

THE BIRDLIFE OF SWITHLAND RESERVOIR

and some thoughts and memories
of a birdwatcher

IAN GAMBLE

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his
eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood
from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

Romans ch.1 vs. 20



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and
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Cover painting by Ernest Leahy:
Ducks on northern section of Swithland Reservoir from Kinchley Lane.

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Contents

Foreword	6
Acknowledgements	7
Author's Preface	8
Introduction by Peter Gamble	9
1. Seasons and Memories	11
2. Charnwood: A Thousand Years of Change	26
3. Physical Features, History and Vegetation	43
4. A Systematic Account of the Birds of Swithland Reservoir	79
DIVERS (or LOONS)	82
GREBES	83
PETRELS	85
CORMORANTS	86
HERONS	87
SPOONBILLS	88
The Waterfowl	88
SWANS	89
GEESE	91
SHELDUCKS	94
PERCHING DUCKS	95
DABBING DUCKS	95
DIVING DUCKS	99
SAWBILLS	104
STIFF-TAILS	106
KITES, HARRIERS, HAWKS, BUZZARDS, EAGLES	107
FALCONS	112
PARTRIDGES and PHEASANTS	114
RAILS and CRAKES	116
Waders	118
OYSTERCATCHERS	120
AVOCETS	120
PLOVERS	121
SANDPIPERS, STINTS, GODWITS, CURLEWS, SNIPE, PHALAROPES	123
SKUAS	134
GULLS	134
TERNs	140
AUKS	142
SANDGROUSE	143
PIGEONS and DOVES	144

CUCKOOS	146
OWLS	146
NIGHTJARS	150
SWIFTS	151
KINGFISHERS	152
HOOPoes	152
WOODPECKERS	153
LARKS	158
SWALLOWS and MARTINS	158
PIPITS and WAGTAILS	160
WAXWINGS	164
DIPPERS	165
WRENS	165
ACCENTORS	166
CHATS and THRUSHES	167
WARBLERS	177
FLYCATCHERS	187
TITS	188
NUTHATCHES	191
TREECREEPERS	192
ORIOLES	192
SHRIKES	193
CROWS	193
STARLINGS	197
SPARROWS	198
FINCHES	199
BUNTINGS	207
5. EXOTIC SPECIES	210
6. WILDFOWL COUNTS	211
7. BIRD RINGING	221
Glossary	226
References	228
Common and Scientific Names	231
Index	233

Paintings by Ernest Leahy

Ducks on the northern section of Swithland Reservoir	Cover Picture
Bittern flying over Bulrushes	17
Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins	18
Male White-headed Duck	20
Osprey in flight	21
Spotted Flycatcher and young	22
Pochard's nest and eggs with one Ruddy Duck's egg	23

Killdeer Plover	24
Great Crested Grebe and young	25
Cuckoo on a fence post	26
Male Black Grouse displaying	28
Male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at nest	30
Calling Corncrake	33
Nightjar in flight at dusk	36
Firecrest	41

Maps

Map showing the location of Swithland Reservoir	12
Swithland Reservoir map showing main vegetation areas	44

Photographs

Frontispiece: Swithland Reservoir: the view from Kinchley Lane	10
1. Aerial view of Swithland Reservoir	45
2. The dam and overspill in 1896	46
3. The fresh scar of 'The Crag'	46
4. The Victorian landscaped filter-beds	47
5. The Waterworks Grounds	48
6. The Woodhouse Brook running through the Waterworks Grounds	48
7. The overflow channel in full spate	49
8. The reservoir overflow	49
9. Overflow channel and granite cliff	52
10. Northern section showing the dam and overflow	52
11. The eastern shoreline near Buddon Wood	52
12. A view from Kinchley Promontory	53
13. Reed swamp on the western shore	53
14. Muddy shoreline on the northern section	53
15. Promontory extending from the eastern shoreline	56
16. View from the quarry south mound	56
17. Central section	57
18. Central section looking towards the viaduct	57
19. Oak woodland on Brazil Island	60
20. The southern section of the reservoir	60
21. Small southern inflow section of the reservoir	61
22. Bradgate Brook, the main inflow brook	61
23. Slender Tufted-sedge (<i>Carex acuta</i>)	64
24. Greater Tussock Sedge (<i>Carex paniculata</i>)	64
25. Cyperus Sedge (<i>Carex pseudocyperus</i>)	64
26. Large Bitter Cress (<i>Cardamine amara</i>)	64
27. Marsh Marigolds (<i>Caltha palustris</i>)	64
28. Brookweed (<i>Samolus valerandi</i>)	64
29. Fresh water mussel shells on the exposed mud	65
30. A male Migrant Hawker dragonfly	65
31. A female Purple Hairstreak butterfly	65
32. A White-letter Hairstreak butterfly at Quorn	65
33. Grey Heron	66
34. Kingfisher	66
35. Great Crested Grebe's nest and eggs	66

