

My Patch – Gailey Reservoirs – Belvide’s Little Brother – Ian Moore and Steve Richards

Access to Gailey Reservoirs is along Gailey Lea Lane, off the A5 Watling Street and just east of junction 12 of the M6 motorway. Entry is officially by permit only and is operated by the West Midland Bird Club. Sailing takes place on Gailey Lower Reservoir (The South Staffordshire Sailing Club - since June 1972) and Calf Heath Reservoir (Greensforge Sailing Club) with fishing activity now operating on all three reservoirs. The two small car parks off Gailey Lea Lane are private and for use by the sailing and fishing club members only. Visitors should park well off the lane as this is regularly used for access to and from Gailey Lea Farm by farm machinery and lorries.

Gailey Reservoirs are a pair of canal feeder reservoirs (grid reference SJ935103) and they were built in about 1847 – Gailey Lower Reservoir is to the west; Gailey Upper Reservoir to the east and they are separated by a causeway. The reservoirs originally fed the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal, situated to the west beyond the M6 motorway. A connected reservoir, Calf Heath Reservoir, stands a little further to the west and beyond the motorway and this was constructed around 75 years earlier. The reservoirs have an estimated surface area of 337,000 square metres (83 acres).

How it all began...

As a young birder living in Codsall, South Staffordshire my first proper ‘patch’ soon became Belvide Reservoir. I would cycle there several times a week as a schoolboy with Steve Nuttall and we soon built up quite a list of scarce birds and made many friends, especially John Higginson, who started taking us in his car to the other birding hotspots in Staffordshire. Visits to Gailey Reservoirs were very sporadic, and usually just to stop off when a good bird had been found there e.g. Smew in 1988, Red-throated Diver in September 1990 and Great Northern Diver in 1992. It was obvious that Gailey had potential, but also had a lot of disturbance, so the draw of the ‘better’ reservoirs of Belvide, Blithfield and Chasewater usually won.

In January 1993, I’d cycled from home to Cannock Tip to see an adult Glaucous Gull and when cycling back along the A5 to visit Belvide, I noticed Gailey Lower Reservoir was partially drained. A quick U-turn and I arrived at the sailing club to find a flock of around 150 Lapwing on the mud – a quick scan through and I was surprised to see a single Knot with them. Little did I realize how rare this was at the time as, 23 years on, there hasn’t been another one there since! I visited again the next day to find the Knot had gone but had been replaced by a Redshank and five Shelduck – I was starting to realise this site could be decent! I visited again the next weekend and had two Ringed Plover and a Dunlin and this was only early February. Unfortunately the hope of a spring full of passage waders evaporated as the reservoir was full by early April, but by then I had also added up to six Little Ringed Plover and Common Sandpipers to my list of waders and started to build a small list for the site. The draw of the larger reservoirs largely took over again for the next couple of years but I did still drop in more often to my new ‘second patch’. In late 1995 a visit produced a flock of around 300 Pochard on the Lower Reservoir and soon found 2 Greater Scaup and then in early January 1996 a female Long-tailed Duck stayed a day and 16 Bewick’s Swan graced the adjacent fields – that was it, I’d found an under watched site with obvious potential, and I was going to give it a go as my new local patch to see what I could find. Little did I realise that, over 20 years on, it would still be causing me so much elation mixed with plenty of frustration – every inland patch birder knows what I mean and ‘me and Gailey’ have fallen out many times over the years, as my close birding friends (and now even social media!) know only too well but I still keep going back for more!

The patch now

From around 2005, fellow Staffordshire birder and twitching companion, Steve Richards started to become a more regular visitor to the site and soon became the second birder to call Gailey their ‘patch’. In recent years, with increased work and family commitments and moving to the other side of the City of Wolverhampton from my patch, I don’t get time to visit as often as before and Steve has taken on the mantle as the main Gailey patch worker. I do still get up there as often as possible – which is often a mad dash to ‘twitch’ one of Steve’s finds! The patch rivalry is very much friendly and, as I’m writing this week, a drake Mandarin (the first since 1997!) has drawn Steve level with me on 172 species each for the site. From my research of all the literature of the WMBC, I’ve found records of 199 species for the site. Species 200 must be just around the corner with the likes of Little Tern, Sanderling, Cetti’s Warbler and Caspian Gull the favourites to take this crown – although, knowing Gailey, it will be something totally unexpected!

