

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report July 2015

Mid-summer and July produced a typical British mix of hot and sticky, cool and wet and sometimes windy weather but the mix of birds was also interesting if not spectacular. Summer waterfowl are in eclipse plumage, ducks and moulting like the geese and tend not to produce any exciting images. The pair of **Mute Swans** on the reedbed still had their two surviving cygnets while another pair arrived with a single youngster the two pairs keeping their distance at opposite ends of the pools. Up to 120 **Greylag Geese** was a typical count but it has often been noted that the large flock of **Barnacle Geese**



on Whitton Sand seldom venture onto the Flats but this year they have started early and in unusual numbers with 282 present on the 30th. The number of **Shelducks** built up rapidly on the Humber topping the 1200 mark but during the same period the numbers at Alkborough Flats only peaked at 110 on the 14th and fell back to 36 on the 30th the majority of which were fledged juveniles. Two **Wigeon** were back on site on the 5th with three, two drakes, on the 14th but there were no further records and **Teal** were unusually scarce for July with the highest count being only 29 birds while there were no more than two Shoveler both being in stark contrast to **Mallard** that were in higher than average numbers with several counts of 110. Only a single female **Pochard** was seen on the 8th and no broods appeared but a single brood of **Tufted Ducks** numbered five young. Following a poor season a brood of young **Little Grebes** was heard on the 30th. **Water Rails** continued to be audibly evident around the reedbeds with a brood of five newly hatched young being seen on the Trent Flash in the 14th.



The fortunes of egrets continue to be notable with **Little Egret** numbers reaching 21 at both ends of the month and yet another arrival by a **Great White Egret** on the 24th. First recorded on the Flats in 2010, March 29th – 31st, and subsequently intermittently between June 2nd – 19th 2013 there were three records in 2014 on June 13th,



August 30th and November 21st – 22nd clearly showing the increasing status of this species in Britain where birds have bred now for four years in the south-west. This particular individual was seen regularly during 24th – 26th but then disappeared only to reappear on the 29th with roosting Little Egrets. Herons are notable wanderers and can travel up to 150 kms in a day between feeding sites so individual rare birds may occur at several sites over the course of several days while they also have a

tendency to return to sites they have visited in the past



and found to be productive as feeding sites. It was also a good month for people wanting to see **Spoonbills** as the flock of immatures became ever more approachable. Two birds at the start of the month increased to four by the 8th then a peak of six mid month with five from then to the month end. How many birds are involved is always contentious as there appears to be a changeover of individuals but some birds clearly leave the site and return after a few days perhaps having been recorded at other sites in between dates. The first dispersing juvenile **Marsh Harriers** began to wander over the site but in general the number of harriers was reduced as adults went into post breeding moult. Both the male and female **Montagu's Harriers**, nesting at Blacktoft Sands, made several visits to the Flats during the month but their



single youngster had failed to cross the eatery divide of the River Trent up to the 31st. this is the second year in succession that this spectacular species has nested on the upper Humber with birds visiting Alkborough Flats and providing a unique opportunity to see the rarest British breeding raptor at its only northern outpost in Britain. Montagu's Harriers are partially nomadic and settle in areas where seasonal food is available in abundance such as areas where vole plagues occur. The centre of the European population is in Spain and Portugal but large numbers nest in central France and into Eastern



Europe and European Russia where less intensive agriculture provides nesting and hunting habitats for the species. In Britain the population has varied markedly over the last 100 years with a notable peak in the 1950's when up to 30 pairs were breeding annually and birds being found north to Southern Scotland. By the 1960's the population was in free fall and reached a low in 1974 when none were known to have bred. Since then most of the breeding attempts have been in southern England as far north as the Wash but recent years have seen less than ten nesting attempts being made and production of young has been particularly poor.

Other raptors on site included the usual **Common Buzzards** and **Kestrels** with an early **Merlin** from the 23rd to the 26th, odd **Hobbies** on a several dates and up to three **Peregrines** including an adult and two juveniles seen together on the 18th.

Waders form a large part of the avifauna of the Flats and

one species dominated July; **Avocets** built up quickly from an already notable 686 on the 4th to 984 by the



14th but even this count was eclipsed by a total of 1150 on the 17th and then 1202 on the 30th. All of the highest Avocet counts have occurred in the last four years clearly demonstrating the increasing importance of the Flats for this species in the early autumn period. The highest previous July total was 968 in 2014 with 893 in 2012 whereas the previous all time peak of 1200 birds occurred in August 2014. As usual there were sightings of several birds from colonies in Northern England up to the Tyne but also from Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk and apparently from France though the details of the latter birds have not yet been confirmed. Initially 95% of the birds were adults or non-breeding immatures but the number of fledged juveniles increased to 50+ by the middle of the month. There was also a good passage of mainly juvenile **Little Ringed Plovers** with peaks of 11 – 14 birds, up to 400 **Lapwings** were present daily, a summer plumaged **Knot** on the 17th, a peak of 49 **Dunlin** on the 20th, up to 15 **Ruffs**, 195 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 1



– 2 lingering **Bar-tailed Godwits**, a flock of 18 **Whimbrel** flying south on the 26th and a new July record count of 409 **Curlew** on the 30th formed the bulk of the additional waders. The previous highest Curlew total was 300 in 2014 showing another species that is clearly increasing in abundance on the site as the habitats change. Only single **Spotted Redshanks** were seen regularly with 6 on a couple of days, **Redshanks** built up to 51 by the 19th and there was another poor passage of **Greenshanks** with a maximum of 10 on the 19th. The **Green Sandpiper** peak was also low at just five birds and the only count of **Common Sandpipers** of note was 10 on the evening of the 18th.



Terns seldom linger for more than a few minutes on the site but three **Sandwich Terns** did at least land for a while on the 12th while a single **Common Tern** passed through on the 2nd and a family party of two adults and two juveniles were all fishing on the 23rd.

Passerines were typically elusive in July but odd **Kingfishers** were present, 30 **Swifts** hawking on the 26th, up to 40 **alba Wagtails** and a male **Grasshopper Warbler** was singing again 3rd – 4th.

Graham Catley, Nyctea Ltd
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