36. Mute Swan and cygnets at their nest site	67
37. Canada Goose alongside the dam wall	67
38. Male Shoveler	68
39. Male Ferruginous Duck	68
40. Male Goldeneye	68
41. Male Smew	69
42. Male Ruddy Duck	69
43. Ruddy Duck's nest and eggs	69
44. Male South African Shelduck on the dam wall	70
45. Male Chiloe Wigeon at Swithland Reservoir	70
46. Male and female Gadwall	70
47. Male Garganey	70
48. Male Kestrel caught for ringing in Quorn	71
49. Osprey in the waterworks grounds in May 1983	71
50. Male Sparrowhawk	71
51. Little Ringed Plover on the dam wall	71
52. Greenshank on the dam wall	71
53. Newly hatched Lapwing chicks	72
54. Snipe caught for ringing	72
55. Snipe's nest and eggs at Ulverscroft	72
56. Woodcock at Buddon Brook meadows	72
57. Woodcock's nest and eggs at Buddon Wood	72
58. Gull roost on the reservoir's northern section	73
59. Adult Little Gull	73
60. Common Tern and Arctic Tern on the overflow	73
61. Turtle Dove	74
62. Turtle Dove's nest and eggs	74
63. Male Great Spotted Woodpecker	75
64. Immature Green Woodpecker	75
65. Male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at nest	75
66. Reed Warbler's nest and eggs in Reed Sweet-grass	76
67. Reed Warbler	76
68. Sedge Warbler	76
69. Male Common Redstart	77
70. A Willow Tit and Marsh Tit	77
71. Male Yellowhammer at Buddon Brook meadows	78
72. Yellowhammer's nest and eggs	78
73. Lesser Whitethroat	78

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Frontispiece photograph by Robin Stevenson. All other photographs by Peter and Ian Gamble.

Foreword

Swithland Reservoir is a part of one of Leicestershire's most beautiful areas, the Charnwood Forest, and it is a great attraction not only to people but also to birds – birds of much variety and interest. Ian Gamble is ideally qualified to write about this lovely site, having grown up in the shadow of Buddon Hill with the reservoir at its feet, and been nurtured in his love of birds by his naturalist father, Peter.

Ian's early interest, awakened by bird books shown to him as an infant, has led him beyond the shore of Swithland Reservoir to each of the world's continents except Antarctica and his experiences, both at home and abroad, are related with infectious enthusiasm.

Under the heading "Charnwood a thousand years of change" Ian reveals a deep understanding of the changes that have fashioned our countryside and its wildlife and which will affect it in future years. The largest section is the systematic account of birds recorded at the reservoir, in which their distribution, local and national status, habits and appearance are well described.

A section showing the movements of some of the ringed birds associated with Swithland Reservoir illustrate another aspect of its importance.

This book is a welcome result of Ian's considerable experience and meticulous research.

Gerald Felstead, July 2001.

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I am indebted to the British Trust for Ornithology and the European Bird Census Council for allowing me to use their figures from their respective publications *The State of the U.K.s Birds 1999* and *The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds*. The rare breeding bird numbers for 1997 were reproduced by kind permission from the monthly journal *British Birds*.

I have received a great deal of help with the compilation of this book and would particularly like to thank the following people: John Ward, Gerald Felstead, Brenda Hudson, Michael Stanley, Rose Warner and Katherin Ward for their time spent proof reading the work and giving their advice on the written text. Gerald also wrote the foreword. Dr Ian Keil who very kindly read through the Heritage chapter and who made some valuable additions to the original text. Finally to Mike Caldwell who gave of his technical expertise in computing and photography.

Ernest Leahy very kindly agreed to do the paintings for the book. One cannot but admire his skill when you look at his work.

In the final months before going to print, the members of Loughborough Naturalists' Club publications committee put in a great deal of time and effort which I much value.

My family have helped me considerably with this book. My father Peter Gamble wrote the Introduction and the chapter on the topography and vegetation of Swithland Reservoir. He also supplied many of the photographs and I received a lot of help and advice from him with regard to the written text. My mother Margaret has supported me and given me encouragement through this venture. Lastly a very special thank you must go to my wife Pamela who has put up with me, supported me and helped me in nearly every aspect of producing this work. Thank you to you all!

Author's Preface

One May morning some twenty years ago I walked from my house in Quorn along the Buddon Brook, around the margins of Swithland Reservoir and returned home the same way. I saw a total of 87 species of bird in my four mile walk which lasted about three hours. There are very few places in Britain that could better that total given the distance travelled and the time spent in the field. In fact some 218 species have been recorded here in the last 60 years and some 92 species have bred at Swithland Reservoir and in the adjacent area including Buddon Wood; another five species have been suspected of breeding. However, after stating that, it does not matter how good any individual site is, even if its bio-diversity is extremely rich, for no area can sustain a large number of bird species on its own. The many and varied bird species that visit the reservoir require a large range of habitats in which to breed and feed during the year and some travel thousands of miles to obtain one of these. A few birds are only transitory visitors to the reservoir, others spend the summer or winter months with us, but very few are completely sedentary. So what happens in other areas of our country or world can directly affect the status of birds at Swithland Reservoir.

