RSPB YORK LOCAL GROUP

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APRIL 2024 NEWSLETTER

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From Barbara Cromack, RSPB York Group Leader

I'm writing this on a beautiful sunny day on Easter weekend. Spring seems to have arrived - I have seen and heard my first Chiffchaffs of the year, Bitterns are booming at St Aidan's and the Black-necked Grebes are back there, too. I hope we have said goodbye to the frequent rainy days, at least for the time being, and look forward to some better weather for our birding trips.

A week ago, we had an excellent coach trip to Low Barns Nature Reserve in County Durham (thank you Judith). It is a truly delightful reserve which was new to most of us. (The report of the trip is on pages 7-8.) The next trip will be in June to Tophill Low (see page 12 for more information and booking form). Please try to join us if you can and it will help planning if you book early - we have to have a sufficient number of people to cover costs and if more people come, then the cost can be reduced. It is difficult for all, and especially for Judith, if we don't know until the last minute whether we can go or not.

In recent months, we have recruited some student volunteers from York University. Shannon and Kate have been busy spreading the word about our group and about the RSPB in general, and I'm delighted to say that both have been shortlisted for the Student Community and Volunteering Award. The award will be presented in early May - we keep our fingers crossed! Sadly for us, they will be leaving the university at the end of this academic year, but we have some new volunteers who they are training up ready to take over. We were pleased to have a stand at the Sustainability Fair in Anne Lister College last month (report on page 11). We had a very successful day - thanks to all who helped.

When you read this, we will be moving into our summer programme of walks, trips and a short holiday in Northumberland. We hope for good weather, and I wish you all an enjoyable summer with lots of birding.

Summer programme of events May – September 2024

All indoor meetings are planned to take place in Clements Hall
For coffee and a chat come 30 minutes before start of indoor meetings

PLEASE SEE OUR WEBSITE FOR ANY FURTHER UPDATES ABOUT EVENTS

MAY

Wednesday 8 – Monday 13	RSPB YORK LOCAL GROUP HOLIDAY: Northumberland Contact Tracy at tracytpeacock@gmail.com for more details
Saturday 18 at 10:00am	MORNING WALK: North Cave Wetlands Leader: Peter Reed Parking: Reserve car park Meet in the car park near the bird cafe Grid Reference SE887328 Post Code HU15 2LY

JUNE

Saturday 8 from 8:00am	COACH OUTING: Tophill Low Nature Reserve Driffield See page 12 for details and booking form
Friday 14 at 10:00am	MORNING WALK: Strensall Common Leader: Peter Reed Meet Scott Moncrieff car park Grid Reference SE636599 Post Code YO32 5UL
Sunday 30 at 10:00am	ALL DAY WALK: RSPB St Aidan's A variety of birds including Black-necked Grebe, Bittern and Spoonbill have been seen at this time of year Leader: Barbara Cromack Parking: Reserve car park near reception Meet outside reception Grid Reference SE398287 Post Code LS26 8AL

JULY

Saturday 6 at 10:00am	ALL DAY WALK: RSPB Bempton Cliffs Leader: Gillian Hillman Parking: Reserve car park Meet outside visitor centre

AUGUST

Wednesday 14 at 10:00am	ALL DAY WALK: RSPB Blacktoft Sands Leader: Masha Sitnikova Parking: Reserve car park Meet outside reception Grid Reference 843230 Post Code DN14 8HR

SEPTEMBER

Wednesday 11 at 7:30pm	EVENING MEETING: "The Answer Lies in the Soil" by Alastair Fitter

Continued on page 3

Wednesday 18 at 10:30am	ALL DAY WALK: Stamford Bridge The number 10 bus service runs on a regular basis between York and Stamford Bridge. People may have heard about the 17th century battle that took place in the area, or know of a football ground down south of the same name! We will walk along the village side of the river, under the viaduct and continue until we reach the village of Low Catton. The path can be muddy if the recent weather has been wet. I would expect to see members of the titmice family, and several finches. At Low Catton, we will follow the main road to High Catton. Care will need to be taken as there could be traffic on the roads. Yellowhammers are often seen along this stretch of road and game birds may be in the fields, depending upon the recent crops. In High Catton, we will then follow the footpath back to Stamford Bridge. Again, care must be taken as the road could be busy. Back in the village of Stamford Bridge, we will walk through the old railway station and stop to admire the views from the viaduct. We will then walk along the A166 back to the village square, where there are toilets, cafe and a bus stop. Leader: Barry Bishop Parking: Car park next to river (just over the bridge when travelling from York) Meet in picnic area next to the car park by the river
Tuesday 24 at 2:15pm	AFTERNOON MEETING: "Australia – snapshots from the world's largest island where wildlife is respected" by Paul Bartlett

Notice of AGM

This year's AGM will be held on **Tuesday 23 April** after Darren Johnson's talk about Blacktoft and the Humber.

