

Nature Notes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world
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A little brown bird's shout of approval!

Just recently I proudly added the 204th species of bird to the list of birds recorded at Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits on the southeastern edge of St Albans. The bird itself was nothing to write home about in terms of looks - a Cetti's warbler (pronounced 'chetty's'), very similar in appearance to a large wren. But the sighting was nonetheless very rewarding for this little bird had never before been recorded at the gravel pits despite the regular visits by birdwatchers every week since records officially began in the 1980s.

Though it is just another 'little brown bird' that skulks around in the reedy margins of waterways, the Cetti's warbler can boast one of the loudest voices of any bird - literally a 'shout of notes' that startles anyone walking through the otherwise quiet reed bed. That voice alone is a pretty good assurance that until a few weeks ago a Cetti's warbler had not visited Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits: if it had someone would have heard it!

Named after 18th century Italian zoologist Francesco Cetti, the Cetti's warbler has been expanding its range northwards, first arriving in Britain in the 1960s and appearing in Hertfordshire from the mid 70s. Unlike many of our native songbirds Cetti's warbler populations have been doing quite well though it is vulnerable to harsh winters with the 'Beast from the East' decimating populations along the east coast of Britain earlier this year.

Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits has become the latest place to become connected to this little part of natural history and, as I write, the warbler is still shouting out its arrival to birders and dog walkers alike. It is a bird that many birdwatchers would consider long 'overdue' at Tyttenhanger; after all the habitat seems perfect and other sites around the county can boast resident Cetti's. The Cetti's arrival now suggests, at least to me, that Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits as a natural reserve has come of age.



A Cetti's warbler shouting out his song.

Picture: STEVEN ROUND

I have been visiting the site regularly since I first discovered it as a teenager in the late 1980s. Over the years I have seen the gravel pits develop from a barren treeless landscape, freshly created from the gravel workings (still active today), to one encompassing a huge variety of different habitats, from open water, reed beds, river and grassland to mature woodland, farmland and all the transitional areas in between.

It is a landscape that many would consider man-made and even tarnished by the extraction of sand and gravel. It is true that the original water meadows of the Colne Valley have long gone and a noisy conveyor belt now traverses the site, carrying the excavated material back to the processing plant. The constant encroachment of the human on the landscape is very evident, be it walkers, dogs, fishermen, horses, bikes and sometimes motorbikes, not to mention the daily activities of farmers and the gravel works. In the 1990s the woods resounded with paint-balling wars while the surrounding farmland played host to partridge shooting parties. Disturbance is and always has been the order of the day and yet wildlife abounds.

For me there is a beauty and wildness to Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits that is quite unique, brought about by this constant interaction of the people with the natural landscape. The ongoing gravel workings ensures daily change, be it in the fluctuation in water levels as water is pumped in and out to wash newly extracted gravel, or in

the carving out of new landscapes to accommodate machinery or access. Farmland is ploughed, sown, harvested and then ploughed again. Pathways and hedges are strimmed and cut back. The overall effect is as dramatic as a tidal flood - demanding responses from wildlife and people alike. But what can often feel violent at the time seems to produce exactly the kinds of habitats that attract wildlife, not least birds.

For me, Tyttenhanger Gravel Pits represents my "local patch" - an area fondly adopted by every birder as 'their own' local place to birdwatch: small and near enough to cover in a few hours but large and varied enough to ensure continuing interest. The 'ownership' of such sites is purely in memories built up over years of visits and observations such that the landscape and all it contains becomes personally known and any little changes are immediately evident.

The arrival of the Cetti's warbler is the most recent of those memories and is special not so much because of the bird itself but because it hasn't been there previously. That it turned up on my watch confers a renewed sense of 'ownership' on me, at least for now. With so many actual different owners and invested parties Tyttenhanger's future as a place for wildlife always hangs in the balance but, to date, it remains one of the best places to see birds in Hertfordshire.

For more information on Tyttenhanger please visit <http://friendsofthgp.wixsite.com/ornithology>