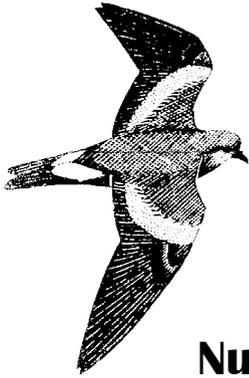


**Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society**

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# **BIRD NEWS**

**Number 128**

**March 2025**



**Grants for Small Projects**

**County Rarity: Hooded Crow**

**Marbury and Witton Flashes 2024**

**Species Spotlight: Western Marsh Harrier  
and Yellow-browed Warblers 2024**

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*Bird News welcomes articles, letters and comments relevant to birdwatching in Cheshire and Wirral. Please either email or post your contributions to the Editor at the address shown above.*

*The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Society, the Council of the Society, or the Editor. Appearance of advertisements in this publication does not infer any recommendation or approval by the Society for the products and services being promoted.*

**Front cover: Hawfinch by Ray Scally**

**Other illustrations by Tony Broome, Phil Jones and Ray Scally**

**Note: the copy date for the next issue is 7<sup>th</sup> June 2025**

# Guest Editorial

These days life always seems to be a mixture of good news and bad news, and this edition of *Bird News* is no exception. Perhaps the best news is from the northwest Wirral: a scheme has received the go-ahead to create a seasonal wetland by slowing the flow of the upper Birket and returning it to its historic flood plain. The project will be managed by Cheshire Wildlife Trust and fully funded by the Environment Agency's flood management scheme. The initial stage - and it could go much further in the future - will develop a wetland with several scrapes on farmland that regularly floods called the Hoylake Carrs, sometimes known as Langfields, that sits next to the Hoylake Municipal Golf Course. [Declaration of interest: after 8 years as Chairman of CWT, I am now Vice-President of the Trust.] This project will soon go out to public consultation and I am sure that supporting comments from CAWOS members will be welcome. Our County Bird Recorder, Jane Turner, is closely involved and deserves credit for the proposed project getting this far.

Another good news story is the burgeoning breeding population of Marsh Harriers in Cheshire and Wirral. Some fifteen years ago, I, with Pete Burton and Richard Castell, spent hundreds of hours in finding the first few nests in the county, but now 10 have been recorded in just one year (2024). In the past we had to watch the birds' movements and triangulate the positions of where they landed in the reedbeds to what might be their nest, or could be a food cache. But modern technology, combined with careful fieldcraft, is described in the fascinating article by Andy Harmer, who used a drone with cameras and heat-sensitive detection to fly over an area and locate nests. This report tells how the drone can provide information on the nest contents and the parents' behaviour, and crucially shows that, with skill and keeping the drone at a suitable height, this type of study can be done without disturbing the birds. Of course permits are necessary, Schedule 1 licences for studying the nests of rare wild birds, and permits to fly within drone protocols. One territory was under the flightpath of Liverpool airport, needing even more negotiation and permission to fly the drone.

Unfortunately, *Bird News* does not print colour images so this article is just an edited account with text only, but thankfully the author has made the full version available online at: [wmh.cwrsg.co.uk](http://wmh.cwrsg.co.uk). Or by emailing: [andyharmer@btinternet.com](mailto:andyharmer@btinternet.com) he will send a pdf to anyone interested. Also, if you have any sightings of Marsh Harriers potentially in breeding habitat, I am sure that Andy will be interested to know.

I hinted in the introductory sentence that there would be some bad news to report, and the worst of these is revealed in Michael Miles's thorough account from Woolston that shows substantial falls last year in almost all of the commoner species. Let us hope that they can recover, although some are in long-term decline.

It is never easy to notice things that have disappeared, and *Bird News* no longer has any reports from CAWOS conservation representatives because, sadly, there are so few members who volunteer to take up these roles. We can do much more for the county's birds than just recording them, and all that is needed for the members of the conservation team is to keep one's eyes and ears open to any concerns that could affect our wildlife, and alert the Society. If you are prepared to act as conservation representative for your local area, please let the Membership Secretary know. Meanwhile, if you suspect a wildlife crime, contact the police or the RSPB and if you spot a development threat or a conversation opportunity, I am sure that Cheshire Wildlife Trust will be interested.

For some, the numbers of Yellow-browed Warblers will be a highlight of 2024 and Richard Smith's article is a nice summary of those on the north Wirral. But they were found in many other places - including a total of 12 recorded one day at Woolston - and we shall have to wait for the 2024 Annual Report to see the records for the whole county. As Richard says, they can turn up in shrubs anywhere, and I even ringed one in my Runcorn garden in 2002. This was on 9th November, a relatively late date for a Yellow-browed Warbler, and led to an interesting telephone conversation with Tony Broome, then the County Bird Recorder, on the features of Hume's Warblers, the latter (much rarer) recently having been split as a different species, and I don't think one has yet been found in Cheshire and Wirral.

My friends know that I have never joined the crowds of birders who travel afar to see a rarity, but it always seems to me that it is the pretty ones that get the most attention. I wonder how many have gone specially to see a Hooded Crow. Steve Barber has analysed all of the county's records for all of the last two centuries, although there have been few in the last two decades. Why is that?

Finally, I want to end with some personal thoughts on CAWOS and its activities, or lack of them. Those who have read all the responses to last year's members' survey will know that I am concerned that lately our Society has been passive rather than active. We have been happy to receive all the bird records that are sent to us, and our volunteers have turned them into high-quality Annual Reports. But these only give a partial picture of the county's birds, mostly from locations visited regularly. We can go further in understanding our county's birdlife by conducting surveys, and I feel sad that CAWOS has not organised any for the last 15 years or so, leaving big gaps in our knowledge and holes in our conservation activities. That is why I am so pleased that CAWOS has revived surveys this year, organised by Hugh Pulsford, to find territorial Marsh Tits and Willow Tits (it's not too late to volunteer now), and in June for counts of Swifts screaming alongside their breeding sites. These are all species that are decreasing, so let us record them whilst we can. The Society's website has a section entitled 'surveys' but these are all for the BTO. It is surely important that members continue to contribute to national surveys but these are not always applicable - such as this year's censuses of Woodlarks, Dartford Warblers and Nightjars - and we ought to try to learn more about our county's birds. Our knowledge is particularly poor on the breeding passerines and I can't help thinking that some of this comes from the recent fashion for keeping lists. Many of those compiling site lists or year lists seem to lose interest once a species has been seen, and don't follow through the year.

If we believe the latest bird report, there were, for instance, few records of breeding Willow Warblers, another species declining in England, and we ought to know more about their local status. Our Annual Reports show that Cheshire is among the top counties in Britain for submitting nest records, but it is not necessary to find a nest to confirm breeding. Some people are worried that approaching birds in the nesting season could be harmful to them, but proof of breeding with most passerines can easily be achieved by walking past and listening for alarm calls or watching for birds carrying food for their chicks, and then moving on.

Before long, volunteers will be asked to participate in tetrad (2x2 km square) surveys of all breeding and wintering birds as part of the next national atlas, which was announced at the recent BTO conference in Manchester to be starting in autumn 2027. We have to consider whether CAWOS can organise another tetrad atlas, already twenty years since the last one - for which CAWOS won the BTO's inaugural award for local ornithology - and it will rely on offers from members to participate.

In case the above sounds too prescriptive, of course birding is, for most of us, a hobby and whatever we do should be enjoyable and of our own choice. But contributing to ornithological knowledge, and helping conservation, can easily be combined with our pleasure.

My last point is that, if you have any ideas for studies or projects for which some funding would be helpful - not just nestboxes and birdfood, I hope - then remember that CAWOS has grants available so please read the details and send your application.

Members will find much more to read in this issue of *Bird News*. Contributions are always welcomed so please send anything interesting to the Editor.

**David Norman**

## **MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR**

Please get in touch if you would be willing to write a future Guest Editorial. Don't be shy. Ed.

**Note: the copy date for the next issue is 7<sup>th</sup> June 2025**

# NEW FUNDING OPPORTUNITY !!!

## ***GRANTS FOR SMALL PROJECTS***

Following the results of our recent membership survey, we are pleased to offer a funding opportunity **in the form of grants for small projects**.

### **Terms**

Grants will be available to organisations (including clubs and community projects) but not individuals.

The value of any one grant will normally be up to £500, but some flexibility might be possible subject to approval.

The organisation must operate within Cheshire or Wirral.

Positive bias will be applied to any project for which the focus is **ornithology**, but consideration will be given to any activity which **supports or benefits the protection of wild birds and their habitat**.

### **How to apply**

The first step is to *express an interest*. Please email **memsec@kawos.org** requesting an application form, giving a brief description of your organisation, including location. No further information is required at this stage.

Unsurprisingly, the total number of grants is limited therefore application forms will be issued on a first-come, first-served basis, along with further information about how to apply. We are aiming to keep the process as simple as possible.

**CAWOS CAN HELP YOU  
TO HELP NATURE**

# CAWOS News

The two Council meetings since the last *Bird News* were in November and January. The main initiative to emerge was the introduction of surveys on Marsh and Willow Tits - activities in which our members are encouraged to take part.

The 2023 *Bird Report* was distributed in January and has, as usual, been well received. As I mentioned in the last *Bird News*, David Steventon has offered to step in to replace Ted Lock as Editor for one year, so we need a permanent replacement if the *Bird Report* is to continue. Furthermore, one of our compilers is stepping down. If any of our members is interested in supporting the society by volunteering to fill one of these roles, or indeed by joining Council as an ordinary member, please do get in touch with me or any other member of Council.

I am writing this article shortly before the member meeting on 7th February on Curlews by Andrew Brockbank. The talk at the March AGM is on Swifts, another species under threat and also an intended subject of another CAWOS survey in the summer.

**David Hiley, Secretary**

## MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Many thanks to the **258** paid-up members for promptly renewing their membership. Thank you also to those who have made additional donations. There are still **23** members who have not yet renewed - if you receive a reminder letter with this copy of *Bird News* then that is a hint that we haven't yet received your 2025 payment!

Underpayments: single adult membership is now **£18**. We still have 40 people who paid only £15, so if that is you please do send in the remaining £3.

New Members: a warm welcome is extended to Stan Davidson, James Towers, Andrew Brockbank, Jonathan Hutchins, Colin and Viv Brooks, Muhummed Hussain and Andy Robinson.

Communications: if you have provided us with an email address then you should be receiving emails from me, in particular the new Bulletin. Emails are sent from **memsec@kawos.org**. **If you are not receiving messages** please check your spam box.

Thank you everyone for your membership, your continuing support is much appreciated.

**Carolyn Bailey, Membership Secretary Tel: 01925 852432**

## CAWOS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 7th MARCH 2024

### CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2024-25

The main topic of discussion at Council meetings this year was the survey of the membership canvassing opinion on our activities. We had a good response (nearly 50%) which can be seen on the Society website, generally the comments received were positive and supportive but there were a number of aspects of our activities which the Council has discussed and intends to put into operation. These included running more surveys, 2025 we will be organising surveys of Marsh Tit, Willow Tit and Swift in the county. We will also look to working more closely with other conservation societies in the region e.g. Cheshire Wildlife Trust. We are also looking to set up a small grants scheme to fund bird and other wildlife related projects in the county which should be in place spring 2025. We have also started to offer *Bird News* as a pdf; postage is one of the main costs incurred by the Society so any reductions in costs are welcome. Our membership secretary Carolyn Bailey has put a great deal of time and effort into the survey, summarising the results and preparing documentation for our grant scheme, thanks for your contribution, hopefully 2025 will be more relaxing.

We had the usual mix of Zoom and in-person members meetings, topics ranging from nocturnal migration, the Canary Islands to Curlew conservation. Unfortunately, support for these meetings continues to decline with no meeting attracting more than 30 attendees, with at least one attracting less than 20. This obviously means that such meetings are no longer sustainable once costs of speakers and room hire are taken into account so it may be that we abandon in-person meetings and perhaps organise a one-day conference type event for the 2025/26 season.