For me birdwatching has very seldom been boring. At times it can be predictable. At certain times of the year you will probably have a good idea of the species you will come across on an outing to your local patch. Species like the Swallow or Cuckoo will normally arrive back to the same area within a few days of when they were first recorded the previous year. Occasionally, however, birds can be unpredictable. Some can be found miles outside their normal range or you might spot a bird behaving in an unusual manner. All these things add to the excitement of birdwatching. Some birds are very beautiful, others graceful in their behaviour, while some species have a certain amount of mystery surrounding their life-style. Given all these facets you have a hobby of which you will never tire. In this book I have not only given scientific facts and figures but I have also tried to help the birdwatcher and non-birdwatcher alike understand more about the birds that have visited Swithland Reservoir showing their behaviour, distribution, favoured habitat and how to identify each species.

As we stood on the threshold of a new millennium I also wanted to put into perspective the state of our local bird population and how national and international trends are affecting them. Throughout the 20th century our birdlife has changed dramatically and once common species like the Corncrake and Barn Owl are now absent from large areas of our land. Over the last 28 years of the last century major declines were noted in 37 of our commonest species and some of them might be lost from Swithland Reservoir and even the county or country in the future. Whoever would have imagined that the House Sparrow or Starling could be under threat, but both have had their populations decimated, falling by 58% between 1970 and 1998?

The Americans of the mid-19th century probably thought their commonest bird, the Passenger Pigeon, whose flocks numbered millions of birds could never be lost but because of habitat change and persecution it became extinct in four decades, the last one surviving until 1914. Our natural heritage is important and if birds are not to survive on their own beauty and charm alone then let us turn around our greed which is causing their decline and realise that it is the natural diversity of our planet that ultimately enables mankind to survive.

Introduction

by

Peter Gamble

It has long been intended to produce a Unit Survey Report for Swithland Reservoir (unit survey No. 19) and to make available some 40 years of Loughborough Naturalists' Club fauna and flora notes for this important Site of Special Scientific Interest. However, in total, these records are so comprehensive that to produce them in a single survey report would have necessitated the information appearing in little more than list form for the many separate groups covered, a production which would have had little interest other than for the specialist. Consequently when Ian offered to write a report on the Bird Fauna, the most popular and intensively observed group, it was decided to accept his offer with the intention of following this later with other reports covering the various other groups.

Between its being built in 1896 and the formation of the Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Section of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1941, little appears to have been written down on the birds at this favourite locality and it is intriguing, though sad, to think of what may have bred or visited the reservoir in its early years, especially considering the unspoilt nature of the reservoir and its environs and the many species which were much more common and widespread at this time.

In the early years of the last century a Mr. Frisby of Quorn, the local representative of the British Empire Naturalists' Association, (now the British Naturalists' Association), did frequently visit the site, sometimes accompanied by scholars and the Head of the local school. In an article in the Quorn Parish Magazine dated July 1906, he reports on watching Black Terns on spring and autumn passage, Common and Arctic Terns fishing here and Little Grebe and Great Crested Grebe (8 pairs of the latter). He also mentioned Common Sandpiper and Common Snipe and a variety of duck species, including Wigeon, Pintail, Teal, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Goldeneye, all species frequently observed today. The Canada Goose was plentiful even then and frequently accompanied by goslings.

Many of the records used, especially of the less common species, were gleaned from the bulletins and reports of the Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society, as also were the wildfowl count figures and we wish to record our thanks for the use of these records.

This locality is a favourite place for many bird-watchers; a place of precious memories, though sadly not the peaceful place it once was. Today it is not regarded as one of the best places to see rare birds but few if any other local sites could show the same diversity of breeding species.



Swithland Reservoir: the view from Kinchley Lane

1. SEASONS AND MEMORIES

I was born in Quorn in 1956 and at a very early age I started birdwatching. My father, instead of reading me stories, would sit me on his knee and we would look through a large volume of *British Birds* by Kirkman and Jourdain. Many of the lovely illustrated plates had been painted by the well known bird artists, Seaby and Lodge. Some of the birds in this book held a mythical status for a young boy: Great Grey Shrike, Waxwing, Hoopoe, Roller and Golden Oriole to mention but a few.

My sister Jane and I would alternate with each other on Sundays to go out birdwatching with my father and one of his close friends. When it was my turn I would sit in the back of his bricklayer's van with his little dog Sherry and we would go to one of Charnwood's many and varied habitats. It would often be Swithland Reservoir which at this time was a quiet place and if you ever met a birdwatcher you would be sure to know him or her. Birdwatching in the early 1960s was not the fashionable pastime that it has become today.

In October 1962 on one of my Sunday expeditions I was taken to an area near Groby where I saw my first male Ring Ouzel sitting on a pile of rocks directly in front of me. A little later in the morning I was shown a Woodlark singing. Both of those species were very unusual birds for Leicestershire – my twitching days had started; I had got the bug!

