

MEDINA VALLEY BIRD REPORT 1999

Keith Marston



JANUARY

A glorious start to the year, with temperatures in double figures, and the Medina Valley resounded with the song of the *blue tits*, *dunnocks* and *robins*. The *little grebes* among the Dodnor reedbeds started to stake out territories with their distinctive calls. A pair of *mute swans* in Newport Harbour performed their graceful courtship routine, and a pair of *mallard* took the courtship a stage further. Meanwhile, on the estuary *red-breasted mergansers* reached peak numbers, fishing in unison in the vicinity of a small party of *goldeneye*. Other water birds concentrated on the shores and surrounding farmland of the Folly Lake, including two dozen *black-tailed godwits*, 400 *lapwing* and 40 *dark-bellied brent geese*. During a spell of arctic air in the middle of the month two male *goldcrests* started to sing continuously in the evergreen trees in the Medina Valley Centre grounds. *Kingfishers* were active throughout the month along the length of the estuary, from Newport Harbour to Cowes Harbour.

FEBRUARY

The month started mild, the *goldcrests* still singing, and the first *black-headed gull* sported a “black” head in readiness for the approaching breeding season. A male *gadwall* visited Dodnor Creek, a duck which is rarely seen in the Valley except in very cold weather. The *skylarks*, *great tits* and *chaffinches* in the Werrar farmland and hedgerows were in full song. Over 70 immature *herring gulls* appeared on the upper estuary, close to record numbers for the species along the Medina. During one of the cold spells early in the month 3 *little owls* could be heard noisily demarcating territory along the linear woodland fringing the estuary at Fairlee. *Magpies* were observed collecting nest material; an early start but not unexpected as early breeding is a characteristic of the corvid family. Two handsome *great crested grebes* frequented the Folly Lake area, and *canada geese* returned to Werrar to inspect potential nest sites. The only sighting in the Medina Valley of the minute raptor, the *merlin*, came towards the end of the month, seen sweeping low over the estuary towards Fairlee.

MARCH

At the end of the first week of the month the last *goldeneye* departed from its arctic breeding grounds. Fine, mild conditions set in towards the end of the second week which coincided with the first song from the *reed buntings* and *song thrushes* at Dodnor, and the welcome arrival in the Valley of the first returning migrant, the *chiffchaff*. Activity in amongst the pools and reeds of Dodnor Creek became frenetic, as *coots* tackled *moorhens*, *moorhens* battled with their own species along margins of disputed territories and the

water rails pierced the air with their unique high pitched squeals. Two of these normally shy and elusive rails emerged from the dense reeds chased by a *moorhen*. On the following day one was observed preening in front of the bird hide. Meanwhile, at the other end of the Reserve in Dickson's Copse, three *treecreepers* were seen together. An unusual sighting was made on the 17th of a pair of *brent geese* in the Folly Lake, engaging in a courtship display. Detailed recording in the Dodnor area for an Islandwide Breeding Bird Survey has given more of an idea of numbers of nesting birds in this part of the Medina Valley. During one of the surveys 4 pairs of *long-tailed tits* were recorded, together with 21 singing *wrens*, 11 singing *robins* and 11 singing *great tits* in the one kilometre square. On the same day the first fluty song of the *blackcap* was heard in the Valley. Following the passage of frontal rain the first *sand martins* were swept in wheeling over the *mute swans* at Dodnor Creek as they settled onto their usual nest site. Twelve individual *skylarks* were in song over the rape field at Werrar as a party of *black-tailed godwits* in full breeding plumage stopped over on the inter-tidal mud to feed up before continuing their journey north.

