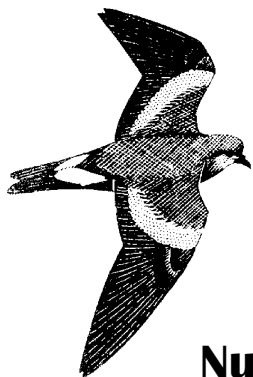


Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society

Reg. Charity No. 702484 www.cawos.org



BIRD NEWS

Number 124 November 2023



Pink-footed Geese

Neston Reedbed Improvement Project

County Rarity: Black Guillemot

Willow Tit Recovery Project

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

Chairman : Vacant

Vice-Chairman : Tony Parker

41 The Park, Penketh, Warrington, WA5 2SG Tel: 01925 726986

Email address : tonyparker@cawos.org

Secretary : David Hiley

23 Greenfield Road, Waverton, Chester, CH3 7NE Tel: 07484 836652

Email address : secretary@cawos.org

Treasurer : John Patterson

10 Mere Hall, Mere, Cheshire WA16 0WY Tel: 01565 830677

Email address : treasurer@cawos.org

Recorder : Jane Turner

Quaintways, Marine Road, Hoylake, Wirral, CH47 2AS Tel: 0151 632 3308

Email address : countyrec@cawos.org

Membership Secretary : Carolyn Bailey

24 Brickhurst Way, Woolston, Warrington, WA1 4LG Tel: 01925 852432

Email address : memsec@cawos.org

Newsletter Editor : Sheila Blamire

Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, WA16 6QG Tel: 01565 830168

Email address : sheilablamire@cawos.org

Bird News welcomes articles, letters and comments relevant to birdwatching in Cheshire and Wirral. Please either email or post your contributions to the Editor at the address shown above.

The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Society, the Council of the Society, or the Editor. Appearance of advertisements in this publication does not infer any recommendation or approval by the Society for the products and services being promoted.

Front cover: Cattle Egret by Ray Scally

Other illustrations by Phil Jones and Ray Scally

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 17th February 2024

Guest Editorial

I am writing this on the 42nd anniversary of Wildlife and Countryside Act gaining Royal Assent. The Act brought together a number of separate pieces of legislation and is the cornerstone of the UK's environmental legislation. At a time where our Government seems to be backtracking on climate and environmental protections, it's brilliant to see some good news stories in this edition of *Bird News*. The Species Survival Fund and Species Recovery Capital Grant Scheme were announced by Natural England earlier this year in order to protect, restore and create habitats for endangered species listed in the 1981 Act. For example, David Bowman reports on a successful application to protect Willow Tits at Woolston, while Tony Parker brings us news of a successful application to protect ground-nesting birds, notably Skylarks and Lapwing. We need more of this sort of initiative to protect our avifauna.

We have been less fortunate with my local conservation 'battle' over Hoylake beach, a newly-formed habitat which is currently supporting three qualifying species for the Species Recovery Scheme, one of which is so rare it's also listed in the Bern convention. We had hoped that there would be an application put in to build protective boardwalks to connect the immense intertidal sandy beach with the promenade and limit footfall on the Atlantic Salt Meadow. Unfortunately, Wirral Borough Council didn't apply when the opportunity was there, but I am hopeful that there will be more options for funding to protect endangered species in the future.

The idea of separating people from precious habitats is explored in Dan Trotman's article on the project to improve Neston Reed bed after the catastrophic fire in 2022. Ditches will both reduce human disturbance in the main body of the reed bed and act as a fire break should the worst happen again. Habitat can be quick to recover from abuse, and despite the destruction of the fire there is good reason to believe that the end result will be an enhanced habitat for wildlife.

Richard Smith's article on the changing fortunes of Pink-footed Geese in Cheshire takes us from their near extirpation in the 1940s, at least partially due to overshooting, to the current record numbers now wintering on the Dee. The Wildfowling licence on the Wirral part of the Dee is up for renewal this year. One of the benefits of being involved in local politics is that when this happens there is a realistic opportunity to make representations on behalf of wildlife during the debate. I am confident we can influence the decision here on Wirral in favour of the birds and I hope that Cheshire West and Chester Council will be able to complete the job. There can be no justification for shooting endangered wild birds as sport.

That's the easy bit of this editorial. Much harder for me to write about is the resignation letter of CAWOS Chairman, Phil Hampson. Phil has been Chair for two years and has been dealing serious personal issues throughout that time. Obviously massive thanks are due to Phil, but I think most pertinently, his message about the need for people to step up and take responsibility for securing the future of CAWOS and the *Bird Report* deserve serious consideration and action from members. Maybe it's my 'time of life' but it's a decision I made a couple of years ago, to start to do more to support local ecology projects, and do all that I can to oppose threats to biodiversity. With that in mind I've just taken the leap to stand in the next general election from the Green party. I dearly hope that someone reading this will take a similar decision to step into Phil's shoes.

Jane Turner

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 17th February 2024

please be prompt

We cannot guarantee that material received after this date will be published in that issue. If you are aware that your material may be delayed, please let the Editor know as soon as possible.

CAWOS News

There has been just one Council meeting since the last edition of Bird News.

We continue to explore ways to increase our membership and improve member engagement. One avenue being explored is to reintroduce some face-to-face meetings and we hope to be able to arrange such a meeting early in the New Year.

From a financial perspective our Treasurer, John Patterson, confirmed that subscription income is as forecast, and that expenditure is in line with budget.

The majority of the work behind the scenes has been focused on distributing data and other information to the compilers for the production of the *2022 Bird Report*. As I type this note the target deadline for the compilers to submit their completed sections is fast approaching and we are aiming to be able to distribute the report before the year end.

The first Members' meeting of the new season was held on October 6th via Zoom, where we were treated to a very interesting talk by David White of the BTO. The subject was the trends, national and local, identified by the various BTO surveys with particular focus on the Breeding Bird Survey. It was disappointing that only 19 members attended. We hope that attendance improves as the new season progresses.

David Hiley, Secretary

MEMBERSHIP

Welcome to new members Stephen Bushell and Andy Harmer - thanks for joining CAWOS.

Membership is currently standing at 298, a similar total to the same time last year.

Your membership is very important to us so please do continue to support CAWOS into the New Year - membership fees for 2024 will be unchanged.

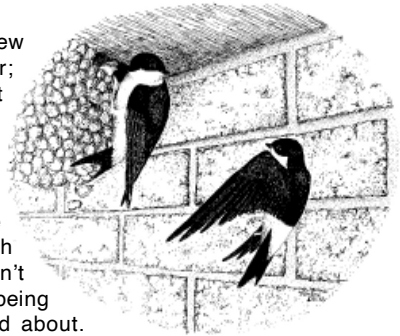
Carolyn Bailey, Membership Secretary

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

We are well into autumn now and rapidly approaching a New Year. 2023 has been a strange year again for weather; spring and summer slipped by without much to make it memorable. I have spent time reflecting on how things have changed birdwise both over lifetime and where I live. Like many members when I was young the spring brought the returning migrants. Swallows were so common and flying around catching their food. House Martin's the same. It was common to see houses with nests under the eaves of houses, so common we just didn't count or take note. Now, depressingly, it is a case of being lucky enough to see either species nesting around and about.

Those of us still living in rural areas may well be lucky enough to still see these two species frequently. Then we have the Swift, where I live over the last 20 years, they have gone from 20-30 birds seen in the few short weeks they arrive to breed. This year the most I saw were four. Nowadays we can put up nests 'boxes' for these species, do please consider it if you can.

Who remembers Hedge Sparrows, of course Dunnocks, this is just about the most regular bird in and around my feeders. The various tit species are returning now, I wonder where they were for the last 5 months. Finches are few and far between, the Greenfinches are no longer calling so am relying on seeing them. Goldfinches are still ever present, indeed probably increasing, their cousin the Chaffinch has gone for me and I haven't seen one for several years. Locally, hopefully, we will have a roost of Little Egrets over the winter. Little Egrets I remember twitching one in the Outer Hebrides when I was there to do some work, the bird was more important. I have now seen one from my lounge window and they have become a bird we see on most of our birding trips.



Last week I was in New Brighton and had time for a quick look at the pontoons in the Marine Lake and there were good numbers of waders at high tide. I couldn't see if the Purple Sandpipers were present as had no binoculars (not a birding trip). I also read a report over the autumn of the Leach's Petrel passage and one being chased and ultimately taken by a gull!

So the purpose of my rambling? Well, as a Society each year we produce a *Bird Report* that summarises the detail of each species seen our area over the year and is a showpiece for some of the talented photographers in the area. To produce the reports we are totally dependent on people submitting bird records. If you don't send in your records please consider doing so, full details can be found on our website. Please ensure that your records have a meaningful location, ideally aligned to our *gazetteer*. People still use locations like 'my garden' or 'outside the backdoor', 'Gran's Garden'. I know some may be funny but they are genuinely ones that have been used. Many of us, me included, just note a species as being present, but please consider counting the birds and entering a total.

The people who have the responsibility for the administration of the Society, the Council, have not been sat back relaxing over the last few months. We are aware that since COVID we've been using Zoom for our meetings. This is the same across many other groups, clubs and societies. But we have been looking for a location to meet face-to-face, which I am sure many of us would like to do. Our old meeting place has become too expensive for us, plus a few members had previously commented that it wasn't ideal with little parking, and that it was difficult for those who had mobility issues, and also it had poor car park lighting. Watch this space as we think we have found somewhere that offers a better option, has car parking and is an all-round better option. Plus, it is more economically viable for us.

Phil Hampson, Chairman

*****IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT FROM PHIL HAMPSON*****

After some years in position I have now decided to stand down as Chairman of CAWOS with immediate effect. The last two years have been very hard personally for me with health issues. Now having got over one there is another and I am no longer willing to be concerned with CAWOS as Chairman whilst having my own problems to address. I would like to say that I leave CAWOS in a stronger place, but I can't do that in any way or form. The society has a membership of almost 300 and the support given to the core of people doing the work required for the Society to continue day to day is extremely poor.

When COVID struck back on 2020 we immediately, in line with almost all other similar organisations, started to use Zoom for our talks. This was very successful and we had people attending who would never have driven across the county for a face-to-face meeting. As COVID eased and regulations relaxed we did look into restarting some meetings, not all as that would exclude those from further afield. The cost of doing this in the immediate post-COVID period was prohibitive, that combined with the fact that complaints had been made about the 'old' meeting place led us to believe Zoom was still the better option. Now, the Council has been looking at reinstating actual meetings for part of the programme in a new location. But if these meetings are not well supported then there is little future in continuing with them when such a low number of members attend.

The talks programme doesn't just appear each year there is an amount of work involved to identify, follow up and book people and ensure it is within budget. Yes, in the majority of cases we have to pay and in the case of face-to-face meetings it can be a considerable amount of money. To see talks so poorly supported by members is not just reward for the work done by Council members and is absolutely dreadful for the speakers. At the last meeting a staff member from the BTO willingly gave his own time with no cost to speak to us, 19 people attended!

The main output from the Society is the Annual *Bird Report*. Of course, this just appears on the doormat each year. No it doesn't! The amount of work involved in producing a *Bird Report* is enormous and very time consuming, again for a small team of people. It starts with the data, i.e. the bird records. Easy? Again no, it isn't certainly in the area of locations. Do people ever think of how meaningless a location of 'Back Garden' or from 'from the back door' is for a meaningful document? The list is long and each of these occurrences has to be corrected. As do the variations of genuine location names used. Before their retirement Sheila and Geoff Blamire did

an enormous amount of work in producing and maintaining the *gazetteer* of locations. Ideally, any records from members should align to this document, sadly in many instances they don't. When all the data work is complete, which is some weeks work; it is a case of collating all the various feeds and reports to be sent to the compilers. This group of people then spend weeks, yes weeks, analysing the bird data/reports/files/WeBS and translating it into the meaningful wording for the report.

So why have I written this? Well, I am stepping down as Chairman, but I will carry on doing the bird data going forward each year and the annual Bird Report as co-editor. But we do not have enough compilers to evenly split the amount of work. Yes, it works at the moment, but if one compiler decided to say no next time there would be a serious issue to replace them. More than one would mean that the production of reports in the future would be seriously impacted, if in fact it could continue. If you'd like to be involved then please just email the Secretary.

Anyway, that's enough. If you can help in the areas I have outlined then please contact the CAWOS Secretary. You may feel this is just more of the same moaning, but that's fine. It is fact that if more people do not step up to help then the future for CAWOS is very bleak. Not only bleak, could be terminal, if in a very short time the key people decide they have had enough, like me. The members are CAWOS and those members should help in keeping CAWOS going.

Phil Hampson 27 October 2023

THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU!!!