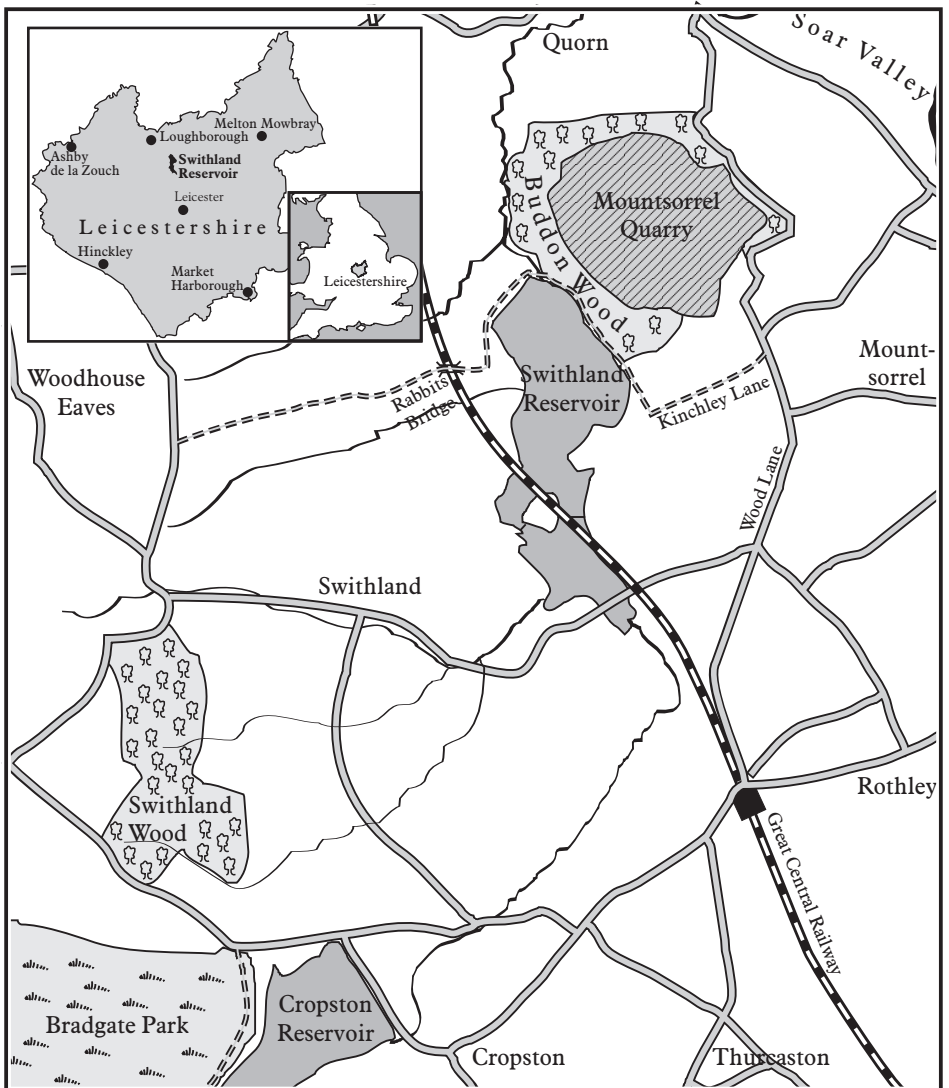
By the age of seven my identification skills were improving and as I walked down the garden from the bird trap I announced to my father that we had caught a Brambling! To his astonishment we had and after ringing the bird we released it. During my early childhood my father held a ringing licence that allowed him to catch wild birds. After the birds were caught they were aged and sexed and then an individual ring was fixed around their legs. The ring held a number similar to that found on a car number plate and the address of the British Natural History Museum. Over the years dedicated bird ringers have collected a huge amount of valuable information about our wild birds.

The downside to birdwatching hit me hard in 1965 when on one of my sister's outings she was shown the first Bearded Reedlings to be seen in the county last century at Wanlip Gravel Pits – my dipping out days had come! In birdwatching parlance that means I missed seeing the bird.

In 1974 I became a trainee bird ringer and my trainer was a close family friend. He gained permission for us to ring at Swithland Reservoir and at some gravel pits in the Wreake Valley. It was exactly ten years since I had missed seeing the Bearded Reedling at Wanlip Gravel Pits that I at last literally got to grips with them. While bird ringing in the Wreake Valley during March 1975 we caught a pair that were subsequently controlled (re-captured) over a year later at Fordwich, Canterbury, Kent. Then in the winter of 1977/ 78 we caught 17 more Bearded Reedlings at the same site and this still remains the largest number ever recorded in Leicestershire.

I spent hours outside, birdwatching and bird ringing during the next fifteen years and learnt much about our local birdlife. Swithland Reservoir was one of my favourite haunts and I soon knew which areas certain species favoured and I got to know the site so intimately that it almost became a part of my life.