APRIL

The returning *whitethroats* from sub-Saharan Africa arrived in the Valley just two days before the first *house martins* and *swallows* came in on the winds ahead of frontal rain. The veering winds, as the rain passed, brought an icy blast from the pole and a covering of snow to parts of the Island. Unfortunate timing for the first *coot* chicks on Dodnor Creek and the pair of *kestrels* starting to nest in a Fairlee oak. The cold snap did not hold back the arrival of *willow warblers* which were heard singing in the thickets at Fairlee. During the high water a large party of *turnstone* roosted on one of the wrecks in the Folly Lake, and a late female *red-breasted merganser* came out of the water to roost at the Werrar saltmarshes with the *oystercatchers*. The cool north wind and strong sunshine provided ideal thermalling conditions utilised by a *buzzard* over Great Werrar Wood, gaining height rapidly and crossing the estuary, heading east. Single *buzzards* were seen overhead at Werrar on a number of occasions throughout the year. As the *shelduck* started their search for suitable holes for nesting the first *whimbrel* arrived, putting down in the fields at Fairlee. A pair of *swallows* arrived at Dodnor Cottage, the male in full song, a sustained version of its twittering flight call. Waves of *swallows*, *house martins* and *sand martins* passed through at the end of the month under perfect weather conditions for their passage by day and night. The first *reed warblers* and *lesser whitethroats* arrived, using the clear, starlit night sky to navigate successfully to their preferred habitat in the Valley.

MAY

Predictably, the first *garden warblers* and *swifts* were heard and seen in the Valley within 24 hours of the 1st of the month. A *nightingale* delighted users of the Newport to Cowes cycleway with its rich, resonant song, deep within the scrub fringing the former railway line. The first *cuckoos* appeared; two resting in the early morning in the Medina Valley Centre grounds having very likely crossed the English Channel during the night. 23 *wrens*, 15 *robins* and 12 *great tits* were all in full song in the Dodnor area, and on Dodnor Creek two family groups of *mallards* and a *coot* with six chicks emerged out of nests in the reedbeds. Numbers of singing male *whitethroats* rose to 10 along the cycleway hedgerows, while overhead the estuary the first *sandwich terns* arrived. Two *buzzards* and a *sparrowhawk* shared the same thermal above Great Werrar Wood, as the first *moorhen* chicks appeared on

the Medina Valley Centre pond. The first cygnets were reported from the St. Mary's Hospital pond. The only record in the Valley of *turtle doves* was made on the 13th of the month; sadly these delicately marked birds are now a rarity along the Medina Valley. A pair of *sedge warblers* took up residence in the hedgerow bordering the cycleway, close to the old railway bridge at Dodnor Creek, the male singing strongly within earshot of the 4 male *reed warblers* in the nearby reedbeds establishing their own territories. The day after a muggy south-east wind brought thunderstorms over from France six cygnets emerged from the nest in the Dodnor Creek reedbeds. Within three days the cygnets were taken by the adults onto the estuary and along to the Medina Valley Centre slipway which they shared with a pair of *moorhens* and their two young chicks. By the end of the month *starlings*, *chaffinches*, *blue tits*, *great tits*, *long-tailed tits* and *magpies* were all observed feeding young.

JUNE

Britain's only migratory falcon, the *hobby*, was seen overhead Dodnor Creek early in the month. Two adult *little grebes*, with two striped young in tow, came off a nest in the Dodnor Creek reeds. Two *treecreepers* seen at Medham may well have been a breeding pair, although no tangible records of breeding success have been made for the species in the Valley. A *grey wagtail*, with its bright yellow underparts and yellow-green rump, flying around Newport Harbour, suggests that this species has bred in the vicinity as in previous years. Meanwhile, at the Island Harbour marina, a female *pheasant* crept across the road with four one day old chicks scampering behind. A *cuckoo* flew out of the Dodnor reedbeds, almost certainly fresh from laying an egg in the nest of an unsuspecting *reed warbler*. The nest site of an active pair of *great spotted woodpeckers* remains uncertain, but the trees behind Dodnor Cottage and in Dickson's Copse are likely candidates. A *lesser whitethroat* gave away the position of its three young in the hedgerow near Dodnor Crossing by a rather unusual protracted sub-song. Across the water at Fairlee the pair of *kestrel* nesting in an old crow's nest in an oak tree raised three young, while nearby, a newly placed owl box held four young *barn owls*. The *barn owls* using the Dickson's Copse box successfully raised five young, the adults regularly seen hunting sometimes as far away from the nest as the Medina Valley Centre. *Sandwich terns* flew up and down the estuary from the Solent, plummeting into the water for fish.



