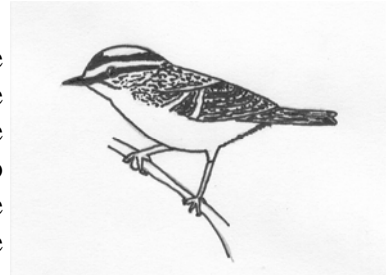


## MEDINA VALLEY BIRD REPORT FOR 2000

Keith Marston

### JANUARY

The female *velvet scoter*, which arrived in the Valley before Christmas, stayed on into the New Year and continued to give birdwatchers rare close-up views of this sea duck. A male *firecrest* passed through the cycleway hedgerow adjacent to the Medina Valley Centre (MVC) and a pair of *blue tits* made serious inspections of one of the nest boxes in the Centre grounds.



Waterbirds along the estuary reached peak numbers with a flock of 300 *lapwing*, 220 *dunlin*, 12 *grey plover*, 64 *wigeon* and, on the water, 12 *red-breasted mergansers*, 11 *goldeneye* and a *great crested grebe*. A small flock of *teal* stayed in the central section of the estuary through the month, perhaps the same birds seen in Dodnor Creek using the reedbeds as a roost. A flock of 43 *goldfinches* at Werrar fed hungrily on remaining seed heads while a variety of species came into song towards the end of the month. A pair of *little egrets* were seen mating at Werrar, although there were no subsequent records indicating that the species attempted to nest in the Valley.

The month ended with a *spotted redshank* on the upper estuary, a pair of *shoveler* over the estuary at Pinkmead and *coots* displaying on the Medina at Dodnor.

### FEBRUARY

During the wet and windy start to the month a *great spotted woodpecker* in Dickson's Copse could be heard drumming, while another *firecrest* was in this wooded part of the Local Nature Reserve. The shy *water rails* in the reed beds at Dodnor Creek started to become vociferous and the *barn owl* from the nest box on the reserve was seen hunting in Dodnor Lane.

*Goldeneye* and *red-breasted mergansers* continued to fish on the estuary, while a group of *swans* in Newport Harbour were seen out by an aggressive cob setting up territory.

A *skylark* displayed at Werrar, two were in song at Pinkmead and another three could be heard over the Heathfield Farm fields, just north of the Island Harbour marina. Clearing fronts led to thermic conditions and three *buzzards* over Dodnor soared overhead, drifting south on the light northerly wind.

Three *kingfishers* appeared at Dodnor Creek, the only other sightings made in the Valley were of single birds seen on fourteen occasions. Following overnight rain and two days of mild south-westerlies from the Azores, a *chiffchaff* could be heard in full song at Dodnor Creek on the 23rd of the month as skies cleared.

The first of four pairs of *stonechats* seen in the Valley during the year were observed at Werrar towards the end of the month.

### MARCH

Early in the month a pair of *bullfinches* fed greedily on the leaf buds just appearing on the hawthorns alongside Dodnor Creek, and the only sighting of a *green sandpiper* was made in Dickson's Copse, the small wader towering out from the pond edge giving its alarm call.

Two species of gull, which are on the increase in the Solent, turned up in the Valley within two days of each other; an adult *Mediterranean gull* in the central section of the estuary and two adult *yellow-legged gulls* in the upper estuary at low water. The *yellow-legged gulls* are similar in size to the *lesser black-backed gull* and have increasingly been over-wintering in the Solent, extending their range from the Mediterranean, following the same pattern as the *Mediterranean gull*.

By the middle of the month 15 *robins* and 14 *wrens* were in song in the Dodnor area, two *chiffchaffs* in song in Dickson's Copse and the *mute swans* started sitting on a nest in the reedbeds at Dodnor Creek. Three *water rails* were active in the same reedbeds and a *lapwing* displayed over the Stag Lane derelict landfill.

The first *sand martins* arrived at Dodnor ahead of a weak cold front, blown in on a south-westerly airflow. Two *buzzards* displayed above the Werrar woods and two *great spotted woodpeckers* drummed in Dickson's Copse.

The *brent geese* numbers began to dwindle along the estuary as birds returned to their northern breeding grounds, as a flock of 19 *black-tailed godwits* in breeding plumage dropped in to feed on the mudflats before continuing on their northward journey. Few *redwing* and *fieldfares* over-wintered in the Valley, and the last groups were seen towards the end of the month. South-east winds off the near Continent brought in the first *blackcaps* and *willow warblers* in the last week of the month.

