

BitterNly cold day at the London Wetland Centre

Written by Neil Gray

Sunday, 10 January 2010 14:06 - Last Updated Thursday, 07 April 2016 11:59

4 January 2010 - on my last full day in the UK before returning to Guinea I decided that whatever the weather I would spend as much time as possible at the London Wetland Centre. The day dawned with the temperature a frigid -7°C . I delayed my departure, but when I arrived at the Wetland Centre at 10:15 the temperature was still a chilly -3.5°C . I spent 5 hours walking around the Centre and when I decided to call it a day the temperature had reached the dizzy heights of -0.5°C .

Most of the small ponds were frozen over and there were dozens of very dejected looking waterfowl sitting around. Many of those that did try to walk across the ice put on some very good skating displays (I wasn't doing too badly myself on some of the frosty boardwalks!), particularly the UK resident birds such as the Common Moorhen and Common Eider.

However, many of the exotic species just decided to keep warm the best way they could, like the Ringed Teal, which just kept one foot on the ice and slept in the sunniest spot they could find. An African White-faced Duck looked distinctly ill at ease drinking while standing on ice. The Hawaiian Laysan Ducks just huddled together under overhanging leaves. Probably the only exotics that really felt at home were South Georgia Pintail gliding gracefully along the channels through the ice.

I was beginning to think after seeing all the ice and lack of flocks of Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard, Common Teal, and other resident waterfowl that ought to be there but for the frozen ponds, that perhaps I should call an early halt to proceedings, but went into the Headley Hide anyway. The best birding decision I ever made. The first bird I saw in the stiff frosty grass was a Fieldfare (lifer), the second a Redwing (lifer) ... and after scanning the distant reedbed fringes a MEGA-lifer in Eurasian Bittern, probably 200m away (and also standing on ice!).

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Spirits boosted with 3 lifers to start my 2010 birding I carried on, and in the Wildside hide saw 2 more very distant Bittern! Then in the WWF Hide a 4th, only 30-40m away and stock still in the reeds to the right of the hide - plenty time to get a great photo. Apparently these Bittern are causing huge excitement at the moment with at least 7 having been recorded in the past 2 days (I learned this from fellow watchers in the WWF hide along with some other hot tips).

I missed out on the Jack Snipe that had been seen earlier, but saw a large flock of Common Snipe and a distant view of a couple of Water Rail.

The walks through the wooded sections of the Centre turned up one of the most recent birds to be declared a "pest" in the UK, the Rose-ringed Parakeet, as well as a lot of the smaller British birds - Robin, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Chiffchaff, Lesser Redpoll and Goldfinch.(Check out the Gallery for some photos)

Neil