Swithland Reservoir is one of Leicestershire's most scenic areas with its mature margins and the backdrop of Buddon Wood. Over the past two decades however the summit of Buddon Hill has been quarried away, leaving the hill truncated and the ancient woodland site but a remnant of its former glory. This is nevertheless still one of the county's most important ornithological areas and a species list of over two hundred confirms this.



a few minutes, flapping and being dragged under the water before having to release it because it was so heavy! That bird stayed throughout May 1967 and towards the end of the month another bird joined it. Hopes grew that the birds might remain to breed but unfortunately they both left a few days later. The last time I saw an Osprey at Swithland Reservoir was in early May 1983. For a few days an individual took up residence in the waterworks grounds and fed on Perch taken from the large cooling pond. It would then spend long periods of time sitting in a Larch digesting its prey.

In a tree above the reeds a female Cuckoo sits watching for some unwary Reed Warbler to leave her nest before she flies quickly down and deposits her slightly larger egg amongst the others, removing one of the Warbler's eggs before flying away, never to return!

The Spotted Flycatcher is also starting to breed by the end of May, finding a nest site either in the ivy or on top of a wall bracket. This rather neat, plain bird will fly from a branch, hover, twist and turn in the air in a constant effort to catch insects, before returning usually to the same perch.

We tend to take our summer migrants for granted but in recent years their numbers have been falling steadily. Some species such as Spotted Flycatcher and Turtle Dove are causing real concern because they have both suffered a 50% population decrease in the last two decades and the local decrease is greater than this. These population collapses could have been brought about by several factors: predation by the now abundant Grey Squirrel, the drought in the Sahel region of Africa, over-hunting on migration (100,000-200,000 Turtle Doves are thought to be shot annually in Malta alone), the changing of habitats in Britain and in their wintering areas in Africa, or a combination of all five. It was in the early 1970s that I found my last Turtle Dove's nest in the reservoir grounds. It was situated five feet up in a small Norwegian Spruce, small, fragile and made of fine twigs and had two small pure white eggs laid on top.

These are a few sights of spring and the migration period but as passage ends, birds settle down to breeding and the site becomes a lot quieter and with the developing foliage and undergrowth birds become harder to see.

Several of our once common resident species have also declined markedly over the last two decades. The local species that have been hit the hardest are:

- Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Song Thrush, Skylark, Marsh Tit, Willow Tit, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Bullfinch, Linnet, Redpoll, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, and Corn Bunting. These declines

could have been brought about by agricultural changes but at present we just don't know for certain!



Spotted Flycatcher and young.

childless in 1883. The Leicestershire estates were not inherited with the title and according to his will they passed on his wife's death in 1905 to his niece.

Changes in farming practice were slow in coming during the 20th century and remained much as they had done since the middle of the 19th century. There had been a slump in grain prices, largely due to cheap grain imports. Planting grain would only become profitable again with the outbreak of war in 1939. Farming was in a depression and old crafts such as hedge laying, which required many hours of manual labour, died out because they were too costly. The result on the countryside was overgrown unkempt hedgerows and large areas of formerly arable land being returned to grassland. Horses were still in widespread use, especially for ploughing, until the outbreak of the Second World War. The First World War saw some areas turned back to arable but because of the lack of resources this was very limited. With the outbreak of the Second World War, however, came the requirement for as much home-grown food as possible. Large areas of previously uncultivated land on Charnwood were put to the plough. Many old pastures with their associated flora and fauna were lost at this time.

The period from 1939 through to the 1950s saw most of Charnwood's remaining upland heath and moorland drained to disappear under the plough. Areas where upland heath and moorland were lost were at High Sharpley, Warren Hills and Timberwood Hill and once they were ploughed a rich upland flora was lost.

Between 1939 and 1945 farming became mechanised. Within a decade of the Second World War finishing most horses had been replaced by machines. The tractor had taken over from the horse and within a few years almost half the farmland in Leicestershire had become arable. The Agriculture Act of 1947 gave stability to the industry and when Britain joined the E.E.C. in 1973 more subsidies were available to the farming community. The E.C. Common Agricultural Policy made cereal growing more profitable than keeping dairy cows and thus produced massive changes. Since the war, mechanisation, transportation, chemicals, energy (electricity, gas and oil) and new technology have hastened the boom in farming. Within a few years of mechanisation during the 1940s the Corncrake had died out as a breeding species in Leicestershire and also from much of Britain. In the 1950s the use of organochlorine pesticides nearly caused the extermination of the Sparrowhawk,



Calling Corncrake.

Plate 9 (top). Overflow channel and granite cliff, April 1981. The cliff is home to pairs of Stock Dove.

Plate 10 (middle). Northern section showing the dam and overflow. June 1987.

Plate 11 (bottom). The eastern shoreline near Buddon Wood, northern section, October 1989. Occasionally, when this stony shoreline is exposed during spring, the Little Ringed Plover will breed here.





Plate 33 (above left). Grey Heron. Though a common resident, these large birds are always a dramatic sight, whether flying with great slow wing-beats, or as here, standing statuesque on the bank. Herons have been breeding at the reservoir most years in recent times.

Plate 34 (above right). Kingfisher: a shy and retiring resident breeder that is often overlooked.

Plate 35 (below). Great Crested Grebe's nest and eggs. Swithland Reservoir, May 1977.