After many years, Mike Hems has stepped down as website manager; fortunately we quickly found a replacement in Geraint Richards, again thanks to both for their assistance. If you have any comments, suggestions or content for the website you can contact Council, any contributions welcome. The Society is present on various social media platforms although the number of active members is small and the WhatsApp group seems to have ceased to exist. We still have an account on X although this may need to be reviewed given current circumstances.

A long-standing issue for the Society is lack of young people - either joining as members or attending our events. I regularly attend events on mammals and insects where the audience is often full of people aged below 30. Several charities have youth ambassadors, the BTO a Youth Advisory Panel and Chester Zoo has set up a Youth Council, whether either of these are applicable to our Society remains to be seen but something needs to change to guarantee the future of the Society.

All members should have received their 2023 *Bird Report*; due to technical issues we just missed the deadline of the end of Dec 2024 for distribution. This will be Ted Lock's final year as systematic list editor so many thanks to Ted for his contribution. David Steventon will take on Ted's role for the 2024 report but we will still need new people to join the team for future reports, if you can help in any way please contact a member of Council.

Finally, after over 20 years on council I will be retiring at this year's AGM, I would like to thank all fellow Council members for their support over the years and wish the new Council all the best for the future.

**Tony Parker, Chairman**

## **SECRETARY'S REPORT 2024-25**

I would like to start by thanking all members, photographers, compilers, other contributors and particularly Phil Hampson and Ted Lock for their efforts in the successful production of the 2023 *Bird Report*. As you will have seen elsewhere, our resources are becoming stretched and we are looking for more support in all aspects of the report's production including data management, editing and compiling. If anyone is interested, please do get in touch!

A special word of thanks should also be made to our membership secretary, Carolyn Bailey, for the excellent work she did in producing and analysing our membership survey and in developing our grants policy. These are two initiatives on which you should hear more in the coming months.

As always, a big thank you to Sheila Blamire for her dedication in not only ensuring *Bird News* is published on time, but also this year producing it in PDF format for those who prefer an 'electronic version'.

We started the 2024-2025 year with two Council vacancies. This effectively increased to three when Neil Coyne had to step down for personal reasons. This was the first year of Bill Bellamy representing Rostherne at Council and we are grateful for his updates and participation in the meetings. I hope that Council will be stronger in this coming year though there is likely to still be at least one vacancy. We are always happy to hear from anyone who wishes to come and get involved.

There have been five Council Meetings since last year's AGM. Our President, Professor David Norman, attended the last three of those meetings. We are grateful for his insight, drive and guidance on initiatives which should make your membership of CAWOS much more rewarding. You are already aware of the Marsh Tit and Willow Tit surveys. There will be other surveys over the next few months and, hopefully, other exciting developments.

In another year of change I must express thanks to Phil Hampson who is stepping down as Vice-Chairman. Fortunately, he is willing to stand for another year on Council and also agreed to prepare the *Bird Report* data for one more year. Similarly, Mike Hems, who has been our 'webmaster' for many years, is handing over the management of the website to Geraint Richards. We are grateful to Mike for his work over the years and to Geraint for volunteering to take over.

**David Hiley, Secretary**

## **TREASURER'S REPORT FOR 2024**

I have pleasure in submitting the accounts of the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society for the year ended 31st December 2024. These accounts show that the Income and Expenditure account incurred a loss for the year of £802 on our general fund. This was largely the effect of inflation which we have attempted to correct by increasing our subscription charges at the start of this year. An additional factor was the requirement to print additional copies of our *Bird Report*.

Membership subscriptions of £4,475 were slightly down on the previous year and database searches contributed just £96 to our revenues (compared to £962 in 2023). Gift Aid income of £916 was in line with previous years.

The cost of distributing the *Bird Report* and *Bird News* was affected by the inflationary pressure of postage charges. In 2024, the *Bird Report* was not produced and distributed until January of this year but all costs were provided for in the accounts and are shown in the Provisions figure on the Balance Sheet.

The evening meetings during 2024 were a mixture of Zoom and actual events which explains the increase in the expenditure on Programme in the accounts.

The loss for the year, partially offset by interest on our cash balances, resulted in a net decrease to our reserves of £500 which now stand at £44,726 of which £23,959 is represented by our general fund and £20,767 in various designated funds.

**John Patterson, Treasurer**

# **SITUATIONS VACANT**

## **“The Society Needs YOU!”**

### ***NON-EXECUTIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS***

**For further information, please contact:**

**David Hiley [secretary@cawos.org](mailto:secretary@cawos.org) 07484 836652**

# County Rarities

## HOODED CROW *Corvus cornix*

Ever since the Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) and the Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*) were described by Linnaeus as two species in 1758, their taxonomic status has been debated. These two distinct crow taxa have a Palearctic breeding distribution with two stable zones of hybridisation. The Hooded Crow or 'hoodie' was classified by the British Ornithologists' Union as a distinct species in 2002 but it is on the edge of being 'lumped' once again. A recent study has shown most the entire genomes of both 'species' are nearly genetically identical, both in their DNA and in



its expression. Regardless of whether it is treated as a full species or a subspecies, it's still an interesting bird and not at all common in Cheshire in modern times. Hoodies are found in the north and north-west of the UK and Ireland, where they replace Carrion Crow. Where ranges of the two overlap the crows hybridize and this includes the populations closest to us. Birds which occur on the east coast in winter are thought to be continental birds. It is not well known why Carrion Crow replaces Hooded Crow in most of the UK and a part of the adjacent European mainland, though we do know that its change in expression of a gene that results in the lack of black feathering. Both Hoodies and Carrion Crows tend to pair with birds that look most like themselves.

Hoodies are the same size and shape as Carrion Crows and act pretty much the same. They are more sociable than Carrion Crows, but that is unlikely to be tested in Cheshire! A classic Hoodie has only tail feathers, flight feathers, wing coverts and head, throat and upper breast black, the rest of the bird being ashy grey. Hybrids and backcrosses (subsequent breeding from a mixed bird) can produce a huge range of intermediates and it can take a really good view to spot a hybrid. It might just be a few black feathers on the vent or rump that give a backcross away. This is why we tend to be cautious with flight views of Hoodies and record them as Hooded Crow or hybrid.

Jane Turner

## HOODED CROW: CHESHIRE AND WIRRAL STATUS

The earliest mention I have found of the Hooded Crow in Cheshire and Wirral is in *Fauna of Liverpool* (Byerley, 1854) where it appears as "occasionally in winter", apparently on the strength of sighting(s) on the shore of North Wirral per a Mrs Longueville. 'Hoodie' is not mentioned in *The Birds of Wirral* (Brockholes 1874). However, *Birds of West Cheshire, Denbighshire and Flintshire* (Dobie 1894) has more to say about the aforementioned Mrs Longueville. A resident of Hoylake 1810 to 1836 and 1840 to 1854 she told Dobie that "during both periods she remembers seeing the 'Royston Crows'\* not infrequently in winter. Their arrival was watched for by those interested in birds. They used to feed on Mussels at Hilbre Point". The only later Cheshire records Dobie has are from Aldersey, Eaton Park, Ince and Ledsham where two of a flock of seven or eight were shot in November 1888. Coward and Oldham in *Birds of Cheshire* (1900) appear to find Mrs Longueville's information sufficient evidence to view the 'Hoodie' as a frequent visitor to the Wirral coast in the first half of the 19th century particularly at Hilbre Point. They note "in recent years however, the bird has only been recorded occasionally in Wirral". Records of birds shot at Plumley (sic), 'obtained' near Rostherne and shot at Warburton and the only dated record of a bird shot near Northwich on 17th February 1897 are added to those quoted by Dobie, leading Coward and Oldham to state the bird had occurred "but rarely on the Cheshire plain" and give its Cheshire status as "a straggler during the colder months".

By the time of *The Fauna of Cheshire* (1910) Coward has more to add to the 'Hoodie' account. This includes reports from the East Cheshire hills where, Coward wrote: "it is, in certain districts at any rate, an annual winter visitor". A gamekeeper informed him that birds are seen in winter on the moors near the 'Cat and Fiddle' and the head-keeper at Lyme said that half a dozen came annually, including one shot in March 1908. One observer informed Coward that he had frequently seen the bird during the last 20 years, on separate occasions seeing parties of three and five or six hunting over the moors. Adding to this information were further reports of birds shot in 1901 at Eaton Park in October and Knutsford in November and at Mollington in October 1904, killed at Warburton in autumn of 1903 or 1904 and killed at Whitegate in February 1906. Perhaps surprisingly, in 1906 a bird survived near Tatton Mere from February 10th to Mar 4th. Back in Wirral, Coward and a companion saw two rise from a sheep carcass on the Dee Marshes opposite Denhall Hall on 10th February 1907. The Fauna's Hooded Crow account is headlined with the status statement "An occasional visitor in autumn and winter to the coast and plain; a regular winter visitor in small numbers to the eastern hills". It is worth pointing out here that the only coastal or estuarine record quoted by Coward later than the mid-19th century is his own from February 1907. The date range of occurrences appears to be from October to March.

Summing up the Cheshire and Wirral status of a species over time is complicated as approximately half the years in the period between *The Fauna* (1910) and 1956 are not covered by detailed annual County Reports. There are gaps each covering several years in the 2nd, 3rd to 4th and 6th decades of the last century. However, it is notable that 'Hoodies' are recorded at some point in almost all the October to April periods that are covered by detailed Reports, an indication perhaps that birds were occurring annually or almost annually throughout the period. The table immediately below shows the number of months in which 'Hoodies' were recorded and the number of sites with records from 1910/11 to 1955/56.

| 1910/11 to 1955/56         | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>Months with records</b> | 6   | 3   | 5   | 10  | 6   | 2   | 6   |
| <b>Sites</b>               | 8   | 3   | 5   | 9   | 5   | 2   | 7   |

The very limited data suggests birds were most likely to be present in Jan and the passage periods. The number of sites from which birds were reported was from just one to five per Oct to Apr period with records. Included in the sites are Carrington Moss and Sinderland, sites no longer in Cheshire but favoured by birders from the 1930s into the 1950s. Peak numbers at Sinderland were up to six present through the 1934-35 winter, when birds were also noted at Bosley, near Macclesfield, Marbury Park and Rostherne; Sinderland had up to four through the 1946-47 winter. Rostherne Mere has been well watched for many years and in 1916-17 and 1946-47 birds were in the immediate area for lengthy periods including very cold spells when up to four 'Hoodies' fed on corpses littering the ice of the frozen mere. Other notable numbers were several frequenting Tatton Park warrens in autumn 1915 and eight or nine in Tatton in Dec 1925. Birds were reported from another 16 widespread sites in this period including four North Wirral/coastal and just one in the eastern hills; few of these occurrences appear to have been lengthy and involved up to three birds, but mostly singles.

After 1956 there is a complete run of detailed annual County Reports. There are no 'Hoodie' records in the three Oct-May periods 1969/70 to 1971/72 and four such periods 1993/94 to 1996/97. Otherwise 'Hoodies' were recorded at some point in almost every Oct to May period from 1956/7 to 2002/03. The table immediately below shows the number of months in which 'Hoodies' were recorded and the number of sites with records per month from 1956/57 to 2002/03.

| 1956/57 to 2002/03         | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>Months with records</b> | 4   | 5   | 4   | 11  | 7   | 10  | 11  | 5   |
| <b>Sites</b>               | 4   | 6   | 6   | 15  | 8   | 8   | 7   | 4   |

The number of sites from which birds were reported was from just one to seven per Oct to May period with records. The table shows that birds were seen most often in January, March and April and most widely in January. Earliest and latest dates are 6th October 1985 at Hale Marsh and 19th or 25th May 1969 at Frodsham where sources disagree over the dates! The table of course

only reflects the information in the Annual Reports but other information suggests that this is incomplete. For instance, the Hooded Crow account in *'Hilbre the Cheshire Island'* (1982, ed. J D Craggs) has "The Hooded Crow is usually recorded once or twice a year and is therefore a rare bird at Hilbre". The account appears to cover the period from 1957 to 1977, some 21 years, but the County Reports only include Hilbre 'Hoodie' records in eight of this run of years. There are no records at all from the eastern hills in the County Reports from 1957 onwards yet Charles Linfoot, an experienced birder who has watched the hills from the 1970s to date, informs me that he was noting one or two birds, usually annually, in the winter months late into the 1990s then noting their subsequent absence.



