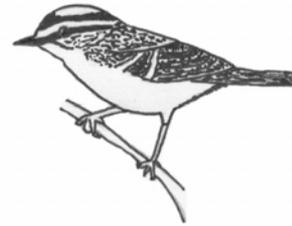


## Medina Valley Bird Report for 2002

Keith Marston

### January

The overwintering *firecrest* observed in the Hurstake area of the upper estuary survived the freezing temperatures at the start of the New Year and the gales and driving rain later in the month. The hard weather brought small numbers of *golden plover* onto the estuary, a species of wader usually confined, on the Island side of the Solent, to the Newtown Estuary. *Mallard*, *coot*, *tufted duck* and *teal* moved out of the frozen Dodnor Creek onto the adjacent estuary.



As temperatures soared three separate *water rails* were heard calling in the reed bed at Dodnor Creek, accompanied by the song of *great tits* and a *song thrush* nearby. A pair of *ravens* flew east over the upper estuary, the first of three sightings of this the largest of all Corvids in the Medina Valley during the year.

A group of five *bullfinches* were observed along the cycleway at Werrar, while on the nearby Folly Lake eleven *goldeneye* and ten *red-breasted mergansers* dived for prey in the cold estuary waters. The two *white-fronted geese* seen associating with the *brent geese* remained throughout the month, often in the fields bordering the eastern side of the Folly Lake. Meanwhile, further upstream an exceptional count was made of one hundred and twenty-eight *common gulls* in one group, perhaps a detachment from the large winter flock on the Ryde Sands. At the end of the month another *raven* was seen above Newport Harbour, drawing the attentions of a *herring gull*.

### February

The flocks of wading birds overwintering along the estuary reached peak numbers with over five hundred *dunlin*, ninety *oystercatchers* making up the largest flock on the Island and ninety *brent geese*. The two *white-fronted geese* remained with the flock of *brent geese* until the middle of the month. *Grey plovers* are usually seen in small numbers throughout the winter along the estuary but the large flock of twenty-seven seen feeding adjacent to the Folly Lake may well have been moving between sites in the Solent. Two of the smaller waders that visit the estuary in varying numbers are the *turnstone* and the *ringed plover*, both species seen during the month in flocks of between twenty and thirty. A favourite high water roost for these waders is the arable field adjacent to the estuary at Werrar, separated from the intertidal mud by saltmarsh vegetation, in turn a favoured wetland habitat for the five *common snipe* and three *jack snipe* seen there during the month.

During stormy weather in the second week of the month a *red-throated diver* came into the estuary for shelter from the more open water of the English Channel and remained for a number of days.

The smallest bird of prey that visits the Valley in the winter is the *merlin* and during the month one was seen hunting at Pinkmead. *Buzzards* are birds of prey which until recent years were very rarely seen in the Valley, but are now regarded as residents, seen in every month of the year, three regularly soaring over woodland on the west side of the Valley during February. A third species of raptor, a *peregrine falcon*, flew over Dodnor Creek, one of two sightings during the year.

Sixteen *teal* flew into the reedbeds making up the western arm of Dodnor Creek, while a

pair of *gadwall* put down on the adjacent estuary. Seen close up in good light both these species of wildfowl exhibit beautifully marked and distinctive plumage.

Towards the end of the month came the first signs of Spring when five *skylarks* could be heard in song over the arable fields at Werrar and a pair of *great tits* explored a tit box with an entrance greatly enlarged by a red squirrel using the box as a temporary drey.

## March

Another sure indication that the winter season was drawing to an end was the song of a *redwing* in Dickson's Copse, the bird moving on to join the last flocks of these winter visitors heading off to their Scandinavian breeding grounds. The *redwing* song mingled with the melodious notes of a *blackcap*, a species of migrant warbler which overwinters in the south of the UK in small, but increasing, numbers. The two *common sandpipers* on the estuary at Medham at the very beginning of the month were a surprise, like the singing *blackcap*, seemingly too early to represent the vanguard of spring arrivals, perhaps individuals that had overwintered in the Solent.

Close views were obtained of a *black-throated diver* in the Folly Lake, while the *swans* at Dodnor Creek established territory, seeing off a pair of *Canada geese*.

A single *sand martin* arrived over the reed beds at Dodnor Creek during the second week of the month, with no other records of this migrant until gale force south-westerlies swept in others a week later along with *chiffchaffs* and *blackcaps*.

This year *Mediterranean gulls* have become a regular visitor to the estuary, their distinctive call, full black head and bright red bill making them stand out from the flocks of *black-headed gulls* with which they associate. Two adults in breeding plumage were seen and heard in the upper estuary towards the end of the month.



