

MEDINA VALLEY BIRD REPORT FOR 2001

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JANUARY

The *little egret* seen flying east off St Catherine's Point in April 1985 was reported to the British Birds Rarities Committee and accepted as the fourth record for the Island. How times have changed as observers along the Medina Estuary submit records of up to six *little egrets* roosting in trees above the Werrar saltmarshes and observe this striking white heron venturing right into the heart of Newport Harbour. The spread of the range of the *Mediterranean gull* has mirrored that of the *little egret*, up to two birds associating with the overwintering flocks of *black-headed gulls* in the upper estuary.

Despite a biting easterly wind during the first days of the year a *song thrush*, *blue tits*, *goldfinches* and *robins* were in song and tits were inspecting nest boxes in the Valley. *Goldeneye*, *red-breasted mergansers* and a *great crested grebe* were seen feeding in the estuary waters throughout the month. The *common sandpiper*, seen at Dodnor Creek causeway in the middle of the month, was the only out-of-season sighting of this migratory wader along the Medina. It is likely that this sandpiper overwintered in the Solent rather than on the coastal fringe of the Iberian peninsula.

The familiar *little grebes* on the estuary were joined for a short time towards the end of the month by a *red-necked grebe*, an occasional visitor to the Island's estuary waters.

During the sunny and settled end of the month a *skylark* was heard in song, *mallard* were in courtship, and a *peregrine* flew over the Folly Lake.

FEBRUARY

The number of sightings of the *sparrowhawk* hunting birds along the hedgerows has noticeably increased in recent years. A *sparrowhawk* at the kill is a grisly sight but the impact on the small bird population is miniscule compared with the activities of the domestic cat. A male *sparrowhawk* regularly hunts along the Cowes – Newport cycleway in the vicinity of Lower St Cross and Hurstake. On one occasion in February this bird was observed flying fast and low along the line of the Aerolaminates Marine Transfer Facility surprising a flock of *redshank* feeding on the intertidal mudflats nearby. *Buzzards* thermalling over the upper estuary is becoming a common sight, this majestic raptor now seen throughout the year in the Valley. *Buzzards* are not in competition with the *sparrowhawks* as the favoured prey of this larger bird of prey is the rabbit. During sunny conditions in the middle of the month up to three *buzzards* were seen soaring over Dodnor. The *peregrine* has a preference for pigeons and doves and this falcon was seen above Newport Harbour towards the end of the month, the second of three sightings of this raptor in the Medina Valley during the year.

Small birds remained in their winter flocks with over forty *meadow pipits* at Lower St Cross, thirty *goldfinches* regularly roosting in an oak at Dodnor and up to fifteen *piebald wagtails* congregating at Seaclose.

MARCH

The *raven* is the largest member of the crow family and two or three pairs nest on the chalk cliffs at the western and eastern ends of the Island. The first of three sightings of the *raven*

was made early in March, a pair flying downstream overhead the estuary, making deep gutteral calls.

The weather changed dramatically at the end of the first week of the month as bitterly cold north winds were replaced by a very mild south-westerly airflow with low cloud and rain. This weather system brought the first returning passage migrants and the first *chiffchaff* song at Dodnor Creek. Meanwhile, the pair of *mute swans* on the Creek established territory, a *carrion crow* flew overhead with nest material and the two *black-tailed godwits* on the estuary had a hint of breeding plumage. Ten *wrens*, twelve *chaffinches* and seven *great tits* were in full song in the Dodnor area while a *great spotted woodpecker* drummed in trees alongside the Creek. Two male *wheatears* were seen in the Dodnor Industrial estate, resting awhile before continuing on to the mainland.

Before the cold north wind set in again the first *blackcap* song was heard at Werrar. The wind veered into an easterly direction bringing sleet with it and eight female *pochard*, diving ducks which occasionally come into the estuary to feed.

A *willow warbler* was heard in song at Dodnor on the 22nd. The wind veered into a south-westerly direction sweeping in the first *sand martins* and many more *chiffchaffs*.

On the estuary the *cormorants* showed white breeding patches and a *great crested grebe* sported breeding plumage. The *swans* in Dodnor Creek started to nest while a second pair displayed in Newport Harbour, near to a *mallard* duck with nine very young ducklings.

The tropical maritime airflow brought with it the first *swallows*, with a flock of *sand martins*, to Dodnor Creek and a low flying *osprey* which was mobbed by *jackdaws* and *herring gulls*. The *osprey* was seen later in the same day on the Western Yar.

APRIL

The warm southerly wind brought with it a steady passage of *swallows*. The *mallard* duck with the young family was drowned by an amorous drake in Newport Harbour in full view of onlookers.

During heavy frontal rain the first *whitethroats* and *sedge warblers* arrived in the Valley with *blackcaps*, *willow warblers*, *chiffchaffs* and a first *cuckoo* of the spring.