A number of the photographs are of birds in the hand. These birds have been caught for the purpose of ringing by trained and licenced ringers. When caught and handled correctly, the birds are completely safe, and undergo minimal disturbance before being released. Wild birds must not be caught except by suitably trained and licenced bird handlers.

The process of bird ringing involves the placing of an individually marked metal ring around a bird's leg. The rings are made in several sizes to fit different species – the smallest size for a Goldcrest and the largest for a Mute Swan. Bird ringing as we know it today was started by a Danish ornithologist, H.C. Mortensen in 1899. In Britain it began with two schemes in 1909. Only the scheme run by Harry Forbes Witherby continued after the First World War and in 1937 this was handed over to the British Trust for Ornithology who now oversee the ringing scheme across Britain. Each individual ringer has to go through an intensive training programme and hold a current ringing licence. In 1963 the B.T.O. collaborated with other European ringing schemes to form E.U.R.I.N.G. – the European Ringing Committee. This body standardised all the information collected by the different national ringing schemes across Europe. Over the years somewhere in the region of 115 million birds have been ringed in Europe. The information gathered has given us an amazing insight into many aspects of birds' lives. Ringing data has been crucial in the conservation of certain species and their habitats.

Plate 66 (opposite top left). Reed Warbler's nest and eggs in Reed Sweet-grass at Swithland Reservoir, July 1972.

Plate 67 (opposite top right) Reed Warbler – a fairly common breeding bird and passage migrant at the reservoir.

Plate 68 (opposite bottom) Sedge Warbler – uncommon at Swithland Reservoir. A decline in numbers over recent years may have been caused by droughts in West Africa, where the birds spend the winter.

Plate 69 (Right). Male Common Redstart, caught for ringing at Buddon Brook meadows in April 1990.

Plate 70 (below) A Willow Tit (left) and Marsh Tit (right) – both these species have declined by half in the last 30 years.



The Great Northern Diver is a large bird about the size of a goose or Cormorant and it is superficially similar to the Black-throated Diver. In breeding plumage it has a dark head, white breast and black and white vertical striped areas on the neck and throat. Its body is dark with white chequering on the back. Like the smaller Black-throated Diver it has a horizontally-held dagger-like bill. The bill and legs are black and it has webbed feet. In winter plumage it is very similar to the Black-throated Diver but it is a more powerfully built bird and has a pale eye ring and a blackish half-collar. On their breeding grounds the birds are very vocal and keep you awake through the long summer evenings and into the short nights with their evocative mournful yodelling calls.

The Great Northern Diver is a rare winter visitor to Leicestershire. It is a rare straggler to Swithland Reservoir that has been seen on three occasions. Two birds were present on the 9th December 1933; one bird was recorded between 25th and 28th November 1944, and two were seen between the 8th and 22nd January 1956.

GREBES Podicipedidae

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

The Little Grebe or Dabchick breeds across central and southern Europe and Asia eastwards to Japan and south to New Guinea and in Africa south of the Sahara. Only the most northerly and easterly populations are migratory, wintering within its southern breeding distribution.

In Britain it is a common resident and winter visitor. Some movement of resident birds does take place, especially during cold spells when birds will travel to rivers and tidal waters. Migrant birds arrive from the Continent from September to November and return again from March to early May.

The Little Grebe breeds on well-vegetated rivers, ponds and lakes. Its nest is a floating platform of aquatic vegetation that is often placed on the submerged branches of overhanging bushes or hidden in emergent vegetation.

It is a small squat bird with rich chestnut cheeks, small yellow-gaped black bill, dark brown mantle and buff flanks in breeding plumage. It has olive green legs with lobed toes. All grebes have lobed toes. This means they have flaps of skin along each side of the toe instead of having webbed feet. In winter it becomes paler brown around the neck and flanks and often shows a white stern.

The Little Grebe is an uncommon to fairly common resident breeding bird in Leicestershire. It was a common resident on Swithland Reservoir with two or three pairs breeding annually and there could have been more. This is a very secretive species and its numbers are hard to ascertain during the breeding season. The largest number of birds recorded at the reservoir was 30 on the 21st October 1961. In the last few years its numbers have fallen dramatically and it now breeds only intermittently. This decline could be linked to the occurrence of Mink on Swithland Reservoir.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

The Great Crested Grebe breeds across central and southern Europe southward to North Africa and throughout central Asia reaching the Sea of Japan. Scattered populations can also be found in Africa south of the Sahara, Australia and New Zealand. The northern populations are migratory, wintering just to the south of its breeding range. The northern European populations start to move south from September to November and return in March and April. Many birds move to coastal waters during prolonged periods of frost when inland waters are frozen.

British birds tend to be sedentary and pairs can be faithful to one site for long periods. During the 19th century this species was almost exterminated in Britain due to the milliner's trade. The soft thick satin breast plumage of these birds was used to adorn ladies' hats and it was given the name 'grebe fur'. In 1860 the British population was down to just 42 pairs and before the end of the 19th century it had the distinction of being the first bird to obtain statutory protection. A census taken in 1965 showed that the species had made a dramatic recovery and the British population was estimated to be 4,500 pairs. Today Britain holds somewhere in the region of 8,000 pairs. This recovery was probably due to the construction of reservoirs and gravel pits that afforded the birds large areas of breeding habitat.