The Cowes grain silos alongside the Newport to Cowes cycleway sustain many small seed-eating birds through the winter, including flocks of *chaffinches* and small numbers of *yellowhammers*. A more unusual species seen feeding with these seed-eating birds was a *brambling*, remaining in the area during the last week of the month.

## April

The high pressure building in the North Sea brought about settled sunny weather during the first half of the month and helped to promote a frenzy of activity, the *swans* nest building in Dodnor Creek, *blue tits* moving into the tit boxes, *coots* battling each other for territory and a pair of *Mediterranean gulls* calling noisily from the midst of the *black-headed gull* cacophony. *Long-tailed tits* collected lichen and gossamer for their nest in the Medina Valley Centre grounds, a *great spotted woodpecker* drummed in Dickson's Copse and *skylarks* sang over the arable fields at Werrar. The first *mallard* ducklings appeared on Dodnor Creek as a *reed bunting* established territory in the surrounding reedmace and the song of a recently arrived *sedge warbler* came out of the depths of the adjacent scrub.

The first *swallows* arrived in the Valley during the second week of the month with a first *house martin*, the day before the distinctive song of a *willow warbler* was heard and two days before the first scratchy warble of the *whitethroat*. A pair of *lapwings* performed their delightful courtship routine in the ploughed fields bordering Waterclose Copse, and further south in the Valley twenty-one singing *wrens* had established territory in one kilometre square at Dodnor.

Just before weather fronts brought the first rain for three weeks the first juvenile *coot*

appeared with the adults in attendance on Dodnor Creek, while a pair of *kestrels* in Dickson's Copse were observed mating.

The south-west winds associated with the weather fronts provided a tail wind for migrants, sweeping in *cuckoos*, *whitethroats*, *common sandpipers*, *sedge warblers* and *reed warblers*. Migrants continued to arrive as high pressure built again over the whole of Europe. The seven-note call of the *whimbrel* could be heard over the estuary for the first time since last autumn, the first three *swifts* appeared in the Valley and *sand martins* arrived in larger numbers.

Despite the attentions of the *swans* a pair of *Canada geese* managed to nest at Dodnor Creek but the five eggs were later abandoned.

## May

A pair of *lapwings* flew in courtship display over open land at Dodnor, but there was no subsequent evidence of a nest site in the vicinity. The song of the first *lesser whitethroats* of the year drifted out of the hedgerows bordering the Newport to Cowes cycleway. The first of the returning *reed warblers* set up territory in Dodnor Creek while a group of *swifts*, *swallows* and *house martins* stayed briefly to feed overhead before continuing the journey north. Low cloud and rain in southern Europe and in France held up the arrival of hirundines for the next ten days. Meanwhile, three pairs of *tufted duck* arrived at Dodnor Creek to inspect the wetland for suitable territory for breeding.

Three *sandwich terns* fed along the estuary, perhaps newly arrived from their long journey of migration or maybe on a foray out from an established nest site on the north Solent coast. A *spotted flycatcher* stayed a while to feed on insects in the vicinity of the Medina Valley Centre, a migrant on passage which is infrequently seen in the Valley and is on the Red List of species of bird of high conservation concern. Another Red List species which has not been recorded in the Valley for a number of years is the *turtle dove*, and two turned up briefly on the edge of farmland at Medham in the middle of the month. As weather conditions improved markedly across Europe many more *house martins*, *swifts* and *swallows* passed overhead, the number of singing *reed warblers* at Dodnor increased to five, *garden warblers* could be heard in song on both sides of the Valley and a male *whinchat* and a female *wheatear* were seen from the cycleway at Werrar.

A *buzzard* dropped into a hawthorn in the derelict landfill site off Stag Lane and was eventually seen off by a *magpie* not prepared to share its territory with a large raptor.

Seven cygnets appeared at the *swans'* nest in the Dodnor Creek reeds and the following day were led out onto the water to face the dangers of predation.

A nest occupied by a pair of *little grebes* through the month in Dodnor Creek was empty in the last week with no sighting made of any hatched grebe chicks.



## June

Two weeks after hatching only four of the seven cygnets from Dodnor Creek remained, but these did survive and the family group stayed together through the summer. Five pairs of *coot* raised eleven young on Dodnor Creek.

*Grey wagtails* are regularly observed in Newport Harbour through the breeding season and

early in the month one was heard in song with a possible nest site alongside the Lukely Brook near to its entry point into the Quay area.

