

Pallas's Warbler at Moor Green Lakes

Visitors to the reserve over the winter will have noticed the upsurge in birders around the reserve as the area played host to a first for Berkshire in the form of a Pallas's Warbler. This was a totally unexpected find in mid-winter Berkshire as this species is normally a scarce autumn visitor to coastal counties, mainly along the East coast. It became clear that the bird was first found on 3rd January 2013 close to the footpath from the car park alongside Colebrook Lake North, even though this bird was originally identified as a Yellow-browed Warbler. This species looks similar to Pallas's Warbler but is slightly less uncommon and the main differences, a yellow crown stripe and yellow rump on Pallas's but not Yellow-browed, can be difficult to see without good views. However, once photos were taken showing both these key features (Dave Rimes, 12th January) and photos of the original bird were examined by experts familiar with both species for some of the more subtle features, it was confirmed that the bird first found on 3rd January was in fact a Pallas's Warbler.

In order to cope with the expected influx of birders on 13th January, once news was out that a Pallas's Warbler was present, members of the MGL committee negotiated access to extra car parking space at the EU Plants site, alongside the poly-tunnels. Some MGL committee members marshalled the car parking on Sun 13th January and made a collection for the Moor Green Lakes Group which raised the excellent sum of £142! By some accounts there were an estimated 250 birders visiting the area that day.

Within a couple of days of discovery the bird relocated to the trees along the river Blackwater and was to be found along the stretch from the south end of path to car park as far west as just short of the sewage farm. Initially it fed quite high up in the trees, both on the Hants (south) and Berks sides, but during the hard weather with snow on the ground it took to creeping around (rather like a Wren) on the riverbank and on branches close to the water where insect food was presumably more available.

The tiny, Goldcrest-sized Pallas's Warbler breeds in Siberia and Asia and migrates south to winter in south China, India etc. However, in recent decades it has become a regular autumn vagrant to the UK, and it has been suggested that some of the population migrate in the opposite direction to the majority in order to reach W Europe. Remarkably the Pallas's Warbler stayed in the area right through the winter and was to be heard singing during the spring before it finally departed 18th April. I have found reference to this species wintering in UK on four previous occasions, in Kent, Sussex and twice in Cornwall, but it appears that this is the longest known stay in UK. A fantastic find for the area and one that will surely take some beating!

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