

Redmires Reservoirs – A body of water with more depth than you might think....

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Although my earliest recollection of Redmires remains a halcyon summer bilberry-picking trip with my parents during the late 1970's, I can still vividly recall my first visit there in the somewhat vain attempt to look for birds. That came in the winter of 1981, when in a howling north-easterly gale, I bravely struggled to hold up my Dad's hefty pair of 10 x 50 binoculars, without being blown head first into the leaden grey waters of the top reservoir. In a scene reminiscent of an Olympic weightlifter, I did eventually manage to hold them up to my eyes long enough to identify a distant, dark blob as my first-ever Goldeneye – a winter-visiting duck, which in those days, was often the only species encountered on the upland reservoirs west of Sheffield at that time of year.

Little did I know that even back then, Redmires had already earned itself a reputation of some ornithological repute. This was on account of a long history of documented bird records, some of them dating as far back as 1941, when notable sightings by luminaries like Ralph Chislett (a pioneer of Yorkshire ornithology and one of the founders of Spurn Bird Observatory), were published in the bulletins of the Yorkshire Naturalists Union (YNU). These early beginnings inspired a new generation of birdwatchers after the formation of the Sheffield Bird Study Group (SBSG) in 1972 (www.sbsg.org), when systematic visits on an 'observatory-style' basis, saw members of the Group not only check the open water of the reservoirs, but continually search the surrounding farmland, moorland and woodlands for both breeding birds and passage migrants. This has largely continued up to the present day, with Redmires still one of the best-watched sites in the Sheffield area and boasting a list of well over 200 species, including rare visitors from all points of the compass – Buff-breasted Sandpiper from North America, Sabine's Gull from the high Arctic, Black-throated Thrush from central Asia and Hoopoe from the Mediterranean. A total of over 80 species have also bred in the immediate surrounding area, which includes the first breeding pair of Wigeon recorded in the Sheffield area, the last pair of Red-breasted Mergansers to breed in South Yorkshire and one of Yorkshire's first-ever pair of Firecrests – still one of the most northerly breeding records ever-recorded in the UK.

So, what's special about Redmires? – well, perched up on the edge of the gritstone moors at 350 metres above sea level, they represent the highest reservoirs in the Sheffield area. This makes them visible to any passing birds from a considerable distance, and although a little off the beaten track for northward-bound spring migrants, which tend to follow the river valleys of the Don and Rother, they sit directly on their flight line during the autumn months, when birds from first northern Britain and then the Continent head between south and west on their way to warmer climes for the winter. Despite appearing rather bleak in nature on account of their acidic, peat-stained waters, the margins of all three reservoirs often prove attractive to species of ducks, waders, gulls and the occasional tern, particularly from late-summer onwards, when lower water levels often reveal an inviting shoreline of mud and gritstone shale. When combined with a variety of adjacent habitats such as open heather moorland, bracken dominant cloughs, upland pasture and both coniferous and deciduous woodland, it's no surprise that Redmires proved to be one of the most ornithological-rich parts of the Sheffield area in the breeding atlas survey carried out by the SBSG between 2003-08.

Whilst the variety and numbers of passage migrants can fluctuate in line with observer coverage and the prevailing weather conditions, it is arguably the breeding species for which Redmires can now claim to be of regional importance. Pride of place must go to its wading birds, where amongst the impressive ten breeding species recorded, the iconic Curlew can still be enjoyed along the nearby conduit path, together with displaying Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Golden Plover and Snipe. The reservoir margins also hold an important local population of Common Sandpiper, as well as Little Ringed and more recently Ringed Plover, when water levels and the amount of human disturbance permit. Sadly, the numbers of people walking the shoreline, particularly with dogs off a lead has increased significantly in recent years, particularly to the detriment of these vulnerable species.

Despite this, the reservoirs themselves remain utilised by both Canada and Greylag Geese, Mallard and the now locally scarce Tufted Duck, whilst the nearby heather moors hold significant populations of Red Grouse and Meadow Pipit, as well as scarce nocturnal species such as Nightjar and Long-eared Owl. Within the adjacent

moorland cloughs and upland pasture, Skylark, Stonechat, Whinchat, Grasshopper Warbler and Reed Bunting can be found, while the plantations prove attractive to migrant-breeders such as Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Redstart, Spotted Flycatcher and scarce residents such as Lesser Redpoll, Siskin and Crossbill.

If all that's not enough, then this remarkable feat of Victorian engineering also plays host to nationally declining Water Voles, Badgers, Brown and Mountain Hares, the occasional Red Deer, numerous insects - including at least 20 species of butterfly, a wide variety of plants and one of the few surviving archaeological remnants of a First World War trench system, that was used to train the Sheffield City Battalion before their fateful offensive at The Somme on 1 July 1916.

Redmires may still often seem a bleak and desolate place, but its history and birds make it a body of water with more depth than perhaps meets the eye.