



THE OBSERVER

SECOS Newsletter

Promoting and fostering the study of ornithology by observation, research and record keeping

Long Weekend - Dorset - 21-24 April 2023

This Newsletter describes the SECOS Long Weekend trip to Dorset from 21st to 24th April 2023. The trip was based on a scheduled itinerary. There were no unscheduled local twitches. A species list is shown on the last page.

Weather

There were occasional heavy rain showers throughout the weekend. Otherwise, the weather was fine with temperatures around 10°C.

Day 1: Friday 21st April

20 members booked the trip to Dorset. All members travelled by car. Car sharing was encouraged, which meant that 10 cars were used. This was the first SECOS trip to Dorset since April 2017 so we were excited to be on our way. We travelled in heavy rain to Strensham Services on the M5 for a welcome breakfast stop.

Radipole Lake RSPB

The Radipole Lake reserve is located near Weymouth. The site was originally a tidal creek but, in the 17th century, it was dammed to create a freshwater lake. In the 20th century, the area was used for gravel extraction. In the 1970s, the RSPB acquired the land to create a nature reserve. Today, the reserve is home to a wide variety of bird species. It is an important stopover point for migratory birds, and it provides a vital habitat for breeding and wintering birds.



Radipole Lake Visitor Centre



Radipole Lake Viewing Shelter

We had a quick lunch in the car park and started our tick lists. In the trees and bushes around the car park, woodpigeon, great tit, house sparrow, blackbird, greenfinch and goldfinch were soon listed. From the Visitor Centre, common water birds were seen - tufted duck, mallard, moorhen, Canada goose, oystercatcher, black-headed gull, lesser black-backed gull and herring gull. Along the Discovery trail to the Viewing Shelter, many Cetti's

warblers announced their presence with explosive bursts of "tchetti tchetti tchetti". We noted with pleasure the return of summer migrants – hirundines (swallow, house martin, sand martin) and warblers (chiffchaff, willow warbler, reed warbler, sedge warbler). The list of water birds expanded to include teal, pochard, gadwall, goldeneye, mute swan, great crested grebe, coot, cormorant. A few common woodland species were added - long-tailed tit, robin, dunnock, wren and carrion crow.

Next, we headed along the North Trail to the North Screens. On arrival, we experienced torrential rain, which continued for some time. Fortunately, the screens were partially covered so we were able to keep dry. There was a good view of a marsh harrier perched at the top of a bush, and a grey heron dropped into the reeds at the back of a pool.

On returning to the Discovery Centre, a common snipe was seen.

Lodmoor RSPB

The Lodmoor reserve is located about 6 miles from Radipole Lake. The site was once a saltwater lagoon but, in the 19th century, it was reclaimed and used for farming. In the mid-20th century, the land was converted into a landfill site before being transformed into a nature reserve in the 1990s. Today, the reserve is an important habitat for a variety of bird species, including waders, wildfowl, and reedbed specialists. Like Radipole, it provides an important stopover point for migratory birds.



Lodmoor

On arrival, there was a heavy rain shower. Most people parked on Southdown Avenue on the north side of the reserve, while a few elected to park in the car park at the southwest corner of the reserve.



We sat in our cars and chatted on WhatsApp while we waited for the rain to abate, although there were no signs that it might improve. After about 20 minutes, just as we were considering abandoning Lodmoor, the rain eased off and we jumped out of our cars. The Southdown Avenue group proceeded down Beachdown Way and the southwest group headed towards the Saltmarsh Viewpoint (the 'bandstand'), overlooking the scrape at the southwest corner of the reserve.

Along Beachdown Way, the pools and reedbeds revealed a little egret, two black-tailed godwits, a pale bar-tailed godwit and a curlew (in addition to several other species seen earlier in the day). A marsh harrier was hunting over the reeds. Peter posted that several good species were being viewed from the 'bandstand') so we hurried on.