I am sure that many of you, like me, will have a range of emotions and reactions on hearing of Phil Hampson's resignation as Chairman of CAWOS – sadness, understanding and gratitude for his passion and dedication to the society. He has been a member for many years, became Vice Chairman in 2015 and, eventually, Chairman in 2021. As Phil said in his first Chairman's Report at the AGM 2022: "None of us expected that 2021 would impact our lives in a similar manner to 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic - how wrong we were". Although Phil states that he can't claim to 'leave CAWOS in a stronger place', there is no doubt that he steered the society through the challenges and obstacles that COVID presented.

As Phil describes in his resignation letter, we cannot deny that the restrictions imposed by COVID have damaged CAWOS. This has been felt particularly in the suspending of face-to-face meetings. This is illustrated by the fact that I have known Phil for some five years now and regard him as a friend, as well as a CAWOS Council colleague, however, we have only met on three occasions!

In addition to guiding the society through these last few difficult years in his role as Chairman, Phil has done an immense amount of work, unseen by many, in working with our data for 'data requests' and, of course, for the preparation and production of the *Bird Report*. In addition to all of that he also fulfilled the role of Membership Secretary for a number of years. I am delighted, and relieved, that Phil has agreed to continue with the data role and the role of co-editor. That said, editing the *Bird Report* is a significant amount of work so, if anyone would like to help, either with the editing role, or as a compiler, please do contact me at davidhiley@cawos.org.

Phil's letter touches on the issues currently facing CAWOS, namely membership, involvement, and attendance at meetings. We do have plans and ideas for improving member engagement with the society and these will be discussed at our next Council meeting which, unfortunately, is not until November 29th. However, again, if anyone has any suggestions on how to make CAWOS more relevant and attractive to them, please get in touch.

So, finally, I would just like to say "thank you Phil" for all you have done for CAWOS and the help you have given me. I speak for everyone when I wish you well in getting through your health issues and I will hope that your involvement with CAWOS may increase again in the future.

David Hiley 27 October 2023

SITUATIONS VACANT

“The Society Needs YOU!”

NON-EXECUTIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

For further information, please contact:

David Hiley secretary@cawos.org 07484 836652

County Round-Up

Some of the records may be unauthenticated and therefore will require review by the Society's Rarities Panel or the BBRC. This report covers the period from May to August 2023.

SITE REPORTS

Chester area

A Garganey was at Mickle Trafford on Jun 23rd, 18 Common Sandpipers on the River Dee on Jul 8th, Night Heron at Chester Meadows on Jul 13th, Red Kite over Chester Zoo on May 26th with others at Farndon on 29th and Mickle Trafford on Jun 27th, two Hobbies at Shocklach, May 14th and Pied Flycatcher at Puddington, May 28th.

Congleton area

A single Common Scoter was at Astbury Mere, Aug 7th, three Red Kites over Congleton Park, Jun 10th.

Crewe and Nantwich area

Two Egyptian Geese were at Doddington on Jul 11th, three Garganeys at Elton Hall Flash, May 19th, Scaup at Elton Hall Flash, Aug 23rd and 30th and Common Scoter at Watch Lane Flash, Aug 2nd. Singing Quail was noted at Bradwall on Jun 29th-30th and again, Jul 5th. Three Black-necked Grebes were at Doddington on Aug 29th. Two Avocets were at Elton Hall Flash on May 17th-18th. A good count of 10 Common Terns were at Doddington on Aug 19th and six Black Terns there on Aug 18th. A Cattle Egret was at Maw Green Tip on May 1st and Night Heron at Pump House Flash, May 30th and Sandbach, Jun 15th. Ospreys were at Elton Hall Flash, Jul 13th, Doddington, Jul 15th, Marsh



Red Kite
by Phil Jones

Harrier at Pump House Flash, Aug 18th whilst two Hobbies at Doddington, May 19th and Lea Forge, Aug 31st. Two Redstarts were at Bickerton, May 1st.

Ellesmere Port and Neston area

Two Garganeys were at Decca Pools, Jun 7th and Garganey at BMW, Jun 14th and Jul 26th. Two singing Quails were at Neston, May 22nd-23rd and Parkgate, Jul 13th, Spotted Crake noted at BMW on Jul 31st and Aug 8th. Waders of note included: Black-winged Stilt at BMW, May 5th and Jun 6th-7th, 288 Avocets on the Jun WeBS Mersey Estuary count, six Bar-tailed Godwits at BMW, May 21st, 400 Knot, Jun 16th, 25+ Ruffs, Aug 20th, four Curlew Sandpipers, Aug 4th, Long-billed Dowitcher, May 2nd, Wood Sandpipers on various dates, 17 Greenshanks, Aug 31st. Little Gull was at BMW, Jun 20th with two Arctic Terns, May 12th.

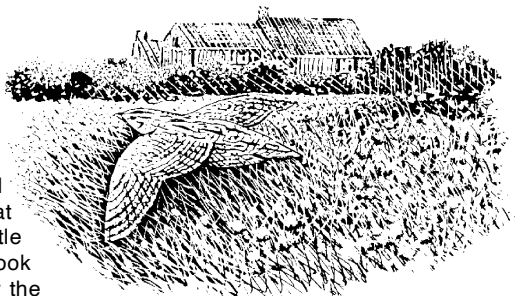
10 Spoonbills were at Parkgate, Aug 25th, Bittern at BMW, May 8th, two Cattle Egrets there on Aug 20th and 24th, Night Heron on Jul 4th and 20 Great White Egrets on Aug 27th. Ospreys were at BMW, May 5th and 13th and Neston, 20th, six Marsh Harriers at BMW, Jul 4th, Red Kite at Burton Marsh on various dates, a White-tailed Eagle at Stanlow, Jul 6th and Ince Marsh, Jul 12th-24th, Merlin at Burton Marsh, Aug 11th and 13th and two Hobbies at BMW on May 2nd. A Hooded Crow was at BMW, May 1st, Redstart, Aug 10th-11th, 33+ Wheatear at Burton Marsh, May 1st and four Crossbills at BMW, Aug 29th.

Halton area

Garganey was at Hale, Jun 23rd. Quail was at Hale, Jul 16th. Two Grey Plovers were at Pickering's Pasture, Jun 8th, Whimbrel, May 5th, Curlew Sandpiper at Hale, May 11th, 20th and Aug 25th with five Little Stints, Aug 25th, Temminck's Stint from May 16th-22nd and Pectoral Sandpiper from May 14th-17th, elsewhere a Wood Sandpiper visited Carr Lane Pools, May 16th-17th. Caspian Gulls were at Hale, May 5th and on the Mersey at Widnes, Jun 11th and Aug 17th with Baltic Gull, Jun 11th and Jun 22nd. Two Spoonbills were at Hale, May 15th and Widnes, Jul 7th and Cattle Egret at Carr Lane Pool, Jun 20th. Osprey was at Pickering's Pasture, Jul 8th and Red Kite at Hatton, Jul 9th.

Macclesfield area

Six Egyptian Geese were at Mere Farm SQ, Jul 8th and four Garganeys at Acre Nook SQ, Jul 19th. Quail was at Macclesfield, May 19th. Two Black-necked Grebes were at Lapwing Hall Pool, Aug 15th, Avocet at Acre Nook SQ, Aug 28th and Ruff, Aug 20th. Three Common Terns were at Acre Nook SQ, Jun 27th and three Black Terns, May 31st. White Stork was at Arclid SQ, Jun 20th, Bittern, Jul 27th and Cattle Egret, Aug 11th. Marsh Harrier was at Acre Nook SQ, May 27th whilst two Red Kites were over the Cat & Fiddle, May 27th. Three Redstarts were at Wildboardclough, May 7th and at least five Crossbills at Tegg's Nose, Jul 18th.



Quail by Phil Jones

Vale Royal area

Two Garganeys were at Ashton's and Neumann's Flash on various dates during late Jul-early Aug and 24 Common Scoters at Marbury CP, Aug 15th. Quail was at Lostock Green, Jun 25th. Black-necked Grebe was at Marbury CP, Aug 2nd, nine Avocets at Neumann's Flash, May 19th, 10 Little Ringed Plovers at Ashton's Flash, Jul 7th, four Whimbrels at Ashton's Flash, May 9th and 75 Black-tailed Godwits near Aston, May 11th. Five Knots were at Neumann's Flash, May 9th, with two Sanderlings, May 31st. White-rumped Sandpiper was at Frodsham Marsh, Jul 3rd, Wood Sandpiper at Ashton's Flash, Aug 2nd and single Spotted Redshank at Frodsham Marsh, Jul 4th. Sandwich Tern was at Marbury CP, Jul 25th, two Little Terns at Frodsham Marsh, May 21st, five Common Terns at Marbury CP on several dates with nine Black Terns, Aug 18th.

Two Cattle Egrets were at Frodsham Marsh, May 8th. Osprey was at Rudheath, May 5th and Marbury CP, Jul 15th, Marsh Harrier was at Ashton's and Neumann's Flashes on several dates, three Red Kites over Lostock Green, Jun 2nd and White-tailed Eagle at Frodsham Marsh, Jun 21st-22nd and again Jul 12th. Short-eared Owl was at Newchurch Common, Jul 16th, Wryneck at

Frodsham Marsh, May 13th and two Hobbies Winnington, Jun 18th. A late Fieldfare was at Whitley Reed, Jun 18th, two Spotted Flycatchers at Little Budworth, Jun 1st; Whitley Reed, Jun 17th; Marbury CP, Aug 3rd and Newchurch Common, Aug 24th, single Pied Flycatcher in Delamere Forest, May 4th-5th and four Crossbills at Marbury CP, Jul 22nd.

Warrington area

16 Garganeys were at Woolston Eyes, Jul 11th. Quail was at Culcheth, Jun 3rd and Silver Lane Pools, Jul 8th. At least 38 Black-necked Grebes were at Woolston Eyes, Jun 28th, two Avocets, May 26th and Jun 8th, two Whimbrels, May 2nd and single Bar-tailed Godwit, May 30th, Little Stint at Woolston Eyes, Jun 4th, two Wood Sandpipers May 4th and 6th, and Spotted Redshank, Jul 9th. Three Common Terns were at Woolston Eyes, May 2nd and 13th, two Black Terns, Aug 19th-20th and a sick Guillemot was found on Morley Common, Jul 6th. Osprey was at Silver Lane Pools, Jun 2nd, Red Kites were over Appleton, May 3rd; Woolston Eyes, Jun 10th and Moore, Jun 15th, three Hobbies at Risley Moss May 13th-14th and two Hobbies Woolston Eyes, May 25th. Two Wood Warblers were at Woolston Eyes, May 6th, a white-spotted Bluethroat was ringed at Woolston Eyes, Jul 15th.

Wirral area

Six Eiders were at Hilbre, May 12th with 100 Common Scoters, Jun 25th. Quail was at Red Rocks, Jun 10th. Single Black-necked Grebe was at Hoylake, Aug 19th. Waders included: Avocet at Meols, Aug 28th, 184 Whimbrels at Heswall, May 2nd with 1200 Curlews, Jul 10th and a record count of 6350 Black-tailed Godwits at Caldy, Aug 20th, three Curlew Sandpipers at Hoylake, Aug 21st and single Purple Sandpiper at Hilbre, Jun 8th, two Little Stints at Hoylake, Aug 19th and 21st, Wood Sandpiper at Hilbre, May 8th and Spotted Redshank at Leasowe, Jul 29th. Eight Kittiwakes were at Hilbre, Aug 27th, Little Gull at Leasowe, Aug 19th and Birkenhead, 29th and 17 Mediterranean Gulls were at Thurston, Jul 19th. 550 Sandwich Terns were at West Kirby, Aug 28th, 100+ Little Terns at Hilbre, Aug 8th, c6 Arctic Terns at New Brighton, Jul 2nd, nine Black Terns at Hilbre, Aug 19th, Great Skua off Hilbre, May 12th with six Arctic Skuas, Jul 30th and Aug 27th and Long-tailed Skua at Hoylake in late Aug.

Four Guillemots were at New Brighton, Jul 2nd, a single Black Guillemot at Hilbre on various dates Jun-Jul and two Puffins at Hilbre, May 7th. Leach's Petrel was at Hilbre, Aug 27th and 30th, Storm Petrel off Hoylake, Jul 30th with 10+ Manx Shearwaters at Hilbre the same day, 65 Gannets at Hilbre, Aug 27th whilst Shag was at New Brighton, Aug 14th and West Kirby, 18th 237 Little Egrets were at Heswall on Aug 25th Single Ospreys were at Heswall, Jul 28th, Leasowe, May 5th and 14th, Meols, May 20th, Moreton Jul 24th and New Brighton, Aug 11th, Red Kite over Heswall, May 17th and 27th, and Jul 20th and West Kirby, Jun 7th, and White-tailed Eagle over Caldy, Jun 22nd. A Wryneck visited a Spital garden, Aug 23rd, two Hobbies at Heswall, May 17th and Jun 18th, Hooded Crow at Leasowe, May 24th, Wood Warbler at Hilbre, May 8th, Ring Ouzel at Leasowe, May 5th, two Spotted Flycatchers at Leasowe, May 20th, 29th and Hoylake, Aug 13th and Black Redstart, Leasowe, May 7th. One or two Citrine Wagtails were at Hoylake, Aug 23rd and 10 Crossbills at Bidston Hill, Jul 5th.