The records from 1957 to 2003 are a mix of one day occurrences, usually of one or sometimes two birds, with longer staying birds at sites or areas some of which have held birds over more than one October to May period. Sinderland and Carrington Moss held a bird from December 1957 to April 1958, December 1959 to January 1960 and one resident for a lengthy period to March 1967. Meols/Moreton had a bird in January and February 1968 and April to May 1986. One or two were attracted to waste disposal sites along the Mersey between Moore and Gatewath in 1976/77, 1987/88 and 1988/89, one visited Woolston from January to March 1980. Interesting observations included one apparently paired with a Carrion Crow at Goostrey on 25th January 1976 and another such pairing at Meols in April and May 1986. Sizeable numbers included five at Hilbre on 13th November 1960, 10 flew east there on 24th March 1962 and a probably never to be beaten 50 over Claughton (Birkenhead) on 24th December 1959! Records in this period are from around 30 fairly widespread sites, almost half are on Wirral and are almost exclusively coastal or nearly coastal.

Subsequent to 2003 the only records have been on four dates in April and May 2017 and single dates in December 2018, May 2019 and April 2020 all at Hilbre, Hoylake, Heswall or Leasowe.

When Hooded Crow has appeared in Cheshire and Wirral it has been as a scarce-rare irregular passage migrant and/or a winter visitor. In the 1920s Coward mused on where our visitors were coming from, speculating in 1924 that birds near Macclesfield in January may have come from the east coast and at Oakmere in October may have originated from the west (Report on Vertebrates for 1924, L&CFC). It may be in the origins of the birds that reason can be found to explain the fall-off in occurrences in Cheshire and Wirral post 2003/04.

*Birds in England* (Brown and Grice, 2005) has little to say about Hooded Crows on the west coast of England. It is though remarked that birds breeding in Britain are relatively sedentary while birds from the north of their range are regular, scarce passage migrants and winter visitors to England but most references are to the east coast. However, Brown and Grice do record a very marked drop in numbers on the east coast towards the end of the last century giving a reason of an increasing proportion of the North and East European population becoming resident. *Bird Atlas 2007-11* (Balmer et al, 2013) looks at breeding and winter distribution and change in Britain and Ireland. It finds little change in breeding between the 1988-91 and 2008-11 breeding atlases. However, a 13% range contraction is noted in Britain between the winter atlases of 1981-84 and 2007-11. This is particularly marked on the east coast, but in the west the map generally shows gains in the coastal regions between Dumfries and Galloway and Anglesey other than in Cheshire and Wirral, which shows a loss between the two winter atlases.

Unless most Cheshire and Wirral birds have filtered through from the east coast there seems no obvious reason for their absence in the County for most of the present century.

**Steve Barber**

\*The old name of **Royston Crow** originates from the days when this bird was a common winter visitor to southern England, with the sheep fields around Royston, Hertfordshire providing carcasses on which the birds could feed. The local newspaper, founded in 1855, is called *The Royston Crow*, and the Hooded Crow also features on the town's coat of arms.

# County Round-Up

*Some of the records may be unauthenticated and therefore will require review by the Society's Rarities Panel or the BBRC. This report covers the period from May to August 2024.*

## SITE REPORTS

### Chester area

10,000 Pink-footed Geese were seen at Hapsford, Sep 19<sup>th</sup>. Two Cattle Egrets were at Puddington, Nov 24<sup>th</sup>. Yellow-browed Warblers were at Mollington, Oct 10<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> and Chester Zoo, Oct 24<sup>th</sup>, five Hawfinches were at Overleigh Cemetery, Nov 3<sup>rd</sup>.

### Congleton area

Two Whooper Swans were at Astbury Mere, Nov 17<sup>th</sup> with single Common Scoter on several dates. A Black-necked Grebe was at Astbury Mere, Sep 16<sup>th</sup>. Firecrest was at Congleton, Sep 9<sup>th</sup>.

### Crewe and Nantwich area

Eight Whooper Swans were at Watch Lane Flash, Nov 13<sup>th</sup>, Garganey at Railway Flash on several dates throughout Oct and a Green-winged Teal at Pump House Flash on several dates during Nov and Dec. Black-necked Grebe was at Doddington, Sep 22<sup>nd</sup>. Caspian Gull was on Elton Hall Flash, Sep 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>, Oct 21<sup>st</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, and Nov 30<sup>th</sup> and three Black Terns, Hurlleston, Sep 8<sup>th</sup>. Hen Harrier was noted at Maw Green Tip, Sep 27<sup>th</sup>. Yellow-browed Warblers were at Elton Hall Flash, Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, Crewe, Oct 23<sup>th</sup> and Dec 18<sup>th</sup>, nine Whinchats present at Maw Green Tip, Sep 12<sup>th</sup> and up to seven Bramblings, Bickerton, Oct 10<sup>th</sup>.

### Ellesmere Port and Neston area

14,000 Pink-footed Geese were counted during the Nov Mersey Estuary Goose survey, 21 Whooper Swans were at BMW, Nov 24<sup>th</sup> with two Garganeys, Sep 11<sup>th</sup> and Green-winged Teal, Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. 176 Avocets and 42,000 Dunlins were counted during the Nov Mersey WeBS, whilst 25 Greenshanks were at Parkgate, Sep 22<sup>th</sup>. Single Black Tern was at Neston, Oct 22<sup>nd</sup>. A max of 12 Spoonbills were noted at Parkgate, Sep 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, two Bitterns at Neston, Nov 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>, 34 Cattle Egrets, BMW, Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> and 40 Great White Egrets there at Sep 10<sup>th</sup>.

An Osprey was over BMW, Sep 1<sup>st</sup>, 13 Marsh Harriers at the same site, Dec 19<sup>th</sup> with Red Kite, Burton Marsh, Oct 14<sup>th</sup> and three Hobbies, Burton Marsh, Sep 13<sup>th</sup>. Yellow-browed Warblers were at BMW Oct 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> and Shotwick, Oct 7<sup>th</sup>, 600 Redwings and 500 Fieldfares noted on migration over Neston, Oct 30<sup>th</sup> and a single Black Redstart at BMW, Dec 31<sup>st</sup>.

### Halton area

Four Whooper Swans were at Hale, Oct 4<sup>th</sup>. Waders included: 120 Avocets, Pickering's Pasture, Sep 27<sup>th</sup>, two Grey Plovers, Pickering's Pasture, Nov 30<sup>th</sup> with Turnstone and Knot on Sep 18<sup>th</sup> and Hudsonian Godwit, Sep 27<sup>th</sup>, otherwise Little Stint present, Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> and Nov 30<sup>th</sup> and four Spotted Redshanks, Hale, Oct 5<sup>th</sup>. Kittiwake was at Hale, Sep 9<sup>th</sup>, with three Little Gulls, Dec 15<sup>th</sup>, Kumlien's Gull, Widnes, Dec 28<sup>th</sup>, four Black Terns, Hale, Sep 10<sup>th</sup> with Guillemot, Sep 9<sup>th</sup> and Shag at Spike Island, Nov 22<sup>nd</sup>. Spoonbill was at Hale, Sep 29<sup>th</sup> and Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> and four Cattle Egrets there Oct 17<sup>th</sup>. Osprey flew over Hale, Sep 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> and Hen Harrier, Hale, Nov 12<sup>th</sup>. Yellow-browed Warbler was present at Hale, Oct 8<sup>th</sup>, Firecrest, Oct 18<sup>th</sup> and Dec 31<sup>st</sup>, Dipper on the Manchester Ship Canal at Wigg Island, Dec 22<sup>nd</sup>, three Tree Pipits, Hale, Sep 7<sup>th</sup>, Rock Pipit, Spike Island, Dec 5<sup>th</sup> and two Hawfinches, Hale, Nov 3<sup>rd</sup>.



## Macclesfield area

15+ White-fronted Geese were at Acre Nook SQ, Dec 4<sup>th</sup> whilst seven Egyptian Geese were here, Sep 21<sup>st</sup>, two Red-crested Pochards, Ridgeway Reservoir, Nov 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> and four Common Scoters, Acre Nook SQ, Dec 9<sup>th</sup>. Single Black-necked Grebe was at Rostherne, Sep 28<sup>th</sup> and two Slavonian Grebes, Acre Nook SQ, Oct 15<sup>th</sup>. Two Black Terns were present Acre Nook SQ, during late Sep. Goshawk was seen at Arley Hall at Dec 26<sup>th</sup> and three Red Kites in the Macclesfield Forest area on Nov 12<sup>th</sup>. Great Grey Shrike was reported from High Legh, Oct



13<sup>th</sup>, three Bearded Tits were ringed at Rostherne, Nov 9<sup>th</sup>, four Yellow-browed Warblers here on Oct 17<sup>th</sup>, Firecrests were in the Macclesfield Forest area, Nov 16<sup>th</sup> and Redesmere, Dec 19<sup>th</sup>, three Hawfinches at Brereton, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> elsewhere 22 Crossbills were at Macclesfield Forest, Nov 16<sup>th</sup>.

## Vale Royal area

Wildfowl included: single White-fronted Goose in the Frodsham area on various dates, whilst 19 whooper Swans were at Neumann's Flash, Oct 11<sup>th</sup>. Garganey was at Frodsham Marsh, Oct 4<sup>th</sup>, Red-crested Pochard, Delamere, Nov 9<sup>th</sup>, Common Scoter present at Neumann's Flash, Sep 25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> and Marbury CP, Dec 15<sup>th</sup> and 22 Goosanders, Marston, Nov 14<sup>th</sup>. Single Black Tern was noted at Marbury CP, Sep 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> and Newchurch Common, Oct 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>. A Spoonbill was at Frodsham, Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>, Cattle Egret, Sep 18<sup>th</sup> and four Common Cranes, Marbury CP, Oct 17<sup>th</sup>. Two Hobbies flew over Comberbach, Sep 10<sup>th</sup>. 315 Meadow Pipits were noted on migration at Witton, Sep 25<sup>th</sup>, two Water Pipits, Frodsham Marsh, Nov 10<sup>th</sup>, six Hawfinches, Delamere, Oct 31<sup>st</sup> and Cuddington, Nov 17<sup>th</sup> and 10 Crossbills, Delamere, Oct 23<sup>rd</sup>.

## Warrington area

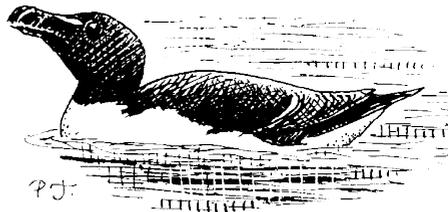
7,500 Pink-footed Geese were seen at Woolston Eyes, Oct 24<sup>th</sup>, 10 White-fronted Geese there on Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> and in the Culcheth/Silver Lane area on 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> and three Whooper Swans at Silver Lane pools, Oct 18<sup>th</sup>. Garganey was present at Woolston Eyes on several dates between Sep 9<sup>th</sup> and Nov 8<sup>th</sup>, Scaup, Oct 15<sup>th</sup>, Nov 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> and Red-breasted Merganser, Nov 4<sup>th</sup>. Grey Plover flew over Silver Lane Pools, Sep 20<sup>th</sup>, single Ruff there Sep 5<sup>th</sup> and Oct 18<sup>th</sup> and three Greenshanks, Woolston Eyes, Sep 5<sup>th</sup>. A Caspian Gull was at Gatewath, Dec 29<sup>th</sup>. Spoonbill was at Woolston Eyes, Sep 17<sup>th</sup> with 17 Great White Egrets at this site, Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Single Ospreys were noted at Moore NR, Sep 13<sup>th</sup> and Woolston Eyes, Sep 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, also at Woolston Eyes Goshawk early Nov, up to five Marsh Harriers during Nov and single Hen Harrier, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, with another at Silver Lane Pools, Nov 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> and a Red Kite was at Appleton, Oct 12<sup>th</sup>. Wryneck noted at Silver Lane Pools on Sep 6<sup>th</sup>, Woodlark, Woolston Eyes, Nov 11<sup>th</sup>, at least six Yellow-browed Warblers at Woolston Eyes, Oct 8<sup>th</sup>, Firecrest, Dec 4<sup>th</sup> with Penduline Tit on several dates in Nov-Dec. Ring Ouzel noted at Silver Lane Pools, Nov 8<sup>th</sup>, with 3000+ Fieldfares and 2000+ Redwings on migration, Nov 4<sup>th</sup>, 60+ Redpolls, Oct 29<sup>th</sup> and two Hawfinches present at Risley Moss, Nov 4<sup>th</sup>.

