

Discovering a new coastal hotspot

The next section has a certain 'read and weep' quality. There is something magical about discovering a new 'hotspot' for birds. I have been fortunate to follow in the footsteps of a few pioneers who have discovered new hotspots for migrant and rare birds and have even dabbled in the process of figuring out my own along the coast. In the armpit of Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, I currently visit a little hamlet called Speeton. No big rarities yet but many hours of vivid imagining! However Speeton is a long drive from my house and not a local patch. Jimmy Steel is an irrepressible guy with a local patch to die for and he was in on discovering it. The list of rarities that has come out of birding Newbiggin in recent years has been mouth-watering by any standard. Why was the potential of Newbiggin not recognised earlier? Are there any more Newbiggins out there to be found? Will I ever have a local patch like that? Should I give up birding now?! *Martin Garner*

Discovering Newbiggin

Jimmy Steel

It was not for me who discovered Newbiggin-by-the-Sea as a birding venue. A bloke called John Hancock got there first. He discovered many things that I never will including Bewick's Swan, which he recognised as a species new to science. Unfortunately he did not discover Bewick's Swan at Newbiggin. That would have been a first for science and a great patchtick and therefore a memorable double. He did however find Dotterel, Long-tailed Skua (a county first) and a Little Stint at Newbiggin (but unfortunately they had already been described to science!). We have recorded all of them since, several times, but he found them without decent optics; indeed, possibly without optics. I am sure Hancock experimented with Newbiggin in the late 19th century for the same reasons as I did in the late 20th. Being one of the most prominent headlands on the Northumberland coast it should have great potential for seabirds and migrants. Having added Yellow-browed Warbler to the British List by shooting one just down the coast at Whitley Bay, Hancock doubtless saw the potential of the headland clearly visible to the north. Hancock was an outstanding collector and ornithologist and one of the great naturalists of his time. As you would expect from such a scientist, he documented and published his findings, but nobody really noticed that, within those records, Newbiggin-by-the-sea featured on a number of occasions. Over the next century, Newbiggin suffered significant environmental degradation from heavy industry and all that goes with it, and so, for most of the period, it disappeared off the ornithological map.

But, as they say, adversity drives innovation. In my case the adversity was a new city, a new house, a new baby and a new job. I was never one to drive from Dundee to Devon for a Baird's Sandpiper, so being twenty percent nearer to Devon wasn't seen as an advantage for my birding pursuits. That stuff was all just too time-consuming. I used to wander the Angus or Fife coast trying to find birds, and had been reasonably successful, even if I say so myself. Now, though, I was in north-east England, time was short, opportunities were few and they appeared at unusual times. I started to suffer from withdrawal symptoms and needed to do some proper birding, but I needed to do it close and did not know where to start. What I needed was a patch.

Finding a patch

I can't be doing with hides and ponds. Whilst I flirted with the notion of some of the reserves in the fine spring of 1989, it didn't last. When I found myself getting up at 5am just to get the first Blackcap of the day before anyone else, I realised I needed more. I dotted around the coast in an increasingly aimless way. I even visited Newbiggin-by-the-Sea during a westerly breeze in April; saw nothing, but noted "potential". By the early autumn I was a desperate and confused soul. Early September brought the first north-easterly of the autumn and I did the unthinkable: I actually crossed the Tyne to seawatch. I was so naïve. The natives at Whitburn were very friendly but seemed to regard me with a sort of benevolent bemusement. You see, unless there is a rarity, you just don't cross the Tyne for birds. Why would you when there is such untapped potential on your own side of the river (whichever side that is)? I got the message, and redoubled my efforts by going back to the north again and focusing there.

I had another crack at Newbiggin one Sunday morning in the early October. I confess the decision was not completely spontaneous as some local birders had reported good seawatching earlier in the autumn (when I was misguidedly south of the river). There had also been a few other interesting birds during recent years, though nothing you would turn off the main road for. But, that day, the moon, the stars and the planets all aligned with the weather and within half an hour a whole new vista had begun to open up. It was a breathy shout that did it. I was enjoying a promising seawatch when suddenly I heard "Little Bunting". I hadn't found the Little Bunting, but I had possibly found my patch. The Little Bunting had been dug out by another birder who I think was (amazingly) seeking the same sort of revelation as myself on the same early October morning. He also turned into a Newbiggin regular.

Since that first Little Bunting nearly 18 years ago I have birded this site regularly, making nearly 1500 visits and seeing 238 species of bird. In that very first October, despite the bunting, I was still not totally convinced it would deliver. That was until I experienced the site on a proper wet easterly blow. Suddenly there were birds, lots of birds, real migrants. Bramblings wheezed overhead as hordes of Goldcrests flicked through. I kicked Woodcock and Water Rail out of the big ditch and, soon afterwards, located a brown *Phylloscopus* that went “tac” and eventually turned into a Dusky Warbler. I was well and truly hooked. By the end of the year I had added Hume’s Warbler, Little Auk and a few other odds and ends. Species number 100 (a Swallow) followed by the end of April and the spring even produced a few goodies too. The autumn was better again and by the end of my second October, Rustic Bunting, Olive-backed Pipit and many others had been added and the list of species exceeded 150. By now there were a few of us birding Newbiggin. In February 1996 I hit 200 species with Slavonian Grebe (a little delayed). It has been predictably slower since then, but every new bird that gets added now is a good one.