## APRIL

Early in the month the winds circulating round a low pressure system in the Bay of Biscay blew in the first *swallows*, together with *sand martins*, *blackcaps* and a female *redstart*. As the wind backed to a cold north-easterly, with snow in Hampshire, a *mallard* appeared in Dodnor Creek with 15 very young ducklings, the first *house martins* arrived and a *mistle thrush* sang continuously from a pylon nearby. The first of the *whitethroats* and three male *wheatears* arrived, while *moorhens* battled on the estuary foreshore and a *coot* came off a nest in the reeds with four young. Six *skylarks* were heard in song in fields adjacent to the cycleway at Werrar. Just before the last six *brent geese* left the Valley for their northern breeding grounds, an *osprey* was seen to take a fish in the lower section of the river during the first week of the month.

A *garden warbler* arrived at Dodnor in middle of the month, and small groups of *sandwich terns* passed along the estuary. A week later the first *cuckoos* could be heard in the Valley. Low cloud and drizzle swept in on a muggy south-westerly brought down the first *reed warblers* and *sedge warblers*, *lesser whitethroats*, four *common sandpipers* and a *whimbrel*.

The *coot* with young in tow in Dodnor Creek saw off two pairs of *tufted duck* which had wandered into its territory.

## MAY

More settled weather favoured the breeding birds and the newly arrived migrants in the Valley. The first *swifts* arrived and twelve male *whitethroats* and four male *blackcaps* took up territory along the Cowes to Newport cycleway. Four *reed warblers* were making their chattering song in the Dodnor Creek reed beds, and twenty one *wrens* were heard in song at Dodnor. Ten *sandwich terns* put down on hard ground on the estuary's inter-tidal zone near to the Island Harbour marina, resting up while on passage. A *greenshank* and four *whimbrel* stopped off to feed on the rich food supplies in the estuary mud, before continuing their northbound journeys.

*Treecreepers* were only seen three times in the Valley during the year, but an adult was observed early in the month, feeding young at a nest in Dickson's Copse. Two pairs of *whitethroat* took up territory in the MVC grounds and the males continued singing their characteristic scratchy warble until the end of June.

*Whimbrel* and *common sandpipers* continued to pass down the estuary, and another group of ten *sandwich terns* came into the mouth of the estuary in Cowes to feed. The *mute swans*, which had been sitting on the nest in Dodnor Creek since mid-March, hatched seven cygnets and the following day were seen escorting their young onto the estuary edge below the sea-wall. As the numbers of *mallard* and *coot* with young families increased, a *great black-backed gull* flew low over the reeds in search of a quick meal.

On the 19th a second *osprey* appeared in the Valley, initially heading downstream, but after harassment by a *black-headed gull* and a *carrion crow*, changed direction and flew off towards the downs east of Newport. *Barn owls* were reported to be resident in three of the four nest boxes placed in the Valley, and a pair of *kestrels* nesting in the fourth.

Twice during the month *peregrine falcons* were seen passing over Werrar and Dickson's Copse, and the pair of *blue tits* in the MVC grounds began to feed their demanding newly hatched fledglings.



## JUNE

At dusk at the beginning of the month a fearless *little owl*, along Dodnor Lane, made use of a traffic bollard in the road as a perch, vehicles passing within a few metres of it. Earlier, at the end of the lane a family of nesting *moorhens* was disturbed on a pontoon in the upper estuary and, as the chicks fled, one was attacked and carried off by a *carrion crow*.

*Sandwich terns* and *common terns* came up the estuary during the month to feed, frequently perching on marker buoys in the channel. The numbers of *oystercatchers*, *curlews* and *lapwings* along the estuary dropped into single figures, but four *little egrets* and three *grey herons* remained in the Valley through the month.

Family parties of *swifts* in tight formation wheeled over the River Medina in Cowes, preparing for the return journey to East Africa. The *moorhens* nesting in the yellow iris in the MVC pond emerged with five young, and a family of *whitethroats* appeared in the grounds. Meanwhile, an adult *whitethroat* was observed taking a marbled white butterfly to feed young at the second nest. On the last day of the month a *song thrush* sang continuously from the top of one of the Monterey pines in the Centre grounds, while the family of *swans* from Dodnor Creek gorged themselves on seaweed on the slipway.

## JULY

With most of the nesting complete the first trickle of returning migrants began to arrive in the Valley, including the *whimbrels* heading back south.

The *little grebes* are late nesters and adults were seen changing places on a nest at Dodnor Creek early in the month. A pair of *tufted duck* came out into the open from a well-hidden nest in the reedbeds with five ducklings in tow. The young *mallards*, which hatched earlier in the season, were still feeding in family groups but now two-thirds adult size and fending for themselves. However, two pairs of *mallard* had ducklings less than a week old with them. The *reed warblers* were still feeding young in the reeds and further along the cycleway an adult *song thrush* was seen feeding a young bird in the hedgerows.