Doing a patch year list at Gailey is a battle of serious willpower – the lack of wader habitat, and especially any hides to shelter in during the best (for birds!) weather conditions, makes the lure of other sites and their easier scarce birds a difficult temptation to resist. I did it once in 2006, after accepting the challenge from Steve Nuttall at Belvide, and racked up 128 species. This was subsequently equaled by Steve Richards in 2013 and then finally beaten in 2015 when, with some serious patch dedication and the bonus of a couple of months off work in the autumn, Steve recorded a mighty impressive 132 species!

Classic days are few and far between at Gailey – the worst weather often produces the best birds, so with the only current shelter being the overhang of the roof of the sailing club, this can prove difficult to endure. A weekend in September 2006 produced a Honey-buzzard, Osprey, over 20 passage Common Buzzard as well as Black and Arctic Terns and, maybe interestingly, two Ruddy Shelduck flying east. A classic weather day in August 2015 (with the right wind direction for shelter under the sailing club roof) saw the unprecedented passage (by Gailey standards!) of Bar-tailed Godwit, 4 Ringed Plover, Redshank, 4 Arctic and over 20 Common Tern.

Over the last two decades myself and Steve Richards (along with Richard Hollis who has a fantastic habit of popping in and finding the best birds!) have found some impressive inland birds at Gailey including; Franklin’s Gull, Red-rumped Swallow, White-winged Black Tern, Ring-necked & Ferruginous Ducks, Sabine’s Gull, Grey Phalarope, three Great White

Egrets, two Honey-buzzards, Bearded Tit, Firecrest, Black Redstart, three Ring Ouzels and 17 Waxwings! Another of my personal highlights is that I have seen all five of the 'regular' British grebes in full summer plumage on the Lower Reservoir over the years as well as a summer plumaged Red-throated Diver!

The site is massively under watched, especially during the working week, as both myself and Steve work full-time and long hours in our respective jobs. So, if you want to make yourself a hero (or villain if we don't see it!) pop into Gailey rather than driving past and find your own good bird – it can be easily scanned from the north end of the causeway if you only have a short time with terns and rare wildfowl often picked up easily on the Lower Reservoir.

Key sites and species

The current recording area, used since 1993 by the two regulars, covers the three main reservoirs and their adjacent fields and woodland, the fields adjacent to the bridleway between Gailey Lea Lane and Fullmoor Lane and the fields north of Gailey Lea Lane (but south of Micklewood Lane) as far west as the M6 motorway.

Lower Reservoir

This reservoir is the largest of the two main reservoirs and the most popular with resident and wintering wildfowl, it is also the best place to connect with any passage wildfowl, terns, gulls and even the occasional wader or raptor. This reservoir is home to regular breeding Little and Great Crested Grebe, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Greylag and Canada Geese, Coot and Moorhen with Gadwall present all year round and they have bred. The island contains a popular heronry and occasionally breeding Oystercatcher. Cormorants can be seen perched on the booms around the island at any time of the year. In winter and on passage this reservoir holds reasonable number of Tufted Duck with varying numbers of Goldeneye, Pochard, Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon – the numbers of all these species often differ considerably depending on the level of disturbance from sailing, fishing and especially shooting that unfortunately still occurs in the winter months. Goosander and Shelduck are irregular and Pintail is scarce. The most regular of the scarce passage birds on the water are Black-necked Grebe, Scaup and Common Scoter. The erosion protection booms around the island and the wall around the north side often hold Common Sandpiper in spring and autumn and have also pulled in the odd passage wader. In spring, and especially in the late summer, Common Tern can often be seen over the reservoir and perched on the many buoys or on the wooden boathouse and this reservoir is the most likely to attract one of the rarer terns or gulls. Black and Arctic Tern plus Little, Mediterranean and Yellow-legged Gulls are almost annual with Sandwich Tern and Kittiwake being recorded several times in recent years. Any passage waders (other than Common Sandpiper) are particularly noteworthy as the water levels are consistently high and any recent work that has resulted in the draining of this reservoir has unfortunately taken place in the winter to avoid any impact on the main summer sailing activities. This reservoir has held the majority of the rare birds found at Gailey since 2000 including Red-rumped Swallow (April 2004), Ring-necked Duck (October 2005), Ferruginous Duck (December 2005), Franklin's Gull (July 2010), Common Eider (January 2011) and White-winged Black Tern (September 2011).