The anatomy of a coastal hotspot

Newbiggin in the late 20th century was (and still is) an odd place. A three-way hybrid- part fishing village, part seaside resort and part mining community- it is probably unique. There is no conventional birding habitat, or wasn’t until some mining subsidence produced a couple of ponds a decade ago (Green-winged Teal, Hooded Merganser, Franklin’s and Bonaparte’s Gulls). Until the ponds were created, the birding was done along a golden sand beach (delicately dusted with coal), on the fringes of a golf course (also delicately dusted with coal) or around the houses in the village (with coal dust). Or on “the mound”, a wooded patch on the old pit head, which is delicately dusted with a variety of former household appliances. Lobster and heroin are both available, if you know the right people, though I suspect the latter may be easier to procure and is more widely used. Above all, the sense of simmering lawlessness gives everything an edge that you either love or hate, or both. Let’s face it, when there are no birds (which is about 90% of the time on a patch, on any patch, including Fair Isle) a police helicopter chasing a hoodie-clad youth on a trail bike is fantastic entertainment. It flushes the plover flock but so what? You don’t get that on the Out skerries AND we’ve had both rare Goldies.

I included a sketch map. Admittedly this looks a bit like something from Treasure Island, but you’ll get the gist. I wanted to write “here lies danger” somewhere to make it more authentic, but then I realised that everywhere lies danger and the place is full of pirates. What makes it good for birds though? And is it any better than any other coastal headland?

The attraction for birds lies in it being a coastal headland of course, but I am not sure it is as simple as that. I am also not sure that it really is any better than many other similar sites. For one thing, you learn a patch. As every year goes by I would contest that the obsessive patch person becomes finely tuned to the subtleties of wind, light, shelter, date and a whole lot of indefinable things which, after years of persistence, help to put you in the right place at the right time. It seems like luck, but isn't, not completely. The quality of the birds that I and the few other stoic supporters found over the first decade or so of watching gradually improved, and have culminated in Fea's Petrel (1996 and 1998), Black-faced Bunting (1999), Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (2001) and even a 1st –winter Hooded Merganser (2002). To establish whether a likely spot measures up cannot be judged on the basis of a couple of visits, it requires real persistence and faith during times of bird famine.

There are some subtle aspects of geography that might be important though. I raise these really because there are probably a few more undiscovered Newbiggins around the coasts of the British Isles and these subtle factors might help to find them.

Any bit of land that sticks out from a relatively flat stretch of coast is advantageous for watching seabirds, but at Newbiggin the very tip of the headland (Church Point) sticks out quite suddenly at the north end of a wide sweeping bay. Furthermore the headland is low, only a couple of metres above sea level, which, although causing a problem for spotting small petrels in a high tide and big sea, has its advantages. As every serious east-coast seawatcher knows, most good seabirds fly north, and this is equally true at Newbiggin. Birds follow the wide sweep of the bay or cut across the outer bay, but because of the low altitude of the point itself they sometimes find themselves almost over the rocks before they know it, particularly in high seas or poor visibility. Skuas and Little Auks sometimes come over the grass of the point itself whilst almost all of our Great Shearwaters have flapped through the "Eider zone" just beyond the tidal rocks. Newbiggin is really not significantly better than any other suitable sites to the north or south, but I think we get better views of the best birds.

There are also some important aspects of geography when it comes to little migrants. When I first started birding at Newbiggin, I spent a lot of time on "the mound". There were fewer household appliances then and probably a bit less surrounding cover. A large area of dense cover is not good. It attracts birds but they become difficult to find. Conversely: one bush works on an island but not on the mainland where migrants don't hang around without cover and melt away. The mound was great, being small enough to be workable but with enough cover and food to hold birds. It effectively acted like an island and I have seen many a migrant from high drop almost vertically into the trees, including a Golden Oriole on one memorable May morning.

The final element in my analysis of the effect of geography is a diversity of habitats of a large enough scale including, for example, a rough field big enough for a rare lark and a bit of water big enough for a duck to hang around. Mind you, you can (and I do) spend far too much time wandering over empty rough fields or scanning empty water, but at least there is the chance of variety.

Discovery ... of all kinds

So I did not discover Newbiggin as a birding site. But perhaps I helped to rediscover Newbiggin. I am quite proud of my role in that, but there were and are others, including at least one resident, who deserve equal credit. I think we also discovered the potential, perhaps almost the full potential, for a site like Newbiggin.

I discovered some things that are also fairly personal. I discovered that I could genuinely like a place that most regard as 'uniquely different!', and that my patch, to me, is almost as much about the people who live there and an entire culture as it is about the birds. The average Newbiggin dog walker has a better knowledge of birds than most dog walkers in the land (and better than a few birders come to that). I have discovered that, if the place you spend your time in can be more than a list, then life becomes interesting. I discovered that good birding is more than just good birds. I punched the air when I saw my first Newbiggin Pheasant some three years after I started birding there. I would still be excited about Nuthatch because I have only seen one and that was on a seawatch. I discovered that you can still push boundaries even in pretty mundane places. I have seen birds at Newbiggin that I would never have thought possible when I started. I think that patch birding, despite the hours of relative boredom without even a helicopter chase for entertainment, stopped me from getting bored with birding.

The world is full of birding places, some loitering in unexpected places. Maybe to discover them you need to bird outside the comfort zone.