JULY

During the fine, settled weather which characterised the first half of the month, the return passage began as families of *swifts* wheeled overhead, drifting south with no sense of urgency. Never starting to nest before the first week of May, *swifts* stay only briefly in their breeding grounds before setting off back towards east and central Africa. The eaves of houses in Cowes, within a short distance of the harbour, hold *swift* nests to which the species return to with great regularity. Large family parties of *swifts* could be heard screaming overhead this built up area at dusk, their aerial antics breathtaking. Along the estuary the first *common sandpiper* to return from its breeding ground by a mainland river could be seen bobbing up and down at the water's edge. From April, up to six *tufted duck* were observed on Dodnor Creek but it was still a surprise when a female "tufty" emerged from the vegetation surrounding the Dickson's Copse pond with six ducklings in tow. Five

days later the family party turned up in Dodnor Creek feeding among parties of *coot* and *moorhen*. Towards the end of the month the fast repeated note of the *whimbrel's* call could be heard as small parties of this curlew-like wader returned via the estuary from their northern breeding grounds. The *sedge warblers* nesting in the cycleway hedgerow at Dodnor successfully raised young, feeding them up in the scrub of the derelict cement works land. Some of the parties of *house martins* returning south took to landing on the tops of the Monterey pines in the Medina Valley Centre grounds instead of their normal perch on wires.

AUGUST

The recently cut oil seed rape on Werrar Farm land provided a rich food supply for large number of *linnets*. Autumn-sown crops have effectively removed the winter food supply for this steadily declining farmland bird. Once the autumn sowing gets underway, these small finches will have to move on to a less intensively cultivated landscape to spend the winter, and by the end of the month few remained in the Valley. On Heathfield Farm, over the estuary from the *linnets*, three *grey herons* were observed in close proximity in a field of recently harvested cereal. Some interesting observations of bird behaviour were made on the morning of the eclipse. As morning turned to twilight as the eclipse reached its maximum, agitated *blackbirds* and *robins* prepared to roost and a group of *herring gulls* circled low over the upper estuary calling noisily as though getting ready to roost. A few days later, low cloud with rain approaching from the west brought down a large mixed flock of hirundines, including 50 *sand martins* and 40 *house martins*, swooping low over the reedbeds at Dodnor, and joined by a single *swift*. An adult *herring gull* and an adult *black-headed gull* were each pestered by a single fully grown, but immature, offspring persistently demanding food on the mudflats of the upper estuary. The remains of the rape crop at Werrar was duly ploughed in but leaving at this stage further good pickings for a flock of *linnets*, 40 *chaffinches* and 6 *greenfinches*. With high pressure to the west and to the east, the *swallow* passage really began to pick up on the last few days of the month.

SEPTEMBER

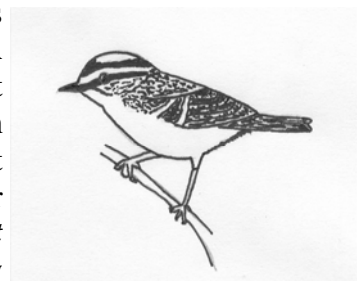
Large numbers of *house martins* took advantage of the light winds and clarity to migrate south early in the month just before the south west winds picked up, heralding the approach of weather fronts. As the weather settled down again the first of two sightings of the *peregrine* was made at Pinkmead, while a *common tern* made its way south along the estuary. Parties of *ringed plover* and *lapwing* used the freshly ploughed land at Werrar as a high water roost and supplementary feeding ground. Numbers of *curlew*, *oystercatcher* and *redshank* started to build up in the Folly Lake area and *coot* started to gather on the estuary, signs of the approaching autumn and winter. Two female *teal* were seen on Dodnor Creek, perhaps preparing to stay on the Reserve throughout the winter. Torrential rain on the 22nd proved to be the wettest day on the Island since 1987 and *swallows* caught out flew low under trees and eaves to shelter. A south-westerly set in on the following days and a *hobby* was watched high over the upper estuary heading south, moving with the dwindling numbers of *swallows* and *martins*. More *sand martins* than usual were seen during this autumn passage, the last three at Dodnor Creek the same day as *kingfishers* returned to the Dickson's Copse pond and Dodnor Creek. On the last day of the month a female *yellow wagtail*, in excellent condition, was found dead at Newport Harbour having met with an unfortunate accident.