Another pair of *swans* raised four cygnets in the Harbour and the cob had a hectic time trying to keep out all other *swans* from its quayside territory.

There have been reports of one or two *lesser black-backed gulls* remaining in the upper estuary during the winter months and in the middle of June, an adult was observed in a suitable nesting site on Newport rooftops south of the Harbour. The breeding status of the *bullfinch* in the Valley is also unknown and the pair observed in the hedgerows near Dodnor Crossing towards the end of the breeding season could be one of several pairs that have successfully bred. This species is now on the Red List of species of high conservation concern, with rapidly declining numbers nationally.

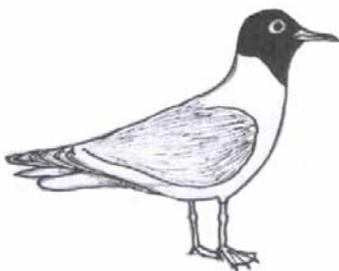
On the last day of the month a very young *little grebe* emerged out of the nest at Dodnor Creek.

## July

Another pair of *little grebes* built a nest during the first week of the month in Dodnor Creek and nearby many of the *mallard* ducklings, although remaining in family groups, were nearly adult-size. A fully grown immature *green woodpecker* closely followed the parent bird round the Medina Valley Centre grounds, noisily demanding food.

Another *peregrine falcon* flew over Dodnor, while further downstream a *barn owl* was hunting in the middle of the day at Werrar, a sure indication that it had hungry owlets to feed. Two *barn owls* were also observed at dusk, one flying north along the line of the cycleway towards Werrar carrying a small mammal, and the other heading towards the edge of Dickson's Copse.

A *raven* flew high over the Valley from west to east passing over Whippingham, and on the estuary below the first returning *whimbrel* and *greenshank* flew upstream, making their distinctive seven-note and three-note calls, respectively. A *sandwich tern* was regularly seen



feeding along the course of the estuary, even penetrating inside Newport Harbour in search of small fry. The *lesser black-backed gulls* remained in the Newport rooftops beyond the harbour, with speculation that they were attending a nest in the chimney pots.

At the end of the month a *kingfisher* reappeared on the estuary after an absence of almost four months, and on the same day a *Mediterranean gull* came into the Valley after a similar length of absence. Meanwhile, another single *little grebe* chick emerged from the nest at Dodnor Creek.

## August

A succession of immature birds that had fledged this season came down to the bird bath at the Medina Valley Centre, including *goldcrests*, *robins*, *blue tits*, *great tits* and a *mistle thrush*. On the estuary the groups of *common terns*, *sandwich terns* and *herring gulls* passing through included immature birds still semi-reliant on the adults for food. Five *common sandpipers* stopped to feed on the estuary on passage from their breeding grounds in the uplands of the UK. The immature *common sandpipers* are distinguished from the adults by the patterning on the wing coverts which need to be seen at close quarters in good light, but as usual these small wading birds were seen on the move flying low over the Medina with characteristic flickering wings and a shrill three-note call.

The small groups of *whimbrel* following the estuary south were all returning from breeding grounds in northern Scotland, Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides. Again the immature birds are not easy to distinguish although their plumage is fresher and buffer than the adults. A calling *greenshank* heading south, like the *whimbrel*, would be returning from breeding grounds in northern Scotland.

## September

*Swallows* were brought down from aloft during the first days of the month as low cloud and a strong south-west wind brought seven centimetres of rain. Deteriorating weather conditions at this time of year present a real hazard to the migrant birds, especially if caught out while crossing large expanses of open water. *Swallows* and *martins* put down on wires and tree-tops in these conditions, delaying crossing the English Channel until conditions improved.

A flock of forty *linnets* at Werrar and five *bullfinches* were seen along the Newport to Cowes cycleway; both species are on the Red List of birds of high conservation concern.

The calls of the *common sandpiper* and *greenshank* could be heard as solitary birds made their way south during the first half of the month. The rasping calls of adult *sandwich terns* and the less harsh calls of adult *common terns* mingled with the squeaky calls of the immature birds as they flew in small groups southwards fishing along the estuary.

Two *whinchats* remained for a few days at Werrar while nearby a *goldfinch* fed a single juvenile on teasel seeds.

High pressure built as the severe weather moved away and a succession of fine days and clear nights, with a light northerly tail wind provided ideal conditions for the migrants including the waves of *swallows* and *house martins* passing overhead with occasional *sand martins*, a *willow warbler*, a *spotted flycatcher* and two *yellow wagtails* seen lingering in the fine weather before heading south. Throughout this spell of fine weather the song of *chiffchaffs* could be heard in the trees and hedgerows adjacent to the cycleway.