The scrape, viewed from the 'bandstand' proved to be a birding hotspot! On a small wire-fence-enclosed island, there were three Mediterranean gulls - a pair of bill-tapping adults and a sub-adult). At the back of the scrape, there were three common sandpipers and a single greenshank. Two common terns were perched on a buoy and sandwich tern flyovers were seen. Towards the front of the scrape, there were a pair of garganey, a bar-tailed godwit and a female wigeon. What a great end to the day!

Hotel

The hotel we chose for our stay in Dorset was the Crown Hotel, located in the heart of Weymouth just a stone's throw from the beach and harbour. Built in the 17th century, the hotel was originally a coaching



inn. Today, the hotel retains much of its original charm, including 'interesting' routes from the foyer to the bedrooms! After a pre-dinner drink in the Onyx Bar, we had dinner in the spacious restaurant. After dinner, we gathered in the first-floor guest lounge to list the day's birds, then retired for a good night's sleep (although some people found that having a room with ill-fitting sash windows opposite the Rendezvous nightclub was not ideal).

Day 2: Saturday 22nd April

Morden Bog

Our first call of the day was to Morden Bog, situated in the Purbeck Hills near the village of Sandford. Morden Bog is an important habitat for a variety of rare and endangered species, including heathland birds, reptiles, and amphibians. The reserve is managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust.

On arrival, the Lawsons Clump car park was almost full but there were some roadside spaces around the entrance. We walked north along the track running close to the roadside. We expected to be able to cross the road to enter the bog. Unfortunately, the area was fenced off and marked private, so we headed back to the car park. We noticed that several hundred metres along the road in a south direction, there is another car park from which the bog can be accessed but it can only accommodate about four cars. Also, some cars were using the road as a racetrack so walking along the roadside was not a safe option. We decided to abandon Morden Bog. We hoped to find the 'special' heathland birds at our next stop, Arne.

Arne RSPB

The Arne reserve is situated on a peninsula that juts into Poole Harbour. It is an important site for many bird species and is home to several rare and endangered reptiles, such as sand lizard and smooth snake. Arne provides stunning views over Poole Harbour and the surrounding countryside.



At the Visitor Centre, an RSPB warden described the best locations to look for Dartford warbler – the heathland at the north of the reserve south of the Big Wood, and a part of the reserve called Hyde's Heath.

Most people chose to follow the Yellow trail on the Shipstal side of the reserve, which has a wide range of habitats – grassland, woodland, heathland, mudflats, saltmarsh, sandy beach and open water. A few people opted to go to the Hydes Heath side of the reserve.

On the Yellow trail, species included shelduck, mallard, Canada goose, pheasant, sparrowhawk, common buzzard, kestrel, woodpigeon, jackdaw, swallow, blackbird, song thrush, mistle thrush, (possible) swift, willow warbler, blackcap, chiffchaff, great tit, coal tit, wren, cuckoo, common crossbill, greenfinch, chaffinch, goldfinch and yellowhammer. At the elevated hide, overlooking the sandy beach, mudflats and open water to Poole Harbour, oystercatcher, curlew, whimbrel, redshank, Mediterranean gull, little egret, great white egret, marsh harrier and osprey were recorded.



Meanwhile, on Hydes Heath, a Dartford warbler was seen and heard for about five minutes; a woodlark was heard; and tree pipit, hobby and stonechat were recorded. Later attempts by others to relocate Dartford warbler, woodlark and tree pipit were unsuccessful, although a showy pair of stonechat, greenfinch, goldfinch and chiffchaff were recorded.

Colin decided that he had done enough walking for the day and hired a tramper (off-road mobility scooter), which seemed well-suited for the terrain.

Back at the Visitor Centre, a male siskin was a frequent caller at the feeders.

At around 4 p.m., Howard posted that, from the highest viewpoint on the Hydes Heath perimeter path, he had spotted two white-tailed eagles flying over Poole Harbour.

As we left Arne a few minutes later to travel back to the hotel, it started to rain. Perfect timing!

