

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report October 2015

While waders and wildfowl typically take centre stage at Alkborough Flats the site has a good variety of smaller birds throughout the year and autumn brings migrants as well as the first winter visitors. With a breeding population of over 150 pairs of **Reed Buntings** there should be at least 500 birds around by the end of the breeding season but as birds are well spread across the site observers seldom see more than ten or twenty birds in one place and there were only an estimated 100 birds at the end



of the month showing that post-breeding dispersal leads to many birds departing from the Flats by late autumn. Other seed eaters noted at the month end were a flock of 10 **Yellowhammers** and up to 12 **Tree Sparrows** were feeding on the stubbles from the 10th onwards. A flock of eight **Lesser Redpolls** was also notable on the 14th and the stubble fields and rough grass also held up to 40 **Linnets**, 25 **Goldfinch** and 22 **Greenfinches**. The autumn **Starling** flock swelled to 5000 on the wet grass fields but the evening roost has yet to reach anything like the size seen in the last two winters with a peak of 10,000 birds on the 30th. On the 14th the first **Redwings** and a



Brambling arrived and with the winds from the south-east for much of the month there were several small flocks of Redwings over ensuing days. **Bearded Tits** have had a good breeding season and the irrupting flocks have been a major feature of the autumn period with estimates of up to 150 birds being made on good days but with small parties spread around all the reedbeds there could well have been a lot more birds in total. Less expected in the reedbeds but a regular winter feeder were flocks of Long-tailed Tits with 10 on the 14th and 14 on the 28th in addition to which the winter **Wren** population moved into the reeds with a few **Blue Tits**. All of these species take advantage of the insects and caterpillars found in the reedbeds in addition to which in cold weather the thick, dense reed stems produce a micro-climate that can produce temperatures much higher than outside the reedbeds and produce a warm winter roost. The last two **Swallows** were seen locally from 10th – 15th. **Chiffchaff** is usually the last of the summer warblers to depart with odd birds occasionally recorded in winter so three on the 8th was not unusual but a juvenile **Sedge Warbler** on the 10th was by a long way the latest ever recorded on the Flats. Most Sedge Warblers have departed by the end of the first week in September but there were obviously some late broods this year and three juveniles were together



on September 17th in itself a late date. **Cetti's Warbler**, a recent colonist of the Humber area, continues to increase in numbers and range with probable breeding occurring

in 2015 for the first time. The species is susceptible to hard winter weather as it is a resident or partial migrant and hence birds tend to spread out into different areas of habitat in the winter where they hold territories that hold enough winter food for single birds. Surveys in October revealed that there were at least four Cetti's Warblers on the Flats but possibly five, new record totals. It has been a good autumn for **Grey Wagtails** and one or two birds were regular all month. An easy bird to identify from its calls and appearance even in flight the Grey Wagtail cannot be described as elusive but the same could not be said of the **Rock / Water Pipits** that were regularly flying around over the saltmarsh calling before flying off or dropping out of sight. There were certainly Rock Pipits on some dates with two together on the 26th but Water Pipits were suspected on calls on several dates from mid month but it may take some freezing weather to force them into open locations where they are more visible. Up to three **Kingfishers** were seen daily and there were also at least three **Short-eared Owls** but their appearances were somewhat erratic. There has been a



notable arrival of Short-eared Owls along the east coast this autumn following a presumed good breeding season in Scandinavia and Russia after which juveniles disperse in search of winter food supplies. Unfortunately most the eastern Britain suffered a vole crash in 2015 following a bumper year in 2014 and so there may not be a lot of the owl's favoured vole prey available for them this winter but there are signs that the foreshore at Alkborough Flats has some voles at least so hopefully the owls will remain with us for some weeks. Up to four Kestrels were hunting the rough grass areas on the site suggesting that the area did indeed have a reasonable vole population this autumn. Up to nine different **Marsh Harriers** were noted during the month including at least two full adult males. On the 14th a young adult male **Marsh Harrier** was flying at about 100 feet up surrounded by a flock of Lapwings that were not really mobbing it but just flying alongside the raptor when it suddenly stooped and stuck out a leg taking a Lapwing by surprise and killed it in flight carrying it off towards the ground. This was the first time that I have ever seen such behaviour from a Marsh Harrier in several 1000 hours of study but it was clearly an opportunistic attack that worked, in most instances the Lapwing would have seen it coming and avoided the attack but maybe this was a young inexperienced