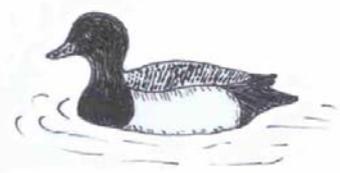
## October

*Ringed plovers* on the estuary peak in the autumn as the passage of Greenland birds swell the size of the flock. During October the numbers remaining in the Valley drop away as the flock heads south to the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean coast. At the beginning of the month the flock was thirty strong, down from its autumn peak of fifty.

A late *sandwich tern* put down on a pile at the entrance to the Island Harbour marina to preen, an adult bird now in winter plumage with a white forehead and a grey-flecked crown replacing the jet black cap. Out to the eastern edge of the Medina Valley seven *buzzards* soared high, while two more circled over woods on the west side of the estuary. Up to eight *little egrets* moved into the Valley, four using a tree in the Island Harbour as a high water roost.

A late *house martin* flying over Newport Harbour towards the end of the month had survived the first major storm of the autumn, and the three *blackcaps* and a *chiffchaff* in the hedgerows bordering the cycleway adjacent to the St Cross Business Park marked the tail end of this season's passage of summer migrants.

A group of forty *coot* congregated on the upper estuary and were joined by a first winter male *scaup*. The *scaup*, a species of diving duck, would have been a nestling in the Arctic earlier in the year and flown south to overwinter along the UK



coastline. They are larger and bulkier than *tufted duck*, although superficially a similar shape in the water. This young male had not developed the white flank feathers or the black head feathers of the adult, but over the weeks that it remained in the estuary it moulted to take on more of the adult plumage. The first few *redwings*, the returning Scandinavian thrushes, arrived in the Valley before the end of the month.

## November

During the wet, windy but exceptionally mild conditions at the beginning of the month *redwings* arrived in larger numbers, and a few days later they were joined by the first *fieldfares*. A smart *grey wagtail* took up residence in the vicinity of the Medina Valley Centre, its bright yellow underparts and long tail distinguishing it at a glance from the more common *pieb wagtail*.

Numbers of *black-headed gulls* continued to build up, flying up in panic when one of the resident *sparrowhawks* came into view. Members of the crow family do not have the same effect on the gulls, even when a pair of *ravens* loomed overhead and landed on the pylons that straddle the River Medina at Dodnor.

*Water rails* have only been recorded in two reedbeds in the Valley, Dodnor Creek and Lower St Cross Creek, but in the middle of the month one of these secretive birds was heard calling from the reedbeds at the back of the Island Harbour Marina. On the adjacent mudflats of the Folly Lake a single *golden plover* was observed, with four *grey plover* nearby. The flock of *dunlin* increased to one hundred and thirty, using the relatively undisturbed pontoons in mid-channel to roost with forty-five *oystercatchers* and thirty *redshank*.

The first two *red-breasted mergansers* arrived in the estuary, last seen in the spring.

Three pairs of *bullfinch* were seen and heard in the hedgerows bordering the cycleway adjacent to the Business Park and a *black redstart* turned up in the nearby Dodnor Industrial Estate.

At the end of the month a flock of twenty-one *common gulls* put down on the estuary near the Medina Valley Centre and five *cormorants* passed upstream fishing in unison with a *little egret* trying to keep up with them along the water's edge.

## December

Three species of *grebe* were seen on the estuary waters during the month; *little grebes* with up to a dozen dotted about between the Folly Lake and Newport Harbour, a *great crested grebe* in the central part of the estuary early in the month and a *red-necked grebe* in the Folly Lake towards the end of the month.

Two *buzzards* over Dodnor were caught out by low cloud rolling in off the North Sea on a north-easterly and had to quickly put down onto fence posts at the back of the Island Harbour. Another *great crested grebe* came into the Valley with the first of the *goldeneye* as the cold polar continental winds set in from the east. The immature *scaup*, now into its sixth week in the Valley struck up an affinity with the *goldeneye* and could be seen diving with these sea ducks. The numbers of *coot* on the upper estuary increased to forty-six and *swans* to thirty-seven, with up to three *kingfishers* fishing between the Newport Rowing Club and the Riverview Park.

During the mild, windy and at times wet end to the year a *brambling* returned to the hedgerows in the vicinity of the Cowes grain silos, a *coal tit* turned up at the Newport end of the cycleway at Hurstake, and five *goldcrest* moved through the same section of hedgerow, shared by a roost of nineteen *house sparrows*.