Day 3: Saturday 23rd April

Portland Bill

Portland Bill is a narrow promontory that juts out into the English Channel on the southern tip of the Isle of Portland, just a few miles from Weymouth. The waters and cliffs around Portland Bill provide feeding and nesting opportunities for a variety of bird species, particularly seabirds. In spring, the surrounding grasslands enable migrating birds to feed and rest before travelling on to their breeding grounds. The area is protected as part of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.



Once we had negotiated the challenging parking machines, we headed to the coastal rocks to do some sea-watching. The initial impression was that there was not much to see. However, once the 'scopes were up and we had acclimatised to the environment, there were many birds.

Shags flew to and from the cliffs to the west, and a single razorbill was perched on a cliff ledge. Several stiff-winged fulmars, guillemots and cormorants flew over the sea. Groups of gannets passed through. Manx shearwater and puffin were added to the day's list.

Exploring the rocks near the lighthouse revealed three rock pipits, one of which obligingly parachuted to the ground. A small flock of linnets flew through, and wheatear and pied wagtail were noted. Some people reported that several opportunistic rock pipits were running around under the picnic tables outside the café!



Little Owls, Portland Bill Quarry

Nearby, we watched the gardens at the Portland Bird Observatory (housed in the disused old lower lighthouse) but there were no notable birds.

Next, we crossed Portland Bill Road and headed up the footpath opposite. A kestrel was hunting across the hillside and several skylarks were singing. A pair of stonechats showed well. A birder told us that a redstart had been seen in a field that contained a wheelbarrow further up the footpath. We found the wheelbarrow but there was no sign of the redstart. We walked on and it turned out that there was another field with a wheelbarrow. This time we had good views of a glorious male redstart perched on a wire fence, feeding on the ground, and flying between bramble patches.

After lunch, we walked to the small disused quarry near the Portland Bird Observatory. We had seen a little owl on previous trips and were not disappointed this time. A pair of little owls were resting in the usual 'postbox' gap in the rocks. Later there was just one bird. Teri suggested that the other bird was the female, who had gone off to do some work!

