

The Joys of Walking Ashbourne Airfield

Patch birding: usually the hardest and yet often most rewarding style of birding available to all birders, yet only a few seem to stick to it rigidly. The thought of seeing something unusual within a short distance of your house, or at a place you visit regularly. There is nothing else in birding quite like it. The desire to go again, the elation at finding your own special bird, even if common elsewhere. The Airfield and surrounding areas are magical for just this reason. Several special birds, yet many more days of weather being cold, rainy, wet, frozen, and windy. You become disassociated with it. And then. It happens. A first for your patch. A few migrant birds. An appearance of a local breeder you did not think would make it there. A bird you had seen further down the road which drifts above your patch's airspace. A glimmer of goodness amongst a plethora of patching when you feel rubbish or tired. The joy of a nailed-on 'patch tick' versus a bird being seen and the identity going unconfirmed... And that, is why going back for more is always the most important thing. For the Airfield, often being the only person (let alone the only birder) present means that you get to encounter everything for yourself, before spreading the joy of your finds through your own means.

Background and accessing the Airfield and surrounding areas

Ashbourne Airfield is a now disused airfield (for mainstream aircraft at least) which was constructed for World War Two use. The industrial estate is now well-established around the southern edge of the airfield, with there being plans to develop the airfield for housing and business ventures. The airfield is still partially used by remote controlled aircraft fliers, so be advised that tracking birds in flight is not always easy! However, this can be advantageous to the grassland species that can be found, as the miniature aircraft can cause airborne predators to flee the scene.

The Airfield is seemingly inaccessible and easily missed when travelling past, heading for Derby. It is sandwiched between the northern edge of Ashbourne Industrial Estate and the southern edge of Bradley Wood. Should you be travelling here from the direction of Derby, your best bet for parking would be to stop on Snipesmoor Lane; a little lane off the A52 main road a few hundred yards before the roundabout at the top of the hill. It is a very easy turn to miss, and there is limited parking here - possibly fitting three cars. However, this provides you with a mere two-minute walk down the lane, then crossing the road to go through the swinging gate and access the Airfield. Alternatively, there is a car park at the local Co-op on Blenheim Road, which is open 24 hours and can fit approximately 25 cars. From here, it would be approximately a ten-minute walk to the airfield through the industrial estate to access the same gate. The other access point would be to park in one of the car parks for Bradley Wood and following the paths up the hill and onto the top end of the Airfield. These can be accessed on the A517 Belper Road.

Airfield patch

At the time of writing, I will have been covering the Airfield for approximately a year and a half, with my first trip there dating back to January 2022. I had become aware of the Airfield through the Derbyshire Birders Facebook page, with sightings from various birders of good numbers of common species and some sightings of scarcer species making me want to start to explore more around my locality. Mostly unaware at the time of the birding possibilities up there (but for these select few Facebook reports) I was pleasantly surprised by the differing habitats readily accessible from the various areas across the Airfield. These include rocky tracks on the old airstrip, man-made 'sand dunes' - I use this term loosely as it is more likely dumped sand from an old project which has happened to evolve into dunes - the area also includes Bradley Wood which has various pathways to follow and provides different birds a home, including raptors, warblers, tits and finches. Add these areas in with open farmland being kept short by sheep, and crop farmland providing refuge for Skylarks and Lapwings and there is plenty to see year-round - if you can handle the seemingly unpredictable weather, just bring some walking boots or wellingtons!

A typical visit would allow yourself time to visit all of the locality and dabble in the different habitats the airfield has to offer. A two-hour venture would find yourself covering the main airstrip and surrounding compartments, the sand dunes, perhaps a walk into Bradley Wood followed by a jaunt across the currently unused JCB land towards Ladyhole Lane before returning to where you had parked. I often stay longer than this to make sure I've provided myself with the best opportunity to cover everywhere and see everything I could hope to see, but this doesn't need to be the case. However, if someone was particularly inclined to continue, then a short trip by car across to Osmaston and a walk down to the mill and surrounding lakes would also be rewarding. Not only a change of habitat and scene, but also the opportunity to engage with different birds. A journey past the lake will take you into the woods on Osmaston Estate which is also worth a walk from time to time.