## Wirral area

330 Brent Geese were at Hilbre Nov 13<sup>th</sup>, four Whooper Swans, West Kirby, Oct 10<sup>th</sup>, five Eiders, Hilbre, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup>, 12,000 Common Scoters off Hoylake, Nov 27<sup>th</sup> and 26 Goosanders, West Kirby ML, Oct 16<sup>th</sup>. Turtle Dove was at Leasowe on Oct 5<sup>th</sup>. Waders of note included: single Whimbrel, Heswall, Sep 7<sup>th</sup>, 4390 Black-tailed Godwits, Caldy, Sep 1<sup>st</sup>, 20,000 Knots, Dec 13<sup>th</sup>, three Curlew Sandpipers, Hoylake, Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, 1475 Sanderlings, Hoylake, Nov 19<sup>th</sup>, 15,000 Dunlins, West Kirby, Nov 5<sup>th</sup>, 23 Purple Sandpipers, Hilbre, Dec 29<sup>th</sup> with Little Stint, Hoylake from early Oct, single Grey Phalarope, Leasowe, Sep 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, Hoylake and New Brighton, Sep 11<sup>th</sup>. Single Little Gull was at New Brighton, Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, two Sabine's Gulls off Hilbre, Sep 11<sup>th</sup> with 132 Sandwich Terns, Sep 25<sup>th</sup>, Arctic Tern at Leasowe, Sep 11<sup>th</sup>, two Black Terns, Hilbre, Sep 11<sup>th</sup>. Single Great Skua,

Hilbre, Sep 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> with six Arctic Skuas there on 10<sup>th</sup> and Long-tailed Skua off Wallasey, Sep 11<sup>th</sup>. Eight Guillemots, Hilbre, Nov 9<sup>th</sup> with four Razorbills, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup>, 14 Red-throated Divers off Hilbre, Dec 30<sup>th</sup> with Great Northern Diver off Leasowe, Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> and Hoylake on several dates during Nov. Storm Petrel was present at New Brighton and Wallasey, Sep 11<sup>th</sup> and 31 Leach's Petrels, Hilbre on the same date along with four Fulmars at Wallasey and 67 Manx Shearwaters off Hilbre, and two Shags noted at Hilbre, Sep 14<sup>th</sup> and West Kirby 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>.



Osprey seen at Hilbre and West Kirby, Sep 18<sup>th</sup> and Meols, Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>, Hen Harrier at Hoylake, Oct 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> and Hilbre, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> with Red Kite, Hilbre, Oct 6<sup>th</sup> and West Kirby, Oct 29<sup>th</sup>. Three Yellow-browed Warblers were at Hilbre, Oct 8<sup>th</sup> and Hoylake on Oct 12<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, Siberian Chiffchaff present at Hilbre, Nov 4<sup>th</sup> and Heswall, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>, Barred Warbler at Hoylake, Nov 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> with Spotted Flycatcher, Hilbre, Sep 1<sup>st</sup> and Heswall on 5<sup>th</sup>. Redstart seen at Hoylake, Sep 7<sup>th</sup>, Lapland Bunting, Hilbre, Oct 5<sup>th</sup> and Heswall on 21<sup>st</sup> and Snow Bunting in the New Brighton/Wallasey area early Nov.

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**Thanks/acknowledgments to:** Dee Estuary Website, SECOS, WECG, Dermot Smith (Mersey WeBS), NNHS, Frodsham Marsh Birdlog, *Birdwatching* Magazine, Manchester Bird Forum, whatsapp groups (Cheshire, Marbury and Sandbach), Rob Cockbain, Bill Bellamy and everyone else who passed records on.

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## Ringing News

Ringing plays an important part in developing our knowledge of birds. In this feature we invite ringing groups (or individual ringers) active in Cheshire and Wirral to contribute their own accounts of their activities. In general, the idea is that these should provide a means of updating local birders on the groups' work - both by way of information about birds ringed or recovered, and news of other events (or incidents). Future contributions from other groups and/or individuals will be welcomed.

### HILBRE BIRD OBSERVATORY (HiBO)

#### Ringing November 2024 to end of January 2025

November 2024 was a good start to Hilbre winter ringing with 38 birds being caught, twice as many birds caught compared to Novembers of the past 5 years. In this number there were 20 Blackbirds, including a bird first ringed in Sweden. At least one of the other Blackbirds caught was considered to be a Scandinavian/Northern European bird based upon measurement of wing length. Northern Blackbirds are known to be bigger than UK ones.

A further 10 migrating thrushes, four Song Thrushes and six Redwings, were also trapped and ringed. The Redwings would be from Scandinavia but the Song Thrushes were probably not. Two Chiffchaffs were trapped with one of them being from the Siberian race, *tristis*, a race only previously recorded on Hilbre once before on a similar date (14 November 2022). This bird will have arrived on Hilbre by following a similar route to the six Yellow-browed Warblers, another species breeding in Siberia, that were ringed on the island during September and October.

Two Blackcaps were caught and ringed in November. By November Blackcaps that breed in the UK will have left for the Mediterranean basin where they spend the winter, so these birds can be assumed to be Northern European/ Scandinavian birds that had arrived using a similar route to the two foreign Blackbirds and the Redwing. People on the Wirral have become used to seeing

Blackcaps on their bird feeders in winter over the last 10 to 15 years. This change in migration strategy is usually attributed, at least in part, to global warming. Hilbre is turning into a warmer place than it used to be. The arrival of Brent Geese from Canada has taken place this year as usual and once again we are seeing colour-ringed birds. The Brent Geese have been wintering in Ireland since after the last war, but with Hilbre's rising temperature they started coming to the island 20 years ago and numbers now hover around 300 to 400.

A ringer from the Merseyside Ringing Group, Iain Main, who spent some time on Hilbre, noticed that a proportion of Blackbirds that breed in the north of England migrate to Ireland for the winter. He studied these birds for a number of years and noticed that after one 10-year period they stopped going to Ireland and remained in England for the winter. He attributed this change to a rise in winter temperature in England. The decade the birds stopped going to Ireland was the 1960s.

Iain wrote his paper on Blackbird migration in the 2000s. The effect of climate change on Hilbre currently could not be described as completely detrimental, as whilst there are some species that have decreased others have increased. The increase in temperature Iain documented back in the 1970s has led to changes that are beneficial for some of the birds that occur at Hilbre.

**John Elliott, on behalf of the Hilbre Bird Observatory**

## **RINGING AT WOOLSTON - SUMMER 2024**

In the six months ended 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024 ('this summer') 1,922 birds of 45 species were ringed at Woolston, a decrease of 2,464 birds (56%) from the total of 4,386 birds of 51 species ringed in the six months ended 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 ('last summer'). To put this dramatic reduction into perspective, as I write this in early November, it is clear that 2024 will turn out to be the poorest ringing year at Woolston since at least as far back as 1993. Some of this reduction is a result of reduced ringing effort, itself an artefact of the adverse weather conditions experienced this summer. Some planned ringing sessions were cancelled. There were a total of 70 ringing sessions this summer compared with 90 last summer. In addition, some sessions that did take place were restricted in scope because the wind conditions precluded opening all but the most sheltered nets. Nevertheless, a 25% reduction in effort cannot, of itself, account for a 56% reduction in birds ringed.

Looking first at migrant warblers, the main focus of summer ringing at Woolston, more than 1,200 fewer warblers were ringed this summer than last summer. It is true that this decline includes 701 fewer Chiffchaffs, a species that had a phenomenal breeding season in 2023 and that the 399 birds ringed in summer 2024 is still a respectable total. However, catches of every species of warbler were significantly lower except Lesser Whitethroat and Grasshopper Warbler, species that are only ever ringed in single figures. A striking fact is that more Cetti's Warblers were ringed than Sedge Warblers. In a repeat of 2023, few birds were found carrying significant amounts of fat as migration time approached suggesting that they were not finding sufficient insect food to lay down the fat necessary to fuel migration flights.

In an echo of summer 2023, Long-tailed Tits were scarce during the breeding season with only 31 ringed (last summer 28) but family parties appeared in October and the full year picture will look better. Wrens, Robins and Dunnocks were all ringed in about half the numbers ringed last summer. The relentless decline in Greenfinches has continued. The following summer ringing totals tell a stark story: 2022-201, 2023-146 and 2024-54. Bullfinches tell the same story: 2022-79, 2023-65 and 2024-46.

Once again the Blue Tits and Great Tits in the boxes on No.3 Bed bucked any trends in the wider countryside and fledged a similar number of young to recent years. However, last year's post-fledging influx of Blue Tits did not happen and just 88 were ringed compared with 326 last summer. The decline in Great Tits ringed was less dramatic, from 267 to 174.

A short-lived autumn hirundine roost formed on No.1 Bed and 56 Swallows were ringed. What is now the recurring April Sand Martin roost on No.3 Bed again formed but it also was short lived and the weather precluded attempts to catch these birds so just two were ringed compared with 497 last summer.

The following first ringing dates for juvenile birds indicate that for resident species the movement in timing of their breeding season was variable. Robins are regular early breeders although early nests are prone to predation if vegetation cover has not developed. This notwithstanding, May 4<sup>th</sup> is particularly early for a fledged juvenile. At the other end of the scale, Bullfinches, once common at Woolston, had a bad breeding season as indicated by the exceptionally late first juvenile date.

### Ringling date of first juvenile

|           | 2024   | 2023   | 2022   | 2021   |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Robin     | 4-May  | 10-May | 21-May | 27-May |
| Wren      | 22-Jun | 16-Jun | 15-Jun | 4-Jun  |
| Dunnock   | 15-May | 13-May | 1-Jun  | 26-May |
| Bullfinch | 27-Jul | 10-Jun | 15-Jun | 18-Jun |

In the case of our migrant warblers the following table of 'first juvenile' dates indicates that, with the exception of Whitethroat, the breeding season would appear to be some two weeks later than recent years.

### Ringling date of first juvenile

|              | 2024   | 2023   | 2022   | 2021   |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Chiffchaff   | 15-Jun | 2-Jun  | 6-Jun  | 28-May |
| Blackcap     | 15-Jun | 3-Jun  | 4-Jun  | 17-Jun |
| Whitethroat  | 22-Jun | 22-Jun | 11-Jun | 26-Jun |
| Reed Warbler | 13-Jul | 22-Jun | 24-Jun | 26-Jun |

After a blank summer last year, caused by unsuitable water levels, a single Green Sandpiper was added to the national colour-ringing scheme. Last year I wrote "Whilst it is clear at a broad level that the population of Willow Tits at Woolston has declined in the last few years ringing numbers this year to the end of September indicate that this decline may have stabilized". Sadly this does not appear to be the case, at least on those areas of the reserve covered by the ringing teams, after 17 juveniles ringed last summer just seven were ringed this summer.

After pretty much a blank year last year there was a light passage of Meadow Pipits and 16 were ringed. A single Tree Pipit was a surprise in a net on No.3 Bed as no lure was being played. Otherwise it was another blank year for passage migrants.

