

## Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report September 2014

September 2014 and autumn in full swing but more amazingly the 90<sup>th</sup> month report from Alkborough Flats since the first flooding in 2006. Over that period much has changed on the site with the most obvious differences in vegetative cover having a pronounced influence on the birds and other wildlife that are found on a daily basis.



But other more subtle and less obvious differences in the wider environment of the upper estuary also come into play and changes in the global populations of some species can produce marked local differences in abundance over relatively short time-scales so the continuity of these reports is a useful tool in monitoring wider scale changes in one of the most important estuaries in the UK.

September is a big month for waders with a typical mix of vagrants from east and west being the result of our changing weather patterns but in 2014 static areas of high pressure blocked all approaching Atlantic fronts and meant that we had a month of light winds typically from the east and virtually no rain and this in turn blocked arrivals of nearctic vagrants.

The attraction of **Avocets** jumped from 600 birds on the 1<sup>st</sup> to 860 on the 8<sup>th</sup> but as water levels fell there were only 422 on the 16<sup>th</sup> and by the 23<sup>rd</sup> the site was deserted but the flock had only relocated down the estuary to the Read's Island area demonstrating the interchange of feeding and roosting areas that is so critical for many wader species on our larger estuaries. The last **Little Ringed Plover** of the summer put in an appearance on the 7<sup>th</sup> the same day that **Ringed Plovers** peaked at 19 birds a rather poor effort for this species; **Dunlin** failed to do much better for most of the month with 37 on the 19<sup>th</sup> seeming to be the high point until 87 appeared on the 19<sup>th</sup> for a brief stay. Early autumn **Golden Plover** numbers tend to be highly variable and this year 200 on the 14<sup>th</sup> proved to be an isolated occurrence with no more than 65 on any other day while the **Lapwing** flock was far more consistent with 550 – 650 birds almost daily. Being so far inland coastal waders like Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit are only scarce visitors to the site in spite of their abundance on the outer estuary; September saw a few arrivals of **Knot** with peaks of 19 on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 25 on the 14<sup>th</sup>. There was no major arrival of **Little Stints** or **Curler Sandpipers** with peaks of only four Little Stints and six Curler Sandpipers on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> respectively. Further arrivals of juvenile **Ruffs** took that species' monthly maximum to 68 on the 8<sup>th</sup> when there were 21 juveniles; the flock stayed all month but declined to around 35 – 40 birds by the 30<sup>th</sup>. There was clearly a good passage of **Common Snipe** but as usual estimating how many birds were present was something of a lottery though 45 were visible on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 55 on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The **Black-tailed Godwit** flock varied between 200 and 300 birds with some movements clearly taking place around the estuary but of note were the 41 juveniles on



the 8<sup>th</sup>. The upward trend in **Curlew** numbers continued with 320 counted on the 1<sup>st</sup> forming a new September record total and becoming the sixth month in 2014 to

record an all time high count for this species something of a remarkable event. **Spotted Redshanks** also had a good month with 23 – 24 birds from 7<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> and up to



15 on many other dates and it was also good to see a bit of an upsurge in **Common Redshank** numbers with a peak of 74 on the 8<sup>th</sup> doubling the August maximum. By contrast it has been a poor autumn for **Greenshank** with daily peaks of 4 – 6 birds on most dates only exceeded



by 12 on the 7<sup>th</sup>; up to three **Green Sandpipers** lingered all month and a juvenile **Wood Sandpiper** from 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> was the 12<sup>th</sup> of the year for the Flats. Two **Common Sandpipers** on the 6<sup>th</sup> may be the last of the year.

An exceptionally early flock of six **Pink-footed Geese** arrived back on the 7<sup>th</sup> with a more expected passage of birds building up from the 23<sup>rd</sup> when the winds changed to north-west assisting the movement of birds from Iceland and seeing 4000 birds back on the Humber before October and unusually high number.

Although high numbers of **Shelduck** remained on the upper Humber the Flats failed to pull in any significant totals with a peak of just 100 birds on the 8<sup>th</sup>; the shrinking area of mud and the rapid desiccation of the site over neap tides seems to be now having a detrimental effect upon the use of the site by this iconic species. **Wigeon** were slow to arrive but 78 were on site on the 11<sup>th</sup> and up to 300 in the area over the next few days though mostly they stayed on the Humber. The intermittent appearance of **Gadwall** continued during the month with 28 present on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 56 on the 13<sup>th</sup>; the fact that the August peak was also 56 suggests that it is a local upper Humber flock that moves between different localities. Up to mid month **Teal** seemed to be on a continuous increase with numbers climbing from 960 on the 1<sup>st</sup> to 1020 by the 8<sup>th</sup> and 1860 on the 16<sup>th</sup> but thereafter totals fell again presumably due to movement of birds between other sites in the upper estuary or onward movement of passage birds. A chance scan of some close Teal on the 11<sup>th</sup> turned up a lingering **Garganey** presumably the last of the year. A flurry of **Pintail** records started with one on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and culminated in a total of 36 present on the 11<sup>th</sup> with 10 on the 14<sup>th</sup> but a rather barren end to the month. The annual peak of **Shoveler** usually occurs in August but the peak of 94 recorded in August 2014 was



exceeded by a count of 147 on 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> the highest ever September total for the site. On the reedbed **Pochard** hung on with nine on the 1<sup>st</sup> and five on the 8<sup>th</sup> but **Tufted Ducks** exceeded their spring peak with 30 birds for much

of the month and 34 on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Two late broods of **Little Grebes** still had small young at the start of September with a total of 16 birds being noted mid month. The number of **Little Egrets** fell away after the August record to a maximum of 25 in September but even this matched the previous highest annual total recorded in August 2012 and demonstrates the continuing expansion and increase in the British population of this beautiful little heron. The **Spoonbill** flock became more erratic in appearances with seven birds including the colour ringed



individual remaining on site to the 14<sup>th</sup> but there were eight on the 10<sup>th</sup> and then the last single on the 16<sup>th</sup>. In the reedbeds the almost constant squealing and grunting of **Water Rails** suggested a rather large number of birds were present so a conservative estimate of 30 created a new record for the site and it appeared that many broods fledged.



Pick of the raptors in a fairly lean month was an **Osprey** heading south on the 7<sup>th</sup>; a **Merlin** on the 10<sup>th</sup>, two adult **Hobbies** on the 1<sup>st</sup> and the last of the year on the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> with a minimum of three different **Peregrines** were the best of the rest.



A single **Little Gull** lingered to the 11<sup>th</sup>, at least three **Kingfishers** were dotted around the site and up to 150 **Bearded Tits** and 50 **Reed Buntings** were noted daily. Notable passerine records included a total of 28 **Jays** logged on the 20<sup>th</sup> as they dispersed in search of winter



foods, the last three **Whitethroats** 8<sup>th</sup>, **Sand Martin** and **Yellow Wagtail** on the 16<sup>th</sup>, **Grey Wagtails** on the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> and **Redstarts** on the 1<sup>st</sup>, two on 13<sup>th</sup> and one 14<sup>th</sup> but by far the rarest bird of the month was a **Hawfinch** that flew out over the Flats and then went off east on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Graham Catley

All photographs © Graham Catley. Nyctea Ltd