bird. The only report of a **Hen Harrier** was on the 23rd and the only **Merlin** records were on the 8th and 30th, the latter bird attacking the roosting Starlings. The pair of **Common Buzzards** from the adjacent escarpment took to sitting in the hedges south of the main hide with the pale adult inviting confusion with other raptors notable Rough-legged buzzard. Winding up the raptor roll call at least two different **Peregrines** were noted on most days though they did seem to become less regular towards the end of the month.

The calls of geese evoke different emotions in people with the coarse and grating sound of the ever present

Greylags typically announcing a rowdy gang of swarthy ancestors of the farmyard goose but the sound of **Pink-footed Geese** newly arrived from their long sea crossing from Iceland, pinking, constantly as they stay in touch with each other is produces a totally different reaction welcoming these great wanderers that return year on year to the Humber to grace our dark winter days. Thankfully Pink-feet are doing well at present and the count of 11,230 birds roosting on Whitton Sand on the 19th combined with 8200 at Read's Island produced the highest ever Humber total for this species. Up to 320 birds dropped in on the Flats with other geese but flocks were almost a constant feature of the latter half of the month as they commuted back and forth overhead calling even more frequently when lost in the murk and fog that pervaded much of the last week. Also arriving from Iceland were the first **Whooper Swans** with six adults dropping in



briefly on the morning of the 14th before continuing and being seen at Boultham Mere on the outskirts of Lincoln an hour later. Two more adults on the 26th preceded the arrival of a flock of 17 on the 30th. This flock fed all day on the stubble fields with Greylag Geese. The flock consisted of a pair of adults with five cygnets, a good brood size for this species, and ten additional adults. For most of the month there were less than 20 **Shelducks** on the Flats but high spring tides at the end of the month saw 243 birds present on the 30th. The same spring tides appeared to coincide with a large arrival of wildfowl from Scandinavia as well as Iceland with **Wigeon** numbers shooting up from 377 on the 27th to 1078 by the 30th but more impressive were the **Teal**. It had already been a good autumn for Teal with 2280 on September 30th but numbers fell in October before a huge arrival saw 4460 counted on the 30th. This count was the highest ever total for the Flats even exceeding the 4200 recorded during



the surge tide flooding in December 2013. **Pintail** were also noted on most days with a peak of 16 on the 8th while 22 **Gadwall** and 114 **Shoveler** on the 30th were both monthly maxima. Lastly three **Goldeneye** on the 19th were the rarest ducks of the month. The Little Egret maximum was ten on the 14th.

Avocets were absent for most of October but 106 reappeared on the 21st and there were 352 on the 24th before they presumably headed off to the south coast for their winter holidays. **Golden Plovers** have been slow to build up with a peak of only 2300 on the 10th while 1304 **Lapwings** were present on the 8th. Flocks of 88 **Dunlin** on the 14th and 100 on the 24th were the exceptions to a poor presence and **Ruff** numbers varied daily but 32 on the 8th and 26 from the 22nd to 30th were both good totals. Other waders maxima in the month were 45 **Snipe**, 190 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 251 **Curlew**, 20 **Spotted Redshank** on the 6th, 73 **Redshank**, two **Greenshank** and two **Green Sandpipers** all of the latter birds present to the 31st.

Finally with the continuing very mild weather a few records of day-flying Noctule bats were logged.

Graham Catley

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