A copy the minutes of last year's meeting are enclosed.

Nominations are invited for all committee posts.

Hazel has completed six years as Treasurer. She is happy to continue if she is re-elected, but also happy to hand the job to someone else if there is anyone who would like to do it.

I am happy to continue as Group Leader if the group wishes, but the appointment needs to be confirmed at the AGM. Other nominations are invited.

Other committee members are all willing to continue in their present roles.

We would welcome new members to the committee, either in specific roles or as general helpers. Please consider whether you could help with the running of the group.

Barbara Cromack

Skipwith Walk Report 15 November 2023

With a forecast of wind, but no rain, 14 of us met in the Skipwith Blackwood Road car park. We were delighted to welcome several newcomers to the group, including some new to the York area. As walk leader, I suggested that we would be likely to hear a number of woodland birds, but might not necessarily see them. I recommended using the app, Merlin, to help with sound identification for people less confident. I encouraged people to share their skills, and welcomed Barry Bishop, in particular. (Barry used to lead the local group for many years.)

The car park is often a good place to start birdwatching, but this time there was practically nothing to be seen or heard. We saw and heard Robin and Goldcrest very briefly, but, for the first kilometre towards the main track through Skipwith, there was practically nothing - not even Carrion Crow or Woodpigeon. Everything seemed to be hunkered down out of the wind. Barry pointed out Marsh Tit, but it was a very fleeting appearance.

Our luck improved a great deal when we turned off on to the perimeter path, which looks north across the Ings to Skipwith church. Within a few minutes, we had seen hundreds of birds. South Moor Field was a mixture of unploughed stubble, bare earth, very low vegetation and large wet areas. A large flock of Fieldfare and Redwing were feeding on the ground, and flocks of Yellowhammer and Linnet passed over. Some people had a brief glimpse of Kestrel. Several fine Hares were sitting motionless on the bare field, with no cover to help them avoid detection. They were a rich mottled brown colour and stood out sharply against the dull soil. A few Woodpigeons ventured out of the distant wood.

Hare courtesy Barry Bishop

Continuing through the wood, we saw a few shy Roe Deer, and Long-tailed Tits accompanied our short lunch break near the ancient Oak. A remarkably well camouflaged Grey Wagtail bobbed up and down on the track, and some of the group had brief glimpses of Siskin. The wet weather has resulted in a fine crop of fungus. Around 20 different bird species were seen in all. Although the first half hour was disappointing, with practically nothing seen or heard, I think I can speak for the group when I say it turned out to be an enjoyable occasion with a chance to meet up and share our enthusiasm for birding with a friendly group of people.

Sue Perutz

York University Campus Walk Report 13 January 2024

A sunny day at long last! Both parts of the University campus were sparkling in the sunshine with the birds in best breeding condition with the approach of spring. The walk was led by Robin and Sue Perutz, who live close to the campus. About 20 people took part. We were delighted to welcome newcomers, including several students.

The two parts of the campus are very different in character and have different bird populations. Most of the walk was on Campus West, because Campus East was very wet and muddy. Robin's introduction included distributing a map he has produced, showing where to look for birds on the campus throughout the year.

We began with a quick look at the lagoon and main lake on Campus East nearest to Heslington, hoping to find wildfowl such as Gadwall and Tufted Duck. There were a few Teal on the lagoon, but not much else. This may have been due to the thin layer of ice on the water. The extensively flooded Lower Derwent Valley, only a few miles away, may have provided the birds with a better option.

Gooseander courtesy of Luca Upper

Good views were had of Bullfinch, calling in the low woodland thickets near the school.

Returning to Campus West, we looked at the Nuthatch nest box with its mud-lined entrance hole, but it was not yet inhabited. We saw a Nuthatch nearby shortly afterwards.

Walking along the side of the lake, we were soon rewarded with the highlight of the day for many of us: close views of male and Brownhead Goosander. (Brownhead includes the indistinguishable female and juvenile birds.)