A single male *garganey* dropped into Dodnor Creek, a migratory duck en route from its African overwintering grounds. The male has a conspicuous white stripe over the eye and is one of the smallest ducks in Europe.

A light north wind set in for a number of days and during that time the first two *whimbrels* put down along the estuary, with a *common sandpiper*. The first *house martins* arrived at Dodnor Creek with *lesser whitethroats* and a single *yellow wagtail*.

House martins, *sand martins* and *swallows* continued to pour in on the south-westerly airflow and a first *reed warbler* arrived at Dodnor Creek. The first six *swifts* were seen over Whippingham before the month ended and six *common sandpipers* put down near the entrance to Newport Harbour.

The *moorhen* nest at the end of the Medina Valley Centre pontoon had eggs in it and a *coot* was seen at Dodnor Creek with five young.

MAY

The first *garden warbler* was heard in song at Werrar and, by the end of the first week, three were in song at Medham. The second sighting of the year of a *raven* in the valley was over Werrar, with a *carrion crow* in hot pursuit. *Swifts* continued to arrive followed by a passage of *common terns* and *sandwich terns* during the middle of the month.

Five cygnets appeared at the *swans'* nest in the Dodnor Creek reedbeds and three days later seven cygnets were led off the nest onto the water. In the surrounding reeds three *reed warblers* established territory and two *reed buntings* were in song. A group of three dozen *starlings*, many immature birds, found rich pickings amongst the seaweed on the estuary foreshore at Dodnor. *Great tits* fed fledglings in the grounds of the Medina Valley Centre. The distraction display of a pair of *lapwing* at Werrar gave strong evidence that the pair had nested in the Valley, the behaviour suggesting fledglings in a nest nearby. A second pair of *lapwings* were observed in the Stag Lane derelict landfill site where attempts have been made to breed in previous years.

JUNE

The first *moorhen* chicks appeared out of the nest in the aquatic vegetation fringing the Medina Valley Centre pond. Two *lesser whitethroats* took up territory in the patches of scrub in the surrounding reserve. During the warm settled weather in the first days of June *house martins* continued to arrive from the south following the course of the Medham estuary.

The noisy family groups of *blue tits*, *great tits*, *robins* and *lesser whitethroats* thrived in the warm, dry weather. Near the east bank of the estuary at Fairlee an adult *great spotted woodpecker* collected grubs for an attentive immature bird, and a pair of *chiffchaffs* in Dickson's Copse had three fully fledged young to attend to.

The song of the *grey wagtail* could be heard at the head of the estuary around the confluence of the Lukely Brook and River Medina, indicating that the species had re-established its usual breeding ground close to Newport Harbour.

The female *wheatear* perched on the 'Ryde Queen' in the middle of the month was an unexpected record for so late in the nesting season. By the end of the month fully grown, but immature, *mallards*, *moorhens* and *coots* were fending for themselves, while the *moorhen* adults returned to the nest to raise a second brood.

JULY

On the first day of the month a pair of *little grebes* appeared out of the reeds at Dodnor Creek with two fledged young. A second family of *little grebe* emerged from the same reedbeds later in the month, the adults with three tiny young in tow.

A pair of *herring gulls* selected the top of a post in the Medina off the UK Sailing Academy as a nesting site. Young were successfully raised during the month. *Sandwich terns* visited the estuary to feed, possibly crossing the Solent from the large breeding colony at Needs Ore, at the entrance to the Beaulieu River.

The numbers of fully grown immature *mallards* reached over fifty, almost indistinguishable from their parents in post-breeding eclipse plumage.

Kingfishers move into the estuary during the winter months and there are regular sightings of up to two birds along the length of the Medina, between Newport Harbour and Cowes Harbour. These striking birds move away in March and are rarely seen during the breeding season. An early returning bird was seen along the estuary on the 15th of the month.

Another species which visits the estuary during the winter months, the *great crested grebe*, unusually turned up in the middle of the month. A *hobby*, our only migratory falcon, was seen to take a *swallow* on the wing over the cricket fields at Fairlee. A *common tern* was seen feeding a demanding immature bird in the upper estuary. A *whimbrel* was heard making its far-carrying seven note call in the upper estuary, and the three high-pitched notes of the *common sandpiper* heralded the start of the passage of returning waders.

AUGUST

Regular sightings have been reported of the *barn owl* hunting in the Dodnor area, mainly seen at dusk but also in broad daylight early morning and late afternoon. Young have been observed in three of the owl boxes which are in place in the Valley. *Little owls* have been seen and heard during the month, one bird often perched along Dodnor Lane in broad daylight. Calling *little owls* in the trees fringing the estuary at Fairlee suggest at least two territories in that area.

The second brood of *moorhens* hatched out in the nest at the Medina Valley Centre pond and one immature bird from the first brood remained as part of the extended family.

Green sandpipers breed in the northern extremities of Europe and across into Siberia, and winter across the Mediterranean and in southern England. One of these freshwater wading birds was observed during the winter months at Dodnor Creek, but the two birds seen over the Creek in the middle of August would have been returning from their northern breeding grounds on passage to a more southerly overwintering location.