OCTOBER

A *chiffchaff* and *goldfinch* remained in full song in the Medina Valley Centre grounds during the first week of the month. Small numbers of *swallows* and *house martins* continued to head south and on the estuary two *greenshank* put down to feed, their distinctive three note call piping out. *Goldfinches* amassed to form large flocks, enjoying the seed heads in the Medina Valley Centre grounds. Two late *sandwich terns* passed through the Valley as the number of *redshank* along the estuary noticeably increased. During high water on the 11th, a record nine *little egrets* grouped with three *grey herons* on the Werrar saltmarshes. *Little egrets* have become a part of the scene along the estuary, recorded throughout the year feeding in shallow water, undisturbed by either the *grey herons* or the *gulls*. The first *brent goose* and *wigeon* arrived in the Folly Lake and Island Harbour, respectively. High overhead, distant “mewing” helped pinpoint two *buzzards* flying north in a direct line to the mainland. The last recorded *swallows* were seen in the middle of the month just prior to a big change in the weather as a deep depression came in from the south-west. A large flock of *goldfinches* fed in the alders at Dodnor Creek, while below on the open water a *water rail* uncharacteristically swam out, calling loudly. *Long-tailed tits* began to group into parties of a dozen or more, moving together through the linear woods bordering the cycleway.

NOVEMBER

Numbers of *coot* built up to 33 on the upper estuary, while overhead the first *fieldfares* and *redwings* were arriving from Scandinavia. The two *barnacle geese* seen on the estuary at Pinkmead may have been escapees from a wildfowl park, or genuine wild birds which had overshot their Dutch coastal wintering grounds. Up to four *water rail* kept up a barrage of sound in Dodnor Creek, one emerging into the open, preening, then swimming in open water below the old railway bridge. A *redwing* and red squirrel fed on haws in the same tree below the bridge; a bumper crop for both species. A trespasser passing through the wet grassland south of Werrar Creek flushed out four *jack snipe* and six *skylarks*, a favoured overwintering site for these species. A pair of *stonechats* turned up briefly at Dodnor, a species that gravitates to the coastal fringes of the Island in the winter. An icy blast of arctic air coincided with the *black-tailed godwit* flock moving into the upper estuary with increasing numbers of *lapwing*. The numbers of *redwings* and *fieldfares* peaked, groups of these vocal thrushes gobbling down the remaining berries along the hedgerows. A single, beautifully marked *waxwing* with its distinctive crest turned up in the cotoneasters in a small front garden in Northwood, a species more usually confined to the east coast of the UK, driven from mainland Europe by extreme winter weather. On the last day of the month a female *firecrest* arrived with a flock of mixed tit species in the Medina Valley Centre grounds.



DECEMBER

A *buzzard* soared over the upper estuary above the first *red-breasted merganser* and *great-crested grebe* of the winter in the Valley. Once again the wind turned to the north and brought onto the estuary a most unusual visitor, a female *velvet scoter*, its white wing bars distinguishing this large diving sea duck from the *common scoter*. Teaming up with a *great-crested grebe*, the *scoter* stayed on in the central and upper estuary for the rest of the month, providing Island birdwatchers with the rare opportunity to view at close quarters the subtleties of its markings. The first three *goldeneye* came onto the estuary, joining forces with the *scoter*, all from the same family of sea ducks. Numbers of *snipe* built up at Werrar within the saltmarsh vegetation, a flock of 27 seen to rise up at high water. Two raptors were observed on the same day at Medham, a *buzzard* flying across the estuary to the east, and a *merlin* emerging from woodland. Following the violent storm on Christmas Eve two *great crested grebes* took shelter in the Valley and numbers of *red-breasted mergansers* rose to ten. The sight of a *peregrine* over the estuary on Boxing Day filled the water birds with instinctive terror. The *velvet scoter* chose to see in the new millennium on the Medina Estuary.



Photograph by C. H. Gomersall, R.S.P.B.