To end on a note, only tenuously connected to ringing, on November 9<sup>th</sup> a first-year male Penduline Tit was found on No.4 Bed which was two years to the day since Woolston's first Penduline Tit, also a first-year male, was caught and ringed on No.3 Bed.

With a nod to Jane Turner's editorial in *Bird News* 127 I recently received the following in an email from an American friend who is a keen ringer and birder: "Those of us who go out into the countryside and take note of what we find are recording the sixth great extinction". It is difficult to argue with that point of view.

**Michael Miles, on behalf of the Woolston Ringing Team**

## COLOUR RING REPORT

This report is a summary of the records obtained by the Dee Estuary Colour-ring Birding Group from October 2024 to January 2025.

### Great White Egret

The first Great White Egret breeding record in the UK was just 12 years ago, at Avalon Marshes in Somerset. In 2024 Avalon Marshes fledged 100 Great White Egrets from 63 nests, a remarkable achievement. We recorded three of these fledglings on the Dee estuary: Red(ADL) from August to November, Red(AFL) in June (it was also seen in Warrington in August) and Red(AFX) in December. In addition, Red(AFU) was in Tatton Park in August and Budworth Mere in November. So we had more of these young colour-ringed Great White Egrets in Cheshire than any other county outside of Somerset.

## Shelduck

Six colour-ringed Shelducks were recorded which had been ringed at Martin Mere (Lancs), Lower Derwent Valley NNR (Yorkshire) and Withymoore Pool (Shrops), the latter being a new ringing site.

## Knot

Our small group logged over 900 records of colour-ringed Knots from October to January, quite an achievement! These included 20 which had been ringed locally at Hoylake. Others have been ringed on the west coast of Iceland, northern Norway, various locations on the Dutch Waddensea, the Orkney Islands, east coast of Scotland, Bangor Harbour (North Wales), Dublin Bay, Altcar, Ainsdale and the Wash. We had several thousand second-year birds over-summering at Leasowe and Seaforth in 2024 and colour ringing has demonstrated that many of these have since dispersed over a wide area being seen, for example, on the southern coast of Ireland, Bangor Harbour, north-east Scotland and the German Waddensea.

## Oystercatcher

An Oystercatcher with red ring inscribed with ON was seen on Caldby Shore in December. This bird was ringed at Newtonmore, Highland, in March 2018. It was caught in a night-time roost on the banks of the River Spey and this is its fourth record for the Dee Estuary. Turns out that the ringer, who now lives in Newtonmore, knew the Dee estuary well as he did his post-Doc study in 1974 to 1978 studying Oystercatcher feeding behaviour on Thurstaston shore.

## Curlew

A Curlew with four blue rings and an orange ring was spotted several times feeding around Hilbre island between August and January. It was a juvenile and released from Nordhorn Zoo, Germany (near the Dutch border), in June 2024 as part of a headstarting programme.

A Curlew with white ring (FOM) returned to the Dee Estuary this winter, for the fifth year in a row. It was ringed in Finland in June 2018 and recorded back there in 2020 and 2021.

**Note:** If you want to be part of the Dee Estuary Colour-ring Birding Group all you have to do is submit a colour-ring sighting either to myself or copy me in on any submission you may make elsewhere so I can include it in our database. Email: [richard@deeestuary.co.uk](mailto:richard@deeestuary.co.uk).

**Note** there is a monthly colour-ring update on the Dee Estuary Birding Website: [www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk).

**Richard Smith**

## MID-CHESHIRE BARN OWL GROUP

2024 was a less than average year for Barn Owl breeding in Cheshire. Although anticipated, it was still a disappointment. However, now for 2025 and hopes for a far better year.

The start of any new year is one of hopeful anticipation. But we still have the hard work of box checking, cleaning, repairing and renewal wherever necessary to be ready for a new season.

Yet the year has not started well. Very cold, extremely wet, and strong gusty winds all go against the Barn Owl. Not being 'waterproof' and hunting mainly by 'sound' leaves this bird extremely vulnerable to such conditions. Unsurprisingly, we've had quite a few recorded sightings of Barn Owls out hunting - but mainly during daylight hours. An indication that the birds are hungry and looking for food whenever conditions permit.

But we have to remember that these weather conditions not only adversely affect the Barn Owl itself, but also its main prey as well. The Barn Owl hunts for ground-dwelling small rodents (voles, shrews, mice, etc). You only have to look at the fields around the county - still sodden and flooded from the heavy rainfall we've had and the possible effects of such conditions on the habitat of these vital animals. This raises serious questions as to the survival rate of these rodents. Only time will tell in the forthcoming weeks and months.

But we have to remain optimistic. Indeed, these birds (and their prey) have survived such conditions for thousands of years. Let's hope Mother Nature is kind to them for the remainder of this year.

As my now usual final comments - we do our best, but it stretches our limited resources to help support these beautiful and iconic birds. We get a great deal of satisfaction out of the conservation work we do. But we are always in need of more help.

To repeat our usual concerns and plea - if you have seen any Barn Owls recently please could you let us know, either direct or by our sighting report on the website [www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk](http://www.cheshirebarnowls.co.uk); as you will appreciate it is important that we know where the birds are regularly seen.

**John Mycock, Chairman Tel: 07970 235437 Email: [cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com](mailto:cheshirebarnowls@gmail.com)**

## CHESHIRE SWAN STUDY GROUP

At the end of March, I will be handing over the leadership of our group to Jenny Dunn (contact details below). Since my last report, the group has ringed five swans which included four second-years and one third-year.

### **The maximum counts of flocks of Mute Swans since my last report are as follows:**

- Acre Dell Pools, nr Congleton: 12 on 12<sup>th</sup> Dec and 22 on 19<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Bottom Flash, Winsford: 34 on 20<sup>th</sup> Oct, 34 on 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov, 41 on 12<sup>th</sup> Dec, 47 on 17<sup>th</sup> Jan and 69 on 20<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Budworth Mere, Northwich: 6 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov, 6 on 15<sup>th</sup> Dec and 6 on 12<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Comber Mere, nr Whitchurch: 7 on 20<sup>th</sup> Oct, 16 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov and 9 on 15<sup>th</sup> Dec.
- Doddington Mere, nr Nantwich: 73 on 21<sup>st</sup> Oct, 50 on 12<sup>th</sup> Nov, 19 on 3<sup>rd</sup> of Dec and 23 on 16<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Neumann's Flash, Northwich: 15 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov, 5 on 15<sup>th</sup> Dec and 3 on 12<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Queens Park Lake, Crewe: 8 on 20<sup>th</sup> Oct, 8 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov, 7 on 15<sup>th</sup> Dec, 7 on 12<sup>th</sup> Jan and 11 on 20<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Sankey Valley CP, Warrington: 21 on 20<sup>th</sup> Oct, 16 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov and 10 on 12<sup>th</sup> Jan.
- Woolston NR, Warrington: 49 on 20<sup>th</sup> Oct, 24 on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov and 24 on 15<sup>th</sup> Dec.

### **Movements**

CFP2 was ringed as a female cygnet on 17-8-14 at Queens Park pool, Crewe and was seen on 15-11-24 at Southport Marine lake = 75kms.

CPP6 was ringed as a female cygnet on 1-8-20 on the canal, Barbridge, Nantwich and was seen on 30-1-22 at Radford meadows NR, Stafford = 56kms and again on 4-1-25 at The Wolseley Centre, Stafford = 54kms.

**Sightings** of all swans, geese and Mallards should be sent to: David Cookson at [cheshireswans@gmail.com](mailto:cheshireswans@gmail.com), giving details of place (6-fig map ref), colour/character combination of ring and, if with other birds, total number present in the flock. All sightings will receive a printout of the history for the relevant bird(s).

**David Cookson, on behalf of Cheshire Swan Study Group**  
<https://cheshireswanstudygroup.wordpress.com>

**Note:** If YOU see anything of interest in your local paper, on the Internet, or even in the national press, relevant to Cheshire and Wirral, please bring it to the Editor's attention. Either scan in the article and email it, or cut it out and put it in the post. Please make sure the source and date are clear. Editor's contact details are on the inside front cover of *Bird News*.

# Species Spotlight

## WESTERN MARSH HARRIER *CIRCUS AERUGINOSUS*

### Ecology Notes from Cheshire and Wirral

In 2010 Cheshire joined the exclusive club of counties hosting breeding Marsh Harrier. The combined efforts of naturalists Pete Burton, Professor David Norman, Rob Cockbain and Richard Castell provided the first record of nesting Marsh Harrier within the recording area. This note describes the status of breeding as we near the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that discovery, the relatively new technology that was used in locating the nests, and behavioural traits that were observed, some of which may be novel to the reader.

During the 2024 breeding season, ten nests were located using a thermal drone within a triangular region of Cheshire and Wirral stretching from Neston in the west, to Woolston in the east and Northwich to the south. The epicentre for breeding is the Frodsham hinterland with half the known number of nests being located here. Polygamy, or to more specific, polygyny (a male with multiple females) was thought to occur within two of the areas where two males were each servicing two nests.

As can be seen with many reedbeds, the colonising reeds tend to spread until the water depth becomes inhibitive. Terrestrially, however, Bulrush will only establish in damp habitat whereas Common Reed will spread terrestrially until it is outcompeted by established vegetation or suppressed by developing scrub. Once established, and without interference, a Common Reed reedbed, even a dry one, can persist for decades.

Spring 2024 in Cheshire was cold, wet and windy, and it was obvious from the numerous Buzzard nests monitored by Cheshire and Wirral Raptor study Group (CWRSG) in spring that egg-laying was retarded in this comparably sized raptor, but the assumption that Marsh Harrier would be similarly impacted upon was not borne out, and small clutches were being located from the second week of April as normal.

### Nest building and maintenance

Observations show an obvious demarcation of duties between the sexes regarding nest construction and maintenance, and without wanting to be accused of avian misandry, the males can appear a little hapless at the nest. Some researchers suggest that the male of the species has little to no involvement in nest construction, whereas others suggest an increasing workload supplying nesting material as the season progresses. It's possible that the conflicting evidence is simply being caused by the individuality of each bird rather than the proclivity of the genders.

Monitoring, using a drone, was undertaken prior to the main thrust of the breeding season and footage was captured of a male standing within a gap in the reeds with his head down seemingly snipping at the base of the reeds, taking flight only as the female showed her intentions to fly into the same gap. Ten days later a nest had been constructed at this exact location and had a sitting female. On this occasion at least, the male appeared to be involved at the start of nest construction.

Of the nests watched closely in Frodsham, the males were the main



nest-material providers during incubation/brooding by the female, though the arrangement of nest material was undertaken by the female. The female, whilst incubating and brooding, regularly picked up old dried phragmites reeds from beneath her and snipped them into much smaller pieces, allowing them to accumulate in the central area of the nest creating a softer cup, whereas the longer uncut pieces were arranged on the periphery. As the young grew and were left for longer periods, the male and female would regularly drop in and deposit nest-material, though the male would often deposit the reeds on top of the young who would sit there and look out under this teepee-like frame until the female arrived to rearrange them. On some occasions the male would simply drop reeds into the nest from above the reedbed. Clumps of short nest material would be carried in by the bill whereas longer stems were more likely to be carried in the talons.

Most nests increase in size as the season progresses. The greater depth and width not only allows for the additional weight and size of the family but provides a much safer 'pontoon' for those on or over water should the nest drop or water levels rise.

## Site fidelity

Naturally, site fidelity can't be assessed if the nesting and possibly returning birds can't be identified definitively, but it is worth noting that all the successful nests in 2022 and 2023 had new nests constructed within five to ten metres of them in the following year, whereas new nests were never constructed near to nests that had failed.

## Feeding

As expected, only the female was observed feeding the young. This usually followed a call from the male who was ready for a food pass. Prey items observed included Long-tailed Field Mouse, ducklings, Coot and Moorhen chicks. One nest had what appeared to be a Stock Dove wing next to the nest.

## Brooding

Atypically, the male Marsh Harrier, as shown in the image on the right, decided to remain at the nest and even brood its chick whilst the female was away from the nest.