Walking west from the sailing club along the north side of the reservoir the garden of Lea Cottage is a good place to look for warblers at the right time of year. This garden and it's surrounding hedges regularly hold all the common warblers with Spotted Flycatcher and Lesser Whitethroat often present in the late summer and early autumn after breeding nearby – this garden also hosted a singing male Firecrest in May 2013. The short grass field west of the garden, between the reservoir and Gailey Lea Lane, often holds a flock of Greylag and Canada Geese and these flocks have attracted both White-fronted and Egyptian Geese in recent years. The resident Oystercatchers can often be found resting up in this field and it has also attracted a Whimbrel. From the northwest corner of the reservoir there is a good view across to the west side of Fullmoor Wood and this can be a good place to look for raptors – Buzzard, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel are resident with Peregrine, Hobby as well as Raven regularly seen from here, Red Kite and Marsh Harrier are becoming more regular and Hen Harrier and Goshawk have been recorded once each. The hedgerow on the western perimeter of this field, bordering the M6 motorway, has held Spotted Flycatchers and a Redstart.

The woodland below the dam on the west side of the reservoir holds all the regular woodland birds and the alders are the best area for Siskin in the winter. The wet area immediately behind the valve tower on the dam has held Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Woodcock, Tawny Owl and Marsh Tit. The pathway around the south side of the reservoir is now passable all year round, due to fishing activities, and this can often produce good views of the wildfowl. The large garden of the house at the south end of the causeway is worth checking for Spotted Flycatcher in spring and especially late July when the young have fledged and in the late autumn and winter for Brambling. The brick boathouse often holds Grey Wagtail.

A walk over the causeway is worthwhile as you get a good vantage point to view both the main reservoirs and, if it is not too disturbed by fishing, it can hold White and Yellow Wagtail in spring. Sedge and especially Reed Warblers regularly sing from the reeds and hawthorn shooting shelters and the causeway has briefly held the occasional passage wader and even a male Ring Ouzel.

Upper Reservoir

This reservoir is slightly smaller than the Lower Reservoir and attracts a similar variety of birds, albeit usually in smaller numbers. The regular fishing activity and their boats often disturb the wildfowl from here although numbers can build up on this reservoir, especially when there is considerable sailing activity on the Lower Reservoir. Tufted Duck numbers are often higher on this reservoir, especially in the late summer and early autumn when a post-breeding moult flock can number over 200 birds. One of the small islands on this reservoir is the favoured drying spot for Cormorant and this tree has also attracted both Great White and Little Egret, and in December 2012 it held both together! The most regular scarce passage birds on this reservoir are Scaup with the odd records of Black-necked Grebe and Common Scoter – although it shouldn't be overlooked as it has held Ferruginous Duck, Great Northern Diver, Garganey and Red-crested Pochard, all since 2005. The numerous wooden fishing platforms and the three islands often hold Common Sandpiper in spring and autumn as well as breeding Oystercatcher on the largest island. Common Tern can often be seen over this

reservoir but the scarce terns and gulls are almost exclusive to the Lower Reservoir.