Amongst the ducks, many of which were already paired for breeding, we observed the grunt-whistle of Mallard courtship behaviour. Also present was a Cayuga. This is a medium to heavy duck, generally reared for its meat and eggs, and also for ornament. It was probably left on the campus when no longer wanted. Also present were two white ducks which may have been taken to the campus for the same reason.

Cayuga courtesy of Gillian Hillman

It took a while to find the many geese which are usually present in large numbers on both campuses, but we did eventually see Barnacle, Snow, Greylag and Canada Geese.

We pointed out the trees near Wentworth College currently used by Little Egrets as their roost. 21 birds were seen leaving the roost at dawn recently. This area of the lake and woodland is deliberately left as a conservation area with limited access for people. A Sparrowhawk darted past low over the water, too fast to be seen by most of the group.

The campus benefits greatly from a very wildlife supportive policy. For example, we pointed out a notice explaining that a half-submerged fallen tree at the edge of the lake has been left there to encourage Great Crested Grebes to use it as a nesting platform. A particularly noteworthy example is the installation of a nest box for Peregrine Falcons high up on the boiler house chimney. It's not yet been used for nesting, but Peregrine have shown interest in the site for several years.* Large numbers of Bee Orchids now thrive in their hundreds on the campus, along with a few Pyramidal and Common Spotted Orchids, protected from regular mowing during the flowering season.

We were lucky to have input from the students who joined the walk. One of them, Shannon Reed, talked about her many observations of birdlife on the campus over the last few years. Her bird-based artwork is on display on the campus.

Many people commented that they had felt uncertain about visiting the campus and were reassured that they are both welcome to visit and that they are likely to see a large number of different species, depending on the time of year.

*Postscript: A pair of Peregrines visited the nest box the day after our visit.

Sue and Robin Perutz

Lower Derwent Valley 14 February 2024

Mute Swans flying over the flooded LDV courtesy Dave Mather

Eleven members met at Natural England's car park at Bank Island on 14th February to explore the Lower Derwent Valley. The Valley was extensively flooded, so there was no access to the hides at either Bank Island or Wheldrake Ings. Nevertheless, on a largely dry day, we recorded collectively 52 species by skirting around the floods.

Starting at the Bank Island viewing platform, small numbers of duck were recorded including Pintail, Gadwall, Tufted Duck and Wigeon. A Snipe was seen well in flight at a distance. One member saw a pair of Grey Partridge nearby. Moving on to the viewing platform at Thorganby, we had views of Whooper Swan, Shoveler, Grey Heron and a single Red Kite at rest.

North Duffield Carrs was our next stop, where one of two hides and a viewing platform were accessible and where two Marsh Harriers were seen (a Norfolk bird had recently been reported wintering) together with a Kestrel and five Whooper Swans.

Whooper Swans courtesy Dave Mather

We stopped at Bubwith Bridge for lunch during a shower. Across the road on the Ings south of the bridge were big flocks of Golden Plovers and Lapwings, together with Dunlins, a few Curlews, 26 Whooper Swans and more Pintails and Shovelers.

Golden Plover courtesy Dave Mather

After lunch, we turned north up the valley to Aughton. Here, there were sightings of a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Pochard and large numbers of Snowdrops near the churchyard.

A final stop at Ellerton yielded a welcome Skylark in song and a nearby wintering flock of 30 of the same species, together with some wintering thrushes and three Mistle Thrushes.

Altogether a varied and worthwhile day despite the floods.

Bob Coursey

Fulford and Heslington 14 March 2024

It was a dull, but dry, morning as seven members met at the junction of Fordlands Lane and Cross Lane, Fulford. Following introductions, we proceeded along the extension of Fordlands Lane to cross over the noisy York ring road.

It was a relief to leave this noise behind and find a large collection of Starlings, Crows and winter thrushes in a field on our right. We continued along Forest Lane recording Blue Tit, Great Tit and Wren. Four Buzzards soared overhead, a Chaffinch called from a conifer tree and a Song Thrush was heard singing in the distance.

The footpath led us around Tilmire Farm and out to turn left following a deep ditch with a hedge on our right. A crouching Hare was spotted in the field beyond the hedge and a group of Fallow Deer behind the Hare was watching us without moving at all. This path eventually reached Germany Beck which we crossed, then turned left towards Heslington. On our right, through a thick hedge, was Heslington Common (The Tilmire). In this hedge, a couple of Blue Tits tested our identification skills!

