

JANUARY 1985

The weather during the first three weeks of the New Year can best be described as somewhat wintry. With bitterly cold air from north east Europe (in Finland on the 7th the temperature went down to -50°C) we were guaranteed snow, and on the 6th considerable falls hit East Anglia and south east England. Up here in the Fylde we were somewhat luckier with only occasional falls that fortunately caused little disruption. Unfortunately the snow did lie for a considerable period, during which time many birds must have suffered as a result.

On the 21st a depression from the Atlantic brought milder weather, and with it the snow cleared. The depression tracked slowly NE across Scotland during the next couple of days depositing heavy falls of snow as it passed. The weather then became somewhat changeable but mainly south westerly ensuring a mild end to the month end.

The Yellow Browed Warbler was still at Inskip early in the month and provided many observers with a "super tick" to start their year-list. The bird created much interest, and as the cold weather set in the question was asked on many occasions, "How long will it stay around?" - it was answered on the 5th when the last reported sighting was made. Over wintering Chiff Chaffs appeared in a Vicarage Lane garden on New Years Day, and in willows at the Mere on the 4th, but subsequently no more sightings were made during January. A similar picture arose with Black Redstarts, single birds at Squires Gate Industrial Estate and Rossall School to the 6th, but then apparently no birds were seen when the weather became colder.

Wintering Twite remained in the Fleetwood area, with up to fifty regularly encountered between the Marine Lake and Rossall School, also a smaller flock seen near to Burglars Alley. Certainly the most unexpected flock of Twite encountered was a group of fifty found on a tiny piece of derelict land close to Preston town centre - obvious victims of the severe cold weather, searching amongst last year's dead weeds for any seeds overlooked by the resident sparrows. The few Snow Buntings found up and down the coast from Cockersands to Fairhaven must have been feeling very much at home in the wintry conditions, but a couple of Meadow Pipits found in small gardens must have been feeling the pinch with local marshland and farmland frozen hard. A single Brambling at Salwick on the 27th was the first local record for this winter.

A few Guillemots were seen off Rossall during the month, with a maximum of 15 on the 5th. Razorbills were fewer, with maxima of two on the 5th and 19th, but a single in the Lune Channel on the 20th was unusual.

At 10.25 on the 5th, one hundred and fifty adults and three 1st winter Little Gulls were seen flying into the Wyre Estuary, then at 11.05 all flew out again - a somewhat unusual event considering the fairly settled conditions at the time, we normally only see such numbers of this species during severe south westerly gales when birds shelter in the Wyre Estuary. Other gulls seen during the month included Glaucous at Fleetwood and the Mere, a Lesser Black Backed of the "*Larus fuscus fuscus*" sub sp. at Rossall on the 19th, and on the same day two unusual Herring Gulls at the Mere described as having dark grey mantles, pink legs, bills shorter than usual birds, with heads and napes cleaner and only slightly streaked.

Up to 8000 Pinkfeet were in Over Wyre throughout the month, accompanied by a Bean Goose, a pale bellied Brent, a Bar Headed Goose, up to two Barnacles, and a Snow Goose. Thesevere freeze up caused a drop in numbers of the smaller wildfowl at freshwater sites, and consequently a few more than might normally be expected turned up on the sea - up to 180 Wigeon off Rossall and 200 at Cockersands, and up to 10 Tufted and 6 Goldeneye also off Rossall. Amongst sea ducks off Rossall were, a Long tailed Duck, 10 Eiders, 22 Mergansers, and 20 Scoters.

Late in the month Pintails were moving through on their way north, evidenced by seven at the Mere and five at Wesham Marsh, all on the 31st.

The bitterly cold weather to the east of Britain may have been the reason for increased numbers of Red Throated Divers in Morecambe Bay - a maximum of seven early in the month had increased to at least 25 off Rossall on the 19th (15 seen flying east and 10 flying west). On the 26th, when many members were up in Barrow looking at a Waxwing, a Great Northern Diver, 2 Black Throated Divers, 7 Red Throated Divers, a

Red Necked Grebe, and a Long tailed Duck, were seen passing by. A Slavonian Grebe on Fairhaven Lake on the 21st provided superb close views when it frequented an ice free area of water near the lakeside cafe.

A Kingfisher was seen a couple of times during the month along the dyke east of the Mere, obviously finding enough ice free water to fish and so survive the freeze. A Great Crested Grebe at the Mere on the 31st was the first herald of the coming spring.