It breeds on freshwater reed-fringed lakes in Europe, but in Asia it may breed on brackish or salt water. The nest is a large mound of aquatic vegetation placed in shallow water in reeds or on the submerged branches of bushes.

In breeding plumage the Great Crested Grebe is unmistakable with chestnut and black head and neck plumes, a long white-fronted slender neck and dark grey upperparts, long flattened body and brown flanks. In winter the head shows a dark cap, the face and foreneck are white and the rest of the body is dark, grey on the upperparts with brown flanks. The bill is long, slim and pinkish in colour and it has olive green legs.

The first breeding record came for Leicestershire in 1874 when a pair bred at Saddington Reservoir. The Great Crested Grebe is a common passage migrant and winter visitor to Leicestershire and an uncommon breeding bird. It is a common and noticeable resident on Swithland Reservoir. As many as eight pairs breed in some years but when the water is low and no suitable places can be found to make a nest, the birds struggle to raise a brood. In the early part of the year the amazing courtship displays can be observed with birds shaking their heads at each other while holding pond weed in their bills. Birds also swim towards each other, necks stretched out on top of the water, and as they reach each other rise up together breast to breast in synchronised display. The largest number of birds recorded on Swithland was 125 on the 27th July 1969.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*

The Red-necked Grebe breeds across northern and central eastern Europe and into western Siberia nearly reaching the Ob River. It can also be found in Kazakhstan and Turkey. Other populations occur in eastern Asia from central Siberia eastwards to Kamchatka and southward to northern Japan and across northern North America. In winter birds are generally found on salt water. It winters along both coasts of North America and down the coast of eastern Asia southward to China. It can also be found on the Black and Caspian Seas. In Europe it winters mainly on the coast of the North and Baltic Seas and in parts of the Mediterranean. It is a more migratory species than the Great Crested Grebe and the European population moves westward and southward during the autumn.

Winter visitors can be seen in Britain from October to March but passage birds can be recorded as late as June or as early as August and it has attempted to breed in Scotland. In Britain it is found frequently in winter on the east coast, but appears to be scarce on western shores.

It breeds on small freshwater pools and lakes. The nest is a floating mound of aquatic vegetation with a depression on top built in shallow water, generally hidden among emergent growth.

The Red-necked Grebe is only slightly smaller than the Great Crested Grebe. In breeding plumage it has a yellow based black bill, black crown, white throat and cheeks, a thick-set chestnut neck and dark grey-brown mantle and white grey-washed flanks. The legs are dark with green tones. In winter plumage it is similar to the Great Crested Grebe but is more dusky around the head and neck and it retains the yellow base to the bill.

The Red-necked Grebe is a scarce passage migrant and winter visitor to Leicestershire. It is a scarce and irregular winter visitor and passage migrant to Swithland Reservoir. It was first recorded on Swithland Reservoir on the 6th March 1926 and has been noted on 16 occasions since. All the records except one fall in a period from September to April. The other record was of a bird in breeding plumage on the 12th May 1993.

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

The Horned Grebe or Slavonian Grebe breeds across northern Europe and Asia, reaching Kamchatka and Sakhalin in the east and over much of northern North America. It winters on the coast of eastern Asia, the Caspian and Black Seas and the west and east coasts of North America. In Europe it winters on western European coasts and reaches the Mediterranean in eastern Europe. Autumn passage starts in September and continues into November and return migration starts in April and finishes in June.

In Britain it breeds in small numbers in central Scotland. It was first discovered breeding in Invernesshire in 1908 and at present about 56 pairs breed annually in Scotland. It can be found in small numbers on inland waters and sea coasts during the winter months.

It breeds on small freshwater pools and shallow lakes surrounded by emergent vegetation. The nest is a heap of aquatic vegetation with a small depression on top built in shallow water, normally hidden amongst emergent growth.

The Horned Grebe is mid-way between the Little Grebe and Red-necked Grebe in size. In breeding plumage Horned Grebe show a stout straight bill, a black head, red eye, golden 'horns', chestnut neck and flanks and black back. At a distance this species can look almost black in summer dress. The bill and legs

are grey with blue tones. In winter it is a very black and white bird, with a black cap, nape, hindneck and back, a white face, foreneck and breast and dusky flanks.

The Horned Grebe is a scarce winter visitor and passage migrant to Leicestershire. On Swithland Reservoir it is a rare and irregular winter visitor that has been recorded on 14 occasions. All but one of the records were of single birds and all except one fell in a period between September and March. The other bird appeared in April and was probably a passage migrant and two birds were present on the 21st November 1998.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

The Black-necked Grebe or Eared Grebe breeds across central and southern Europe eastwards into Western Siberia and southwards in scattered populations over Asia Minor with a small population occurring in north-east China. It can also be found in central North America and in scattered populations in south and east Africa. It winters on sea coasts and inland on lakes and reservoirs. In winter it can be found over much of the western United States, Asia Minor and on the coast of eastern Asia from northern Japan south to Hong Kong and over central and southern Europe, reaching North Africa.