With Fulford Golf course on our right, ball-watching instead of bird-watching was more interesting. After the muddiest part of the walk, we turned left along a path close to, but well-sheltered from, York's ring road. Another muddy path crossed an agricultural field, leading to White House Farm, where they appeared to have abandoned farming to engage in moving heavy equipment around!

A few spring-like flowers were seen during the walk: Periwinkle, Daffodils and Primroses were recorded.

No new birds were seen as we returned to our cars over the ring road bridge just as it started to rain. A meagre total of only 22 species were seen along with one other, a Song Thrush heard. The same walk in 2021 produced a total of 27 species. One notable absence on this year's walk was the Yellowhammer. Ken Searstone

Low Barnes Coach Outing Report 23 March 2024

20 local group members joined the coach trip to a Durham Wildlife Trust reserve near Bishop Aukland. Luckily, the only rain we encountered was as we were travelling North up the A1.

After completing the necessary formalities at the visitor centre, we set off to explore the reserve. The sun was shining, and when we were out of the wind it was pleasantly warm.

West Pasture hide was our first stop where we were able to watch birds at the feeders.

Nuthatch, Siskin, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Blue, Great and Coal Tit were very active, as were the Mallard Ducks picking up bits of seed that fell out of the feeders. On the lake were Canada Geese, Greylag Geese, Coot and Moorhen. Two ladies, who were regular visitors to the reserve, told us about the family of Mute Swans we could see. The male and three young were all together and had been since the mother died. They were uncertain as to how the female died. Normally at this time of year, the adult swans would have chased the young ones away so that they could concentrate on raising this year's young. Seeing the family together reminded us how strong their family bond is.

Grey Wagtail

A walk along the boardwalk through part of a reed bed allowed us to hear a Water Rail calling, and we imagined how many Sedge Warblers would soon be in the reed bed. We walked along the path to the Northumbrian Water hide. This path runs alongside the River Wear, and just before we got to the hide, we were able to watch a Grey Wagtail feeding at the edge of an old weir. Surprisingly, it was still there later in the day, so everyone was able to see it.

From the hide we could see Tufted Duck, Teal, Little Grebe, Chiffchaff and Long-tailed Tits. At this point it was lunch time and we returned to sample the menu in the café. After lunch, we started out by visiting the bird feeders next to the car park. A similar mix of birds to the ones visiting the other feeders, but with better views of a Nuthatch and, later on, a Marsh Tit was seen.

Nuthatch

The Rangers hut was our next stop, and through the large windows we could see Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Cormorants, Mute Swans and Shovelers. We continued our walk towards the "Everglades" and heard, and then saw, a pair of Marsh Tits. From the North and South hides we had better views of the birds on the lake and were able to add Goosander to our list, as a male was asleep on one of the islands.

Several gulls dropped in for a bathe. Most of them were Herring Gulls, with a single Black-headed Gull and a couple of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. One gull had very yellow legs and feet and we added Yellow-legged Gull to our day list.

Goldcrest

As we walked along the path, we came across John, a member of our group who had located two Goldcrests in a conifer tree, and we were able to watch them for a while. We followed the path to the Northumbrian Water hide, and the Grey Wagtail was still there. From the hide, we added Grey Heron, Wood Pigeon, Carrion Crow, Little Egret and Sand Martins to our day list.

We stopped briefly at the West Pasture hide again and Marsh Tits were visiting the feeders.

It was now 4pm and time to leave for home. It had been a very pleasant day with at least 40 birds on most people's day list.

Thanks to Judith for organising the trip.