Leach's Petrel
by Phil Jones

Tony Parker, 41 The Park, Penketh, Warrington, Cheshire, WA5 2SG
Tel: 01925 726986 Email: tonyparker@cawos.org

Note: If YOU see anything of interest in your local paper, on the Internet, or even in the national press, relevant to Cheshire and Wirral, please bring it to the Editor's attention. Either scan in the article and email it, or cut it out and put it in the post. Please make sure the source and date are clear. Editor's contact details are on the inside front cover of *Bird News*.


Species Spotlight

PINK-FOOTED GEESE

I got up shortly after first light on September 13th, by the time I got downstairs it must have been around 7.30am and I was somewhat surprised to see six texts and eight WhatsApp messages, all of which had come in over the past 30 minutes. It was the first major influx of Pink-footed Geese of the autumn, and the number of texts and messages nicely demonstrates how much people love to see them!

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the numbers that morning;

the total moving was probably in the region of 2,000 - 3,000, but lovely to see. These days we are used to seeing large flocks of Pink-footed Geese flying overhead and feeding on the marshes and adjacent fields from September to April, but that certainly wasn't always the case. So I thought it would be of interest to review the status of Pink-footed Geese on the Dee Estuary including the recent remarkable increase (and the even more recent and remarkable increase on the Mersey Estuary!) and put it in a national context.



Pink-footed Geese
by Ray Scally

Pink-footed Geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) in the United Kingdom

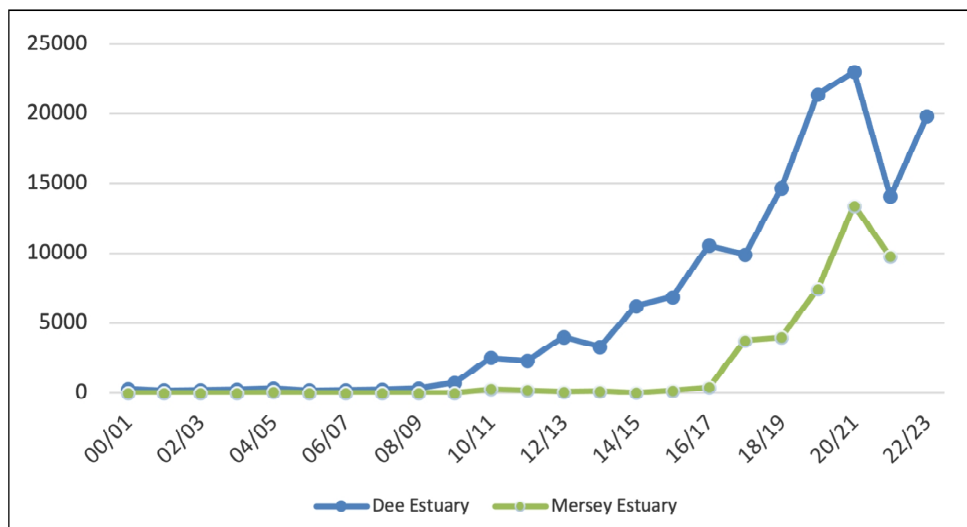
Regular counting of Pink-footed Geese started in the 1960s, in 1965/66 there was just under 70,000 in the country. After breeding in Iceland and east Greenland the counts showed that they first flew to Scotland, arriving in September and October. Many stayed the winter there, but the Ribble estuary and south Lancashire potato fields had also long been important for them and by the early 1970s counts of at least 10,000 were typical there, peaking in mid-winter. 1975 saw the establishment of Martin Mere (Wildfowl Trust) in south Lancs which gave them a safe roost site and a large area to feed in free from shooting (the Wildfowl Trust had bought the shooting rights in the surrounding fields). Helped by safe roosting sites like Martin Mere numbers slowly increased nationally so by 1983/84 the count went above 100,000 for the first time. However, change was afoot when the geese discovered the delights of sugar beet in the coastal fields of North Norfolk. None were recorded here in the winter of 1981/82 yet by 1989/90 there were 15,600 (numbers continued to increase here with a phenomenal 122,000 counted in 2003). No doubt helped by their new diet of sugar beet the period between 1984 and 1990 saw a big rise nationally and they more than doubled to 200,000, a slower rate of increase then followed but by 2008 they reached over 300,000 for the first time.

With total numbers now around 300,000 many goose experts thought that counts would plateau out at that high level, but everyone was surprised when in 2015 there was an incredible 530,000 counted - more than double the 2011 total. It was during this period that we saw the start of a near exponential increase of Pink-footed Geese on the Dee Estuary, which nicely brings us to the next section.

Pink-footed Geese on the Dee Estuary

Pink-footed Geese were present in the Dee estuary before World War II but were driven away by the industrialisation at the head of the head of the estuary and by over-shooting. Despite the huge rises in numbers nationally the geese stayed away for over 70 years, with only the odd small flock seen (apart from 1979 when there was a significant cold weather movement which peaked at 1,500 in February that year). But the long absence has made their return all the more exciting and below I detail some of the highlights.

Pink-footed Geese on the Dee and Mersey Estuaries 2000 to 2023



Looking back at the WeBS (Wetland Bird Survey) data there were signs that the geese were returning at the beginning of the century with an average maximum winter count of 194 from 2000 to 2009, compared with the previous 20 years when the average count was just 27. These were birds counted on the ground, but we sometimes saw much larger flocks passing overhead. Pink-footed Geese leave North Norfolk in January and it was these birds we sometimes saw flying up the estuary then heading for south Lancs. Probably the largest number of Pink-footed Geese ever recorded on the Dee Estuary up to that point was seen in 2007, and I quote from the February 2007 *Dee Estuary Newsletter*:

A spell of still sunny weather from January 22nd to 24th (2007) was an opportunity for Pink-footed Geese to move across the country from Norfolk to South Lancs. Many passed overhead through the Dee Estuary with 850 on the 22nd, 350 on 23rd and a remarkable 4,500 - 5,000 on 24th. The first flocks appeared around 11am each day, just enough time for the birds to have left the Wash at first light and traveling at 30 - 40mph over a distance of about 120 miles.

But it was during the two cold winters of 2010 when Pink-footed Geese started to over-winter in significant numbers, this was from the *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report 2010*:

Numbers probably not seen since the early 20th century overwintered during both winter periods on the Dee marshes. The two highest counts in the early winter period were 700 at Parkgate Marsh on Jan 2nd and 670 at Burton Marsh on Jan 31st. Large numbers were also recorded at IMF [Inner Marsh Farm], either on the reserve or flying over between Burton Marsh and Shotwick Fields, Flintshire, with 600 on Feb 19th and 750 on both Mar 1st and 3rd. In the late winter period numbers had already reached 600 by Nov 18th at Parkgate Marsh, followed by 700 on Dec 7th and 750 on Dec 19th. Numbers peaked on Dec 23rd and 24th with counts of 1000.

Later on in that winter (2010/11) those counts were soon bettered during the spring tides in February when 2,000 were flushed by the sea from Parkgate Marsh - I well remember looking in amazement at that huge number of birds, and the noise they made. The following winter was similar and in February 2012 they took to feeding on the marsh close to Parkgate Promenade giving wonderful views.

Numbers continued to increase with notable flocks including 4,500 off Gayton in November 2013, and in March 2017 7,000 were seen in the air together at Neston. Hundreds also started feeding in inland fields all along the west coast of Wirral, around Shotwick Fields, Burton, Parkgate, around Irby and Pensby, Thurstaston and between Greasby and Hoylake. All this meant that skeins were constantly in the air over much of west Wirral as the geese moved between the coast and inland fields.

By the winter of 2017/18 several hundred took to roosting overnight on the edge of Heswall Marsh, at first light they moved inland flying over Thurston beach in several skeins. They still do this and it's a wonderful sight - on December 24th 2022 4,855 were counted coming over, fantastic! Other notable counts in recent years were at least 10,000 at Burton Mere Wetlands during a big spring tide in March 2020, and 12,500 were seen flying into roost on the edge of the marsh at Neston and Parkgate on October 25th 2021.

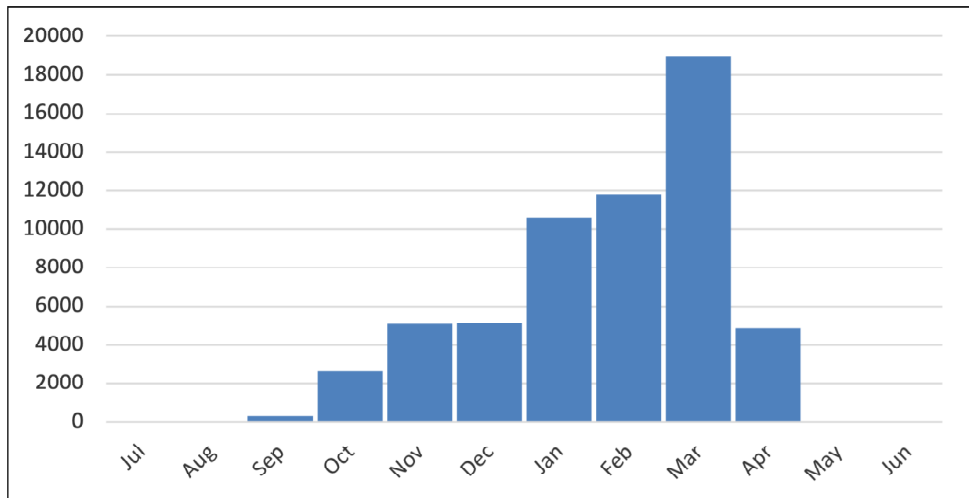
Over the past few winters Pink-footed Geese have also started feeding on coastal fields the Welsh side of the estuary, anywhere between Connah's Quay and Point of Ayr. More unexpected was the sight of hundreds in fields around Whitford, two or three miles inland from Mostyn Docks, on September 21st 2023.

Arriving and Departing

The first ones back from Iceland are usually recorded during the first two weeks of September, and it's quite likely that some may well make it here without stopping, a journey of around 950 miles. The first flock in 2021 arrived very early, on September 1st, but it's usually a week or two later - this year, 2023, the first small skein was spotted on 7th. By mid-September we can start getting quite large numbers arriving, although the flocks tend to be scattered so difficult to count, and by early October thousands will be here; for example 5,000 were counted from Denhall Quay on October 8th 2020.

You would have thought January was too early for the geese to be thinking of heading back north, but that is what the Pink-footed Geese in North Norfolk do with just a few stragglers left by early February. I've already described a big movement of Norfolk birds flying through the estuary in January 2007, but since the big rise in numbers here it's difficult to tell local from cross-country movements. However, recently we've seen three big flocks heading north in late January and early February and these are likely to be birds moving from Norfolk - 4,220 which roosted on Heswall shore overnight then flew north on February 3rd 2021, 5,000 flew north over Thurston and West Kirby at first light on January 28th 2022 and 6,330 north over Heswall shore on 22nd January 2023.

Pink-footed Geese on the Dee Estuary
Average monthly distribution 2000 to 2023



In contrast to Norfolk the Pink-footed Geese on the Dee Estuary actually increase in numbers in January and February, and peak in March, as the bar chart shows. My guess is that the surge in numbers in January is driven by geese which have left Norfolk, some of which then stay on the Dee Estuary for the rest of the winter. As winter progresses, the geese spend more time grazing

the saltmarsh off Parkgate and in late winter, with the cessation in shooting, they move onto Burton Marsh. On 16th February 2021 a remarkable 18,000 were grazing on the saltmarshes at Burton and Parkgate/Gayton.

April is when the Pink-footed Geese leave us, and it is often spectacular. Each year is different but the normal pattern is for large skeins to head out of the estuary at first light anytime between late March until the third week of April. 8,000 flying past Hilbre during the first two hours of daylight on April 17th this year (2023) was exceptional, and a wonderful sight. Some years their exodus is prolonged over several weeks such as in 2021 when the first flock heading north was on March 30th and the last on April 28th, and the total counted leaving over that period was 16,173. Often we don't see them as they fly out at night and on April 13th 2021 a large flock was heard flying over Hoylake around midnight, taking seven minutes to pass over.

