GVCG visit to Watatunga Wildlife Reserve 27.4.26



21 volounteers visited Watatunga on Monday 27.4.26. Our guide was Charlie who, through short wave radio gave an excellent commentary to the passengers on the trailer and the Chairman who was being chauffer driven by Henry in the following buggie!

We entered the reserve and passed a sitting oyster catcher which was incubating 3 eggs on a small mound of aggregate and watched a Chinese water deer galloped away. In a large expanse of grassland were 2 Asian water buffalo, “Rocket” and “Slice”. They are two of a collection of 40 on the site. These individuals are 20-25 years old, and their weight is estimated as 1 ton. They are an important conservation tool as they turn over soil and will eat anything including bracken and bramble. They have very thick skin which lacks sweat glands and to keep cool they wallow and use the lake. This is beneficial for the site as it turns over the water and reduces the algal bloom. Close by was “William” a brindled or blue wildebeest which came from a zoo which was closing. Charlie informed us that this individual has a malformed asymmetric horn and as a result females will not mate with him.

There were numerous brown hares which the site encouraged. There were no rabbits as their burrows have the potential for injuring hooved animals.

Under the shade of trees and in amongst Rhododendron we passed a pen which housed 2 Great Bustards known as Tiger birds because of the markings on their chests. There are 8 on the site. This species was endemic to Britain but became extinct in 1832. These are individuals from the reintroduction project in Salisbury plain where individuals have been reintroduced from Russia and Spain. The great bustards at Watatunga have not started laying and this is thought to be that they have not achieved optimum weight. The females need to reach 9 Kgs to reach the egg laying weight,

and they are being rested and fed a high protein diet to see if this can be achieved. This species can reach weights of 21 kgs. Whilst these individuals have their wings clipped, if they do prove to be fertile, the resulting offspring will be sent to the Salisbury plan project where 100 individuals have been released. Close by was a stunning silver pheasant from Mongolia. Under the trees sitting was a magnificent antelope, a cape eland which is 10 foot tall and also weighs a ton. It has an orange crown of fur which is deliberately bleached by this male by rubbing his head in his urine.

Through the trees and into some more grassland we saw a group of small Antelope called blackbuck also known as the Indian Antelope. They are one of the fastest Antelope in the plant reaching speeds of 80 kph as their predators were cheetah before they became extinct in India. Close by was a group of beautiful Javan Peafowl and a male Philippine Spotted Deer, there are an estimated less than 500 individuals left on the planet it is the rarest antelope.

The site has the largest collection of captive Eurasian cranes which are native species. The birds in the collection have their wings trimmed. However chicks which are bred on the site are free to fly. Helmeted guinea fowl which are referred to as 'Disco Chickens'. The collective noun is a confusion. They are an important pest regulator as they feed on ticks on the grass leaves and reduce the tick numbers which affect the Deer. Bar headed geese are the highest-flying gees and able to fly from breeding sites in Mongolia, northern China and the Tibetan Plateau to wintering areas in India, crossing the Himalayan mountains. Sitatungas are the most aquatic antelope. It has a tiptoeing style of gait which it employs to find its way through swampy habitat. By the side of the lake were orange coloured antelope called Kafue Flats Lechwe they have distinctive long back legs. In addition there were some Père David's deer or Chinese swamp deer. Amongst them there was a newly born fawn which Charlie was very excited about as he had not seen it before. The deer of this species are precocial meaning they are able to walk within 30 minutes to an hour after birth. These deer were hunted in China almost to extinction. According to our guide, the Duke of Bedford obtained 12-15 individuals from various European zoos and brought them to Woburn Abbey. They have bred and individuals from this project have been returned to China and the population of this species have increased to 2000. Two of the males had impressive antlers. Antlers are shed every year, but the Père David's deer shed their Antlers twice per year. By the lake by itself was a fine looking Blesbok known as "Dexter" which was obtained from a zoo in Belfast. The name comes from the fine white blaze on its face and forehead. They were almost wiped out by trophy hunting. They are speedy migratory Antelope.

Before the end of the tour we were also shown 2 white European storks and a red crowned crane and a hut which house sand martin nests. Last year 57 sand martin chicks were ringed for the BTO.

This was a fascinating tour and highly recommended. John Hayes thanked Charlie afterwards and we look forward to providing some conservation work for Watatunga in November 2026.

Summary by Keith Redhead 28.4.26