

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report November 2014

Normally wildfowl and waders take up the bulk of these monthly reports as they are the species most frequently occurring on the Flats but November 2014 was a good month for smaller birds particularly scarce passerines and thus we start with a run down of the more and less obvious birds of the month.

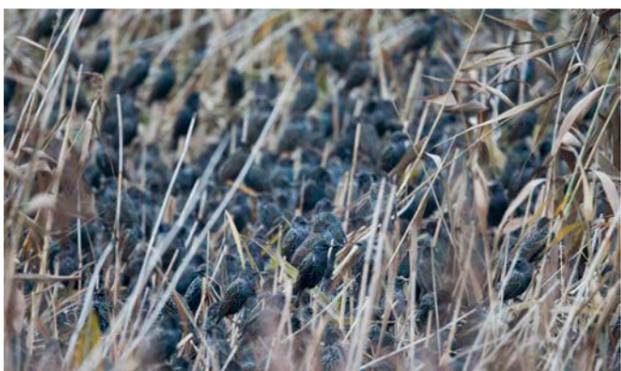
The humble **Starling** was long regarded as a bit of a bad guy in gardens, dominating feeders and eating all of the food put out for smaller birds but over the last 10



-15 years the realisation that Starlings were no longer numerous in gardens even in winter started to dawn and now many people seldom see the species which has undergone national declines of 80% as a breeding bird in our increasingly sterile countryside with its lack of suitable nest sites. Fortunately for us the species is still doing much better in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia and this region provides us with a wintering population that numbers several million birds, arriving from late September onwards along the east coast the flocks



spread inland to favoured wintering areas that often include wet pastures. On the Flats the wet grassland has been holding a flock of 500 – 1500 birds this autumn but it is the evenings that have drawn the crowns of Starlings and would be murmuration watchers. Starlings gather to roost in woodlands or reedbeds in numbers that often tax the most experienced of bird counters with the largest in the UK holding up to one million birds. On the Flats the number of roosting birds built up quickly this year to unprecedented totals with an estimate on the 16th



suggesting a total of 200,000 birds an amazing number. Often apparently stimulated by the presence of raptors, which at Alkborough includes Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Peregrines and Sparrowhawks, the huge flocks perform spectacular movements known as murmurations as the flocks coalesce and manoeuvre at high speed forming amazingly complex patterns and shapes in the late evening sky. Not every night produces a good show but when everything comes together some truly stupefying views can be had; one such evening event was brilliantly captured by Wayne Gillatt in the video linked below; http://normanbynature.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/starling-murmuration_17.html.

After a singing **Cetti's Warbler** was heard at the end of September 2014 at least two birds were present on the Flats from the 9th and possibly three birds were recorded. The species continues to expand its range in the north of Lincolnshire and has now spread to several sites in East Yorkshire so it seems only a matter of time before they

attempt to nest at Alkborough. **Bearded Tits** became far less obvious, as is typical of the species, as they settled into wintering reedbeds and reduced their vocal output.

Meadow Pipit is a regular breeding bird on the Flats with 80+ pairs in summer but almost all of the birds depart after the breeding season though a flock of 10 – 15 birds was noted this month some of them associating with two to three **Water Pipits** that proved typically elusive as they spent the majority of their time feeding in the beds of sea aster in the fresh marsh. This species breeds in the alpine meadows in the Alps and Pyrenees and unlike



most passerines moves north in winter to areas of fresh marsh with abundant vegetation where they are able to survive even relatively cold conditions. A seemingly regular wintering bird on the Flats in small numbers they are always hard to tie down and are usually located by their call notes as they fly long distances between favoured feeding areas. Although there are usually