One exodus that sticks in my memory was on April 9th 2016 during a big spring tide, having been flushed from the marsh by the inrushing sea the geese decided it was time to leave, and I quote from my *Newsletter* for that month:

The most interesting event as far as I was concerned was seeing the over-wintering flock of Pink-footed Geese, probably around 4,000 strong at that time, leaving the Dee marshes on the 9th at the start of their migration back to Iceland. They left in many flocks, some several hundred strong, from dawn to high tide, i.e. from 7.30am to 1pm. Many passed over my house in Caldy and were seen from Hilbre and all along North Wirral. I was at Heswall when a total of at least a thousand took off from the marshes as the tide came in and headed north. It was certainly a mass exodus, just awesome.

Pink-footed Geese on the Mersey Estuary

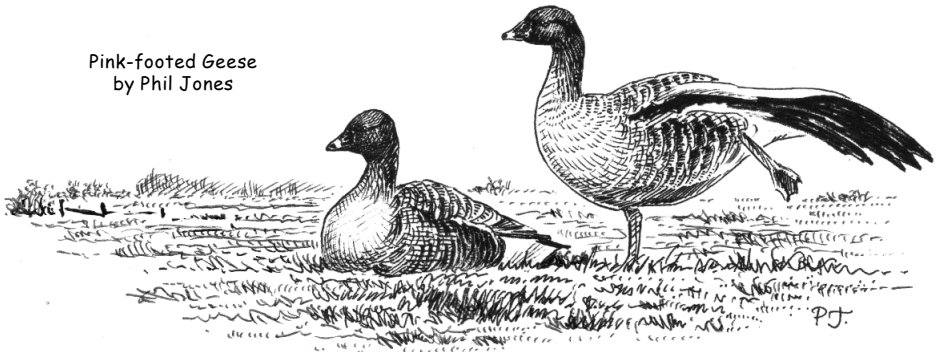
The recent rise in numbers of Pink-footed Geese on the Mersey has been just as dramatic as on the Dee, although the increase started several years later, in 2017/18 (see graph above). So far the peak count is 13,400 in January 2021, and it's interesting that the peak count is in January rather than March, as it is on the Dee, so it seems highly likely that it's the same birds which are moving around the area - as Pink-footed Geese do, of course.

Hardy (Ref 5), writing just at the start of WWII, says "small flights still visit the Mersey marshes, Ince and Stanlow" but, again like the Dee, they were then largely absent for many years and a look at the WeBS counts from 1965 reveals mainly counts of zeros right up until the 1990s, an exception being a nice count of 850 at Ince during hard weather in January 1982 which also produced plenty of other records across Cheshire that month.

Further up the Mersey Valley at Woolston Eyes they saw exceptional numbers of Pink-footed Geese in 2022 and I quote from their *Annual Report* (Ref 6):

"October brought further, but unexceptional, movements, until the final week when numbers rose to levels never seen before at Woolston. On 25th October 1,200 flew east over No.4 bed, followed by 2,000 in the same direction the next day and 3,600 also flying east in many skeins on the early morning of the 27th. The movement was reported to be over by 09.00 hours. This was just the beginning of the huge numbers reported in the following two weeks. Up to 4,000 flew east

Pink-footed Geese
by Phil Jones



at 08.20 on 30th October, but at least 10,000 flew west over Latchford Locks in 20 minutes in the late afternoon of 31st October, presumably going to roost on the Mersey. These massive skeins continued to be reported daily in the first two weeks of November, with birds flying east in the early mornings and west in the evenings. The last breath-taking numbers were 8,000 at dawn on 10th November, 10,000 east on 12th November and a minimum of 10,000 flying west on 13th November. The observer of that count considered that as many as 12,000 birds could have been involved. By then these large noisy skeins had attracted the attention of the general public, while workers from a factory adjacent to Woolston waited to see the geese pass over each evening, and the local Warrington Guardian newspaper published many positive comments of people who had watched this great wildlife spectacle.”

A Final Note

For further reading I would recommend Colin Well's (retired RSPB Dee Estuary Manager) Pink-footed Geese account in *The Birds of Wales* (Ref 7). Colin quite rightly points out that the spectacular growth in numbers on the Dee Estuary during the second decade of the 21st century has been greatly aided by the creation of the large sanctuary area by the RSPB.

References

1. Richard Smith, Geese on the Dee Estuary - Part 1, *Dee Estuary Birding January 2012 Newsletter*.
2. Austin, G.E., Calbrade, N.A., Birtles, G.A., Peck, K., Shaw, J.M. Wotton, S.R., Balmer, D.E. and Frost, T.M. 2023. *Waterbirds in the UK 2021/22: The Wetland Bird Survey and Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC/NatureScot.
3. Neil Friswell and Colin Wells, *Dee Estuary and North Wirral Foreshore Annual Report, 2022/2023* (and various previous reports).
4. *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports* 1964 to 2021.
5. Eric Hardy, *The Birds of the Liverpool Area*, T.Buncle & CO, Ltd, 1941.
6. David Bowman, Woolston Eyes Conservation Group, *Annual Report 2022*.
7. Rhion Pritchard et al., *The Birds of Wales*, Liverpool University Press, 2021.
8. Latest Sightings and Newsletter archives - <http://www.deeestuary.co.uk/>.
9. Nick Acheson, *The Meaning of Geese*, Chelsea Green, 2023.

**Richard Smith (article first published on the Dee Estuary Birding Website
<http://www.deeestuary.co.uk>)**

Note: the copy date for the next issue is 17th February 2024

We cannot guarantee that material received after this date will be published in that issue. If you are aware that your material may be delayed, please let the Editor know as soon as possible.

**If you know anyone who might want to advertise
in future Bird News please let me know and
I'll contact them with all the information.**

Sheila Blamire at sheilablamire@cawos.org Tel: 01565 830168

Projects and Surveys

WILLOW TIT RECOVERY PROJECT RECEIVES NATURAL ENGLAND FUNDING

A share of Natural England's £14.5 million funding for threatened species will go towards boosting the Willow Tit population at Woolston Eyes in Cheshire.

The project aims to return the site's population of the rapidly declining tit to previous high levels. Woolston Eyes has traditionally been a stronghold for this species, with 40 years' worth of monitoring data. Until recently, the reserve regularly supported a population of 25 to 30 breeding pairs - but recent ringing data shows an apparent decline to around 17 to 20 pairs.

The project is being led by Woolston Eyes Conservation Group (WECG), a voluntary organisation that manages the site, which is owned by Peel Ports. It is one of 63 projects across the country that has been awarded a share of £14.5million by Natural England to help recover 150 species nationwide.

The funding was welcomed by Amanda Wright, Nature Recovery Manager for Cheshire at Natural England, who said: "Woolston Eyes is an amazing site for wildlife, providing a hotspot for so many species across a unique man-made site which is owned by Peel Ports and supported by the RSPB. Woolston Eyes Conservation Group have created a mosaic of habitats across the site, and with this funding will, they will be able to support further wildlife benefits, especially for the endangered Willow Tit."

Willow Tit is the fastest declining resident bird species in the UK, with a grim 94% reduction in numbers since 1970.

MORE INFORMATION FROM WECG:

We've been fortunate at Woolston Eyes to see our application for nearly £100,000, from the national Species Recovery Programme, being successful. The fund, which is administered by Natural England, has been created to try and halt the decline in some of the nation's most important species. For us, it's our critically important Willow Tits. The money will be used to employ a contractor to coppice 54 hectares of woodland and scrub across the Reserve, turning back the succession to mature woodland. Willow Tits need young, low scrub with diverse ground cover and a supply of rotting stumps, in which they excavate their nests, in order to thrive.

Research is another aspect of the programme, with successful bidders being required to contribute to our knowledge of species recovery nationally. So, we'll be trialling different approaches to coppicing and monitoring their outcomes, in terms of breeding Willow Tit pairs. Yesterday [2nd October] I met with colleagues from the RSPB, ecologist Andy Harmer and contractor Steve Fletcher to plan the required work, which we hope to start this month.

David Bowman, Woolston Eyes Conservation Group, 3rd October

BTO WINTER GULL ROOST SURVEY

The British Trust for Ornithology is relaunching the Winter Gull Roost Survey after a gap of 20 years. We are looking for volunteers that enjoy counting gulls at roost and that are interested in collecting wintering gull data. This information will aid us in vital monitoring efforts to assess population changes and provide data for the designated of protected wintering sites.

The survey will involve visits to key gull roosts and random samples across inland and coastal sites in January. Supplementary count data at key roost sites in autumn is also encouraged to monitor seasonal differences in gull numbers.

For more information, including a Vacant Site Map where you can find available sites in your area, and to sign up for the survey please visit www.bto.org/wings. If you have any questions don't hesitate to contact wings@bto.org.

Emma Caulfield (WinGS Network Organiser)

County Rarities

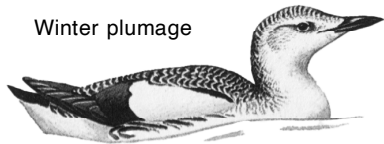
BLACK GUILLEMOT *CEPPHUS GRYLLE*

Black Guillemot is a bird I always associate with close views in harbours or close into cliff bases in Shetland, West Scotland or West Wales. Not much bigger than Puffin, and jet black aside from a big white oval in each wing, white underwing, and luminous red legs and feet. Totally unmistakable and one of the most charismatic birds on the planet. Who doesn't love a Tystie!

Until very recently, just about all the Wirral records were birds in flight seen on sea watches. They almost always catch me out for a second or two out of context. In winter plumage Black Guillemot is a pale water bird with darker upper wings and the same big white ovals, with rapid wing beats. It's easy to start to think that it might be a small grebe until you work out that the white patches are too big and in the wrong place, but on a smallish distant bird



Winter plumage



with whirring wings it can take a bit of time to work out where things are! In fact I did this in reverse this year. I'd been seeing the long-staying bird that spent most of summer loafing off Hilbre, but ranging as far up as Leasowe on quite a regular basis. I thought ah it's in winter plumage, until I realised that this time I really was watching a small grebe!

The nooks and crannies in the boulders around Hilbre look just about ideal for Black Guillemot to breed, so just perhaps one year soon more than one will take up residence.

Jane Turner

BLACK GUILLEMOT: CHESHIRE AND WIRRAL STATUS

Coward and Oldham include this mainly sedentary species in their *Birds of Cheshire* (1900) on what might be considered somewhat dodgy grounds. Having stated that the species "is almost unknown upon the Wirral coast" the only evidence for its occurrence they quote is "Dr Dobie informs us that Captain Congreave possesses a water-colour sketch of an immature bird, marked 'Burton, 1837'".

At the time of writing the only 'breeding station' Coward and Oldham were aware of was on the Isle of Man and they were not surprised by its Cheshire and Wirral status. Holloway in *The Historical Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland 1875-1900* (1996) shows the Isle of Man as the only breeding site in the whole of the Irish Sea.

By 1968-72, the period covered by *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (Sharrock 1976), Black Guillemots were breeding at sites on the English (albeit just one!), Scottish, Irish and Welsh coasts of the Irish Sea, including on Anglesey which remains the nearest breeding site to Wirral waters today. Presumably as a consequence of this expansion, aided by the popularity of Hilbre as an Observatory and birding site, the first modern day records were made off 'The Cheshire Island' on 25th November 1961 and on seven dates from 3rd Nov to 30th Dec 1962.

As the graph of annual distribution shows, Black Guillemot remains an irregular visitor to our waters with sightings in just 25 of the 62 years from 1961 to 2022. The monthly distribution graph shows that most records are in Aug/Sep and Nov/Dec. Weather conditions are rarely mentioned in Reports in relation to the sightings, so may not be particularly relevant to a bird appearing in our area.

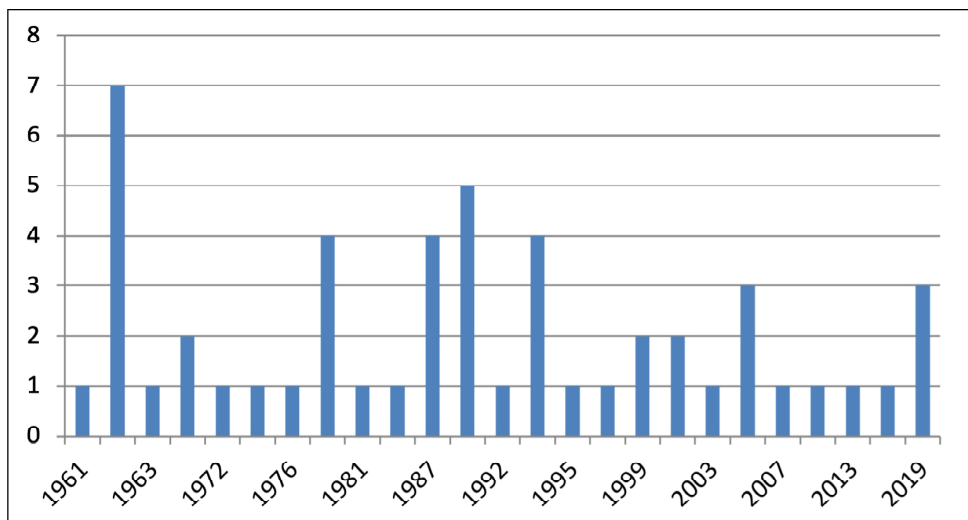
Almost all records are of single birds, there are just four records of two birds, all off Hilbre in Sep (2), Oct and Nov. In 1993 an adult first seen off Hilbre on May 8th, initially in summer plumage, remained until at least Aug 15th, but this length of stay is unique. One was seen off the island on seven dates 3rd Nov to 30th Dec in 1962, but most years have a bird on just a single date.

