

## Medina Valley Bird Report for 2003

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### JANUARY

The large area of high pressure that settled down over the country for the first half of the month was responsible for the sunniest January since 1952. The over-wintering *chiffchaff* along the cycleway survived the freezing overnight temperatures and the wind chill of the north-easterly. A flock of *linnets* found sufficient grain in the vicinity of Werrar Farm to remain in the locality during the cold spell. Despite the cold, a pair of *carrión crows* continued nest-building along Dodnor Lane and *great tits* inspected the tit box modified by a red squirrel for use as a dray at the Medina Valley Centre. The *song thrush* at Lower St Cross and the *skylarks* at Werrar were in song later in the month, during another spell of sunny, settled weather.

A flock of up to 26 *black-tailed godwits* ranged along the mudflats between the Folly Lake and the Newport Rowing Club and a flock of 13 *shelduck* sieved out hydrobia, the minute gastropod snail, in this stretch of inter-tidal mud. Up to six *reed buntings* frequented the scrub on the estuary edge at Werrar, with a *jack snipe* and three *common snipe* in the tussocky grass nearby.

### FEBRUARY

Visitors to the Folly Lake during the month included 13 *Canada geese*, a *great crested grebe* and a *Slavonian grebe*. The over-wintering numbers of *goldeneye* and *red-breasted mergansers* on the estuary were down during this month. The distinctive call of the *Mediterranean gull* could be heard above the *black-headed gulls* in the upper estuary, and an over-wintering *lesser black-backed gull* joined the flock on one occasion.

A *muscovy duck* and three *domestic geese*, including a hybrid with a *greylag goose*, appeared alongside the estuary at the Riverview Residential Park and terrorised the residents for three weeks before disappearing as suddenly as they had arrived. Further upstream at Newport Harbour two *moorhens* battled fiercely for territory, while the *goldcrests* in the Monterey pines at the Medina Valley Centre were in full song.

During very mild conditions towards the end of the month a flock of 54 *fieldfares*, the larger of the two species of Scandinavian thrush, were seen flying down the Valley.

### MARCH

In spring, a breeding birds survey is undertaken in the 1 km grid square immediately to the north of Medina Valley Centre, which includes Dodnor Creek and most of Dickson's Copse. During the first week of the month 16 *robins* and 17 *wrens* were in song and a *great spotted woodpecker* was drumming in the Copse, and in the Creek the first song of the *reed bunting* could be heard.

The two *common sandpipers* seen early in the month in Cowes Harbour would have over-wintered in the Solent or on the English Channel coast. By the second week of the month the first song of the *chiffchaff* was heard at Dodnor Creek, with a passage of singing males over the following few days.

The last sightings of the *goldeneye*, *wigeon* and *kingfisher* were made in the middle of the month, before they departed for their breeding grounds - above the Arctic Circle for the *goldeneye* and *wigeon*, and the *kingfisher* to the mainland. The *mute swans* at Dodnor Creek were seen in courtship followed by mating, and twelve days later were building a nest in the reed bed.

The first *blackcap* songs could be heard along the Cowes-Newport cycleway before the end of the third week; they arrived in light winds under clear skies, from their wintering grounds in southern Europe. The flock of *linnets* remained at Werrar Farm to the end of the month, a pair of *long-tailed tits* completed a nest at Dodnor, and the first *mallard* ducklings appeared at Newport Harbour. Four days later, nine very young *mallard* ducklings appeared at Dodnor Creek, while a pair of *great spotted woodpeckers* and a *treecreeper* were active in Dicksons Copse. The first song of the *willow warbler* was heard at Dodnor Creek at the very end of the month.

## APRIL

In the wake of a clearing cold front on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, the first 3 returning *sand martins* swept into Dodnor Creek, as the cob *swan* chased away a *Canada goose* from its territory. As the last 6 *red-breasted mergansers* and last 2 *brent geese* flew out of the Valley for their northern breeding grounds, the first *whimbrels* and *sandwich terns* arrived along the estuary and a single *swallow* appeared over the reeds at Dodnor Creek.

