

Dubious Faith

A modest turnout of just half a dozen met at 9 am at the RSPB lagoon at Humberston Fitties for our first birdwalk of the autumn.

There were plenty of birds about. The air was full of swallows and martins, large assemblies of gulls covered much of the water's edge, and there was ample by way of the usual finches and pipits amongst the bushes in the grassy area between the lagoon and that huge expanse of saltmarsh which stretches as far as the eye can see. We also noted a few passing terns and several late swifts.

But, sad to say, we didn't really take much notice of any of these. We had been seduced by the prospect of something much more exciting. The white-rumped sandpiper is such an unlikely find here that birders from far and wide have been visiting the area for much of the past week just to see it. We hadn't gone far before a birdwatcher with an earnest look and some very posh equipment approached us to inquire as to whether this bird (which should really be in South America) was still around. I told him I thought it was but wasn't confident about distinguishing it from the dunlins. He set off heartily in an appropriate direction saying "I'll find it".

Twenty minutes or so later, he signalled to us from across the far side of the lagoon. We all marched across to where he was and peered in turns through his high-powered telescope at what he claimed was said bird. When we inquired as to how he could be sure it wasn't just a dunlin we were told it had a shorter and darker bill.

Perhaps they're not what they used to be, but the evidence of my own eyes left me unconvinced. Maybe that bill *was* a bit shorter. And darker. But I couldn't really see it. Maybe it was a white-rumped sandpiper. If it had taken off so that the white rump was visible I could have believed it. Call me a doubting Thomas, but I can't help thinking that a twitcher who's come all the way from Liverpool in pursuit of another tick will "see" what he wants to see. Which is not necessarily the same thing as what's actually there.

Ray Hume
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