

Lockdown Bird Life in Waterlow Park  
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Re-discovering Waterlow Park has been one of the few real joys of lockdown. I hadn't been for years, gravitating instead towards the Heath, but remembered visiting as a child when the aviary was still a big attraction. We thought it terribly exotic and would make a beeline for the small enclosure in the hope of hearing Charlie the Mynah Bird speak.

The aviary is of course long gone but the park is still full of birds and for the past four months I have wandered the paths, binoculars in hand, trying to put names to the calls and songs coming from the trees.

At first, I noticed familiar Great Tits and Blue Tits, flitting from branch to branch, busy searching for nesting materials. Robins strutted confidently along the paths, red breasts puffed out, holding their ground for as long as they dared before diving into the undergrowth as dog walkers passed.

There were lots of Wrens, perched with their characteristic upward flick of the tail, and singing at volumes that far outstrip their tiny size.

In April as the early mornings warmed up, I started to hear new sounds. There was a Song Thrush in the strip of woodland between Lauderdale House and the boundary of Channing School. Each morning he posed high up in the still bare branches, belting out his song in the hope of attracting a mate.

As breeding season progressed, I watched Tits flying in and out of the nesting boxes in the woods surrounding the upper pond. One morning, on my way to visit them, I startled a pair of Nuthatches with their pale-peach coloured breasts and distinctive Cleopatra-style eyes.

Another time, there was a small flock of Long-tailed Tits hanging out in a tree at the back of the Bisham Gardens houses. I saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker further along that path and again, a few days later, probably the same one, in a tree overhanging the lower pond.

A glance one morning across the middle pond was rewarded with a quick glimpse of what I am pretty sure was a Grey Wagtail. And rounding a corner one day near the High Street Gate I walked straight into a fight. Two Dunnocks, probably rival males, in pursuit of a third, probably a female, who wanted nothing to do with either of them.

During those early walks, at most, a single plane would fly overhead. There was almost no traffic noise and in the unusual quiet I began to tune into, and then learn to identify less familiar birds.

First came the repetitive, one-tone rhythms of a single Chiffchaff. He taunted me for days, hidden in the dense woodland around the lower pond, loud but never visible until he suddenly decided one morning to announce himself from the very top of the tallest tree.

Then came the Goldfinches, Chaffinches and on one occasion, a family of noisy Greenfinches fussing in branches to the west of the middle pond. There are lots of Blackcaps in Waterlow, including the ones I watched rushing back and forth to feed hungry fledglings hidden in bushes at the north end of the pond. And at the bottom of the steep path leading to the upper pond, my most exciting discovery of all; a pair of Treecreepers doing exactly what the name suggests, tiptoeing up the trunk of a tree, their speckled brown wings almost indistinguishable from the bark, curved beaks pecking for insects as they climbed

There have been other birds, mostly small and fast moving, that I have failed to identify and of course lots of Blackbirds, Magpies, Crows and the ubiquitous screeching Parakeets.

But now, at the height of summer, there's far less birdsong and not so much activity. The noisy business of attracting a mate, nesting, collecting food and launching young is done for the year. The birds will be back in song next spring. And thanks to my lockdown re-discovery of the wildlife wonders of Waterlow Park, so will I.