

# My patch – Stanford Reservoir

Stanford Reservoir is situated on the upper reaches of the ‘Warwickshire’ Avon and lies on the county boundary between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. The reservoir was built in 1928 and is owned by Severn Trent Water. It lies on an imaginary line drawn between the Wash and the Severn, a proven ‘flyway’ for migrating birds across the centre of England.

One of the great things about Stanford is the diversity of habitats surrounding the reservoir. These include two *Phragmites* reedbeds, a disused railway track, adjacent broadleaved woodland and a variety of arable farmland. The dam attracts its share of birds too, and in years when water levels are low, birding gets very interesting indeed.

Some of my first memories of visiting Stanford are from the 1980s. At that time, the reservoir supported significant numbers of various duck species, which have sadly declined over the years. My earliest insight into the potential of the reservoir to attract migrant birds came in the form of a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* in 1984, the only record at the site.

Since those early days, I have made frequent visits and it has become my local patch in the last ten years since moving into a village just a kilometre away. I maintain the sightings history on the ringing group’s website (<http://stanfordrg.org.uk>) and have taken on the task of completing the monthly WeBS (Wetland Bird Survey) count. It is interesting to look back at the records and see the changes over the years in respect of the number of wintering wildfowl at the reservoir. Long gone are the days of large flocks of Shovelers *Spatula clypeata* and Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis*.

The species list for the site stands at a respectable 251, and my patch list at 190. Notable ‘firsts’ for either Northamptonshire and/or Leicestershire have included Wilson’s Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*, Franklin’s Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan*, Caspian *Hydroprogne caspia* and Whiskered Terns

*Chlidonias hybrida*, Dusky *Phylloscopus fuscatus* and Icterine Warblers *Hippolais icterina*.

The knowledge of the site’s avifauna would not be as it is today without the dedication of the Stanford Ringing Group, which has been going strong for over 40 years. The ringing data give a real insight into the site as a key migration route for passerines. In the last four years the group has ringed over 7,000 birds each year (just short of 9,000 in 2016), most of which are passerines. The list of birds ringed is outstanding for a small Midlands reservoir, and some of the more notable species ringed include Hoopoe, Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Dusky and Icterine Warblers, and three each of Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus* and Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*. In addition, there is a regular autumn passage of Common Redstarts *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (13 in 2017 was a site record).

There are good numbers of commoner breeding species that are ringed on a regular basis at Stanford, including Willow *Phylloscopus trochilus*, Sedge *A. schoenobaenus* and Reed Warblers *A. scirpaceus*, Common *Sylvia communis* and Lesser Whitethroats *S. curruca*. Recent additions to the breeding birds at the reservoir have included Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* and Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*. Common Terns *Sterna hirundo* returned to breed in 2018 following the



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**175.** Stanford Reservoir, Leicestershire/Northamptonshire, December 2017.

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**176.** Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*, Stanford Reservoir, Northamptonshire, October 2018.

deployment of two tern rafts earlier that year.

There is no permanent habitat for migrating waders, although muddy areas occasionally emerge when water levels are low. When this happens, the patch can really hot up – and 1991, 1995, 2011 and 2017 are well known in Stanford birding history as years when water levels remained low. The first and so far only Wilson’s Phalarope for Stanford appeared in 1991, and a Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* turned up in 1995. During 2011 the selection of autumn passage waders was fantastic, including species such as Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, Red Knot *Calidris canutus*, Ruff *C. pugnax*, Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos* and Spotted Redshank *T. erythropus* – all of them exceptional records away from the larger reservoirs in the region such as Draycote Water and Rutland Water.

In 2017, water levels were low during spring and into early autumn delivering an outstanding array of migrating birds. I recorded 26 species of wader that year, including three popular Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, c. 130 Black-tailed Godwits, 30 Bar-tailed Godwits *L. lapponica* and a Jack Snipe *Lymnocyrtus minimus* that remained into June (the latest spring record for Leicestershire). Also seen were numerous Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*, Sanderlings *Calidris alba*, Wood Sandpipers *T. glareola* and Spotted Redshanks. The undoubted highlight for me was a self-found Baird’s Sandpiper

*C. bairdii* in August (the first for the site).

The selection of other birds in 2017 was exceptional, contributing to a new species record for the year (160). Records included Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*, Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*, Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*, Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*, Common Crane *Grus grus*, Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*, Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* and approximately 110 Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* on spring passage. The year was capped off with that first Dusky Warbler for Northamptonshire in the ringing group’s nets.

One of the things I love about my patch is the relative peace and tranquillity. No dog walkers or crowds, only the anticipation of something unexpected. Scanning the dam or the muddy fringes of the reservoir in late autumn always has the potential to deliver. At other times of year it might be the excitement of the first Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* or Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, or a sudden blast of song from a resident Cetti’s Warbler *Cettia cetti*. Although individual observers have come and gone over the years, the combined efforts of a handful of patch-watchers and that of the ringing group provide a lasting record and growing understanding of bird populations using the site. Despite its track record, Stanford Reservoir still remains under-watched and very much under-rated but as my local patch it is a gift that keeps on giving.

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