

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report March 2015

March so full of promise and yet so often disappointing bird wise fulfilled its prophesy in 2015 as days lengthened but the winds remained cold and persistent often from the north-west or east killing off migration from the south. High spring tides over the weekend of the 21st – 23rd refreshed the inundation area after a longish dry spell and produced an increase in **Shelducks** up to 172 birds, but in spite of flooding and rains the pastures started to dry out and in general geese numbers started to decline as birds moved into breeding sites. After a winter of avoiding the Flats the **Barnacle Geese** arrived en masse with 780 birds from 21st – 24th and they were accompanied by a single **Dark-bellied Brent Goose** on 23rd – 24th while three **Egyptian Geese** were in the same area from 18th – 23rd; the latter species is the latest



introduced species to be spreading around Britain and gaining a foothold as a breeding bird in Lincolnshire after breaking out of their former stronghold in East Anglia. A



notable movement of **Whooper Swans** on the morning of the 11th saw a flock of 53 birds heading northwest but two other parties probably moved over the site earlier in the day. A single bird lingered around the breach and on the south side of Whitton Sand from 21st to 23rd. There were still 540 **Wigeon** up to the 18th but a gradual drop in numbers left 430 on the 23rd; **Teal** numbers have been low through most of the winter after the large autumn arrival and they declined further after 261 being recorded on the 2nd with 150 remaining on the 6th and 144 by the 23rd. On the new reedbed diving duck numbers remained volatile with **Pochard** increasing to 30 on the 21st but **Tufted Duck** numbers fell to 11 from 21 on the 2nd. In the same area the **Little Grebes** became much more vocal with at least six birds in residence though **Coot** numbers fell away to eight pairs. Also increasing in volume were the **Water Rails** scattered around the reedbeds with their distinctive sharming screams emanating from several areas and odd grunts and strange noises also betraying their locations on calmer days and cold evenings. **Little Egrets** were on the move and daily totals varied between two and ten birds; an early **Spoonbill** appeared on the 14th and was still present in the area on the 15th but this proved to be a short stay.

A splendid **Red Kite** appeared over the Flats before heading off inland and then tracking south on the 6th. In spite of the huge increase in numbers that has taken place since the species reintroduction schemes in the



1980's and 1990's and there being breeding birds within 30 miles of the site birds tend to be quite site faithful

and wander little once they reach adulthood but younger birds often move large distances checking out potential



breeding areas and March – June is the time when these wanderings reach a peak. On sunny bright days the local **Marsh Harriers** started some displays but the generally cold weather seemed to even inhibit their territorial establishment. Up to six to eight different birds could still be identified over the Flats on good days. **Common Buzzards** are clearly well established in the area and two pairs were patrolling the hillside to the south of the site in addition to which odd birds passed through. Interestingly one of the local birds was a pale individual, a variation in Buzzard plumages that was formerly only regular in Scandinavia and central Europe but in the past ten years such birds have started to occur in the British breeding populations and seem to be on the increase; whether



they originated from Scandinavian wintering birds or if a genetic throwback is involved is not at all clear. Both adult and juvenile **Peregrines** were seen most days but just how many different birds visit the site is still a mystery; are they all local breeding birds or do we get wandering immatures or a mix of wandering and passage birds and local breeders? What is certain is that you are now more likely to see a Peregrine than a Merlin and Hen Harrier as the latter two species have declined dramatically through human persecution while Peregrines have managed to adapt to living in urban environments where they have a better chance of survival. For the second successive year **Common Cranes** passed over the site but this year a flock of six on the morning of the 13th was particularly impressive for those lucky enough to have picked them up. Unlike 2014 the birds did not land and there were no subsequent sightings. The first **Oystercatchers** returned at the beginning of the month with five birds present by the 11th. Much more obvious though was the influx of **Avocets**; with 253 present in the first two days of the month it looked like being a record year but by the 6th there were none at all. A return of birds from further down



the estuary was assumed when 300 were noted during 14th – 18th but an exodus saw only 25 again on the 23rd but by the 27th there were again 203 noisy birds feeding, displaying and mating. With a large population further down the estuary it is easy to assume that birds simply move up and down the Humber from day to day but things are clearly much more complex and the observation of a colour-ringed bird, H7 revealed some of the complexities of Avocet movements in relation to the Flats. H7 was

ringed as a chick in a small colony in Cambridgeshire on June 26th 2010 and by August 5th it was at Alkborough staying until August 19th. It then disappeared and was next seen at Grafham water Cambridgeshire on April 5th 2012 before resurfacing at Alkborough on July 13th. Another 31 months then passed before anyone saw it again this time at Frampton Marsh in south Lincolnshire on March 26th 2015; amazingly the following day at 14:07 H7 was



photographed mating with a female at Alkborough Flats confirming it to be a he. This rapid movement of birds between prospective colonies is seldom recorded but as more birds are being colour ringed at smaller colonies we are learning more about just how mobile these birds can be from year to year. The first **Ringed Plover** of the spring arrived on the 15th but there were no sightings of Little Ringed Plovers a regular feature of recent springs in March. Other waders were typically in decline with the peak monthly count of Lapwings being just 14 birds, **Dunlin** numbers fell from 550 on the 11th to 164 by the 23rd but numbers of **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Redshanks** remained pretty static with 152 of the former and 58 – 64 of the latter. After a very poor winter a small passage of **Ruffs** saw five present by the 23rd and 11 on



the 28th; the latter included a colour-ringed female that appears to be from a German scheme. The flock of ten **Spotted Redshanks** remained in situ to the 2nd but only two were seen on the 27th – 28th.

Away from waders and wildfowl a **Kingfisher** was seen on several dates, the **Green Woodpecker** was yaffling from the escarpment, **Skylarks** suddenly arrived en masse with singing birds spreading over the grasslands while



Meadow Pipits were also parachuting and singing on the better days. Passage of wagtails got under way with Pies passing through and a flock of four **Grey Wagtails** by the car park on the 7th. a single male Stonechat was seen on the 11th, the first singing **Chiffchaff** arrived on the 7th with three by the 14th, the male **Cetti's Warbler** moved his territory but continued to sing and to round off the passerines a **Twite** flew west along the Humber shore on the 23rd.

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