Numbers of *redshank* and *curlew* along the estuary started to build up again.

## AUGUST

The twelve *herring gulls* thermalling above Newport Harbour early in the month may have been part of the group which settled onto the rooftops in Newport for the season. Although the west Wight chalk cliffs is the favoured breeding ground for this species there is speculation that attempts may have been made to nest in the town.

Returning *common sandpipers* and a *greenshank* called in on the estuary on their return passage, while the four *little egrets* remained in the Island Harbour marina. Twelve *grey herons*, including three immature birds, were seen taking off from the upper estuary, thermalling to one hundred metres and then heading south. This exceptional number of herons together could indicate a dispersal of a colony. Two *grey herons* remained behind, perching on an oak tree on the edge of Dodnor Creek.

The high pressure with light winds at the end of the month favoured the large numbers of *swallows* and *house martins* heading south. A *willow warbler* on passage dropped into the MVC grounds and sang from a concealed bush for a while, and an immature *redstart* passed through the scrub bordering the cycleway hedgerows at Medham. A *green woodpecker* was seen with two immature birds at Pinkmead and in the same area a *merlin* flew low over the cycleway.

## SEPTEMBER

As wet and windy weather spread down across the mainland from the north large numbers of *swallows* and *house martins* continued to cross the Solent ahead of the rain, many navigating across the Island via the Medina Estuary, swooping low to feed. *Chiffchaffs* and *willow warblers* continued to pass along the hedgerows adjacent to the cycleway, mixing with flocks of tits.

In the middle of the month the first *kingfisher* re-emerged at Dodnor from its secretive breeding grounds and another *greenshank* passed along the estuary.

There are few records of *coal tits* in the Valley, but during the last week of the month one was heard in song on the MVC grounds. Two *chiffchaffs* were also in song at Dodnor Creek at the end of the month.

## OCTOBER

The late *swallows* and *house martins* had to contend with wind and rain as a series of deep depressions swept across the country during the month. During the drier spells between weather systems there was a steady passage of *swallows* and *house martins*, often flying low over the estuary.

The last *sandwich terns* flew up the estuary, and on the same day the first two *dunlin* and first seven *wigeon* returned to the central estuary. Numbers of *turnstone* and *ringed plover* feeding on the water's edge began to build up, some perhaps staying to over-winter. The number of *little egrets* increased to nine, six of these birds roosting in the Island Harbour marina.

Again the distinctive three-note call of the *greenshank* could be heard during the month as this wading bird dropped in to feed up as it headed south from its breeding grounds. A single *whinchat*, making a late departure for its wintering grounds, turned up at Medham.

By the end of the month the flock of *oystercatchers* had built up to over sixty, and the *redshank* to over forty.

## NOVEMBER

Twenty *dark-bellied brent geese* arrived in the Valley during the first week of the month and one goose unusually mingled with the *coot* which were now taking to the estuary. The first *great crested grebe* of the winter was seen on the Folly Lake in the middle of the month, when *brent geese* numbers had increased to thirty four. Like the *coot*, the *little grebes* take to the estuary waters this time of year, and the Medina Estuary remains a stronghold for the species.



During a night of south-westerly gales a *guillemot* took shelter in Newport Harbour and stayed throughout the following morning. It is very unusual for members of the auk family to come in to the estuary from the open seas.

The first two *red-breasted mergansers* of the winter were seen diving for fish along the upper estuary during the last week of the month. Meanwhile, small groups of *redwing* moved along the cycleway hedgerows in search of berries.

## DECEMBER

Numbers of *red-breasted mergansers* built up to twenty seven early in the month and up to fifteen remained, often diving in unison. The number of *mute swans* gathering on the estuary alongside Riverview Park increased to twenty eight and a count of twenty two *snipe* was made downstream in the wetland on the fringe of the estuary at Werrar. Two diminutive *jack snipe* were over-wintering at the same locality.

The third sighting of a *peregrine falcon* was made in the middle of the month, flying into the mouth of the estuary at Cowes, causing the gulls to scatter in terror. Other raptors were observed during the month, including a *buzzard* flying into Great Werrar Wood and a *sparrowhawk* swooping down onto the roof of the MVC to take a small bird.

No records were made this year of the *reed bunting* nesting and indeed only one bird was seen during the breeding season. In the middle of the month a male was seen feeding on reed mace in Dodnor Creek and on the same day three males were calling from scrub close to the estuary at Werrar.

As the year drew to a close the first *goldeneye* arrived on the estuary, their arrival perhaps delayed by the unseasonably mild conditions over southern England during the first three weeks of the month. The milder winters are encouraging more warblers to over-winter on the Island, the *chiffchaff* observed in the trees at Medham late in the month a good example.