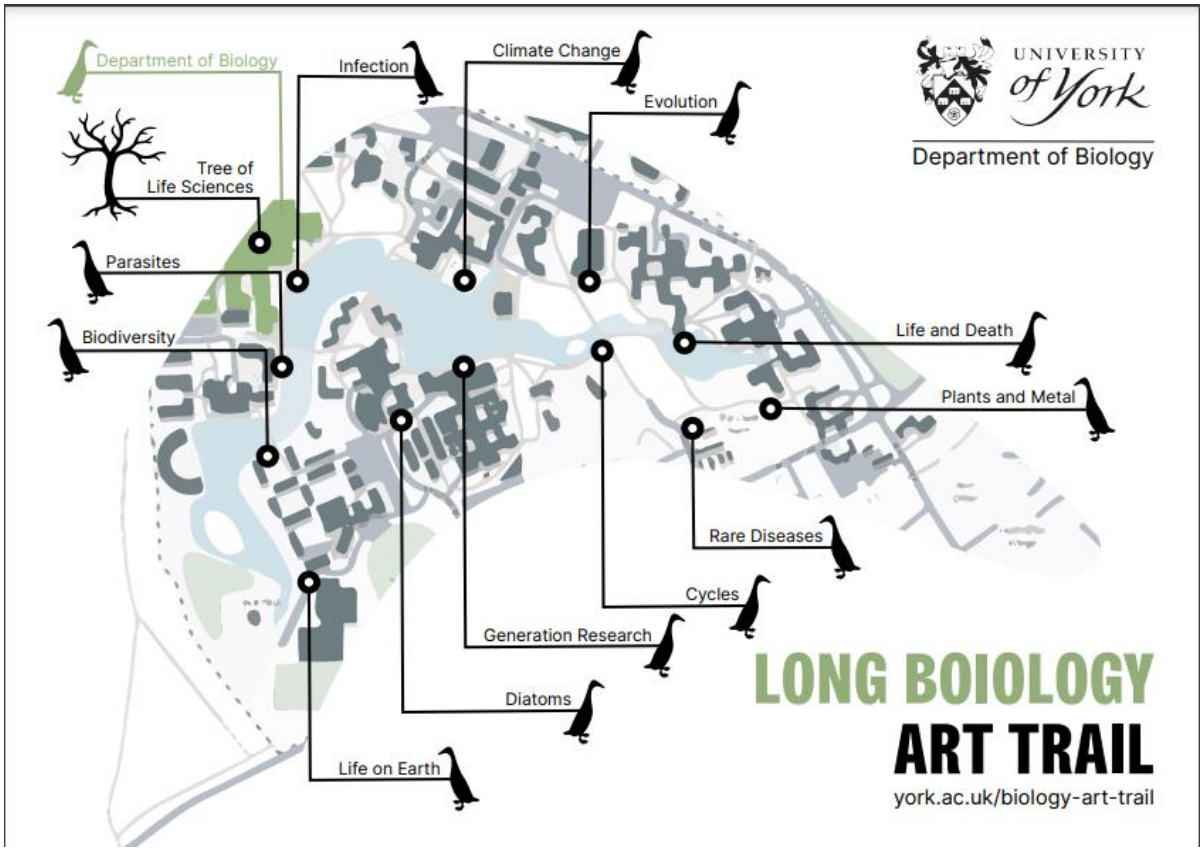
Text and photographs Barry Bishop

Long Boiology: the Department of Biology's Art Trail

Opened in September 2023, the "Longboiology" art trail celebrates 60 years of biosciences at the University of York with twelve life-sized Long Boi cutouts decorated by staff and students of the Department featured around Heslington West Campus. Organised by Professor Pen Holland, the trail takes inspiration from current areas of research taking place in the Department of Biology ranging from infection to evolution, through to climate change. The trail makes a wonderful lake-side walk on the campus, and QR codes adjacent to each duck will guide you to a website featuring words from each artist.

Pictured on the right is the first duck on the trail, the Infection Duck, featuring nine oil paintings of bird species affected by the High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Virus (HPAI) in the current UK outbreak. From top to bottom, the paintings are as follows: HPAI virus, Pied Wagtail, Green Finch, Ringed Plover, Red Kite, Kestrel, Gannet, Barnacle Goose, Arctic Skua, Sea Eagle.

The piece was created by Shannon, the current RSPB Student Ambassador at the University and third year Biology student. She also created the Climate Change duck for the trail below.



Text and illustrations Shannon Reed

Fancy Boi: the University of York's Mandarin Duck

Many of the waterfowl on the University's campuses are beloved by the students, but only a few acquire campus fame. Fancy Boi, as he is known to the students, is a Mandarin Duck living on Heslington West Campus at the University of York. After arriving in 2021, the duck quickly reached fame amongst the students for his beautiful colours and charming personality. However, that's not all that he is known for. Fancy Boi is proudly referred to as the best adopted father on campus as, for two summers, he has fostered and brought up ducklings belonging to a female Mallard.

The adjacent photo, taken in May 2022, shows the Mandarin Duck and Mallard with her ducklings relaxing near Wentworth College. This was the first summer that the Mandarin Duck was seen to look after the Mallard and her ducklings. With both species having drastically different preferences for nesting environments, the pair appeared to compromise with the nest being built within the bank pictured.