Walking east along the north side of the reservoir you get a good vantage point to scan the east side of Fullmoor Wood and the more distant woodland towards Cannock Chase and, as with the west side, raptors and Raven can be seen regularly given a bit of effort and especially luck. The wet woodland on the south side of the reservoir path can hold Water Rail, roosting Tawny Owl, Woodcock and is now the best chance of connecting with Marsh Tit. The thin strip of woodland, mainly beech trees, north of the path is the best spot to see Garden Warbler in the summer and Brambling in the late autumn and early winter. The reedbed on the north side of the reservoir holds a few pairs of Reed Warbler and a regular pair of Mute Swan. The walk along the south side of the reservoir allows a closer look at any wildfowl present but the noise from the A5 makes it difficult to hear any singing birds from the small pools that are just south of the road.

Calf Heath Reservoir

The smallest and most disturbed of the three reservoirs it is rarely visited – usually just to get complete wildfowl counts for the area. The sailing club and large number of fishermen result in little being present on the water except for good numbers of Great Crested Grebe which also breed. The reservoir has held a flock of Common Scoter, a Scaup and a Black Tern as well as a fly over Gannet along the A5 in October 2003!

Gailey Lea Lane

A walk or slow drive along the lane is worthwhile as the roadside hedgerow often contains a singing Lesser Whitethroat in the summer and has produced hunting Barn Owl during early morning or late evening visits as well as fly over Woodcock at dusk in the winter leaving their daytime roost in the Upper Reservoir wet woodland. This walk has produced a passage Merlin on more than one occasion. The field immediately north of the sailing club has also held a spring passage Bar-tailed Godwit and Whimbrel in recent years and the hedgerow just east of Gailey Lea Farm has held Whinchat more than once in the spring. The Red-rumped Swallow (April 2004) was also seen perched on the wires along the lane between the sailing club and the farm.

Bridleway from Gailey Lea Lane to Fullmoor Lane

A walk along this bridleway is worthwhile given time and can add a selection of farmland birds that can't usually be found around the reservoirs. Starting at the gravel pull-in off Gailey Lea Lane, at the south end of the path, walk north along the west side of the hedge. This hedge can be productive for common migrants, especially in the autumn, and regularly holds all the common warblers as well as Lesser Whitethroat and Spotted Flycatcher and has attracted Ring Ouzel in both spring and autumn 2005, Redstart and Tree Pipit – gaining it the affectionate name of the 'Old Fall hedge' to the two Gailey 'regulars'. There are several gaps in the hedge and the field immediately to the east was traditionally the most productive field in the Gailey area, unfortunately it has now been largely lost to chicken farm sheds. It has attracted a variety of species during the year with winter often holding double figure counts of Common Snipe and Skylark and it was previously a semi-regular haunt for wintering Bewick's Swan and Grey Partridge but these have both become much rarer in recent years. In spring it can hold passage Wheatear and Meadow Pipits, Merlin has been recorded more than once, singing Skylarks are present in reasonable numbers and Barn Owl has also bred. In autumn the wild flowers are left and this is then the best area to find a passage Whinchat in September or a Stonechat in late October or November. The large field on the west side of the hedge is often ploughed and is traditionally the best place to see Wheatear on spring passage and flocks of Linnet, Golden Plover and Lapwing in the winter, although numbers of the waders have reduced considerably in recent years. These fields occasionally attract a flock of gulls if they are ploughed in the late summer with Yellow-legged Gull noted on several occasions and the Franklin's Gull (July 2010) was originally located in the western field. A walk down the bridleway will arrive at the edge of Fullmoor Wood – a large wood used primarily for Pheasant shoots. The 'Pheasant cover' strips of set-a-side left on the edges of the fields near the western edge of the wood are usually good for finches and buntings and the best place to find flocks of Chaffinch along with a few Tree Sparrow, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting in the autumn and winter. The finch numbers have declined from past records but these can still attract the odd Brambling. A patch of blackthorn along the bridleway is a good spot for Lesser Whitethroat and Bullfinch. Fullmoor Wood is private and not accessible due to the shooting but in early summer roding Woodcock can be seen over the northwest edge from Fullmoor Lane. It is always worth keeping a look out above the wood for raptors and a burst of Woodpigeon out of the wood often results in the presence of a Peregrine.