With daytime April temperatures the highest for at least 30 years, a *nightingale* arrived in the scrub on the north side of the Dodnor Creek reed beds and remained for the next six weeks. However, its magnificent song apparently failed to attract a mate. Within a couple of days of the *nightingale's* arrival the first *whitethroat* was heard along the cycleway at Werrar and the first returning *reed warbler* arrived in the reeds at Dodnor Creek.

A *great crested grebe*, in full breeding plumage, dropped in to the estuary as the first returning *common sandpiper* put down in the Dodnor area. The first *coot* chick hatched at Dodnor Creek, and nearby a male *black redstart* made a rare appearance in the Valley.

Ahead of a vigorous depression, the vanguard of returning *swifts* arrived in the Valley with the first group of *house martins*, and a *whinchat*. The strong south-westerly air flow in the wake of the weather fronts brought in *sedge warblers* and *garden warblers*, with one of each species heard at Dodnor Creek on the last day of the month.

## MAY

A total of 23 *wrens* were in song in the Dodnor one kilometre square during the first week of the month, together with 18 *chaffinches* and 14 *robins*. Blue tits occupied three of the bird boxes at the Medina Valley Centre and the *starlings* were feeding young on the nest. Three days after the first *cuckoo* was heard at Medham, five cygnets appeared at the *swans'* nest at Dodnor Creek in wet and windy weather. The

downdraught associated with a large shower cloud brought *swifts* and *house martins* from aloft to the reed beds of Dodnor Creek.

A pair of *lesser whitethroats* took up residence in scrub close to the old railway line at Dodnor, the male maintaining hold of the territory by singing its distinctive tune for the next four weeks. The five cygnets were led onto the Creek waters away from the safety of the nest, and the parents were observed deliberately stirring up the sediment for the young to feed on fragments of vegetation that came to the surface. A week later, a pair of *swans* with five cygnets appeared in Newport Harbour, the aggressive cob keeping a herd of 20 other *swans* from entering the Harbour.

The *great crested grebe* in full breeding plumage on the Folly Lake was perhaps a young male in search of suitable breeding territory. Meanwhile, the *blue tits* hatched in the nest boxes and the parents were feeding the young at the end of the month. The *nightingale* at Dodnor Creek kept up its song to the end of the month and in a nearby field at Werrar, a *lapwing* performed its display flight.

## JUNE

A total of six *reed warblers* established territory in the reed beds at Dodnor Creek, and another was holding territory in a small patch of reed beds at Fairlee, on the east side of the estuary. The two male *reed buntings* at Dodnor Creek early in the month may have bred in the reeds, as their three note descending song could be heard during the breeding season. *Common terns* and *sandwich terns* fished along the estuary in ones and twos throughout the month.

The pair of *swans* continued to fiercely defend an ever-increasing feeding area with the five cygnets in tow. The cob was seen battling with another male and attempting to drown the bird for almost ten minutes before the victim escaped to the foreshore where the skirmish continued. During the last week of the month six *little egrets* were seen together in a field at Lower St Cross Farm, with the possibility that some of the group may have been immature birds.

## JULY

The *barn owls* in the Valley bred successfully, with three owlets at the nest site in Dickson's Copse, four at Pinkmead, two at Whippingham and three at the Island Harbour marina. A pair of *herring gulls* raised young at Carpenter's Quay on Newport Harbour, and the noisy immature gulls were observed in the confines of the harbour and along the upper stretch of the estuary demanding food from the parents. This is the second year that breeding has been observed on this building.

Two *lesser black-back gulls* ranged between Newport Quay and the centre of Newport. A *peregrine falcon* flew over Dodnor, one of five sightings made of this raptor in the Valley, all in the first half of the year.

In the third week of the month, the numbers of *mute swans* in the upper estuary peaked at 38 and the first *common sandpiper* and *whimbrel* returned from their breeding grounds.

## AUGUST

Throughout the exceptionally hot spell of weather during the first fortnight of August the return migration of waders, terns and passerines gained momentum. A pair of *little grebes* busily fed two demanding chicks on Dodnor Creek as temperatures soared to 33° C.

