

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report February 2023

One of the iconic sounds of the Flats soundscape in February was the whistles and growls of male and female **Wigeon** echoing across the wet grass fields as the swarms of birds waddle around grazing and communicating before exploding into the air at the



approach of a Peregrine or a Marsh Harrier chancing its luck on a close pass and taking refuge on the nearby flood lands. Formerly a much less abundant species on the Flats with winter peaks of around 500 – 600 prior to 2011 the establishment of the permanent pastures



and latterly more frequent winter flooding has seen a consequent rise in numbers with winter peaks now around the 1750 to 2000 mark and thus there can be a lot of noise from a concentrated flock. Although some Wigeon breed in Britain, around 300 – 500 pairs their breeding range extends from 50N to 70N across Northern Europe and Asia and from Iceland and Northern Britain across Scandinavia and Northern Russia to the Bering Sea. Most of our wintering birds arrive from breeding grounds in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia but ringed



birds have been shown to move up to 4000kms from the UK and birds have been tracked covering 1000kms in a single day. Most of our wintering birds depart by the end of March with rapid departures of lingering flocks often audible on fine April evenings as birds gain height and set off East after sunset. Less obvious and more subtle but more beautiful is the courtship call of the divine drake **Pintail** and with numbers building up nicely to 47 by the 26th there was more chance to listen to these gorgeous birds and watch them displaying to the rather more subtle females. The males' call is written a *krooo* and sounds



rather like a European Bee-eater! Like Wigeon most of the ringing recoveries of wintering Pintail show that they breed in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe across into Russia and their imminent departure is also expected in March but with the bulk of the British wintering birds being found on west coast estuaries we often see an increase in numbers through March as birds presumably stop off for a refuel before making the long-haul flight back to the breeding grounds. Prior to the tidal inundation in the last week up to 142 **Shelducks** were feeding in front of the

main hide with a large flock of **Shoveler** but as the water became too deep again the birds resorted to the wetlands



by the Trent. The Shoveler flock topped out at 2023 birds but this was eclipsed by a new all-time record count of 302 **Gadwall** on the 19th – 21st. **Teal** were less obvious but numbers built up to 623 on the 21st though **Mallard** numbers fell away after the count of 187 on the 1st. The first three **Tufted Duck** of the year put in an appearance on the 12th with the first **Little Grebe** back on territory from the 8th and the first **Coot** of the year appeared on the 23rd. The geese scene was dominated by the local **Barnacle Geese** that made a very obvious visual and audible impact with a peak of 2520 birds logged on the 28th. Over the years several suggestions have been



made as to the origins and movements of the Humber flock but only observations of ringed or colour ringed birds have shed any light upon these theories. Currently the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust are colour ringing and adding neck collars to several 100 birds from the different populations of naturalised birds around Britain and some of these birds have now arrived on the Humber. Oddly a party that visited East Halton Marshes in January 2023 did not arrive on the upper estuary but on February 18th a flock of **12 birds** comprising three neck collared and five colour ringed birds all of which had been ringed at Scorton North Yorkshire in July 2022 arrived at Alkborough Flats. Their journey though had been much more complex firstly moving to Saltholme, Cleveland from August – November 2022 then travelling south to Sheppey in Kent where they stayed during January 2023 before heading back to Hornsea Mere, East Yorkshire in February 2023. This party, that were much tamer than the local birds,



originally joined the local flock but then split from them on the 20th and interestingly stayed separate from the local birds thereafter. Up to 170 **Greylag Geese** were also present daily with 100 **Pink-footed Geese** feeding for the day on the 21st, a Dark-bellied Brent Goose on the 12th and a flock of 19 **White-fronted Geese** fed on the Trent foreshore on the 23rd.



Little Egrets increased slowly to four by the last week and the first **Spoonbill** of the season made it into February appearing on the 26th four days later than the record breaking 2021 bird. Another record breaker

was the **Bittern** heard booming on the 11th a full month earlier than usual and a party of three **Common Cranes**, tracked struggling west up the Humber into a near gale on the 20th inevitably passed over the Flats starting the 2023 Crane season.

Although the number of roosting **Marsh Harriers** fell back from the January peak up to 12 birds could be seen daily including the dark-headed juvenile that appears to



be a male while one of the resident males was displaying and the pair settled into their 2022 territory. A ringtail **Hen Harrier** was still being seen on many dates and it roosted on site during 8th – 10th the first such instance of this behaviour. Passage also got under way with a **Red Kite** being seen on the 8th and then two birds moved through on the 19th making it a good start to the year for



this species that remains a scarce visitor to the Flats. Up to six **Common Buzzards** were in the area and 2 – 3 different **Peregrines** seen on several dates.

Numbers of **Lapwing** and **Golden Plover** never recovered after the January freeze with maximum counts of only 580 Golden Plovers and 1250 Lapwings both on the 8th. The first **Ringed Plover** of the year flew over on the 23rd and there were up to 450 **Dunlin** on the wet grass fields following the high spring tides. Up to 270 **Curlew** formed the only other notable wader presence with dismal peaks of 20 **Black-tailed Godwits** and 44 **Redshank** while there were **no Ruff** or **Spotted Redshanks** two formerly regular wintering species.

Following several poor years, it was a record month for **Barn Owls** with a maximum of seven birds hunting the site in the evenings. Clearly there was an abundance of Short-tailed Voles particularly on the foreshore but as



these areas were flooded in the last week by the high tides that source of food clearly diminished. After a recent dearth in **Water Pipit** encounters six were feeding in the area in front of the main hide on the 19th and one to three seen in the ensuing week but mainly in flight as is rather typical of this elusive species. Passage of **Stonechats** picked up from mid-month with day counts of up to seven birds but markings showed different birds were involved on different days. After a single **Chiffchaff** on the 10th a bird wintering in the sewage works broke into early song from the 18th and at least two birds were present elsewhere on the 21st – 23rd. **Greenfinch** numbers fell to 56 by the 5th and a **Siskin** flew through on the 23rd and finally after a lack of records in 2022 a **Raven** flew east on the 23rd.

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