The main section of the Airfield away from the airstrip is sectioned off into what I can only describe as compartments. These are areas of ground generally adorned by small Alpine plants and Birds-foot Trefoil which are a great attraction for pollinators in summer. Each compartment is separated by tall ridges of grass, bracken and bramble which is a haven for migrant Warblers, most notably Whitethroat and Lesser Whitethroat, as well as more common species such as Blackbirds and Dunnocks.

As you move off from the compartmented areas and head further towards Bradley Wood, the series of man-made sand dunes loom into existence. I find this area generally the best to find the, perhaps, more exciting migrants that the Airfield hosts. Indeed, the dunes alone hosted a wealth of rather stunning migrants in 2022; Northern Wheatear, Ring Ouzel, Whimbrel, Stonechat and Tree Pipit (over) to note a few of the species seen around the Dunes. Add in the more regular migrants, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff, and some of the colourful locals, Green Woodpecker, Yellowhammer and Bullfinch, and it starts to make sense why I spend a lot of time in this section.

The dunes are not the only area that attract migrant birds, nor home to the only interesting birds. Across the airfield and the various habitats that can be found, the variety of birds also changes. The crop fields are home to the breeding Lapwings and Skylarks but were also joined last year by two families of Yellow Wagtails which were first seen late on in spring and later attended nests in midsummer. A first Derbyshire breeding record for me and an absolute treat to watch and listen to such special birds zipping around. Both Pied and Grey Wagtails were also recorded on the Airfield in 2022, meaning that all three 'common' Wagtail species were recorded in the same location in Derbyshire – I wonder how often this happens...?

This same area of cropland is harvested, and later in the year holds a magnificent flock of Skylarks which are often joined by Reed Buntings, Linnets and Yellowhammers. Whilst I, like many of you, will often find loose dogs irritating when attempting to watch birds, they often spook up this wintering flock whilst they feed amongst the stubble, allowing for views of waves and waves of Skylarks *et al* tumbling over each other as they head for deeper cover; a rather spectacular sight. This area was also home to a huge wintering flock of Snipe, and a co-ordinated count of the flock with Tom Coe in late 2021 gave up a whopping 115 birds of which 113 were Common Snipe and 2 were Jack Snipe. Unfortunately, this area has now been flattened to make way for housing on the industrial estate, but there is hope they may return in winter 2023 in the grazed farmland on the north side of the airfield.

Perhaps the star discovery last year came in Autumn. A post-work evening wander unearthed at least one juvenile Little Ringed Plover skittering around on the loose gravel which now covers the old Airstrip. Whilst this came as a bit of a shock, the reality was that I should not have been too surprised. A handful of sightings of single Little Ringed Plovers earlier in the spring of 2022 made me aware of their presence, but then nothing for weeks. Having assumed they had been unsuccessful in finding a mate I turned my attention to some of the other birds which the Airfield hosts. It is certainly a bird that birders such as I, and any prospective birders from further afield, need to be aware of during the peak migration season in future.

It's not all about the birding!

Whilst the birds make up most of the reasons to visit the Airfield throughout the year, there are of course many other reasons to visit when the time is right. The breeding birds went quiet, and the Butterflies took the spotlight in the sunshine in summer 2022. Exceptional sightings of Common Blues, Dingy Skippers, Wall Browns, and Brown Argus and made sure there was plenty to look at the floor for. These, on top of all the regulars, make for fantastic viewing - if you can find a sunny day to see them all. Not only are the butterflies a source of interest, but sightings of other species certainly raise an eyebrow. Various species of Orchid including Early Purple, Southern Marsh (including a count of 52) and Common Twayblade as well as some regular species of flower including Scarlet Pimpernel make for a botanist's dream. Finally, if spiders and arachnids are your interest, a small colony of Sand Bear Spiders (*Arctosa perita*) have been discovered. Living in the dunes, they are most often found on coastal dunes - how on earth these have been found in the Derbyshire Dales is quite beyond me but, nevertheless, another interesting species to look out for if visiting.

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