records of only one to three birds the winter of 2007 – 2008 produced a flock of at least 30 birds an exceptional occurrence for the region and county of Lincolnshire. At least one **Grey Wagtail** was seen on a few dates mainly around the sewage works and the adjacent ponds. Up to three **Kingfishers** continued to frequent the site and after the October arrival **Stonechats** were seen regularly with two pairs from the 9th but only three birds seemed to have survived to the 30th. Winter thrushes were slow arriving but a small influx of birds on the 16th brought a flock of 19 **Fieldfares** and a little group of **Blackbirds** the latter feeding on the hawthorn berries at the Whitton end of the site were accompanied by a juvenile **Ring Ouzel** a notably late migrant and the second bird of the autumn. Completing the non-wader and wildfowl list a **Barn Owl** was seen on odd evenings and a **Short-eared Owl** was hunting over the Trent foreshore at dusk on the 22nd.

Murky weather with easterly winds are a good vector for seabirds moving into the inner Humber but most do not get past the Humber Bridge; a few Gannets and some skuas do make the bridge crossing and on the 29th two parties of five and three juvenile **Pomarine Skuas** were seen heading over the bridge at Barton; later in the day



a single **Pomarine Skua** appeared over the Trent Falls hide and went inland towards Adlingfleet while what must have been the same party of three birds arrived off the Humber and Trent and then looped back over the Flats to the Humber off the breach. This scarce skua

has not been recorded on the Flats before and becomes the third species of skua recorded since 2007. An adult **Mediterranean Gull** on the 9th was ringed with a white colour ring but was too distant for the combination to be read. At least 30 **Water Rails** were audible in the reedbeds but it is quite possible that more birds were present.

It was another good month for **Whooper Swan** passage



with three on the 8th and 16th but a very obvious movement of birds on the 23rd when a total of 55 birds flew south in six different flocks ranging in size from four to 16 birds. Up to 520 **Greylag** and 220 **Canada Geese** were logged on the pasture fields and Trent foreshore but the only **Pink-footed Geese** to land were five on the 16th though many flocks passed overhead. Other wildfowl peaks included 1845 **Teal** and 346 **Wigeon** on the 9th, 300 **Shelduck** on 22nd, six **Gadwall** on the 29th, up to 10 **Pintail**, a peak of 74 **Shoveler** on the 29th but 34 for most of the month, a **Goldeneye** flying onto the Trent on the 16th, a female **Goosander** that landed in front of the main hide on the 9th and the last **Little Grebe** of the year on the 16th. **Great White Egret** is a species on the increase but this year has produced three records on the Flats with the most recent a bird that fed by the tower hide on the 21st and then flew in presumably to roost at 16:00 on the 22nd. A **Bittern** on the 8th was the first seen since the summer while **Little Egret** numbers generally dropped off but ten roosted on 1st. a gathering of ten **Marsh Harriers** on the 22nd took that day's tally to 13 birds but the fact that they



were all attempting to take one injured Teal was a notable winter feeding strategy not previously recorded on the Flats. A single female **Hen Harrier** on 8th – 9th and 16th – 22nd was seen to take a Starling from the roost gathering on the 9th while a **Merlin** seen regularly from the 8th – 30th was seen taking two Dunlin. Up to three **Peregrines** including two juveniles and three Sparrowhawks often attended the evening Starling roost.

A single **Avocet** hung on to the 22nd; up to 8000 **Golden Plovers** were regular but **Lapwing** numbers were very impressive with 5200 birds on several dates from 16th. A **Little Stint** first seen on the 18th stayed to the 30th and will presumably now winter in the area but a juvenile **Curlew Sandpiper** seen on the 9th was a one-day bird. **Dunlin** and **Black-tailed Godwits** both peaked on the 16th at 396 and 297 respectively and one the same date 30 **Ruff** appeared in the early morning but disappeared soon after and no more than ten were seen on any other date. A record count of four **Jack Snipe** on the 16th was a result of a concerted search of some of the suitable habitat that also revealed 56 **Common Snipe**. There were 63 **Redshank** from mid month and up to 10 **Spotted Redshank** while a single **Greenshank** lingered to the 14th and a **Green Sandpiper** looks set to winter again being seen all month.

Graham Catley

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