Hilbre has almost 80% of all records, with almost 20% from the Wirral coast between Thurston via Red Rocks to Leasowe. Listing these records from the mainland, all singles: off Meols on 29th Sep 1968; in flight off Leasowe on 2nd Oct 1977; in gale force winds off Meols on 15th Nov 1977 and Thurston next day; Red Rocks had its first on 26th Jan 1990, a juv on 14th Aug 1992, and what was thought to be the long-staying Hilbre bird on 8th May and 15th Aug in 1993; a juv was on the sea off Leasowe on 27th Sep 1996 and one off Hoylake Shore on 12th Feb 2005 is the most recent away from Hilbre. The only Cheshire record is of a juv on the River Dee at Chester on 23rd Jan 1981.

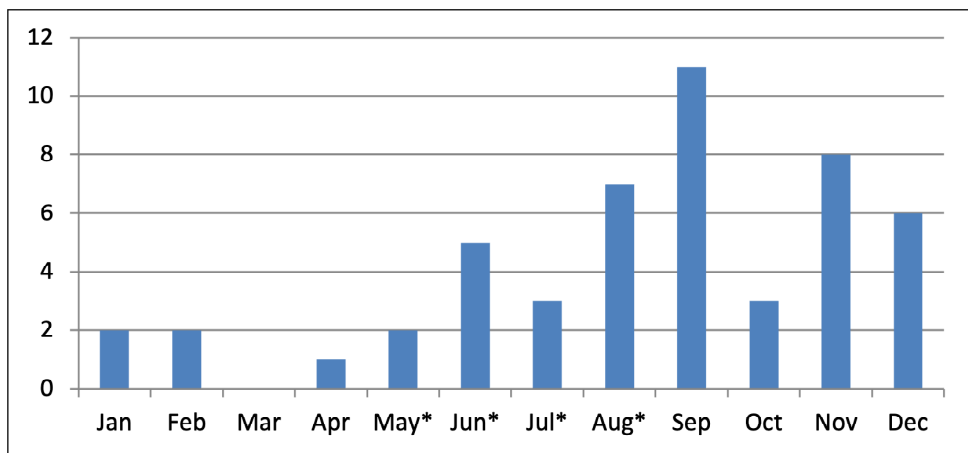
Given the irregularity of sightings it is difficult to predict when the next bird will appear, but an observer at Hilbre will likely have the best chance of seeing it.

Steve Barber

**Black Guillemot annual distribution of records 1961-2022 (no of dates)
(the long-staying bird of 1993 is counted just once for each month of its stay)**



**Black Guillemot monthly distribution of records 1961-2022 (no of dates)
(* indicates months with long-staying bird counted only once per month)**



Ringling News

Ringling plays an important part in developing our knowledge of birds. In this feature we invite ringling groups, or individual ringling, active in Cheshire and Wirral to contribute their own accounts of their activities. In general, the idea is that these should provide a means of updating local birders on the groups' work - both by way of information about birds ringling or recovered, and news of other events (or incidents). Future contributions will be welcomed.

HILBRE BIRD OBSERVATORY (HiBO)

Ringling June 2023 to end of September 2023

The BTO continue to monitor bird flu (HPAI - highly pathogenic avian influenza) in conjunction with other agencies throughout Europe. The authorities are concerned that autumn migration may set off new outbreaks of the disease and have developed a system to forecast the likelihood of new outbreaks occurring based around data for waterfowl. They do not have data for seabirds currently, such as the terns and gulls that were decimated at Shotton, but this will not be a concern before the arrival of the next breeding season. The good news for Hilbre is that there have been no reports of bird flu in passerines this year and there is no suggestion anywhere that people have been infected with the disease.

The bird observatory has set up a colour-ringling project for Rock Pipits on the island this summer and has added colour rings to a number of Rock Pipits. Some of these colour-ringling birds have been sighted away from the island at other Wirral locations and we would urge birders to report any colour-ringling Rock Pipits they see to us. We expect to be visited by Rock Pipits from Norway over the next month or so, we recovered a colour-ringling Rock Pipit from Giske, a Norwegian island, a few autumns ago. These birds are reported to be different from our local birds. At this time of year they cannot be easily separated from UK birds by their looks, however, they can be separated by their feeding habits.

The local UK Rock Pipits feed on Hilbre and in the intertidal areas around the island, but the Scandinavian birds prefer to feed in a salt marsh environment. If any colour-ringling birds are seen in the local salt marshes then it is a fair bet that they are Scandinavian birds. We would like to know about them.

We have ringling about 45% fewer birds in the period from June to September this year than the average number of birds ringling for the same period in the previous four years. We have not seen evidence of the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico that other west coast sites have experienced; no American passerines have arrived on Hilbre as far as we know. We believe that some of the Greenland Wheatears we catch on Hilbre may have originated in Canada. David Hussell, who set up the Long Point Bird Observatory there, encouraged us never to give up catching Wheatears as he was convinced that one of his birds would turn up on Hilbre. It remains to be seen what October will bring.

We have had some surprises during this summer. We were trying to catch Rock Pipits with spring traps and drop traps and a Ringling Plover took a liking to the meal worms and caught itself. That was the first Ringling Plover we have caught since 2014. There was another Ringling Plover this summer with a colour ringling which had been ringling in Norway and a Dunlin with a colour ringling that we have not found out about yet.

John Elliott, on behalf of the Hilbre Bird Observatory

MID-CHESHIRE BARN OWL GROUP

The breeding season for 2023 is coming to a close (certainly for Barn Owls). In an earlier report this year I reported a degree of optimism for Barn Owls which, thankfully, has continued.

The weather has been as changeable as ever and, although average brood sizes were slightly larger than of late, there has been a marked increase in the number of successful breeding pairs. Taking details for the Mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Group (which effectively covers Cheshire from the

A49 eastwards) there has been a near 20% increase in the number of breeding Barn Owls in 2023 - figures which are hopefully reflected throughout Cheshire.

However, I would reiterate a comment from a report last year that means we've now had around seven years of consistent Barn Owl breeding activity. But such 'success' is reliant upon Mother Nature and the breeding cycle of the Barn Owl's main prey (voles, shrews, etc). We are overdue a significant dip in that breeding cycle but if/when that will occur is as uncertain as the weather.

As for the next few months of 2023 and the start of 2024 - as every other year, it's a period for cleaning out, repairing and replacing existing Barn Owl boxes and finding locations for new ones.

The threat of disruption to Barn Owl activity in Cheshire due to the likes of the HS2 railway and the HyNet hydrogen pipeline has receded considerably, with the cancellation of HS2 and delays to the hydrogen pipeline having been confirmed in recent months. We can look to carrying on with our 'normal' support and conservation of wildlife generally and Barn Owls in particular with greater certainty.

As noted in our last reports, we've still found no obvious signs of bird flu deaths within the Cheshire Barn Owls. Fingers crossed again in this respect, because we have no obvious controls over this desperate disease at the moment.

As my now usual final comments - we do our best, but it stretches our limited resources to help support these beautiful and iconic birds. We get a great deal of satisfaction out of the conservation work we do. But we are always in need of more help.

To repeat our usual concerns and plea - if you have seen any Barn Owls recently please could you let us know, either direct or by our sighting report on the website www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk; as you will appreciate it is important that we know where the birds are regularly seen.

John Mycock, Chairman Tel: 07970 235437 Email: cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com

COLOUR RING REPORT

This report is a summary of the records obtained by the Dee Estuary Colour-ring Birding Group from June to September 2023.

Cormorants: Colour rings on Cormorants aren't easy to read as the birds are usually on the far edge of East Hoyle Bank, but we got lucky this summer with six which were ringed at Hale Duck Decoy, and another on Puffin Island. These were all juveniles so it will be interesting to see what happens to these young birds over the coming years.

Great Egret: One with red ring (ABM) was spotted at RSPB Burton Mere Wetlands in July. It was ringed on the Avalon Marshes, Somerset in April 2022 as a chick. Before making its way to BMW it was seen at RSPB Blacktoft Sands (East Yorks), Alkborough Flats and Winterton (Lincs) and RSPB Old Moor (South Yorks).

Little Egrets: We all know about the big increase in the number of Little Egrets in recent years, but their movement around the country is not fully understood so a lot have been colour-ringed to find out more. The Merseyside Ringing Group has been busy at Hale Duck Decoy and over the past two years we have recorded 12 Little Egrets at Thurstaston and Heswall ringed by them. We've also recorded birds elsewhere including one ringed at Newark-on-Trent (Notts) in 2017 and another at Wheldrake Ings (Yorks) in 2019, both of which returned to Heswall for the fifth year running this summer.

Shelducks: A lot of work is currently being undertaken on the migration and movements of Shelducks, including by a PhD student at Liverpool University sponsored by the BTO. We are glad to help in this work by providing records of colour-ringed birds that we've sighted and during August and September we had 46 records of 25 birds, all off Thurstaston and West Kirby. Our data shows an interesting movement of Shelducks between here and the Lower Derwent Valley (Yorks), over the past few years we have recorded at least 18 different birds which were ringed there. Many of the other Shelducks we see are ringed at Martin Mere WWT where they are well fed during the winter (!), but we've also recorded ones ringed at Longton Marsh on the Ribble, Seal Sands on the Tees Estuary, Seaton Marshes by Axmouth and Withymoor Pool in Shropshire. Many of the movements revealed by our sightings were previously unknown.

Ringed Plovers: Two colour-ringed Ringed Plovers were recorded in August, both ringed on the island of Giske on the west coast of Norway. Previous sightings have revealed our Ringed Plovers come from a good variety of locations including Dundee, Iceland and Germany.

Oystercatchers: A lot of research is currently being carried out in Iceland on Oystercatcher migration and we saw two from this scheme at Hoylake in September, one of which was a returning bird last recorded here in 2018. Other Oystercatchers here this summer were ringed in Aberdeen, Dawlish Warren and Bergen (Norway).

Lapwing: One, which was colour ringed in mid-Wales, south-west of Welshpool, was at RSPB Burton Mere Wetlands in August. It had been previously recorded at BMW in August 2019 and July 2020.

Redshanks: We saw six Redshanks at Thurstaston and Heswall this summer which had been ringed by the mid-Wales Ringing Group, three of which are returning birds from previous years. Another one was ringed at Frieston Marsh, on the Wash, in 2020. A Redshank ringed at Farlington Marshes in Langstone Harbour (near Portsmouth) in 2020 has shown some interesting movement being seen at Slimbridge WWT (Gloucs) in the winter of 2020/21 then at Sunderland on the Lune estuary (Lancs) in the autumn of 2022.

If you want to be part of the Dee Estuary Colour-ring Birding Group all you have to do is submit a colour-ring sighting either to myself or copy me in on any submission you may make elsewhere so I can include it in our database. Email: richard@deeestuary.co.uk

Note: there is a monthly colour-ring update on the Dee Estuary Birding Website: www.deeestuary.co.uk.

Richard Smith

CHESHIRE SWAN STUDY GROUP

Since my last report in June, our activities are still confined to counting flocks and collecting ring numbers. We know that Avian Influenza is still active in Cheshire because a swan which died in the Poynton area in July tested positive for the disease. Please note that at the time of printing, the RSPCA at Stapeley Grange, Nantwich is still only accepting young wildfowl.

The maximum counts of flocks of Mute Swans since my last report are as follows:

- Acre Dell Pools, nr Congleton: 12 on 4th Jun, 26 on 22nd Jul and 12 on 19th Aug.
- Bottom Flash, Winsford: 21 on 18th Jun, 26 on 22nd Jul and 25 on 23rd Aug.
- Budworth mere, Northwich: 9 on 20th Aug and 9 on 17th Sep.
- Comber Mere, nr Whitchurch: 6 on 18th Jun, 7 on 9th Jul, 5 on 20th Aug and 7 on 17th Sep.
- Doddington Mere, nr Nantwich: 50 on 19th Jun, 47 on 3rd Jul, 46 on 1st Aug and 31 on 4th Sep.
- Neumann's Flash, Northwich: 5 on 18th Jun, 2 on 9th Jul, 11 on 20th Aug and 8 on 17th Sep.
- Sankey Valley CP, Warrington: 17 on 18th Jun, 17 on 9th Jul, 22 on 20th Aug and 17 on 17th Sep.
- Trent and Mersey Canal, Middlewich: 8 on 21st Jul and 7 on 23rd Aug.
- Woolston Eyes NR, Warrington: 40 on 17th Sep.