Whimbrels, *common sandpipers* and a *wheatear* were seen during the month, staying only briefly on their journey south.

At the end of the month five *buzzards* seen circling low over Great Werrar Wood seemed to suggest a family group. Regular sightings have been made throughout the season around these woods.

SEPTEMBER

A high pressure system out to the west resulted in a north-westerly airflow across the country, providing tail winds for the returning migrants. Two *spotted flycatchers* put down in the Dodnor area, a migrant species regularly seen in the Valley during the autumn passage. The last *whitethroat* of the season was seen at Pinkmead, a last *sedge warbler* by the Medina Valley Centre pond and a *whinchat* at Dodnor. A *chiffchaff* was heard in song on the 10th in the Medina Valley Centre grounds. The cold north-westerly winds continued well into the middle of the month, providing thermic conditions for the *honey buzzard* seen on passage over Medham, making a rare appearance over the Valley on its journey to central-southern Africa. The north wind ensured a steady passage of *swallows* and *house martins* also heading for southern Africa. A flock of thirty *whimbrel* used the estuary as a pit-stop on their journey south. The last two *spotted flycatchers* of the season lingered on the edge of Dickson's Copse in the warm, sunny conditions.

OCTOBER

During the first week of October two deep low pressure systems tracked across the country with associated gale force winds. A *curlew sandpiper* took shelter along the estuary, joining the *ringed plovers* at their high water roost on the fields adjacent to the Medina at Werrar. This small wading bird has a down-curved bill and house martin-like white rump, which distinguishes it from other wader species. The wader breeds in the high Arctic, on the northern edge of Siberia and in September/October heads south-west across Europe to its overwintering grounds along the north and west African coast.

Three *chiffchaffs* lingered in the hedgerows along the cycleway near Lower St Cross creek while the last of the returning *sandwich terns* and *common terns* fished in the adjacent estuary waters.

A flock of twenty-one *skylarks* flew over Dodnor Creek while *pieb wagtails* gathered as a roosting flock on the boats near the Folly Inn. A last lone *swallow* of the year headed south

overhead the Medina Valley Centre and a *peregrine* flew over Newport Harbour heading south.

NOVEMBER

Early in the month a large area of exceptionally high pressure settled over the country, bringing about the first frosts of the winter. A late *ring ouzel* at Werrar was delaying its return to the Mediterranean's lightly wooded hillsides, fortunate to have dry, settled weather for its journey. This 'mountain blackbird' reaches peak numbers on the Island late September and early October in most years, but is not often observed in the Valley. On the same day the first of the large Scandinavian thrushes, the *fieldfares*, arrived to gorge on the hedgerow berries. A few days later the *redwings* arrived on a cold north wind, bringing with it the first snow to eastern England.

The flock of *brent geese* increased in number through the month, returning from their breeding grounds on islands in the high Arctic. It is the dark-bellied race *bernicula* which overwinter in the Solent Estuarine System and along other estuaries in eastern England. The flock is often to be seen along the eastern edge of the Folly Lake, prone to disturbance from people straying off the line of the footpath. Unlike the disturbed wading birds these geese can always return to the safety of the water. The flock is a distinctive sight during the winter months, calling with their characteristic croaking call when agitated.

The month ended with a female *blackcap* seen along the cycleway south of the Medina Valley Centre. This migratory warbler is known to be overwintering in southern England in increasing numbers.

DECEMBER

During the first days of the month up to five separate *water rails* could be heard calling from the reeds on either side of the bridge taking the cycleway across the reserve. The *water rails* are marsh dwellers, rarely seen in the open, and favour wetland with dense reedbeds. Dodnor Creek and Bembridge/Brading marshes are the two main strongholds of the species on the Island, although no confirmed reports of breeding have been made during this season at Dodnor Creek. The *water rail* seen swimming across open water at Dodnor Creek in the middle of the month was indeed a rare sight.

After many consecutive days of east and north east wind blowing round the persistent high pressure system, large numbers of *white-fronted geese* came into southern England from their marshy tundra breeding grounds. Two birds of this Eurasian race *albifrons*, with pink bills, joined the *brent geese* flock now numbering over sixty. Pink bills distinguished these 'white-fronts' from the Greenland race with their yellow or orange bills. These strangers to the Medina estuary stayed on until the year's close.

The first three *goldeneye* sea ducks arrived on the estuary on the day that two handsome *gadwall* ducks appeared on Dodnor Creek, mingling with four dozen *mallard*.

Grey plover overwinter along the estuary in small numbers but the flock of fifty *golden plover* near to the Kingston power station were unexpected perhaps part of the overwintering flock from the Newtown National Nature Reserve.

The 120 species of bird recorded in the Medina Valley between Newport and Cowes in 2001 is the largest number seen in recent years and I am grateful to all those who submitted their records.

