

BIRD WALKING THE STIPERSTONES

Report by Rachael Davenhill, an inexperienced birdwatcher, on a morning walk organised by Upper Onny Wildlife Group and Natural England, on Sunday 7 May 2017

A merry group of around 29 arrived at the Stiperstones on a bright blue May morning to be greeted with the sound of a Cuckoo.

Leo Smith gave an introduction to the Upper Onny Wildlife Group which was formed in 2004 to keep an eye on the Curlew and Lapwing population. The area covered is 125 square kilometres, divided into squares and surveyed by volunteers three times in each breeding season. Leo encouraged people to contact him if they wanted to get involved in the surveying, as well as to email him with any curlew or lapwing sightings.

Simon Cooter then talked about reserve management and the way in which the traditional management of the land with the burning and cutting of small patches of heather brings back new shoots which the red grouse like to eat, and gives them plenty of cover in hiding from predators such as the Peregrine Falcon. Bracken control takes place through helicopter spraying so that the bracken doesn't smother the whinberry and heather. He emphasised the heathland is a rare habitat and is managed for that, so that the birds we were able to observe on the walk are there because the heathland habitat has been so well maintained. If left unmanaged it would revert back to oak woodland.

The Stiperstones habitat was saved because local people gathered together to stop it being planted up with conifers. Some conifers were later removed in the 'Back to Purple' project, encouraging the growth of heather in order to recreate the habitat in which species like the emperor moth can flourish.

As we walked we heard and saw a host of bird life including Buzzards, Red Kites, Tree Pipits, Willow Warblers, Robins, Blue Tits, Wrens, Coal Tits, Kestrel, Blackbirds and Stonechats. And to cap it all, beautiful green hairstreak butterflies appeared at various points on the walk much to everyone's delight.

A grateful group of people ended the morning having learned so much from the expertise of the walk leaders, Leo and Simon, as well as from each other through the gentle, knowledgeable and friendly conversations that took place as we walked through and listened to the Stiperstones landscape.

In total, 32 species were seen (in alphabetical order): Blackbird, Blue tit, Buzzard, Carrion crow, Chaffinch, Chiffchaff, Coal tit, Cuckoo, Dunnock, Goldcrest, Green woodpecker, Jackdaw, Kestrel, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Mistle thrush, Pheasant, Pied wagtail, Raven, Red grouse, Red kite, Reed bunting, Robin, Skylark, Stock dove, Stonechat, Swallow, Tree pipit, Wheatear, Whitethroat, Willow warbler and Wren.