Movements

CPH6 was ringed as a male cygnet on 14-11-19 at Spike island, Widnes and was seen on 20-6-23 at Aber Ogwen near Bangor North Wales = 91kms.

CSJ4 was ringed as a female cygnet on 15-8-21 on the Shropshire Union Canal, Barbridge, near Nantwich and was seen on 16-9-23 at Llyn Coron, Isle of Anglesey = 124kms.

Sightings of all swans, geese and Mallards should be sent to: David Cookson at cheshireswans@gmail.com, giving details of place (6-fig map ref), colour/character combination of ring and, if with other birds, total number present in the flock. All sightings will receive a printout of the history for the relevant bird(s).

David Cookson, on behalf of Cheshire Swan Study Group
<https://cheshireswanstudygroup.wordpress.com>

RINGING AT WOOLSTON - SUMMER 2023

In the six months ended 30th September 2023 ('this summer') 4,386 birds of 51 species were ringed at Woolston, an increase of 198 birds (5%) from the total of 4,188 birds of 57 species ringed in the six months ended 30th September 2022 ('last summer'). This represents a return to 'normality' after the very poor summer in 2021 and, indeed, many species were ringed in similar numbers in both this summer and last summer. There were a small number of notable exceptions. Looking first at migrant warblers, the main focus of summer ringing at Woolston, it is evident that Chiffchaffs enjoyed a very good breeding season and that 2023 will be the record year for the species with over 1,100 ringed. The total for the whole of 2022 was 914 and no previous calendar year has exceeded 700. On the downside, it was not a good year for *Acrocephalus* warblers. The number of Reed Warblers ringed fell by 37% from 512 to 323 and Sedge Warblers fared even worse with a fall of 67% from 114 to just 38. Many of the Reed Warblers ringed were not carrying the fat levels normally associated with the start of migration and insect numbers in the reed bed must have been below normal.

Amongst resident birds, Long-tailed Tits appear to have had a poor breeding season with just 28 ringed compared with 88 last summer, a fall of 68%. However, 33 more birds were ringed in the first part of October so the full year picture may look better. Wrens also showed a decline of 26% from 164 ringed last summer to 122 this summer. Last year was an exceptional year for Wrens at Woolston with the best ringing total since 2007 so this decline is probably just a return to normal levels. Much more depressing is the relentless decline in Greenfinches. Just 146 were ringed compared with 201 last summer, a decline of 27%. As recently as 2017, over 1,000 Greenfinches were ringed in the year. As an anecdotal aside, I am writing this whilst sheltering from Storm Babet in Hugh Town on the Isles of Scilly. In the famous evening bird log it has been the case for years to call for 'Greenfinch flocks over 20'. There are now so few responses that the call is being adjusted to 'Greenfinch flocks over 10'. A sad sign of the times. Last summer I wrote that I hoped that the decline in Bullfinch numbers was just a blip. Sadly, this was not the case and just 65 were ringed, a reduction of 18% on the total of 79 last summer which was, itself, a low point after 106 in 2021. There was a notable post-fledging arrival of Blue Tits from the surrounding area. The number fledged from our own boxes was similar to last summer but a total of 326 were ringed, an increase of 62% compared with 201 last summer.

There were no significant hirundine roosts at Woolston in autumn but for the third year running a short-lived Sand Martin roost formed on No.3 Bed in April. Last summer a single catching attempt was a case of 'close but no cigar' as the birds descended into the reed bed close to but not into the nets. This year two catching attempts were 'direct hits' and 497 Sand Martins were ringed compared with just 12 last summer.

The following first ringing dates for juvenile birds indicate that for resident species the timing of their breeding season was in the normal range for Wrens and Bullfinches but some two weeks earlier than recent years for Robins and Dunnocks.

Ringing date of first juvenile

	2023	2022	2021	2020
Robin	10-May	21-May	27-May	25-May
Wren	16-Jun	15-Jun	04-Jun	09-Jun
Dunnock	13-May	01-Jun	26-May	22-May
Bullfinch	10-Jun	15-Jun	18-Jun	07-Jun

In the case of our migrant warblers the following table of 'first juvenile' dates indicates that the breeding season was very much in line with recent years.

Ringing date of first juvenile

	2023	2022	2021	2020
Chiffchaff	02-Jun	06-Jun	28-May	26-May
Blackcap	03-Jun	04-Jun	17-Jun	07-Jun
Whitethroat	22-Jun	11-Jun	26-Jun	16-Jun
Reed Warbler	22-Jun	24-Jun	26-Jun	16-Jun

Although more passage waders now pass through the new wetland on No.4 Bed, than do so through No.3 Bed, there were Green Sandpipers present on the bed. However, water levels were not conducive to setting a net across the channel where they are usually trapped so it was a blank year.

Both Blue Tits and Great Tits had a reasonable breeding season in the nest boxes on the reserve with 155 chicks ringed on No.3 Bed (2022-147, 2021-137 and 2020-134).

Whilst it is clear at a broad level that the population of Willow Tits at Woolston has declined in the last few years ringing numbers this year to the end of September indicate that this decline may have stabilized as illustrated by the following comparisons:

Different birds handled (including re-traps)	2023 20	2022 18
Birds newly ringed	2023 17	2022 15
Juveniles newly ringed	2023 17	2022 15

For the fourth year running there was no significant arrival of finches in late summer but the signs are that an influx has started in October.

It was not a good year for passage migrants, with no Redstarts, Stonechats, Whinchats, flycatchers or Tree Pipits captured. There were some highlights however. A Buzzard ringed on No.1 Bed was just the fifth ringed at Woolston and an impressive bird to find in a mist net. On 16th April whilst driving along the canal track at dawn, Kieran Foster had to stop to avoid running over a Great Crested Grebe which had landed on the track and was unable to take off. Uninjured, the bird was ringed and released on water, the first of this species to be ringed at Woolston. Finally, on 16th July on No.3 Bed a Bluethroat of the white-spotted race *Cyanecula* was ringed on No.3 Bed, just the second ringed at Woolston after a bird on No.1 Bed in 1996.

Michael Miles, on behalf of the Woolston Ringing Team

LOCAL RINGING REPORTS

First published on The Knutsford Ornithological Society - Latest News (10x50.com) in August 2023, including all the photos mentioned the articles.

KNUTSFORD MOOR

At this time of year, juvenile/1st calendar year or fledged birds are out and about in numbers. They are often more visible than adults and tame. Firstly it's been a good year for warbler breeding. A dry, warm May helped fledgling success and a dry June ensured good insects to get them started once they had left their nests. A damp July has kept good invertebrate numbers up. I will call them juvs as they are still in juvenile plumage. All are undergoing a post fledging moult, of feathering over/growing feathers on their bare underparts. They don't moult their main flight feathers or tails. Adults will (mostly) undergo a complete moult of all their feathers, but not *Acrocephalus* warblers.

The Reed warbler shows a classic set of neat feathers, with minimal abrasion at the edges. Juv feathers are more translucent and weaker than adults; after all it only had c16 days to grow the lot! But an adult Reed Warbler is still wearing its feathers from its post-breeding moult in Africa in February this year, and will not change/moult them till after it arrives on its wintering grounds. So an adult has heavily abraded and chipped edges to its tail and all its flight feathers, and washed out/bleached base colours and will not appear as brown as a juv bird. Seems a strange biological strategy to make your main southerly migration with a set of clothing you put on 10 months before and after you have gone through the stress of raising a brood or two, but that's bird biology for you! Note some birds still show a gape line at the base of the bill. For us ringers we have a fail safe way to age such birds as all *Acrocephalus* warblers (and *Locustella* too) retain tongue spots till about December. Adults don't have them.

The juv Cetti's is a recently fledged bird and appears somewhat tatty and has a noticeable gape still showing. It also appears 'fluffy' underneath again a classic sign of a juv bird. Adult feathers are sleek and well organised. When we caught this bird it had probably only been a couple of weeks out of its nest.

The Willow Warbler is a little gem. Juvs are so lemon yellow they look like dipped in custard! These birds now have finished their post-juvenile moult and will look like this till February (not that we see Willow Warbler in Feb!). Note the fluffy undertail coverts, again a juv feature. Remember an adult will have finished its post-breeding complete moult of everything and will look like the field guides. Pristine, sleek, yellowish to the underparts, white throat and ready for the long haul south.

I really like Sedge Warblers. At least five pairs bred at Knutsford Moor this year. They are a little different in that adults and juvs do a partial moult before leaving the UK, so they are difficult to tell apart (but juvs have tongue spots), although a juv looks very well marked, dark centres to many feathers, tiger striped with dark centres to the tertials, crown and coverts in particular, (hence folks claiming Aquatic Warblers down south), whilst an adult (again still wearing its plumaged moulted in February) will appear pale and washed out.

For info, seven ringing sessions from early July trapped Reed Warblers: 11 adult and 55 juvs, Sedge Warblers: 6 adults and 5 juvs, Cetti's: 1 ad and 1 juv, also 34 Chiffchaffs and 12 Willow warblers so far. Now it is clearly migrant birds moving onto the reed bed to feed up, rather than local breeders. August is when the Willow Warblers and Tree Pipits move through, September for the Chiffchaffs and Grey Wagtails move south, so we are hoping expectantly. Whilst catching only 6 Reed Buntings so far suggests they might not have done that well locally, however, talking with the locals, they have bird feeders in their gardens so suspect they have moved off the reed bed.

Hugh Pulsford

REED WARBLERS

Following the informative narrative on the warblers of Knutsford Moor from my SMRG colleague, Hugh Pulsford, I would like to provide an insight into the population of Rostherne Mere Reed Warblers.

In the early 1970s the reed beds around the mere were generally narrow and in the absence of damage from winter roosting Starlings, I was able to find most of the warbler nests and ring the nestlings. From 2004 heavy trashing of the reed stands made human access more difficult and my attention then focused on the aim of capturing the full-grown birds.

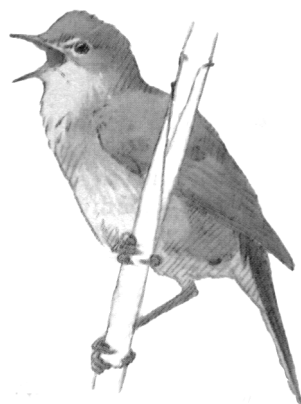
In 1998 the BTO introduced the RAS scheme (retrapping adults to calculate survival rates) and my project is unique in being the only Reed Warbler study established in the inaugural year and continuing to the present time.

I estimate 55 to 60 pairs of Reed Warblers nesting annually on the reserve and my return normally identifies at least 100 adults each season on the reserve. The BTO calculate an annual survival rate for the adults at around 55%. In simple terms, of a nesting pair, one would survive to the next breeding season and the missing bird would be replaced from the previous year's young.

Now for the interesting bit! Like tossing a coin and continually calling correctly, individual birds can defy the odds, survive, return from tropical West Africa through the vagaries of weather and avoiding predators, and renew their membership of the breeding population. The great advantage of a long term study - mine started in August 1972 - is it provides the scope for identifying these intrepid creatures.

The oldest known Reed Warbler was a bird at Peterborough, ringed as adult male (at least one year old) in July 1988 and last encountered in July 2001. This bird must have been at least 14 years old. I ringed an adult male at Rostherne on 22 May 2004 and last netted him on 19 June 2016 - a bird of at least 13 years and the 3rd oldest known anywhere (it was handled 17 times over 8 seasons). One which I ringed as a nesting in 1993 was last trapped in 2004. Birds bred in 2010 and 2012 survived to return 10 years later.

Something rather different: I caught and ringed a juvenile Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on 10 August - the first such ringing on the reserve for 24 years.



Malcolm Calvert

Sites to Watch

RSPB DEE ESTUARY RESERVE NESTON REEDBED IMPROVEMENT PROJECT



First published on the RSPB Dee Estuary Blog on 27 September 2023 – see <https://community.rspb.org.uk/placestovisit/deeestuary/b/deeestuary-blog/posts/neston-reedbed-improvement-project>

The memory will never leave me; stepping up to my kitchen window and catching sight of the thick, dark plume rising ominously into the crystal blue sky of a fine early spring evening, I knew instantly the smoke's origin and lurched into a primal fight or flight response. Once the dust had settled and media fuss faded, the subsequent 18 months since the devastating fire destroying the majority of Neston Reedbed have yielded much discussion and planning to avoid a repeat of such an impactful event.