## Roosting male

During the breeding season, a monogamous male was noted roosting within 15 metres of its nest, beneath a Hawthorn bush, however, when a small branch supporting a camera was installed roughly two metres from the edge of the nest, he immediately started roosting on this new perch, his tail feathers and a black curved talon clearly seen as it gripped the camera lens. This, along with other events questions the neophobic reputation of the species.



## Predation and human interference

Marsh Harrier eggs and young are vulnerable to mammalian and avian predators, as are the adult birds in certain circumstances. Terrestrial mammalian predators such as Fox, Badger and Mink have all been observed in 2024 within the same reedbed as a Marsh Harrier nest. On one occasion, when using a drone to check on a nest, a fresh track could be seen leading towards an active nest, from the direction of a public footpath. This was concerning as the tracks appeared to be typical of those left by a human but when the nest was inspected from the air it was found that the track passed within five metres of the nest, and thankfully the female was still incubating. Increased visits over the following week revealed other similar tracks elsewhere in the reedbed. On one evening at dusk a large Badger could be seen crashing through the reeds leaving a trail in its wake. Foxes and Mink have been observed weaving their way through the reeds without leaving a trail.

## Nest failures

It's often difficult to determine why a nest fails but the inexperience of an adult bird, abandonment, predation of eggs, young, or even adults, flooding, disturbance, nest collapse, etc, are all paradoxically on a very long shortlist.

The only nest that wasn't in a reedbed was the most southerly at Northwich. The nest appeared to be in amongst sedges and willowherbs, with a sparse amount of Common Reed. The nest appeared very precarious as was constructed mainly out of the feathery deadheads of Common Reed, sinking in the area that the female was sitting, so much so that the female appeared to be at a 45 degree angle. The reflections from the area around the nest suggested that there was water beneath it at the time of the visit, but the structure was not typical of the 'pontoon' nests observed at Woolston, Burton, and Frodsham, which were similarly over water.

## Ringing results

Merseyside Ringing Group and CWRSG's combined efforts resulted in the ringing of 12 Marsh Harrier pulli at four nests in 2024. Marsh Harriers with green DARVIC rings containing a white alpha-numeric code can be reported at <https://cr-birding.org/node/6502> or [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org). Alternatively, contact Steve Binney (project leader for colour-ringing Marsh Harrier in Cheshire, Wirral and Merseyside) at [thosedozycrows@aol.com](mailto:thosedozycrows@aol.com).

## The future

If Marsh Harrier continues to increase in numbers, it is likely to reach saturation point in the reedbeds of north Cheshire and dispersal into arable land may occur. This rationale is congruous with recent movements and sightings in reedbeds of north-east Wales, the reedbeds flanking the Mersey estuary, mosses to the east of Warrington and attempted breeding of a pair at Northwich. Marsh Harrier is known to nest in arable crops, but this can have disastrous consequences if harvesting of the crop coincides with the breeding season. One crop prevalent in north Cheshire that could be a 'surrogate' reedbed is miscanthus, a biofuel crop (though sometimes used as feed for livestock). It grows to around 3 metres high and dries through winter. The main issue with this type of plant production germane to Marsh Harrier nesting is the timing of the cut which is usually restricted to February, following a dry spell. Though the cut is outside of the breeding season, it's whether the crop will grow to an acceptable height for the nesting Marsh Harriers before the start of nest construction, typically early April.

## Drone usage

Though recognised as a relatively new piece of 'tech', 2025 will be the tenth year that the author has been utilising drones for ecology work. The current drone has thermal capability and transmits a live split-screen (normal view and thermal) image back to the drone pilot. This enables remote habitat mapping, mammal monitoring, nest finding/counting, etc. Benefits from this bird's eye view is greater accuracy for assessing location and numbers, the ability to record the view, less disturbance, less manpower required for similar investigation on foot, greater access (the airspace above a property is not controlled by the landowner), and no trails left to or from a nest, and no damage to habitat.

A drone code has been drawn up by the Civil Aviation Authority which addresses the heights, distances and proximity to people, buildings, etc, and has a certification process to allow greater flexibility on these aspects. Scheduled animals, including Schedule 1 birds, will require the drone operator to have the appropriate permit/licence if indeed the target species is to suffer disturbance through the activity. The author of this report obtained his first Schedule 1 permit in the 1980s and is currently licensed for all species of Schedule 1 raptor breeding within the recording area.

**Andy Harmer** Email: [andyharmer@btinternet.com](mailto:andyharmer@btinternet.com)

## References

Burton, P., Norman, D., Castell, R., Cockbain, R., (2010) First Breeding of Marsh Harrier in Cheshire. *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Report 2010*. pp. 146-148.

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# YELLOW-BROWED WARBLERS 2024

What are you doing here when you should be in the steamy jungles of south-east Asia? And where will you go to when you leave here? I was looking at a Yellow-browed Warbler sitting calmly in Jane Turner's hand which she had just ringed - and my first record!

Those two questions I was asking as I was looking at this tiny sprite, birders have been asking for many years - and the fact that they remain unanswered sums up how puzzling their autumn arrival each year is. I will briefly summarise here what the puzzle is, and I have already gone into some detail in my previous article in 2016 (Ref 1).

There have also been many articles published in ornithological journals about the Yellow-browed Warbler

(YBW) puzzle and the one I found the most interesting and comprehensive is *The Yellow-browed Warbler* (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) as a model to understand vagrancy and its potential for the evolution of new migration routes by Paul Dufour et al (Ref 2).



## The Puzzle

1. YBWs breed right across Siberia from the Urals in the west to the Sea of Okhotsk in the east, and winter in southern Asia with Thailand being particularly favoured. So what are they doing in the very different location and climate in western Europe?

2. The YBWs which reach western Europe appear to be flying in the opposite (i.e. 180°) direction to the rest of the population. This suggests some kind of Reverse/Mirror migration, but nobody really understands what this is or what causes it.

3. Records of YBWs in the UK have increased greatly this century, this suggests a westwards range expansion or a general increase in numbers, but there is no evidence for either as yet.

4. YBWs are seen in the UK in good numbers in September and October, but numbers overwintering, either here or further south, are tiny in comparison. Also, numbers recorded on spring passage are tiny. Does that mean very few survive the winter to return to Siberia in spring, or is it just that we haven't found their wintering area yet?

5. There is very little evidence that a new migration route is being established. Yet it seems incredible that the thousands, and increasing numbers, of individuals arriving here in autumn are just vagrants (i.e. do not return to breed and therefore are lost to the gene pool) rather than being true migrants.

I end this section with a quote by Steve White and Chris Kehoe from their Report on scarce migrant birds in Britain in 2016 (Ref 3): *Something is clearly happening somewhere with Yellow-browed Warblers but a clear explanation for the exponential increase in British records is still lacking.* Something of an understatement!

## The 2024 Influx

2024 saw another massive influx of YBWs into north-west Europe, on a par with 2016 which Steve and Chris were commenting on above. Early September saw just a handful of records, then the birds arrived in good numbers on 19<sup>th</sup> with 40 records reported to BirdGuides, followed by 99 the next day - and they kept on coming. Nearly all of these early records showed that the large majority of the birds were on the Shetland and Orkney islands and on the east coasts of Scotland and England, there were just a handful of records further west - including on Hilbre on Sep 20<sup>th</sup>. By mid-October they were everywhere in England and Wales, as well as in Scotland and Ireland. A lot of records were still from the east coast and Shetland and these presumably indicate birds were still arriving into the country. But there was obviously a movement from north-east to south-west with a lot of birds in south-west Ireland, the Scilly Isles and Cornwall. Whilst I was writing this I looked at the records for the middle week in November, there was just one record from Shetland

and they were largely absent from the east coast of England with most being seen in the south-west of Ireland, England and Wales. Most had obviously already passed through, there were a total of just 77 records for the whole of that week in mid-November, compared to over 540 in just three days from Oct 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>.

## Dee Estuary and North Wirral 2024

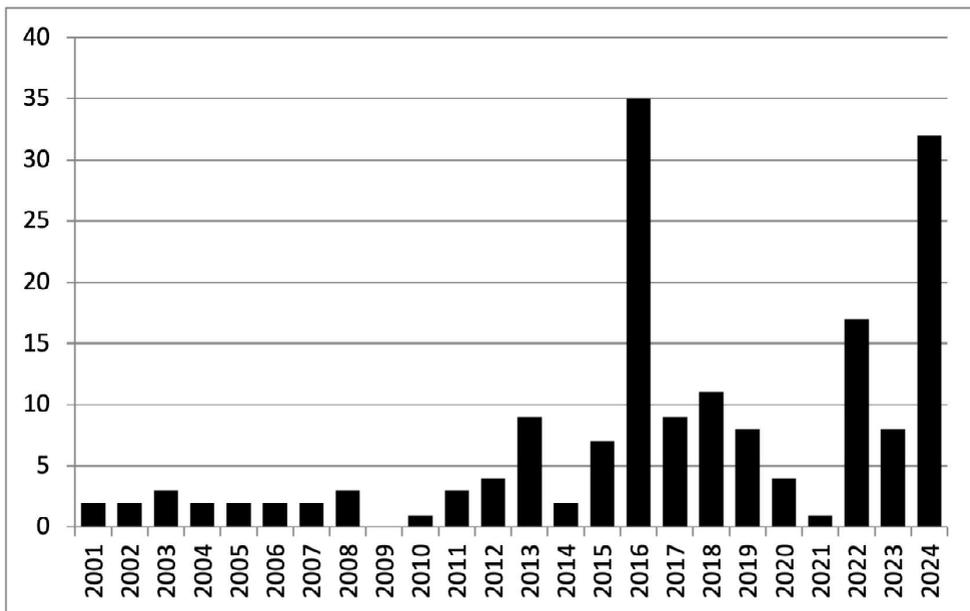
We've had 32 records this year, slightly below the highest ever total of 35 in 2016. No doubt the actual number of YBW's passing through our area will have been far higher, as you would expect for a small bird which skulks hidden in shrubs and trees. When you get birds turning up in birder's gardens where they can be identified, you wonder about all the other gardens where people would have no idea what they were looking at.

The hotspots this year were undoubtedly Hilbre and gardens adjacent to the west end of Hoylake promenade. Hilbre had the first two birds seen, with singles on Sep 20<sup>th</sup> and Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>, ending up with a total of five. Jane Turner's wildlife garden at Hoylake had the majority of records with at least 10, and several more were recorded elsewhere in Hoylake. One caught by Jane on Oct 10<sup>th</sup> was carrying significant fat reserves, but it had increased its bodyweight by 20% when it was re-caught on Oct 13<sup>th</sup> with a fat score of 50 - i.e. a very well-fed bird. So, whatever happened to these birds when they left our area, they had obviously found plenty to eat.

## History

The first YBW to be recorded on the Dee Estuary/North Wirral was on Hilbre on the relatively recent date of Oct 13<sup>th</sup> 1973. Another was at Hilbre the following September, and it was 1979 before the next one turned up, in a garden at Red Rocks. There was a gap of six years but then, reflecting the increase nationally, they became more or less annual from 1985 onwards (Refs 4 and 5). As can be seen in the bar chart below, annual numbers remained small with usually just two or three recorded for the first 10 years of this century\*. Nationally, they started to significantly increase from around 2003, but here on the west coast it wasn't until 2012 before we saw a similar increase, peaking with the remarkable 35 records in 2016, and numbers have remained relatively high ever since.

**Yellow-browed Warbler Records  
Dee Estuary and North Wirral 2021 to 2024**



## References

1. Richard Smith, Yellow-browed Warbler Influx 2016, December 2016 *Dee Estuary Newsletter* ([www.deeestuary.co.uk](http://www.deeestuary.co.uk)).
2. Paul Dufour et al., The Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) as a model to understand vagrancy and its potential for the evolution of new migration routes, *Movement Ecology*, 10, Dec 2022.
3. Steve White and Chris Kehoe, Report on scarce migrant birds in Britain in 2016 (Part 2. passerines), *British Birds* 111, September 2018.
4. *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports* 1973 to 2022, CAWOS.
5. Allan Conlin & Eddie Williams, *Rare and Scarce Birds of Cheshire & Wirral*, 2017.

