

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report February 2015

The winter of 2014 – 2015 has been another relatively benign one with no prolonged spells of hard weather that may have affected bird survival so by late February and the worst of the winter already passed spring was certainly in the air by the last week when various birds were breaking into song particularly obvious being the Skylarks.

A pair of **Mute Swans** in residence on the new reedbed may be the immature birds present for a few years that have thus far failed to nest successfully but this is not unusual in such large, long-lived species that often do not breed until they are over six years of age. The first flock of nine **Whooper Swans** flew north on the 28th. The Humber **Pink-footed Goose** population remained in a buoyant state through the winter with regular appearances of flocks over the Flats but few dropped in though there were 76 on the Humber grassland on the 13th; this flock was notable in that they were accompanied by a party of seven **European White-fronted Geese**, probably



a family party. European White-front has become an increasingly scarce species in Britain as most of the population are short stopping in the Netherlands due to generally warmer winters. Although the number of birds recorded in Britain varies every winter there has been a 26% decrease between 2001/2002 and 2011/2012 and a 59% decline between 1985/86 and 2011/2012. At Slimbridge, on the Severn Estuary, the former stronghold of the species in Britain a peak winter population of 7600 was recorded in the 1968/69 winter but there has been a 89% decline there between 1998/99 and 2009/10. At Alkborough Flats there was a notable arrival of European



White-fronted Geese in the 2010/2011 winter with a flock of 47 in December but this was eclipsed the following winter when up to 129 birds were noted between late December 2011 and February 2012. The much rarer Greenland White-fronted Goose, typically restricted to Western Scotland and Ireland, also graced the site in 2011/2012 with a party of six adults frequenting the northern grasslands and Whitton Sand from January



2012 to February; the latter flock were accompanied by a single juvenile European White-fronted Goose begging the question where did the two widely separated species come into contact maybe on the Humber? More information on European White-fronted Goose can be found at the link below. <http://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Waterbird-Review-Series-Greater-White-fronted-Goose.pdf>

The naturalized local geese increased in occurrence during the month as they approached the breeding season with **Greylags** peaking at 158 on the 20th while there were 96 **Canada Geese** on the 13th and 700 **Barnacle Geese** on the 21st. The latter birds were accompanied by the usual Ross's Goose x Barnacle Goose hybrid and there



were varying small numbers of other hybrids between Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese demonstrating the propensity of all three species to pair up with birds of the wrong species in spite of the presence of their own species in the area where they nest. **Shelduck** numbers were generally low with a peak of 59 in the first two weeks but 122 had gathered again on the 20th and 196 on the 27th. Flooding of the grasslands by the Humber started to attract some of the feeding **Wigeon** from the third week while the rest of the flock typically fed on the new reedbed and the Trent foreshore. In total there were 572 on the 13th and 592 on the 27th with numbers varying daily as birds moved between the Flats and the adjacent areas of the Humber and Trent. It has also been a topsy turvy winter for **Teal** on the Flats with a low point on the 11th when 197 birds were all that could be found but a sustained increase from then on saw 253 on the 13th and 442 by the 20th. Most of the latter birds were feeding in the flooded pasture and rough grass fields south of the main



hide where food was clearly available. Wintering Teal in Britain originate not only from the British population but from Iceland, the near continent, Scandinavia and north-west Russia and it is likely that the Humber birds come from a variety of populations with British birds forming the early returnees in late spring and the later departures probably involving birds that have farthest to travel to their breeding grounds. Scarcer waterfowl included the usual small party of **Pochard** and **Tufted Ducks** on the new reedbed with the former species peaking at 16 on the 27th and the latter 21 on the same date. Surprisingly a maximum of only two **Shoveler** was recorded a number beaten by the increasingly numerous **Gadwall** of which there were 12 birds by the 27th and **Pintail** with nine birds on the 22nd. Only a single **Little Egret** had been present during January and early February but three birds were seen on the 20th and there were five by the 22nd. Two pairs of **Common Buzzards** were displaying over



the adjacent escarpment and a pair of **Peregrines** were similarly engaged on the 23rd while a **Merlin** was seen on a few dates and Hen Harriers disappeared although odd birds were seen across the Trent including an adult male. The new reedbed had seen **Coots** present all through the winter in small numbers but there was an obvious arrival from the 18th with 26 present by the 20th when a

pair of **Little Grebes** was also present in preparation for the breeding season.

The wet grass fields continued to attract the bulk of the feeding waders present but the number of both the plover species, **Golden Plover** and **Lapwing** were reduced with a peak of 900 Golden Plovers on the 27th and 1815 Lapwing on the 20th. As the winter progressed **Dunlin** became more obvious and numerous with 1480 on the



20th a significant part of the upper estuary population. The flocks moved between the various parts of the inundation area as well as the flooded grass and arable fields but in spite of close scrutiny the Little Stint was no seen after the end of January. The flock of **Spotted Redshanks** continued to wander between Blacktoft, Trent Falls and the Flats with ten birds still present but the flock split into smaller parties on some days. **Redshank** numbers were lower than the January peak but up to 52 birds were noted. Only four **Ruff** were seen on one date and most days there were none present and though the **Green Sandpiper** was seen on a few occasions it also seemed to be much more elusive than birds in previous winters. Up to 158 **Black-tailed Godwits** were seen all month with odd birds starting to adopt some brighter spring plumage by the end of the month and a dedicated



walk around turned up a total of 46 **Common Snipe** on the 20th but no Jack Snipe after the excellent January presence while a roost count located a peak of 427 **Curlew** on the 1st. The first **Avocets** usually return in the last days of February or early March so 21 on the 27th was expected but the total of 245 that arrived on the 28th was by a long way a new February record total the only previous notable count being of 110 in February 2014. Single **Barn Owl** and **Kingfishers** were recorded on several dates and the male **Cetti's Warbler** continued to rattle and sing from its chosen territory but passerines were generally in lower numbers though there were up to 50 **Reed Buntings** and 100 **Linnets** and a flock of 17 **Bearded Tits** was no doubt only a part of the wintering population. One pair of **Stonechats** were obvious and



the flock of 500 **Starlings** still held the white headed bird.

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