Neston Reedbed developed naturally over the past few decades, at the source of a freshwater spring providing the optimum conditions for common reed to thrive. Having been part of the RSPB Dee Estuary Reserve since our initial land acquisition in 1979, the habitat expanded steadily through natural succession, becoming increasingly important over the past decade as reedbed specialists Marsh Harriers and Bitterns first colonised. As well as being protected as a nature reserve, the reedbed is also an important component of the Dee Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Protection Area (SPA), both designated for the significance of the bird populations that are supported here.

Whilst always being recognised as vulnerable due to the proximity of a public right of way, the reedbed has previously been a non-intervention part of the reserve - unlike the heavily-managed Burton Mere Wetlands - leaving nature to take its course and purely providing a stewardship of what is still a locally scarce habitat.

We coordinate a seasonal volunteer wardening scheme to maintain a watchful presence along the adjacent footpath during the most high-risk period at the start of spring, when the reedbed is dry, brittle and highly flammable. This has been largely effective in deterring antisocial or dangerous behaviours that secluded parts of the countryside can be subject to, but last year's fire proved it alone is not sufficient. After months of discussions between various parties, we're delighted to have been granted permission and funding to deliver some significant work to reduce the threats to and improve the wildlife value of the reedbed.

Keen-eyed locals, or even birdwatchers from further afield visiting the marshes, may have noticed excavators accessing the marsh from the south end of Parkgate promenade last week, and then made steady progress with the agreed work. The first task was creating a substantial ditch along the landward edge of the reedbed, for the first time offering a physical separation between the fragile habitat and the public footpath. Additionally, as vegetation recovers and shelters the ditch edges, this new open water will provide space to feed for some of the key species such as Bittern, whilst supporting warblers and a potential return of Bearded Tits.

This perimeter ditch will massively reduce the level of year-round wildlife disturbance caused by the proximity of the footpath to the reedbed and should go a long way to preventing future fires. A significant additional value though, is that in the event of another fire, this ditch will serve as a fire break to protect the properties that border the estuary on the western outskirts of Neston. The scale and intensity of the 2022 fire caused extensive damage to a number of gardens of adjacent residences and had the wind direction been different on that day, there could have been severe threat to the buildings and their inhabitants. This is very much a win-win project; whilst being done primarily to meet our objectives of protecting the habitat and its precious wildlife, there is also a huge benefit to local residents.

Following the perimeter ditch, attention turned to within the reedbed, with the machines excavating a network of ditches and a small pool with a similar dual purpose. Creating a more varied and open structure to the reedbed will further enhance the feeding opportunities for Bittern and Water

Rail, with fish stocks naturally replenished on high tides via connectivity of these new ditches to existing saltmarsh gutters. A further crucial function of these interior ditches is to act as fire breaks like the perimeter ditch, effectively dividing the reedbed into four discreet cells meaning if a future fire does occur, the loss of the entire reedbed should be avoided.

After the 2022 fire, only the far south-eastern tip of the reedbed was saved by the wind direction and efforts of the fire service, so the effects on its inhabitants were huge. A non-existent breeding season, not just for the single Marsh Harrier pair which previously nested within the reedbed, but seemingly impacting two other pairs who nested nearby on the estuary the previous year. Following this, a disrupted winter roost with Marsh Harrier numbers down and a suggestion of affecting the traditional Hen Harrier roost near Parkgate Old Baths.

With these new cells in place separated by wet ditches, fire should only be able to ignite a portion of the whole reedbed allowing the remainder to survive and result in much lower impact on the precious wildlife that lives within. As well as benefiting the reserve, this simultaneously reduces the risk of fire spreading uncontrollably and posing a considerable threat to houses in the Moorside Lane and Manorial Road area of Neston and Parkgate.

Understandably, this is a sizeable landscaping project which has been made possible thanks to generous funding from the Our Dee Estuary project and we're confident our local supporters, and hopefully many with little prior connection to the reserve, will appreciate the benefits of the Dee Estuary becoming an increasingly important place for a range of nationally threatened birds, along with a genuinely unique and impressive landscape.

Upon completion of work in the reedbed, the contractors moved south to the Denhall Quay area of Burton Marsh, where the excavators are carrying out the periodic desilting of the saltmarsh gutters off Quayside, Little Neston. This work, done every few years, aids our management of the marsh through restricting the movement of grazing livestock, and is a proven method for managing mosquito populations by maintaining tidal flow, limiting the shallow and stagnant water in which these insects can thrive.

With normally so much emphasis on Burton Mere Wetlands, being the focal point of our visitor facilities and reliable year-round wildlife spectacles, it can be easy to overlook the importance of the vast, wild tidal areas of the Dee Estuary that we manage. Seeing this project come to fruition is a real triumph for the reserve team who suffered the impact of the fire almost as much as the reedbed wildlife, whilst also helping us to keep the estuary in favourable condition for its SSSI and SPA features.

We hope you await as eagerly as us the months ahead to see how quickly this priceless improvement work has a positive impact on Neston Reedbed, helping some of our star wildlife bounce back from the setback of last year.

Dan Trotman, Visitor Experience Manager, RSPB Dee Estuary Reserve

WOOLSTON EYES NATURE RESERVE

Newsletter June 2023

The past few years have seen significant developments on the Reserve; most importantly the creation of a new 100-acre wetland on No.4 bed. This has trebled the amount of standing water on the Eyes, and is already attracting a great variety of wildlife, including some rare species.

The wetland is a result of a co-operative effort between WECG and our other partners, including the RSPB, Natural England and the landowner, Peel Holdings. Without Peel's permission and commitment to the project the development could not have taken place, or the large amount of funding been obtained. This was partly from the Heritage Lottery Fund and also from DEFRA. An enormous amount of time was spent at the pre-planning stage by all the partners, notably by David Bowman of WECG. Work finally began on the wetland in late 2019, and was completed in the late autumn of 2022. The earthmoving was carried out to an exceptionally high standard by our contractor Steve Fletcher and his team and in no time water levels began to rise on the west cell and wetland species moved in. In many ways it was not an auspicious time for the development as most of the work coincided with the Covid lockdown. This presented major challenges for our contractor, who faced swingeing increases in fuel costs and a number of instances of vandalism

and theft. Undeterred by all this the work progressed and the superb wetland that has resulted is a credit to all involved. As well as attracting wildlife it must be remembered that wetlands such as that on No.4 bed act as carbon sinks, storing large amounts of carbon dioxide, one of the important drivers of climate change.

Wildlife sightings on No.4 Bed

During the spring of 2022 two rare bird species visited the west cell. The first was a White-tailed Lapwing, first record for Woolston and for Cheshire, and followed by a Temminck's Stint, the first sighting at the Eyes since 1989. Equally unexpected in the autumn was a Penduline Tit, just the second record for Cheshire. Initially it found its way into a ringer's net on No.3 bed before moving to the east cell on No.4, where it was photographed and remained for at least two days. This is a species whose home range is Eastern Europe and parts of the Mediterranean. It is clear that given the amount of wetland now at Woolston anything is likely to turn up.

In 2023 Black-headed Gulls bred for the first time on both cells of No.4 bed, while common species such as Coot are breeding in increasing numbers with up to 40 broods recorded across the Reserve this year. Several pairs of Shoveler have also bred, and record numbers of breeding Pochard, for which Woolston is a national stronghold, producing an amazing 30 broods.

Woolston's wetlands are incredibly rich in insects of many species and during the recent hot spell in June amazing numbers of some Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies) have been recorded - for example one count of over 130 Black-tailed Skimmers on No.4 bed. Butterflies have thrived in the hot weather, notably Ringlets, with up to 16 seen recently.

Swifts, whose numbers have been declining across most of the UK, have been feeding in large flocks over the new wetlands, the food obtained there helping to sustain a thriving population on a nearby housing estate. It is pleasing to report that a pair of Marsh Harriers has successfully bred on the Reserve for the third year in succession.

Black-necked Grebes and Willow Tits

These two iconic Woolston specialities have had differing fortunes during the past few years. The breeding populations of Black-necked Grebes had averaged about 10 pairs up to 2021, but there was a remarkable breeding season in 2022 when at least 38 adults returned in the spring and 19 pairs bred. No. 3 bed was full of growing young during May and June and, for example, on 26th May one experienced observer reported 64 grebes - 37 adults and 27 young on the bed - with another birdwatcher finding 32 growing young there on the same day. This is almost certainly the most successful breeding season ever in the UK since the species first bred in the very early years of the twentieth century. This year slightly fewer adults have returned but at the time of writing 13 broods have been seen with many growing young, including Woolston's first brood of four young.

Willow Tits, on the other hand, have declined in recent years from up to 30 breeding pairs to currently little more than five successful nests found during the painstaking surveys carried out each year by Allan Rustell and Mike Lloyd. This is a species that is facing a major decline nationally, and which is now absent from many parts of the country. The reasons for the rapid fall in the population at Woolston are not entirely clear, although undoubtedly some long-established territories on No.4 bed were lost during the construction of the new wetland. Even allowing for this, many breeding pairs have been lost from other parts of the Eyes where the habitat has changed little. To try and reverse the decline WECG has applied for a Species Recovery Grant to improve habitat in a large woodland on No.4 bed. We have just heard that the bid has been successful, and the money received will be spent on extensive coppicing and other improvements that will make the woodland more attractive to Willow Tits. Work on this major project should commence later in the year.

My book about Woolston Eyes

Some years ago it became apparent to me that with an ageing Committee the remarkable achievements of WECG in developing and managing Woolston Eyes could easily become forgotten if not written down. The book, entitled *Woolston Eyes, from Wasteland to Wetland*, has taken a number of years of research and writing, but has now been completed. As I have said in the Preface it is a story that needs to be told, of how a group of volunteers has created over the past

43 years, with the help of partners and the support of our permit holders, a nationally important wildlife haven. Local photographers have contributed many great pictures and there are also papers on some of the most important aspects of the Eyes' natural history.

The book costs £25 plus £3 postage and packing and full details are available on: www.woolstoneyes.com.

More good news

One of the benefits of WECG's close relationship with the landowner, Peel Holdings, has been that the Group now has leasehold status on No.3 bed and a large part of No.4 bed. This followed several years of meetings and discussions and has given us a level of security on the land for the first time. Our thanks go to all those who made this possible and their hard work in achieving it.

Brian Martin

ROSTHERNE MERE NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

Newsletter Jul-Sep 2023

Welcome to late summer newsletter. It covers a fascinating time for wildlife when many new offspring and family parties are evident but when we also welcome the arrival of the first winter visitors!

Interesting wildfowl records included: two juvenile Black-necked Grebes in Jul, 20 Common Scoters in Aug and 23 Egyptian Geese in Sep. There was a count of 85 Mandarin Ducks in Jul which set a record high for the Reserve. A Little Egret was seen in Aug. There were two broods of Great Crested Grebes and several Coot chicks were seen. Up to seven Grey Herons visited in Aug. Three Pink-footed Geese flew over in Sep and Goosander, Pochard, Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon were all seen for first time since the spring. A Water rail was heard 'sharming' in Dolls Meadow in early Sep. Waders were rarely encountered but a Common Sandpiper and a Curlew were logged in Aug.

One of the highlights of the quarter was the sight of up to four Hobbies in front of the Observatory. Food passes between adult and juvenile birds were witnessed on several occasions. A female Marsh Harrier was frequently viewed quartering Dolls Meadow. Up to three juvenile Kestrels were seen around the Reserve. There were six Buzzards circling over the Mere in Aug and four Sparrowhawks in Sep. A Peregrine was also recorded in Jul. Amazingly, a Long-eared Owl was spotted by Steve Collins and his daughter Emily on 31st Aug. This is only the second ever record for Rostherne! Both Barn Owls and Tawny Owls were also logged in the quarter.

Swallows bred at Briddonweir Farm with six nests recorded but counts over the Mere were generally in single figures! Although 20 were seen on wires near Marsh Lane during Sep. There were 24 House Martins in early Jul but the highest count of Swifts was only 20. Another fantastic record was that of a juvenile Lesser Spotted Woodpecker ringed by Malcolm Calvert in Aug. The presence of a young bird suggesting they bred nearby.

Both Garden Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat were recorded in Aug. A pair of Common Whitethroat bred in Dolls Meadow. A Spotted Flycatcher was seen near the Permissive Path. It was a good breeding season for Reed Warblers with over 100 adults ringed by Malcolm and John Adshead. Sedge Warbler and Willow Warbler were both recorded but at low numbers. Cetti's Warblers were heard in several areas in the margins of the Mere and five new juveniles have now been ringed this year by Malcolm and John. Blue Tits had a very good breeding season with young birds seen throughout the Reserve and many of them were ringed. It was also an encouraging year for House Sparrows with 43 seen in a hedgerow near Briddonweir Farm. A juvenile Willow Tit was ringed by Malcolm near Old Hall Wood in Aug.