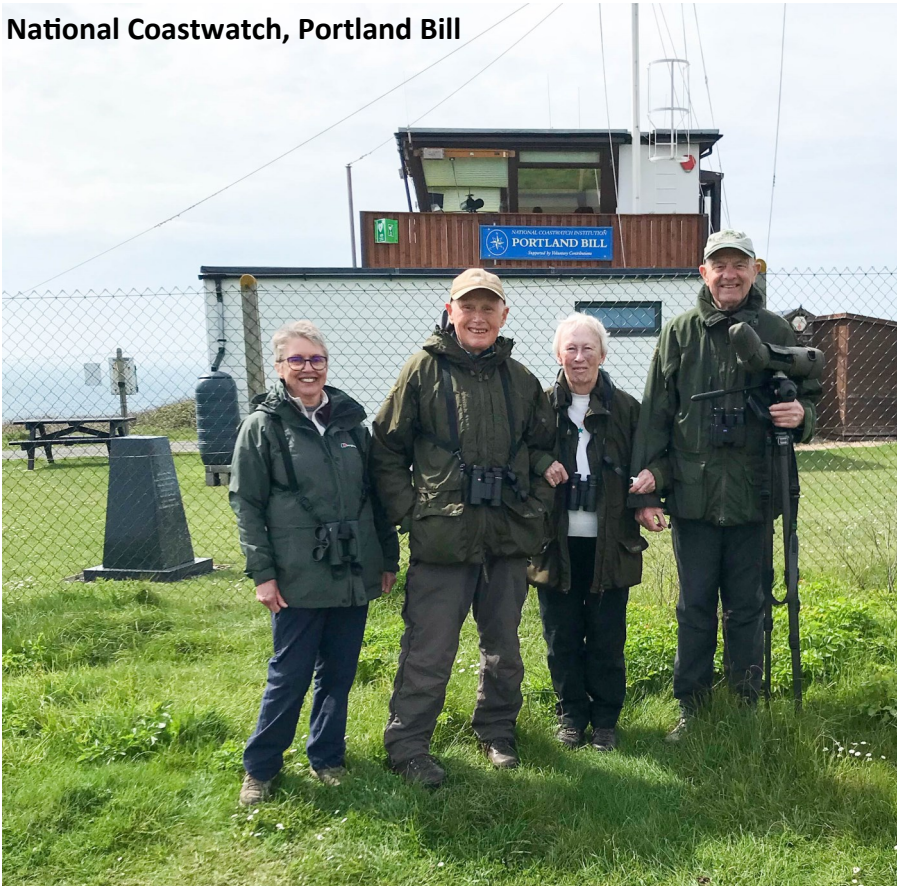


Portland Bill Observatory



Redstart, Portland Bill

National Coastwatch, Portland Bill



We followed the footpath to the cliffs, passing the coastguard station. As we followed the South West Coast Path back to the car park, we marvelled at a kestrel hunting close by above the cliffs, staying stationary in the blustery wind. What amazing evolutionary engineering. As we left Portland Bill, it started to rain. Perfect timing, again!

Chesil Beach & Fleet Lagoon

The area lies at the centre of the Jurassic Coast, a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site. Chesil Beach is a pebble spit stretching 18 miles from Portland to West Bay. For much of its length, it is separated from the mainland by an area of saline water called the Fleet Lagoon, which is the largest tidal lagoon in the UK. Chesil Beach and the Fleet Lagoon are important for wildlife with several national and international designations.

On arrival at Chesil Beach, it was raining lightly. Most people chose to set up their scopes in the Wild Chesil Centre. Some decided to brave the weather and set out across the shingle bank. A pair of whimbrel showed well in front of the centre, as well as ringed plover, dunlin, redshank and Mediterranean gull. There were many wheatears on the shingle. Two common terns perched on a distant buoy and two sandwich terns flew over. Other birds included black-tailed godwit, bar-tailed godwit, lesser black-backed gull, herring gull, oystercatcher, curlew and skylark.

In the evening, as we gathered in the guest lounge after dinner, Colin told us about his experience at Portland Bill:

"In the afternoon I sat on the rocks to continue sea-watching. I watched a small black blob close to the shore by the rocks for a while. As I was trying to decide whether to record it as a common scoter, a bloke stood up wearing a black wetsuit."

Day 4: Monday 24th April

Before breakfast, Chris and John spotted sandwich tern and common tern from Weymouth Pier.



After breakfast, we posed for a group photo before setting off to Ham Wall.

Ham Wall RSPB

Ham Wall, once a peat extraction area, was transformed by the RSPB in the late 1990s into a thriving wetland habitat. It is renowned for its rich biodiversity, with an abundance of bird species, as well as rare plants and insects.

From the visitor reception hub, we followed Ham Wall Loop, a scenic old railway path. Glastonbury Tor dominated the skyline. Numerous birds were seen/heard including

garden warbler, willow warbler, reed warbler, blackcap, chiffchaff, Cetti's warbler, great tit, blackbird, song thrush, robin, chaffinch and wren. Occasionally, a little grebe was heard trilling. A sparrowhawk circled high in the sky. A few swallows flew through.



From the platform viewpoint, we looked out over the water and reedbeds. A bittern boomed. A variety of ducks, geese, grebes, herons, gulls and other water birds were seen – pochard, tufted duck, mallard, gadwall, shoveler, teal, Canada goose, moorhen, coot, cormorant, little grebe, great crested grebe, little egret, grey heron, black-headed gull and lesser black-backed gull. A single spotted redshank in black summer plumage and a pair of garganey were seen feeding among the reeds. Other waders were singles of lapwing, redshank and ruff, and three black-tailed godwits. Sand martins hunted over the water. A bittern took a short flight before dropping back into the reeds. Close to the viewpoint, a great spotted woodpecker landed high in a tree.

We had lunch in a small partly-covered hide during a prolonged heavy rain shower. 200+ sand martins hunted very low over the water. When the rain stopped, they moved on, and so did we.