The pair are frequently seen together and, despite sharing no biological offspring, appear to be bonded with one another exhibiting a form of inter-species relationship. During the breeding season, this pair are usually found initially by the Spring Lane Bridge and later near Wentworth College once the Mallard is ready to nest.

Text and photograph Shannon Reed

Can't wait for your next local group update? We're on social media.

Facebook	Instagram	Website
RSPBYorkLocalGroup	RSPBYorkLocalGroup	https://group.rspb.org.uk/york/

Our newsletter in your inbox

As Ted Lowe, snooker commentator for the BBC, once told viewers, "For those of you watching in black and white, the pink is next to the green."

Some 65% of our membership are now choosing to receive this newsletter in colour as an email attachment. If you would like to join this readership, please contact Barbara at bjcromack@btinternet.com who will be delighted to transfer you to the list of members receiving our newsletters directly into their inboxes.

Check out a copy in colour on our website at https://group.rspb.org.uk/york/

Sustainability Fair

Val Gray and Barbara Cromack courtesy of Shannon Reed

We were very pleased to be part of the first university Sustainability Fair, which took place on 6 March in Anne Lister College on Campus East. The aim of the event was to promote green initiatives by bringing together student societies, local sustainability-focused groups and charities - all on a mission to make our community a little bit greener. Several committee members were joined by our RSPB Student Ambassadors. These student members did a great job of engaging with the visitors, most of whom were fellow students. Our stall included a variety of quizzes, info sheets, a raffle and delicious biscuits baked by the students. First prize for the raffle was a soft toy puffin, which the winner was thrilled with. We were kept busy for much of the day. Although finding our way to the college took some thought, now we know how to get there, we'll be very pleased to return next year. Sue Perutz

Wins for Wildlife

The Wins for Wildlife event was a family-friendly gathering hosted by us, featuring the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's (YWT) #TeamWilder. Held at Clement's Hall, the event aimed to educate attendees about the Wildlife Gardening Award and the impactful actions that can significantly benefit wildlife. Activities included making very messy wildflower seed balls and a handful of bird identification quizzes. "Bills, Bills, Bills" was a quiz where participants guessed 50 birds based solely on their head and beak; another required identifying the bird from its call. There were also a couple of entry-level quizzes, including identifying common birds. Some very enthusiastic children were delighted with their scented candle and bird-themed mug prizes. Mid-afternoon, YWT presented the details of their award.

The Wildlife Gardening Award, initiated by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, encourages individuals to create wildlife-friendly gardens. It recognizes efforts to transform gardens into natural havens, providing essential habitats and connecting urban green spaces with the countryside. The award is open to various garden types and sizes, from private homes to community spaces, schools, workplaces, and care homes. Participants who meet the criteria receive a certificate and, for a small donation, a plaque to display in their garden.

For more information and to apply for your award, please visit the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Wildlife Gardening Award page at https://www.ywt.org.uk/Wildlife-Gardening-Award

Jobie Kirkwood

RSPB York Local Group

Outing by coach on Saturday 8 June, 2024

to Tophill Low Nature Reserve, Driffield

Tophill Low Nature Reserve in East Yorkshire is an active Yorkshire Water treatment works built in 1959. It formally became a reserve in 1993. It has 12 hides over the 300 acres and sits alongside the River Hull. The two reservoirs attract many wildfowl and around the perimeter there is a network of marshes, ponds, woodlands and grasslands.

There are toilets on site, but please bring all the food and drink needed for the day.

The cost is £3.50 or £2.50 for over 65's - payable on the day.

Coach pick-up is at the Memorial Gardens at 8.30am. There will be opportunity to meet the coach at the depot at 8:00am and at the Holiday Inn on Tadcaster Road at 8:35am. Please indicate preference. All times to be confirmed.

Please return the booking form and your cheque made payable to **RSPB York Local Group** by **Tuesday May 28th** to Judith Sutton at 11 Beaverdyke York YO30 5ZG (Tel: 07833 945225)

NAME	
ADDRESS	
Mobile telephone number	
I wish to book …… places at £24.00 pp for Tophill Low Nature Reserve, Driffield on Saturday 8 June, 2024	
Please indicate pick-up point: 1 Depot Hospital Fields Road 2 Memorial Gardens 3 Holiday Inn	
Email address for confirmation of a place	

The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home