Other interesting records included around 200 Wood Pigeons on the harvested Sprout Field and 100 Jackdaws in the trees along Rostherne Brook in Jul. There were up to six Ravens and around 80 Meadow Pipits recorded in Sep.

Bill Bellamy

Editorial note: The update from Natural England what is happening about surface water run-off which contributes to poor quality within the Rostherne Mere will now be in the March *Bird News*.

Notes and Letters

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

This section is a chance for members to contribute, whether a few lines, or a long article, which might be split over several issues. Some ideas might be amusing (or otherwise!) anecdotes, unusual avian behaviour, special memories, ringing and/or survey stories, and looking back over the years – even back to childhood! The list is almost endless – it's up to members. Also, we are always interested in your views on any of our articles or on the newsletter itself. Ed.

WISDOM OF THE CROWD

First published on 19th July 2023 <http://www.10x50.com/latest.htm> (Knutsford Ornithological Society website).

Pink-footed Geese arrive back in Britain to winter with us towards the end of September. Their first port of call after leaving their breeding grounds in Iceland, and to a lesser extent Greenland, is the Lancashire coast around Southport. From there many move south-east to Norfolk, normally at the end of October and on through November, before doing the return journey in March. Their route to Norfolk often entails using the 'Cheshire gap' as it provides a passage between the Clwydian Hills in Wales on the one hand and the Peak District and South Pennines on the other. I remember one November morning, many years ago, when cycling to work (so it must have been many years ago!) stopping to watch two pinkfeet heading roughly south-east, their flight was erratic and they appeared to be struggling to decide which direction they should be taking. A few minutes later a substantial flock of c.300 appeared - as straight as a die with no deviation as they headed for Norfolk.

I've always considered this as a good example of 'Wisdom of the crowd' in the animal, rather than the human world. From Wikipedia: *"The wisdom of the crowd is the collective opinion of a diverse independent group of individuals rather than that of a single expert. An explanation for this phenomenon is that there is idiosyncratic noise associated with each individual judgment, and taking the average over a large number of responses will go some way toward cancelling the effect of this noise"*.

I've been wondering if another example is the spread of certain species, of mainly water birds, northwards from their traditional homes around the Mediterranean - Little Egret, Great White Egret, Cattle Egret, Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Cetti's Warbler, etc., but with the temperature in these areas currently heading towards 50p C, I suspect there is a much more obvious reason!

Tony Usher

STONECHATS

I read with interest Richard Smith's article 'A day of Stonechats'. Interesting to note that I too experienced record counts on my local patch, the Whitley Reed, near Antrobus, albeit slightly earlier than Richard's date [17th March]: 5 on 7th March, 11 on 11th March and 5 on 16th March.

Chris Hancock

PINK-FOOTED GEESE

Walking down Town Lane, Mobberley on 8th October I heard some pinkfeet and then saw them coming from the north-west and heading south-east (c50), but by the time I'd found the video settings on my phone and looked where they should have now been, there was nothing! A Ryanair 737 was taking off at the same time and they would have been over runway2 when I noticed them. I suspect they scattered when the plane took off. I once witnessed this with a huge flock and a PIA 747.

During planning for runway2 I remember those doing the planning enquiring about local bird movements with CAWOS - gulls going to roost at Rostherne and Canada Geese, but I also recollect no mention at the time of the much greater threat of pinkfeet, as they fly much higher than the Canadas. Presumably they show up on the radar of both the airport and the planes about to take off.

Tony Usher

Conservation News

A round-up of news from the CAWOS conservation representatives, who aim to keep an eye on what is going on in their area. If you have any issues or concerns then do contact your local representative (by letter or email preferably). They may be able to help or should know someone who can!

HALTON AREA

The Mersey Gateway Environment Trust has received a grant from Natural England's Species Recovery Programme to fund management work on the saltmarshes at Widnes and Runcorn to help ground-nesting birds such as Skylark and Lapwing. The work will be undertaken in partnership with Halton Borough Council and The Conservation Volunteers over a two-year period.

Tony Parker, Halton Area Representative

WIRRAL AREA

Tidal Power schemes Tidal Lagoon schemes have been proposed for both the Dee and Mersey estuaries, although in both cases these are in the early stages. Both estuaries are, of course, highly protected sites for wildlife and, in the opinion of your Wirral Conservation Representative, such schemes shouldn't be even contemplated on what are two of the most important wilderness areas in the country.

Neston Reed Bed March 2022 saw a massive fire which destroyed most of Neston Reedbed. That breeding season was decimated and it also had a negative effect on the winter roost of Marsh Harriers. However, this spring the reedbed has showed strong signs of recovery with little evidence of the fire remaining. To avoid any repeat of such devastation the RSPB have been busy digging a perimeter ditch to separate both the public footpath and adjacent houses from the reedbed, they've also dug a network of ditches and a small pool within the reedbed itself. These have the dual purpose of creating firebreaks and also creating a more varied open structure to enhance feeding opportunities for Bittern and Water Rail with fish stocks naturally replenished on high tides via connectivity to existing saltmarsh gutters.

Bird Influenza (HPAI) - 2023 breeding season Breeding Black-headed Gulls were hit hard at RSPB Burton Mere Wetlands with less than 100 pairs nesting compared with the usual 1000 pairs. This in turn had a negative effect on the Avocets which breed within the gull colonies. Breeding of both Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls at Shotton Lagoons were badly effected with large numbers of adults and young of both species found dead

Richard Smith, Wirral Area Representative

CONSERVATION TEAM

Conservation Officer	Steve Turner, 11 Pinfold Way, Weaverham, Northwich, CW8 3NL Tel: 01606 853796 Email: conservation@cawos.org
Chester	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Congleton	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Crewe and Nantwich	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Halton	Tony Parker, 41 The Park, Penketh, Warrington, WA5 2SG. Tel: 01925 726986 Email: tonyparker@cawos.org
Macclesfield	Vacant - please let Steve Turner know if you are willing to take on this role
Vale Royal	Roy Leigh, 8 Hall Drive, Marston, Northwich, Cheshire, CW9 6DT Tel: 01606 892032 Email: roysleigh@aol.com
Warrington	Brian Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Tel: 01925 264251 Email: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com
Wirral	Richard Smith, March Wall, King's Drive North, Caldy, Wirral, CH48 1LL. Tel: 0151 625 2320 Email: richard@deeestuary.co.uk

Diary

DECEMBER 2023

- 1 **CAWOS** **WILDLIFE OF EAST ANGLIA**’ by Kevin Elsby, **Wildlife on the Web**
- 3 KOS Marshside RSPB and Martin Mere WWT, ring for details
- 7 WGBG ‘BELIZE’ by David Swann, followed by Christmas Buffet
- 8 SECOS ‘WADER QUEST’ by Rick Simpson
- 10 SECOS Middleton Lakes RSPB, ring for details
- 15 KOS Christmas Party
- 16 WGBG Car trip to Pennington Flash, followed by lunch, ring for details

JANUARY 2024

- 4 WGBG ‘FRODSHAM MARSHES’ by Bill Morton
- 5 **CAWOS** **‘THE SCIENCE AND BEAUTY OF BIRDS’** by Oliver Smart
- 12 SECOS ‘AN EYE FOR BIRD’ by Bruce Kendrick
- 13 KOS Mere Sands Wood NR, followed by Lunt Meadows
- 21 SECOS Martin Mere WWT, ring for details
- 26 KOS ‘THE LAND OF GEYSERS AND GYRS’ by Keith Offord
- 28 WGBG Coach trip to Far Ings/ North Cave, ring for details

FEBRUARY 2024

- 1 WGBG ‘BEYOND 66 DEGREES NORTH - ARCTIC NORWAY’ by Richard Steel
- 2 **CAWOS** **‘ANTARCTICA, FALKLANDS AND SOUTH GEORGIA’** by Mike Watson
- 9 SECOS ‘A CELEBRATION OF BRITISH BIRDS’ by Nick Martin
- 17 KOS Tatton Park, ring for details
- 18 SECOS North Wales Coast, ring for details
- 23 KOS ‘GORDON YATES FILM NIGHT’
- 23-25 WGBG Minsmere weekend away, ring for details

MARCH 2024

- 1 **CAWOS** **AGM followed by ‘MERSEY WeBS SUMMARY 2022’ (tbc)** by Dermot Smith
- 1-4 SECOS Long Weekend – Dumfries & Galloway, ring for details
- 7 WGBG ‘MERSEY ESTUARY BIRDS’ by Dermot Smith
- 8 SECOS ‘CRANE SPOTTING’ by Ashley Grove
- 10 KOS Burton Mere Wetlands RSPB, ring for details
- 22 KOS ‘A WALK IN THE WOODS’ by Kevin Briggs
- 24 WGBG Coach trip to Middleton Lakes, ring for details

APRIL 2024

- 20 KOS Brockholes Nature Reserve, for ring for details
- 21 SECOS Lake Vyrnwy RSPB, ring for details
- 25 WGBG ‘EQUADOR’ by Peter Booth, preceded by AGM
- 26 KOS AGM and MEMBERS’ IMAGES
- 28 WGBG Coach trip to Rutland Water, ring for details

MAY 2024

- 12 WGBG Coach trip to Bempton / Flamborough, ring for details
- 19 SECOS Burton Mere Wetlands RSPB, ring for details

JUNE 2024

- 2-6 KOS KOS 50th Anniversary Trip to Dumfries and Galloway
- 9-10 SECOS Short Weekend – East Yorkshire, ring for details

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

ADNHS Altrincham & District Natural History Society <http://mpettipher.me.uk/altnats> Meetings: Jubilee Centre, The Firs, Bowdon, Altrincham 7:30pm, contact Jacky Johnson 0161 928 7896

CAWOS Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society www.cawos.org
Meetings currently held by Zoom, starting at 7:45pm, contact Sec. David Hiley 07484 836652

CRSPB Chester RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/chester
Meetings: Christleton Parish Hall, Christleton, CH3 7AS 7:30pm, contact Norman Sadler 01244 335670

CWT Cheshire Wildlife Trust www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk
Contact Michael Singh info@cheshirewt.org.uk

HPRSPB High Peak RSPB Members' Group <https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/groups/highpeak/> Meetings: Senior Citizens' Hall, Marple 7:30pm, contact David Knass 07879 646856

KOS Knutsford Ornithological Society www.10x50.com Meetings: Jubilee Hall, Stanley Road, Knutsford 8pm, contact Sec. Karina Stanley 07532 833083

MRSPB Macclesfield RSPB Members' Group www.rspb.org.uk/groups/macclesfield Meetings: Macclesfield Community Centre, Macclesfield 7:45pm, contact Ray Evans 01625 432635

NNHS Nantwich Natural History Society
Occasional meetings throughout the year, contact Sec. Roger Crow, 01270 618416

SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithological Society www.secos.org.uk
Meetings: Ettiley Heath Church Community Centre at 7:30pm, contact Mike Tonks 07484 306147

WGBG Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group <http://wgbwcopy.wikidot.com/wgbg> Meetings: Wilmslow Guild at 7:30pm, contact Stuart Mollison 07505 254306

Will **affiliated societies**, who wish to advertise meetings of relevance to CAWOS, please send their programme to:- **Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, Cheshire, WA16 6QG** or, *preferably please*, by email: sheilablamire@cawos.org

**If you know anyone who might want to advertise
in future Bird News please let me know and
I'll contact them with all the information.**

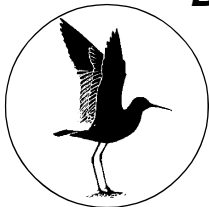
Sheila Blamire at sheilablamire@cawos.org Tel: 01565 830168

Index

Page 1	Guest Editorial	Page 14-15	County Rarities
Page 2-4	CAWOS News	Page 16-21	Ringing News
Page 5	Situations vacant	Page 22-25	Sites to Watch
Page 5-7	County Round-Up	Page 26	Notes and Letters
Page 8-12	Species Spotlight	Page 27	Conservation News
Page 13	Projects and Surveys	Page 28	Diary

‘WILDLIFE OF EAST ANGLIA’

by KEVIN ELSBY on 1st DECEMBER 2023



Low Prices, High Standards.

Binoculars & Telescope Sales

FOCALPOINT OPTICS LTD

Birdwatching at its Best

Phone Focalpoint on 01925 730399

Part Exchange & Repairs Welcome

Opening times

10am - 4pm Mon - Sat

Email: focalpoint@dial.pipex.com / Website: www.fpoint.co.uk

Optics----- ✓
Repairs--- ✓
Books----- ✓
Clothing-- ✓
Bird Art--- ✓
Part Ex--- ✓