Further along the path, two great tits and a robin came close. John held out his hand with crumbs on it and the great tits came to feed.

At another pool, a great white egret dropped into the reeds, showing its black summer bill. A marsh harrier hunted over the reedbed.

We stopped when a cuckoo was heard. Dave got the bird in his 'scope and kindly shared it. The bird was perched at the top of a distant high tree, its pointed wings dropped down and its wide tail wagging from side to side.



On the way to Avalon hide, a sedge warbler was singing.

Back at the platform viewpoint, we added three whimbrel and singles of snipe, little ringed plover, dunlin and common sandpiper. A common whitethroat was seen in the bushes. A few swifts came through in a group of sand martins.

At the Mini Marshes, close to the visitor reception hub, Peter saw a water rail.

We left Ham Wall and set off on the final leg of our journey back home.

Thank you

A BIG thank you to all the Dorset travellers for sharing their weekend. I enjoyed the trip immensely – a perfect combination of outstanding locations, brilliant birding and great socialising with friends!



Credits – Images & Narrative

Radipole Lake Visitor Centre - Des Blenkinsopp*

Radipole Lake Viewing Shelter - Mike Tonks

Lodmoor - Vertigogen*

Garganey - Teri Small

Weymouth Seafront - Chris Parry

Arne Hide - Derek Harper*

Colin on Trumper at Arne - Ian Taylor

Sea-watching, Portland Bill - Mike Tonks

Narrative: Mike Tonks

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Redstart, Portland Bill - Dave Meakin

National Coastwatch, Portland Bill - Sylvia Jarvis

SECOS Group, Crown Hotel Weymouth - Mike Tonks

Ham Wall & Glastonbury Tor - Michael Day*

Great Tit, Ham Wall - Sylvia Jarvis

Weymouth Harbour - Chris Parry

Species List



119 species were seen/heard during the trip.

Green text indicates **33** new species that have been added to the 2023 SECOS Field Trips Total, which is now at **152** species.

Little Grebe	Hobby	Razorbill	Dartford Warbler
Great Crested Grebe	Common Pheasant	Puffin	Common Whitethroat
Fulmar	Water Rail	Feral Pigeon	Garden Warbler
Manx Shearwater	Moorhen	Stock Dove	Blackcap
Gannet	Coot	Woodpigeon	Chiffchaff
Cormorant	Oystercatcher	Cuckoo	Willow Warbler
Shag	Little Ringed Plover	Little Owl	Goldcrest
Bittern	Ringed Plover	Swift	Long-tailed Tit
Great White Egret	Lapwing	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Coal Tit
Little Egret	Dunlin	Woodlark	Blue Tit
Grey Heron	Ruff	Skylark	Great Tit
Mute Swan	Common Snipe	Sand Martin	Nuthatch
Greylag Goose	Black-tailed Godwit	Swallow	Treecreeper
Canada Goose	Bar-tailed Godwit	House Martin	Jay
Common Shelduck	Whimbrel	Tree Pipit	Magpie
Wigeon	Curlew	Meadow Pipit	Jackdaw
Gadwall	Spotted Redshank	Rock Pipit	Rook
Teal	Common Redshank	Pied Wagtail	Carrion Crow
Mallard	Greenshank	Wren	Raven
Garganey	Common Sandpiper	Dunnock	Starling
Shoveler	Mediterranean Gull	Robin	House Sparrow
Common Pochard	Black-headed Gull	Redstart	Chaffinch
Tufted Duck	Common Gull	Stonechat	Greenfinch
Goldeneye	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Wheatear	Goldfinch
White-tailed Eagle	Herring Gull	Blackbird	Siskin
Marsh Harrier	Great Black-backed Gull	Song Thrush	Linnet
Sparrowhawk	Kittiwake	Mistle Thrush	Common Crossbill
Common Buzzard	Sandwich Tern	Cetti's Warbler	Yellowhammer
Osprey	Common Tern	Sedge Warbler	Reed Bunting
Kestrel	Guillemot	Reed Warbler	