

The Cotswold Water Park

A Fantastic Birding Destination!

The Cotswold Water Park (CWP) is an area of 40 square miles of the upper Thames valley, mostly comprising large areas of mixed farmland. For the past 50 years or more, sand and gravel extraction has been ongoing, resulting in the production of habitats not normally associated with farmland in the upper Thames, for example, the active quarrying produces shallow wetlands, expanses of gravel, sandy cliffs, reed beds and willow carr, whilst the post-extraction restoration process produces lakes of varying sizes, reed beds, duck marsh and wader scrapes.

These new habitats have attracted a whole range of wetland birds not normally associated with farmland. The CWP supports in excess of 20,000 wintering waterbirds and holds nationally important numbers of Great Crested Grebe, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Gadwall, Coot, Lesser Black Backed Gull, Smew and Shoveler.

The BTO Winter Gull Roost count was undertaken in winter 2003-2004 and over 21,000 gulls were recorded at the main roost locations, mainly Black Headed Gull, Lesser Black Backed Gull and Common Gull but also small numbers of Herring Gull, with the occasional Greater Black Backed Gull, Yellow Legged Gull, Iceland Gull, Mediterranean Gull and Caspian Gull.

Breeding waterbirds are important here, with good numbers of Great Crested Grebe, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Coot and Mute Swan with increasing numbers of Gadwall and Red Crested Pochard, plus the occasional Pochard, Teal and Shoveler!

But its not just about the ducks!!!

The CWP supports a locally important population of breeding Little Ringed Plover (20+ pairs in 2004), Sand Martin (1300+ pairs in 2004), Black Headed Gull (78+ pairs in 2004), Common Tern (49+ pairs in 2004) and Nightingale (25-30 singing males in 2004). Lapwings breed in increasing numbers. Two pairs of Oystercatcher bred here in 2004. Several pairs of Redshank may have bred in 2004 at several locations, potentially representing the stronghold of breeding Redshank for Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

Ongoing work by the Cotswold Water Park Society (CWPSoc) and Cotswold Water Park Ringing Group (CWRG) on the Reed Bunting has produced some fascinating data regarding our breeding and wintering populations. Furthermore liaison and partnership working between the CWPSoc and the local mineral operators enables Sand Martin colonies and Little Ringed Plover nests to be safeguarded each year, drastically increasing their breeding success in the CWP. The mineral companies such as Aggregate Industries UK, Hanson plc, Hills Minerals & Waste Ltd and Cotswold Aggregates Ltd have been exemplary in this regard supporting these conservation efforts.

This partnership working enables the ringing group to focus efforts not only on the wetland species but also the species favouring the active mineral workings, species characteristic of the local area. Furthermore, many of the mineral companies and other local businesses also

sponsor the CWPSoc and the ringing group and its projects.

When are the best periods for birding in the CWP? Birding highlights include:

- **Early Spring**, April and May for the early arriving warblers and hirundines as well as the Nightingales of Swillbrook Lakes (Lakes 46/48). The Hobbies arrive back, often in large numbers and often with a Red Footed Falcon in tow!
- **The Summer** for breeding waders such as Little Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher and Lapwing and for large numbers of breeding ducks such as Tufted Duck and Gadwall. Also breeding Hobby, Barn Owl and Little Owl.
- **The Autumn** for the sheer number and variety of passage birds migrating through this inland site; passage birds in 2004 included Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, Yellow Wagtail, Whimbrel, Temminck's Stint, Grey Plover, Black Tailed Godwit and Bar Tailed Godwit, Mediterranean Gull and Black Tern.
- **The Winter** yields large numbers of wintering waterbirds and gulls; look out for Pochard, Gadwall, Goosander, Smew, Caspian Gull, Yellow Legged Gull, Iceland Gull, Little Egret, Red Throated Diver, Green Sandpiper, and Yellow Browed Warbler. Plus large flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover. Look out for Cetti's Warbler, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Snipe, Water Rail and Kingfisher.

Further details of monthly bird sightings for the key birding locations in the CWP may be found at <http://www.waterpark.org/society/birdwatching.html>

Further information and maps including the lake numbers can be found at either of the visitor centre at Keynes Country Park, nr Somerford Keynes or the Cotswold Water Park Gateway Centre, nr South Cerney (Tel: 01285 862962). The Gateway Centre also has a recent sightings board.

Please send in your bird records please as they help us to safeguard our breeding and wintering birds. All records are forwarded to relevant county recorders and Record Centres and many will be used on the website below.

Latest birding information can be seen at <http://www.surfbirds.com/blog/cotswoldwaterpark/>

For further information please contact me.

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