

Brownside Braes Lesser Whitethroat Outing

It did not bode well, weather-wise, for our Lesser Whitethroat walk on Sunday 30th April 2023. Low cloud enveloped the hills and a fine drizzle persisted all morning. Nevertheless, 21 people arrived to hear Tom Byars tell us about the history of his Whitethroat project and to guide our walk through this beautiful terrain. This was the annual joint meeting of the Paisley and Glasgow Natural History Societies, and we had good representation from both groups. We also had the benefit of the company of two of the rangers from Gleniffer Braes Country Park, as the Whitethroat territory is within the park, and the rangers have been working in close cooperation with the Paisley Natural History Society in protecting and developing the site.



Tom Byars showing the group the ideal Lesser Whitethroat habitat

Tom gave us a brief resume of the project before we started out up the hill to look at the habitat. He reported how a pair of Lesser Whitethroat had first appeared in the area in 1983, and this was only the third sighting of the Lesser Whitethroat in Renfrewshire. He realised that this area, at the foot of the Gleniffer Braes to the south of Paisley, was an ideal habitat for the bird. Hawthorn with an undercover of gorse and bramble provided the necessary thick, impenetrable scrub for nesting. Tom realised that the initial site could be extended over the full range of the hill within the country park, encouraging returns and more birds. He has devoted many years to preserving the site and monitoring the activity of this summer migrant species. Its increased presence in the west of Scotland, and decline in southern England, is a sign of climate change. In recognition of this work, the Paisley Natural History Society has adopted the Lesser Whitethroat as its logo.

The walk was in two stages; firstly, we walked northwest along the side of the braes, looking at the existing mature cover of the hillside, Tom explaining that the good drainage of the hill helped maintain the thick cover of hawthorn, gorse and bramble. In spite of the ideal habitat, there have been no nesting pairs of the Lesser Whitethroat here, however, for

several years, only individual birds. There was plenty of other bird song around us though, with Tom's attuned ear picking up every species as we passed along. See full list below.



Tom Byars using a Lesser Whitethroat recording on his mobile phone

We then retraced our steps back to the car park, and set off in the opposite south-easterly direction to examine the barer stretch of hillside that has been planted in recent years with young hawthorn, gorse and bramble, to create a more extensive habitat for the Lesser Whitethroat and other song birds. Both the local Natural History Society and community groups under the guidance of the park rangers have been busy planting for several years. It was satisfying to see that the hawthorn trees are now semi-mature, and the gorse taking root. Bramble seems to be the most difficult to establish. It will be many years, however, before the site is dense enough to attract nesting pairs. Tom demonstrated how he uses a bird recording on his mobile phone as a lure to any possible Lesser Whitethroat in the vicinity. No bird responded!



Looking at the planted hillside with misty views of Dykebar and Brownside in the distance

So no sighting of the little bird that has had so much care lavished to create a perfect habitat here in Renfrewshire, but we had a great story, heard and saw many bird species and enjoyed a lovely May Weekend walk – in spite of the wet.

Anne Gray

Species seen

3 Greylag Goose
2 Pheasant heard
Wood Pigeon 30+
1 Great Spotted Woodpecker
pr Meadow Pipit
5 Wren
5 Dunnock
3 Robin
4 Blackbird
2 Song Thrush
2 Blackcap
3 Chiffchaff
15 Willow Warbler
1 Goldcrest
pr Long-tailed Tit
1 Coal Tit
4 Blue Tit
5 Great Tit
1 Treecreeper
10 Magpie
20+ Jackdaw
15+ Carrion Crow
10+ Starling
6 Chaffinch
1 Greenfinch
4 Goldfinch