

Thorndon Birdlife, November 2014



One of my favourite British birds is the wryneck, a scarce spring and autumn migrant in Suffolk, and I've long hoped to see one in Thorndon. This autumn there were quite a few seen along the coast, drifted across the North Sea on easterly winds on their migration from Scandinavia to Africa. Having seen one at Shingle Street I was thrilled to hear of one being seen in a garden in

Thorndon in the last week of September. Wrynecks are strange but beautiful looking birds, related to woodpeckers but most often seen on the ground, feeding on ants. A little smaller than a starling, the wryneck's subtle markings are a visual feast of grey, brown, buff, black and white and it's hard to imagine a bird as delicately beautiful with such a limited palette of colours. Wrynecks are very cryptically marked, which makes them rather unobtrusive, but the most obvious features are the grey head and back, with a broad dark stripe running from the middle of the head all the way down the middle of the back, the buff throat with delicate dark bars across it, the pointed bill and the longish, delicately barred tail.

Just after sunrise on 1st October I saw a group of house martins flying purposefully south-east over The Street just above rooftop height. These birds were part of the exodus of summer visitors that have to head for warmer climes because they simply cannot find enough insect food here to sustain themselves over the winter months. Surprisingly, although they are one of our most familiar birds, we do not know exactly where our house martins spend the winter, but what we do know is that they are becoming less common in the south-east of the British Isles. Next year the British Trust for Ornithology will begin a two-year survey to find out more about where house martins are breeding and how successful they are so I'll be very interested to hear from anyone who is lucky enough to have them nesting on their houses or outbuildings.



November is the last month of the birding autumn and there are still plenty of birds on the move, particularly those that are coming to us for the winter to escape the much colder conditions in northern and eastern Europe. In early November, listen out after dark for the "Seep" calls of redwings as they pass overhead. Like many birds, redwings migrate at night as well as during the day and many will pass over on their way further south and west, having

arrived from Scandinavia and Iceland. Some, of course, will stop off to feed on fallen fruit and berry-laden bushes. Looking a little smaller and slimmer than a song thrush, redwings are also brown on the upperparts and whitish with dark streaks on the underparts, but what makes them look really distinctive is the whitish stripe above the eye (called the supercilium), which imparts a somewhat angrier look than the benign, open-faced look of the song thrush. The red under the wings (from which the redwing gets its name) extends onto the sides of the body and so can be seen even on perched birds.



Of the many birds that cross the North Sea to spend the winter with us one of the more surprising perhaps is the short-eared owl and I was really pleased to hear of one being seen near Eye in the second week of October. Many species of owl are nocturnal but short-eared owl is one that is often active during the day, especially around the time of the new Moon, when the nights are at their darkest. Short-eared owls are dark brown, spangled with yellowish-buff on the head, breast and upperparts and white with dark streaks on the underparts. They are longer-winged than tawny owls and are often seen quartering rough grassland. Their "ears", from

which they get their name, are actually small tufts of feathers on the top of the head, which you can see on perched birds (the ears proper are completely hidden by feathers) and if you get a good look at a perched short-eared owl they have piercing yellow eyes with black pupils, rather like the little owl.



In the middle of October I was delighted to see a covey of about a dozen grey partridges in the village, the most I've ever seen together here. A little smaller and slither than the more familiar red-legged partridge, the grey partridge also has brown bars on the flanks but has an orange face, grey breast and a brown horseshoe-shaped patch on the belly: really super looking birds and a real joy to see.

As ever, I shall be pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth.

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