\* The number of Yellow-browed Warblers in the bar chart were those reported in various sources including this website, but not all records were submitted to the Rarity Committee so the 'official' number of records quoted in the *Cheshire and Wirral Bird Reports* will, for some years, be lower.

**Richard Smith (article first published in the December 2024 Newsletter on the Dee Estuary Birding Website <http://www.deeestuary.co.uk>)**

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# Sites to Watch

## A REVIEW OF 2024 AT MARBURY AND WITTON FLASHES

Situated on the outskirts of Northwich, Marbury Country Park (including Budworth Mere) and the Witton Flashes have long been one of Cheshire's premier inland birding areas. They are easily accessed, and only being separated by the Trent and Mersey Canal make an ideal patch for many local birders. A range of habitats including wetlands and woodlands produces an excellent variety of resident and migrant species throughout the year. 2024 was not a vintage year by any means, with no major rarities and a below average tally of 143 species. Nonetheless these included two new species for the flashes: a Little Tern at Neumann's Flash on 10th May, and rather less welcome, two Ring-necked Parakeets also at Neumann's Flash on 6th Nov.

For a few years now Marsh Harriers have been infrequent visitors, presumed to be from the known breeding sites further north along the Mersey Valley. Given few had lingered, it was a surprise when a pair of immatures (a second calendar year female and a third calendar year male) began spending more and more time at Ashton's Flash during the spring. Once the male began displaying and both were seen carrying nesting material it was clear something wholly unexpected was underway. Later in the spring food passes were witnessed and drone footage showed a nest had clearly been occupied. Unfortunately, although it would appear that young were hatched, none survived, with the pair's lack of experience probably a key factor. However, successfully the end result may be considered, breeding Marsh Harriers within shouting distance of Northwich town centre is something to be celebrated.

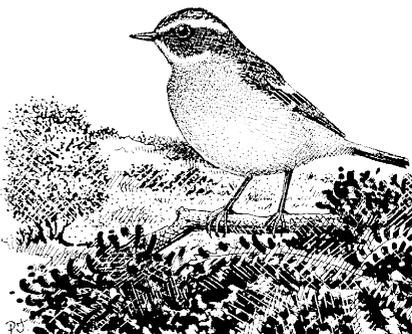
There was plenty more to enjoy during the rest of the year too. Judicious use of thermal imagers has been of great help in tracking the presence of the Bitterns in the Coward Reedbed at Budworth Mere. As a result, many visitors were delighted with their first ever views of them from the mere hide, often with Kingfishers on view at the same time. One Bittern was present from the start of the year, with two seen on a couple of occasions in January and February. Bittern watching often coincided with spectacular Starling murmurations with up to 10,000 roosting in the Coward Reedbed in late winter, although the main event was over at Neumann's Flash where 60,000 roosted in late January.

Although the patch is not blessed with many food sources for Waxwings, a pair was seen briefly at the flashes on 1st February. A rarity in recent years, Scaup put on a good show in January with six turning up at Budworth Mere on 10th, and another present from 17th-20th. Even more surprising was male which was seen at Neumann's Flash from 17th-26th May. Common Scoter passage can be a bit hit and miss some years, but 2024 saw an often confiding drake at Budworth Mere from 14th-18th February, another there on 16th March, and a young male at Neumann's Flash from 25th-30th September. Unfortunately, Garganey fared less well with just two single observer sightings at Ashton's Flash in April and Neumann's Flash in May. Following no sightings in 2023, the arrival of 30 Whooper Swans at Budworth Mere on 26th February was most welcome and small flocks also made appearances later in the year in keeping with small influxes seen at other regional sites.

Once an iconic resident at Marbury Country Park, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers maintain a tenuous presence and a male photographed in March gives some hope for the future. The same cannot be said for Spotted Flycatchers, with none seen at traditional breeding sites or on migration. At one time similar fortunes were considered apt for Grasshopper Warblers and Cuckoos, however, four territories of the former were located in spring whilst the latter were a regular presence throughout May and June.

A highlight of early spring was the presence of a pair of resplendent Black-necked Grebes at Budworth Mere on 10th March. They were the earliest ever recorded here, but also proved to be the only ones seen all year. Also early migrants were four Little Gulls at the mere on 8th March, three of which remained on the 11th. April at Budworth Mere also produced a Kittiwake from 10th-12th and an Arctic Tern on 16th and 17th, but there were no Black Terns during the spring. Two Yellow-legged Gulls were seen this year, both of which were at Neumann's Flash on 25th March and on 10th September.

Only one Redstart was found, a male along the Trent and Mersey Canal on 12th April, although there was a reasonable spring passage of Wheatears with a few Whinchats and Yellow Wagtails too. At least one 'Channel'-type Yellow Wagtail with strong Blue-headed vibes was amongst the latter in fields by the Budworth Mere sailing club on 14th April.



Wader passage across the patch was particularly dire in 2024. There was for example only one sighting of a Ruff and just two records of Dunlin, however, somewhat surprisingly Greenshanks fared well during late summer and autumn passage. The best sites certainly suffered from a surplus of water, but overall it simply felt like fewer waders were on the move compared to past years. Notably on the increase in recent times, even Avocet numbers were down, mainly due to less available habitat. On the plus side, Great White Egrets and Little Egrets are now standard fare from late summer through to early winter. A Cattle Egret was also found at Neumann's Flash on 16th July, only the fourth patch record and the first in breeding plumage.

Making up for their absence during the spring, three adult Black Terns were at Budworth Mere on 12th August and a juvenile was also there from 10th-12th September. Some very concentrated visible migration sessions undertaken from Witton Mill Mound on the west side of Ashton's Flash during the autumn produced some remarkable counts by local standards. A Tree Pipit overhead on 25th September was notable, but there were also patch record counts of 315 Meadow Pipits on 15th September and 9051 Woodpigeons on 23rd October. November also yielded a record count of Pink-footed Geese, with at least 3500 passing overhead on 11th November.

A nationwide influx of Hawfinches during late autumn boded well for sightings at Marbury Country Park. Sure enough, following one seen on 5th November, four were found on 8th and remained through to the end of the year, although they could be frustratingly elusive for some visitors. With the Bittern returning by 13th December, the Starling murmurations back again at both the mere and the flashes, a wintering Great White Egret and appealing flocks of Goosanders and Goldeneyes around it was a good end to the year. Positive signs for another year of patch birding in 2025.

# ROSTHERNE MERE NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

## Newsletter Oct-Dec 2024

Welcome to the final newsletter of 2024 which covers the last three months of the year. It has been a fascinating quarter with some amazing records! The total number of species for the year was 127 which represent the highest tally for the Reserve since 2012.

Up to nine Mute Swans, including several juveniles, visited in Oct and 16 Whooper Swans dropped in during early Dec. There were four Egyptian Geese recorded and around 300 Pink-footed Geese flying over in several skeins. An amazing 35 Goosanders came into roost during Dec evenings setting a new record. There were 55 Great Crested Grebes and 92 Shoveler in Oct.

The number of wintering ducks gradually increased throughout the quarter with 124 Mallard and 126 Wigeon. However, Goldeneye numbers were modest with only nine representing the highest count and Teal peaked at only 32. 20 Mandarin Ducks were recorded in Nov and single male and female Pintails were also seen.

A Great White Egret visited and there were four records of Little Egret. Up to four Water Rails were heard 'sharming' in the reed beds around the mere. Several Kingfishers were seen at various locations around the shoreline. Waders included: Green Sandpiper, Lapwing (up to 180), Woodcock and up to four Snipe in Dolls Meadow with one ringed in Nov.

The final Hobby left on 6th Oct. Kestrel, Buzzard, and a single Peregrine was seen on several dates. There were up to three Sparrowhawks hunting the Starling roost in Nov.

There were around 1000 Black-headed Gulls in the roost with 33 Herring Gulls. Several Great Black-backed Gulls were recorded and up to 300 Lesser Black-backed Gulls. A second-winter Yellow-legged Gull visited in Dec.

There were wonderful views of up to two Barn Owls hunting over the meadows at dusk and several Tawny Owls were heard hooting from Old Hall Wood. Great Spotted Woodpeckers have been very active with several ringed and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was recorded on four days which is very encouraging.

We have a top-notch ringing team at Rostherne with a combination of great endeavour, vast experience and now youth with the addition of Sam Rayner joining Malcolm Calvert and John Adshead. The team have handled over 1000 birds this year and they have been rewarded with some outstanding catches. These included four Yellow-browed Warblers caught by John on 17th Oct, the second record for the Reserve and the first since 1996! A fifth bird carrying a lot of food reserves was caught on 21st Oct. Then in early Nov three Bearded Reedlings, an adult male, adult female and young female, were caught in Dolls Meadow by the ringing team. The species was last recorded in 1978 and then before in 1977 when Malcolm was also present. He only had to wait 47 years to see them again! The Bearded Reedlings stayed for nearly a month and the Rostherne volunteers rapidly built four grit trays under the guidance of the Reserve Manager Steve Ormerod. The trays were used briefly before the birds left in early Dec.

An interesting habitat for birds, just on the Reserve boundary, was the root crop on the Sprout Field near the Natural England car park in which sheep were grazed. Notable sightings included up to 18 Chaffinch, 50 Linnet, 60 Meadow Pipit, five Song Thrush and around 100 Fieldfare and Redwing.

There were up to 19 Collared Doves on the wires by the workshop in Oct and Siskin, Lesser Redpoll and Stonechat were recorded in the quarter. The last Reed Warbler record was on 17th Oct. Up to three Cetti's Warblers were singing around the Reserve and an overwintering Chiffchaff was recorded in Dec. The final Swallows included four seen on 2nd Oct. Ravens were often recorded with four the highest count. There were around 10,000 Starlings roosting in the reed beds in Nov.

There were almost daily records of Ring-necked Parakeets from mid-Oct with the highest count of four in Dec. This has coincided with the phenomenal increase in the species visiting Dunham Massey and Tatton Park.

**Bill Bellamy**

# Notes and Letters

## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

This section is a chance for members to contribute, whether a few lines, or a long article, which might be split over several issues. Some ideas might be amusing (or otherwise!) anecdotes, unusual avian behaviour, special memories, ringing and/or survey stories, and looking back over the years – even back to childhood! The list is almost endless – it's up to members. Also, we are always interested in your views on any of our articles or on the newsletter itself. Ed.

## WREN APPARENTLY FEEDING UNDER SNOW

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* has earned the name of 'cave dweller' owing to its propensity to enter crevices in search of invertebrate prey.

As the snow melted on the conservatory of my house in Handforth on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> January 2025 there remained a sheet of semi-frozen snow overhanging the pvc gutter. A Wren alighted on the gutter and then entered the 'tunnel', seemingly in the search for food amongst the small clumps of moss within.

The bird failed to reappear over 15 minutes of my observation but was seen to briefly visit the gutter some five hours later. It was seen walking along the snow free gutter on 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> January. I assumed that all observations were of the same bird.

**Malcolm Calvert**

## TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

Having lived in our current house for 24 years Viv and I were having a bit of a pre-Christmas clear-out last month. Underneath a load of old Dee Estuary Voluntary Wardens leaflets and wader count forms I came across a copy of the *Dee Estuary WeBS Annual Report for 1999/2000*. Quickly looking through it I was intrigued when I realised it was the first ever such report written (by Neil Friswell and edited by Colin Wells). It was fascinating reading it because there have been some dramatic changes to the estuary's birds over those 24 years, and reading the report really brought that home. So I thought, using extracts from the 1999/2000 Report and comparing them with what is written in the current 2023/2024 Report, it would be of interest to choose 12 species and show how their fortunes have changed.

Note that words in italics are direct quotes from the reports, otherwise they are my own comments.

