, as that way you will not disturb the birds and they will come out in the open. As it is fairly sheltered and gets the early morning sun it is a favourite area for Spotted Flycatchers in the autumn.

Area 2 & 3

We then make our way to areas 2 and 3, Hanover Bridges and the Park's main areas of reedbed. The reedbed viewed just before you start to cross the first of the two bridges in early autumn has a cut area that has enabled visiting birders the chance to view up to three Water Rails. These birds are attracted to a feeding station that is positioned in the Rail Ditch if the weather takes a turn for the worse. In spring if you cross the first bridge and sit on the benches that are behind a small reedbed you will be rewarded with fantastic views of singing male Reed Warblers. At least ten pairs breed in the Park, and until the establishing of the reedbeds the species was just a passage migrant. From this vantage point you can watch the passage of hirundines, pipits and wagtails in spring and autumn. The more you visit, the greater the chance of something more exceptional, eg Osprey, Hobby, Whimbrel or Greenshank - all these have been seen from here in the past.

From here it is a short walk back along the edge of the lake to Clarence Gate and your starting point. On the way you will pass another reedbed; as well as breeding Reed Warbler, this hosted a pair of Sedge Warblers in 2015, though proof of a new breeding bird for the Park was not confirmed. Another scarce breeder, the Reed Bunting, has bred here in the past. Always keep an eye out as you walk alongside the lake: a Black Tern once spent several hours hawking insects over the lake. Kittiwakes have dropped in on a couple occasions and, while counting Red-crested Pochard in 2015, I observed a pair of Common Scoter drop in for a few minutes. You will pass the western side of the

Table 1. Earliest and latest dates of summer and winter visitors to the Park

Earliest	Summer visitors	Latest	Earliest	Summer Visitors	Latest
30/04/2006	Honey Buzzard	02/10/2000	15/03/1961	Wheatear	15/11/1994
23/03/1996	Osprey	22/09/2010	26/03/2007	Ring Ouzel	03/11/2006
24/03/2010	Hobby	02/11/1995	21/04/2013	Grasshopper Warbler	15/10/1973
28/03/1985	Common Sandpiper	18/11/2004	04/04/2016*	Sedge Warbler	18/09/1968
10/05/1966	Black Tern	15/09/1994	13/04/2012	Reed Warbler	06/10/1982
08/05/1978	Sandwich Tern	02/10/1986	05/04/2002	Garden Warbler	11/10/1984
22/04/1995	Common Tern	12/10/1995	12/04/2016*	Lesser Whitethroat	05/10/1967
24/04/2006	Arctic Tern	01/09/1994	09/04/2011	Common Whitethroat	05/10/1978
05/04/1982	Turtle Dove	05/11/1981	16/04/1951	Wood Warbler	18/09/1991
08/04/2011	Cuckoo	10/10/1955	11/03/1990	Willow Warbler	14/10/1981
09/05/2010	Nightjar		29/04/1966	Spotted Flycatcher	08/10/1976
18/04/2007	Swift	10/10/1985	09/04/1991	Pied Flycatcher	07/10/1986
15/03/1994	Sand Martin	12/11/1989			
01/04/1993	Swallow	30/11/1968	Earliest	Winter Visitors	Latest
16/03/1990	House Martin	10/11/1983	10/12/1962	Smew	21/05/2010
21/03/1963	Tree Pipit	*18/10/2016	30/10/2006	Jack Snipe	29/04/1999
03/04/2004	Yellow Wagtail	09/11/1967	15/09/1981	Fieldfare	28/04/1978
19/04/1985	Nightingale	30/09/1972	15/09/1981	Redwing	31/05/1995
07/04/2005	Common Redstart	06/10/1960	14/09/1997	Brambling	15/04/1967
15/04/2007	Whinchat	09/10/1980	04/09/2015	Siskin	21/04/1984

*subsequent to publication year

Bandstand Island and will once again be able to get good views of several of the Grey Heron nests, particularly during the first five months of the year.

Access & directions

The Park opens at approximately 5:30am every day of the year, with Primrose Hill being always open. There are slightly different closing times throughout, which can be found at the entrances or online.

The Regent's Park is easily reached by road or by tube. Parking on the Park roads is metered, but if visiting at a weekend you can park free of charge on the single yellow lines and meters just north of the Regent's Canal, but not in the residents' parking bays. The nearest stations are Regent's Park, Great Portland Street and Baker Street, the last being closest to the start of the walk. The nearest Network Rail station is Marylebone, situated five minutes' walk west of Baker Street station.

Further information:

www.regentsparkbirds.blogspot.co.uk

twitter @parksbirdlondon

<http://www.royalparks.org.uk/parks/the-regents-park>

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Readers may request a Checklist of species seen in the Park from the author.



Two Bearded Tits that had been seen at several waterbodies in the London area were seen at the Park in mid-February 2013.
(Tony Duckett)