The *whimbrel* passage continued throughout the month with a flock of 11 birds passing along the estuary on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The passage of *ringed plover* peaked at 52 birds during the middle of the month, accompanied by small flocks of *dunlin*, some of which remained in breeding plumage.

The *wood sandpiper* is a wading bird that is not often detected in the Valley, but one put down briefly in Lower St Cross Creek on its return passage from far northern breeding grounds. *Common sandpipers* returning from riverine sites on the mainland flew along the estuary making their high-pitched two-note alarm call when disturbed. The smaller migrant species on return passage included a *sedge warbler* at the beginning of the month, *wheatears* at Heathfield farm, a fall of *leaf warblers* at Lower St Cross Creek and a *pieb flycatcher* at Werrar on the last day of the month.

## SEPTEMBER

The first *kingfisher* of the autumn returned to the upper estuary, perched on the foreshore outside the Medina Valley Centre, with an immature *great crested grebe* feeding in the estuary waters nearby. Three species of passage waders were seen and heard moving along the estuary during the month, a *spotted redshank* in the Werrar saltmarshes, a *greenshank* flying south in the upper estuary and *common sandpipers*. The dry, settled conditions during the month seemed to have encouraged a number of passage birds to delay their departure across the English Channel, including *spotted flycatchers*, a *redstart*, *sandwich terns*, *swallows* and *house martins*, lingering in the Valley late in the month. The first returning *brent goose* arrived in the Valley towards the end of the month.

## OCTOBER

The first of the returning over-wintering *wigeon* arrived on the same day that the last of the departing *common terns* was seen feeding in the estuary. A week later the last three *sandwich terns* circled the Folly Lake.

A *chiffchaff* remained in song in the allotments alongside Newport Harbour and a *hobby* flew south following line of the Valley. The size of the over-wintering flock of *oystercatchers* increased to 58, the group of *coots* on the estuary at Dodnor grew to 40 and the flock of *brent geese* increased to 10.

The wind set in from the east and swept in small groups of *redwings* and *fieldfares* across the North Sea from Scandinavia, and by the end of the month five *kingfishers* had taken up residence on the west side of the estuary between Werrar and Medham.

## NOVEMBER

During the first week of November the large area of high pressure over Scandinavia continued to feed in cool east winds from winds from continental Europe, bringing

with it further flocks of *redwings* and *fieldfares* to south and east England. These thrushes remained in the Valley for the rest of the month, noticeably in the hawthorns in the hedgerows along the Newport to Cowes cycleway, gorging themselves on the haws.

A pair of *kingfishers* simultaneously crashed into a dining room window at the Medina Valley Centre, leaving the birds dazed and motionless for ten minutes before flying away one after the other up the estuary, apparently unscathed.

A pair of *stonechats*, over-wintering in the scrubby bushes alongside the estuary at Werrar, was joined by a rare and unexpected species, an immature male *bluethroat*. The bird arrived in this patch of scrub during the third week of the month, causing a stir amongst the Island's birdwatchers. It was impossible to determine whether it belonged to the northern or southern race, due to the immaturity of the bird. The last time this species was recorded on the Island was over 30 years ago.

On the last day of the month a *merlin*, the diminutive raptor, was observed hunting in the Pinkmead area.

## **DECEMBER**

Six *rock pipits* were seen feeding on the eastern edge of the estuary near to the Island Harbour marina and on the other side of the river, five *grey herons* roosted in the trees overlooking the inland creek at Medham. Further along the cycleway towards Cowes, a flock of 32 *goldfinches* roosted in trees and at Werrar Creek, 30 *teal* fed on the algae on the mudflats.

Upstream, a flock of 17 *black-tailed godwits* fed in the bay near the Medina Valley Centre and a *greenshank* put down on the estuary near the Newport Rowing Club. The flock of *oystercatchers* roosting on the mooring platforms on the Folly fairway reached 120 and the first *goldeneye* sea duck arrived on the estuary on 15<sup>th</sup> December.