### Little Egret

1999/2000: *Now regularly recorded in all months of the year.... Maximum count 5 in September.*

2023/2024: Peak count was 399 in September and there were 88 nests in Marsh Covert. ... a count of 620 in August 2024 suggests another surge in numbers...!

### Bewick's Swan

1999/2000: Peak count was 56 in January. But the highest ever WeBS count on the Dee Estuary was made the following winter when there were 118 present.

2023/2024: *None were recorded again in this year's WeBS.*

### Whooper Swan

1999/2000: *As usual a few birds wintered on the Estuary with the maximum count of 8 occurring in January.*

2023/2024: ... a peak of only 31 in January. Although current numbers are much higher than 24 years ago they actually peaked in Feb 2011 with 86. The Report asks the question *is there an issue with the Dee Estuary as all swan species are in sharp decline?*

## **Pink-footed Goose**

1999/2000: *The maximum WeBS count was 66 on 23 January but higher counts were recorded, with up to 80 during late January to mid-February.*

2023/2024: *A record count this winter and the five-year average continues steadily upwards. That record count was 23,816 on Feb 11th 2024. Of all the species in this article the increase in 'Pinkfeet' numbers has to be the most spectacular. See the 'Pink-footed Geese' article in the October 2023 Dee Estuary Newsletter: <http://www.deeestuary.co.uk/news1023.htm>.*



Pink-footed Geese by Ray Scally

## **Light-bellied Brent Goose**

1999/2000: *This winter the highest count was 8 birds which is typical of recent years.*

2023/2024: *WeBS counts this year were 482, 561, 475, 638, 624, 399, 358 in October, November, December, January, February, March and April respectively. These are record counts....*

## **Wigeon**

1999/2000: *Peak count was 2751 in December, not untypical for the previous 10 years.*

2023/2024: *Another good peak count this year - the third highest over the last 38 years. The count was 8293 in November.*

## **Shoveler**

1999/2000: *The highest WeBS count was 77 on 12 September.*

2023/2024: *Very high counts again this winter, particularly September to November with an astonishing 426 in the latter month.*

## **Goldeneye**

1999/2000: *...maximum count 16 in January - slightly down on recent winters (eg 31 in January 1999).*

2023/2024: *Three records - one in December, one in January and two in February.*

## **Goosander**

1999/2000: *No Goosanders reported.*

2023/2024: *Peak count was 30 in November. Note there was a maximum of 36 on West Kirby Marine Lake in December (on a non-WeBS count day).*

## **Oystercatcher**

1999/2000: *There has been a steady decline in Oystercatcher numbers since 1993/94. That winter marked a low point in Oystercatcher numbers with a maximum of just 14,889 in September - down from a typical count of 30,000 to 40,000 prior to 1994. This decline was almost certainly due to over-fishing of the cockle beds, and the large amount of disturbance caused by the cocklers.*

2023/2024: *Some good counts this winter. The maximum count was 27,448 in September. The highest count in recent years was 30,362 in January 2022. The recovery in numbers is due to the Dee Estuary Cockle Order brought in 2008 to strictly control the cockling industry. Can we have a similar Cockle Order for north Wirral please??*

## **Purple Sandpiper**

1990/2000: *Peak count was 45 in February.*

2023/2024: *Peak count was 20 in December.*

## Black-tailed Godwit

1990/2000: *There has been a large increase in numbers since the late 1980's....* Peak count was 2543 in November.

2023/2024: *A record count in August 2023.....* Peak count was 10,422.

The increase in Black-tailed Godwit numbers has been well documented in this website - for example, see the 'Black-tailed Godwits 2024' article:  
<http://www.deeestuary.co.uk/news1124.htm>.

## References

1. Neil Friswell and Colin Wells, *Dee Estuary WeBS Annual Report*, 1999/2000.
2. Neil Friswell and Colin Wells, *Dee Estuary and North Wirral Foreshore WeBS Annual Report*, 2023/2024.

Also see the *Wetland Bird Survey Annual Report* section on the BTO website:

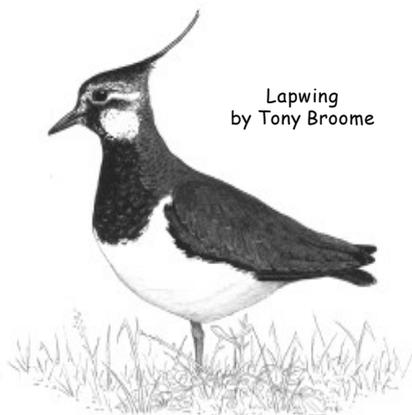
<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/wetland-bird-survey/publications/webs-annual-report>

**Richard Smith** (article first published in the January 2025 Newsletter on the Dee Estuary Birding Website <http://www.deeestuary.co.uk>)

## LAPWING FEAST!

Looking through my 2024 notes it definitely was a Lapwing Feast last year!

By 30<sup>th</sup> May we had found 5+ pairs with chicks in a small area (less than 1.5km) - three large fields and two smaller fields, four were winter cereals and the other was a stubble field. I say 5+ because there were definitely 6 breeding pairs, but only 5 pairs that we'd seen with chicks - the other pair was too far away to see any chicks but they often alarmed even when a Canada Goose got close, so I'm sure that they had chicks. Another site had been abandoned by 2 pairs at the incubating stage (so many corvids in that area) - they'd got them to hatching stage over the years, but not in 2024. Add in Skylarks (3-4 sites) and Yellowhammers (3 sites) a good year in our patch!!!



Lapwing  
by Tony Broome

**Sheila Blamire**

**Note: the copy date for the next issue is 7<sup>th</sup> June 2025 - *please be prompt***

We cannot guarantee that material received after this date will be published in that issue. If you are aware that your material may be delayed, please let the Editor know as soon as possible.

**If you know anyone who might want to advertise  
in future Bird News please let me know and  
I'll contact them with all the information.**

**Sheila Blamire at [sheilablamire@cawos.org](mailto:sheilablamire@cawos.org) Tel: 07837 745939**



## APRIL 2025

- 12 KOS Woolston Eyes, ring for details
- 13 HPRSPB St Aiden's RSPB, ring for details
- 14 HPRSPB 'WINDHOVER - A YEAR AMONG KESTRELS' by Laurence Rose
- 25 KOS AGM followed by '3 MONTHS, 3 COUNTRIES, 3 EAGLES' by Sheila Blamire
- 25-28 SECOS Norfolk weekend, ring for details

## MAY 2025

- 11 KOS Belvide Reservoir, ring for details
- 11 SECOS Leighton Moss RSPB, ring for details
- 19 HPRSPB 'A BRUSH WITH NATURE' by Anne-Louise Pickering
- 25 HPRSPB Goyt Valley, ring for details
- 29-1 HPRSPB Norfolk / Suffolk long weekend, ring for details

## JUNE 2025

- 8-9 SECOS Forest of Dean, ring for details
- 15-17 KOS Far Ings / Blacktoft Sands / Fairburn Ings, ring for details
- 22 HPRSPB Bempton Cliffs RSPB, ring for details
- 27 KOS Mobberley evening walk, ring for details

## JULY 2025

- 5 KOS Whixall Moss, Shropshire, ring for details
- 20 HPRSPB Little Wolden Moss, ring for details
- 25 KOS Neumann's Flash area evening walk, ring for details

## AUGUST 2025

- 24 HPRSPB Blacktoft Sands RSPB / North Cave YWT, ring for details

## SEPTEMBER 2025

- 7 KOS Red Rocks / Parkgate / BMW, ring for details
- 8 HPRSPB AGM followed by MEMBERS PRESENTATIONS
- 14 HPRSPB Burton Mere RSPB and Wirral, ring for details
- 14 KOS Red Rocks / West Kirby, ring for details
- 22 HPRSPB 'THE FOREST OF DEAN' by Nick Martin
- 26 KOS 'NORTH WEST YEAR' by Chris Galvin

Will **affiliated societies**, who wish to advertise meetings of relevance to CAWOS, please email their programme to:

**sheilablamire@cawos.org** Or post their programme to:

**Sheila Blamire, Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane,**

**Mere, Cheshire, WA16 6QG**

**AFFILIATED SOCIETIES (Meetings are a mixture of Indoor and Zoom)**

**ADNHS Altrincham & District Natural History Society** <http://mpettipher.me.uk/altnats>  
Meetings: Jubilee Centre, The Firs, Bowdon at 7:30pm, contact: info@altnats.org.uk

**CAWOS Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society** [www.cawos.org](http://www.cawos.org)  
Meetings: Mere and Tabley Community Club, Warrington Road, Knutsford at 7:45pm, or by Zoom, as detailed in the programme, contact Sec. David Hiley 07484 836652

**CRSPB Chester RSPB Members' Group** <https://group.rspb.org.uk/chester> Meetings: Christleton Parish Hall, Christleton, CH3 7AS at 7:30pm, contact: RSPBchester@googlegroups.com

**HPRSPB High Peak RSPB Members' Group** <https://group.rspb.org.uk/highpeak> Meetings: Senior Citizens' Hall, Marple at 7:30pm, contact David Knass 07879 646856

**KOS Knutsford Ornithological Society** [www.10x50.com](http://www.10x50.com) Meetings: Jubilee Hall, Stanley Road, Knutsford at 8pm, contact Sec. Karina Stanley 07532 833083

**MRSBPB Macclesfield RSPB Members' Group** <https://group.rspb.org.uk/macclesfield>  
Meetings: Macclesfield Community Centre, Macclesfield at 7:45pm, contact Ray Evans 01625 432635

**NNHS Nantwich Natural History Society**  
Occasional meetings throughout the year, contact Sec. Roger Crow, 01270 618416

**SECOS South-East Cheshire Ornithological Society** [www.secos.org.uk](http://www.secos.org.uk)  
Meetings: Ettiley Heath Church Community Centre at 7:30pm, contact Mike Tonks 07484 306147

**WGBG Wilmslow Guild Birdwatching Group** <http://wgbwcopy.wikidot.com/wgbg>  
Meetings: Wilmslow Guild at 7:30pm, contact Stuart Mollison 07505 254306

**\*\*\* POSITIONS VACANT \*\*\***

***BIRD REPORT EDITOR***

***BR DATABASE MANAGER***

***AND COMPILER(S)***

**Compiler(s) required for the Bird Report 2024 - *urgent***

**Bird Report Editor to take over for the Bird Report 2025**

**BR Database Manager to take over for the Bird Report 2025**

Please contact **David Hiley: [secretary@cawos.org](mailto:secretary@cawos.org)**

More information, including Job Description can be supplied

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| Page 10-12 | County Round-Up           | Page 28    | Diary             |
| Page 12-16 | Ringling News             |            |                   |

## \*\*\*\*\* FOCALPOINT \*\*\*\*\*

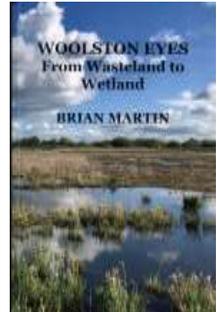
It's with great sadness that after over 40 years of serving the nature market, we announce Focalpoint will permanently close its doors on Monday 31st March. Focalpoint supported CAWOS for many years. They will certainly be missed.

## FROM WASTELAND TO WETLAND

### A HISTORY OF WOOLSTON EYES

by **BRIAN MARTIN**

A captivating book written by Brian Martin. It delves into the remarkable history of the Woolston Eyes Conservation Group and their tireless efforts to transform what was once a neglected wasteland into one of the foremost wetlands in the country. The reserve, located in Woolston, has evolved from its early days in the 1980s, overcoming challenges and celebrating triumphs along the way.



The book, spanning 212 pages, provides insights into the group's journey, the cooperation of landowners and partners, and the natural wonders of the Woolston Eyes Reserve. Local photographers have contributed stunning images, and the book also features papers on key aspects of the Eyes' natural history.

The book costs £25 plus £4 postage and packing. To order on-line go to: <https://woolstoneyes.com/news/25471/>

Any further information please email: [brianmartin1940@hotmail.com](mailto:brianmartin1940@hotmail.com)