

## Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report March 2016

The year marched on and spring should in theory have been almost upon us but with a cold and windy spell at the end of the month there was often little sign of any real change in bird species on the Flats though the inevitable departure of wildfowl and waders for northern breeding grounds was evident as daily counts of many species dwindled.

Two pairs of **Mute Swans** got down to some serious nest building at the same time as a notable passage of **Whooper Swans** saw these birds that had wintered on the Ouse and Nene Washes heading off on the first stage



of their return passage to Iceland. The family of four birds present all winter were still present on the 13<sup>th</sup> when they dropped onto the Trent Flash field with a party of 16 birds that paused for the day resting after the first part of their



travels. On the same day a flock of 66 birds flew north over the Flats in the fog and later in the day another flock of 37 birds dropped onto the Humber making a day total of 123 birds. The **Barnacle Geese** were still on site through to the 11<sup>th</sup> with the flock peaking at 2180 birds a stunning sight. Other geese numbers were far less remarkable with 193 **Greylags** on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 16 **Pink-feet** on the 11<sup>th</sup> being the only notable totals. **Shelduck** numbers never beat the 188 present on the 11<sup>th</sup> but **Wigeon** continued to favour the flooded grass fields with a maximum of 1000 on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 620 still present on the 16<sup>th</sup> before birds started to depart in the third week.



The same flooded grass fields continued to attract excellent numbers of dabbling duck particularly as levels dropped later in the month with the count of 75 **Gadwall** on the 11<sup>th</sup> being twice the previous highest March total obtained in 2010 but even more notable was the count of 74 **Shoveler** on the 1<sup>st</sup> eclipsing the previous highest



March total of 11 in 2012. The same field also attracted the site's earliest ever drake **Garganey** first seen on the

22<sup>nd</sup> and present through to the 27<sup>th</sup>. Garganey is an increasingly scarce migrant to Britain being a species that winters south of the Sahara and suffers from the vagaries of migration across a large area where they are shot as well as suffering from the ongoing loss of habitat in their winter quarters and less predictable summers in Britain. **Teal** numbers fell away after the 506 noted on the 11<sup>th</sup> with less than 100 on several days to the month end a similar pattern to **Mallard** of which there were 121 on the 1<sup>st</sup> but only 60 by the 31<sup>st</sup>. Diving ducks also arrived on the reedbed with a maximum of 29 **Pochard**



but only seven **Tufted Ducks** on the 11<sup>th</sup> and to wind up the waterfowl tally there were two **Pintail** on the 11<sup>th</sup> and nine on the 12<sup>th</sup> with six **Little Grebes** establishing territories on the reedbeds and **Coots** building up to a high of 38 birds also on the 11<sup>th</sup>. The shrinking area of water on the flooded fields also provided good feeding for herons and egrets with a peak of 16 **Little Egrets** on the 27<sup>th</sup> and up to ten **Grey Herons** feasting on the small fry stranded in the shrinking pools.

On nice days there was an abundance of **Marsh Harrier** activity with no less than eight individuals indulging in various amounts of display over the site including three males performing some spectacular aerial sky dancing



and switchback displays while filling the air with their haunting wailing calls. Two pairs set about nest building but whether they will be any more successful than past



years with a high population of Red Foxes wandering around the inundation area remains to be seen. At least one **Hen Harrier** continued to provide regular sightings on the Flats through to the third week of March but the only **Red Kite** sighting of the month concerned a rather ragged bird passing through on the 11<sup>th</sup>. **Common Buzzards** were much in evidence, mainly over the adjacent hillside, but with aerial activity spilling out over the Flats and up to seven birds seen in single thermals on sunny days. One pair also seemed to be prospecting a wood on the edge of the Flats. At least two pairs of **Kestrels** were in local residence with one pair perching

on the handrail of the Tower hide on some days! The second calendar year male **Merlin** was seen on the 11<sup>th</sup> and there were odd **Peregrines**, mainly adults all month.

After the first **Oystercatchers** appeared in late February one or two pairs were present in March. **Avocet** numbers



varied daily with 67 on the 1<sup>st</sup> but only two on the 11<sup>th</sup> then a sudden rise to 132 on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 270 on the 17<sup>th</sup>, the



month's highest total with less than 100 birds for most of the rest of March. The first spring passage **Ringed Plover** arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> with another 26<sup>th</sup> and there were still 92 **Golden Plovers** on the 11<sup>th</sup> but **Lapwing** number predictably plummeted from 412 on the 1<sup>st</sup> to 116 by the 11<sup>th</sup> then just 32 on the 16<sup>th</sup> and six on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Most waders departed by mid month with the count of 265 **Dunlin** on the 1<sup>st</sup> being the only notable total in March. After a month's absence a single **Ruff** reappeared on the 1<sup>st</sup> and there were then 16 birds on the 16<sup>th</sup> but this proved to be a very brief visit with no other sightings. The flock appeared to be the same birds seen during the winter accompanied by the white-headed male but where they commute to and from is still unknown. A notable count of 42 **Common Snipe** on the 23<sup>rd</sup> presumably involved spring migrants but the seeming consistency of the size of the **Black-tailed Godwit** flock, varying from 140 – 177



birds suggested that they were the same birds present all winter but starting to moult into fine russet plumage prior to their Iceland bund departures. Good counts of **Curlew** continued through the month with 330 to 358 birds noted on most days while a passage flock of seven **Bar-tailed Godwits** flew through on the 20<sup>th</sup>. **Redshank** increased from around 75 in the first half of the month to peaks of 106 on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 146 on the 27<sup>th</sup> as passage birds joined the wintering flock and **Spotted Redshanks** also built up at the same time from the winter maximum of nine to 13 birds on the 26<sup>th</sup>. A juvenile **Glaucous Gull** that flew over on the 27<sup>th</sup> was the only notable gull of the period. Two **Short-eared Owls** continued to hunt the rough grass along with one or two **Barn Owls** and a **Green Woodpecker** could be heard yaffling from the hillside. The first three **Sand Martins** arrived on the 27<sup>th</sup> but singing **Chiffchaffs** from the 11<sup>th</sup> on which date a male **Blackcap** was also in song predated them. One or two **Stonechats** remained on site and there were at least three singing male **Cetti's Warblers** that will hopefully all remain to breed.

Graham Catley Nyctea Ltd  
All photographs © Graham Catley