In Britain it is a winter visitor and passage migrant with small numbers remaining to breed. Passage begins in March and goes on into mid-May and the return movement starts again in July and goes through to September. It breeds regularly in central Scotland but only isolated pairs nest elsewhere in Britain and probably no more than 46 pairs now breed annually. In most of Britain they have proved sporadic breeders, colonising an area in good numbers then, if conditions vary, disappearing. A good example of this was in Ireland between 1929 and 1932 when about 250 pairs bred annually on Lough Funshinagh in Roscommon. This species now no longer nests in Ireland.

It often breeds in colonies and prefers shallow well-vegetated freshwater lakes. The nest is a mound of aquatic vegetation built in shallow water generally in the cover of emergent vegetation.

The Black-necked Grebe is smaller and more slender than the Horned Grebe, with a finer bill. The lower mandible is angled upward giving the bill an up-tilted appearance. The bill and legs are black. In breeding plumage it shows a black head, neck, breast and back with chestnut flanks but its most distinctive feature is the yellow fan of feathers behind its red eye. Like the Horned Grebe these birds look completely black at a distance. In winter plumage it is very similar to the Horned Grebe but it is more dusky around the cheeks and neck.

It is a rare winter visitor and uncommon passage migrant and summer visitor to Leicestershire. It is an uncommon and irregular visitor to Swithland Reservoir that has been seen in every month except June. A pair were seen displaying on the 31st May 1980. Birds were present in May, July and August in 1983 and some display was also noted. It remains an exciting prospect that some day this species might breed on Swithland Reservoir. The largest number recorded in spring were four birds in breeding plumage on the 15th April 1944. The highest autumn counts came in 1997 when seven birds were present on the 21st September with six remaining at the reservoir throughout October rising to eight on the 18th October 1997. This is the largest number ever recorded at Swithland.

SHEARWATERS and PETRELS *Procellariiformes*

STORM-PETRELS *Hydrobatidae*

Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*

The Leach's Storm-petrel breeds on oceanic islands in the north Atlantic and Pacific and winters in the subtropical waters of the southern oceans.

It nests in burrows and crevices on rocky coasts. In Britain it breeds on the Outer Hebrides and Shetland.

The Leach's Storm-petrel is a small fork-tailed bird that has blackish-brown plumage with a grey wing stripe and a white rump divided by a dark line. It has a black bill and legs. Birds migrating south in the autumn occasionally get caught up in strong westerly gales. Many hundreds of birds can be blown off course and swept inland and such movements are given the name 'wrecks'.

The last major 'wreck' to affect this species in Britain happened in the autumn of 1978 and one bird ended up at Swithland Reservoir. It was seen on the 2nd of October.

Common Teal: Yearly Counts

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March
1960-61	0	N/C	50	20	0	65	7
1961-62	0	5	35	0	120	40	60
1962-63	N/C	2	0	0	100	20	10
1963-64	5	0	0	0	0	10	0
1964-65	16	6	30	0	40	105	44
1965-66	0	10	8	55	11	0	0
1966-67	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	18	43	18
1967-68	0	12	22	19	2	0	4
1968-69	8	N/C	14	N/C	2	87	0
1969-70	0	14	28	12	5	24	4
Average	3.6	7	20.8	13.2	29.8	39.4	14.7
1970-71	33	20	25	8	22	12	16
1971-72	N/C	12	6	42	26	10	25
1972-73	15	15	42	46	9	6	N/C
1973-74	6	N/C	0	14	25	6	2
1974-75	18	N/C	24	12	32	8	0
1975-76	17	63	92	75	69	60	49
1976-77	35	265	150	325	725	170	6
1977-78	50	101	38	156	47	19	14
1978-79	19	48	23	97	115	16	8
1979-80	70	16	8	12	20	2	0
Average	29.2	67.5	40.8	78.7	109	30.9	13.3
1980-81	5	4	37	4	55	138	2
1981-82	32	104	111	82	54	29	8
1982-83	53	76	97	12	170	24	2
1983-84	0	7	19	12	19	57	7
1984-85	36	84	37	25	16	62	8
1985-86	11	10	16	41	178	60	36
1986-87	19	86	44	19	195	70	6
1987-88	29	31	41	111	75	20	29
1988-89	27	40	24	47	71	22	21
1989-90	23	101	98	49	39	17	0
Average	23.5	54.3	52.4	40.2	87.2	49.9	11.9
1990-91	197	179	84	173	285	38	16
1991-92	89	81	140	31	128	74	29
1992-93	32	35	29	32	42	0	19
1993-94	51	14	0	12	6	0	6
1994-95	92	45	55	47	6	32	0
1995-96	98	27	121	170	94	165	26
1996-97	81	N/C	168	83	0	226	40
1997-98	81	44	22	10	7	4	0
1998-99	79	52	7	N/C	6	4	0
1999-2000	92	32	2	0	45	3	2
Average	89.2	56.5	62.8	62	61.9	54.6	13.8