The wader count on the 20th produced the following - at Cockersands, 702 Oystercatchers, 30 Grey Plovers, 750 Knot, 13 Curlew, 92 Dunlin, 12 Redshank, and 22 Turnstones - at Lane Ends (Pilling), 3800 Oystercatchers, 12 Grey Plover, 1500 Knot, 180 Bar tailed Godwits, 205 Curlew, 800 Dunlin, and 60 Redshank - at St. Annes, 1750 Oystercatchers, 230 Grey Plover, 3400 Knot, and 2800 Bar tailed Godwits - strangely though no counts were received of Sanderlings from any of the count sites.

Overwintering waders, normally encountered as passage birds, were a Green Sandpiper by the River Wyre on New Years Day, a Greenshank by the River Lune at Glasson Dock on the 27th, and a Curlew Sandpiper at Conder Green from the 26th to the month end.

FEBRUARY 1985

The brief period of milder weather at the end of January continued into February, but only for the first few days. By the 7th a very cold south easterly airstream had become established, and with it some heavy falls of snow in the south and across Wales. On the 10th heavy snow coupled with the bitterly cold wind caused temperatures to fall as low as -25°C in some parts of East Anglia and the Midlands. Locally, temperatures were not much above freezing for the most part, with overnight temperatures as low as -10°C . The severe cold spell lasted until the 20th when the weather became more westerly, then mild southerly winds to the month end brought just a suggestion that Spring might be on the way.

The mild spell at the start of the month encouraged a number of wildfowl to drop in at Wesham Marsh, which was briefly ice free after the freeze up in January. On the 2nd at Wesham two Shelduck, and on the 3rd one hundred and thirty Teal, twenty five Shoveler, and forty one Pintail. Elsewhere the only other notable gatherings of wildfowl were the 172 Mallard at the Mere, 120 Wigeon on Newton Marsh, 63 Teal at Conder Green, and 240 Coot at the Mere. The numbers of Eiders off Rossall fluctuated somewhat throughout the month, with some observers seeing only odd pairs, whilst others reported up to fifteen.

Moss Edge proved the best place to see the Pinkfeet flocks, and also provided some variety. Six thousand Pinkfeet on the 20th were accompanied by at least two Bean Geese and a Snow Goose, and later in the month four Bean Geese, three Barnacles, and a "light bellied" Brent were with the Pinkfeet. Three Whooper Swans appeared at Lane Ends on the 24th.

Seawatches from Rossall Point during the severe cold spell proved interesting, with up to sixteen Red Throated Divers between the 9th and 17th, at least 2 Black Throated Divers, 7 Great Crested Grebes, a Red Necked Grebe, 3 adult Gannets, up to 42 Cormorants, and 12 Guillemots. Birds on the sea off Anchorsholme included at least 3 Black Throated Divers, 15 Great Crested Grebes, and occasional single Red Throated Divers. A Great Northern Diver seen near North Pier on the 17th may have been the same bird off Fleetwood Pier at high water on the 23rd.

The sea also provided Ed Stirling with species 98 and 99 from the South Shore Telephone Exchange - two Shags on the 24th was species 98 and a Black Throated Diver on the 26th was number 99.

The Curlew Sandpiper found at Conder Green in January was still there until at least the 24th, and on the same date a Spotted Redshank was at the wader roost at Lane Ends. Rossall Point held up to four Purple Sandpipers amongst the 260 Turnstones for most of the month, but a group of five Purple Sandpipers found on the ironwork under North Pier was most unexpected.

The wader counts on the 10th showed an increase on January's count at Lane Ends, but a dramatic decrease at St. Annes (No count from Cockersands for February). Lane Ends count - 300 Oystercatchers, 190 Grey Plover, 3700 Knot, 1860 Dunlin, 150 Redshank, 1750 Bar Tailed Godwits, but no Curlew - the St. Annes count was 210 Oystercatchers,

21 Grey Plover, 36 Dunlin, 215 Sanderlings, 1600 Bar Tailed Godwits, and strangely no t.

Three Woodcock were at Ribby on the 3rd, and three more at Bourne Hill on the 17th.

A Short Eared Owl over the rooftops of Larkholme Estate at about 11.00 on the 18th, was probably the same bird seen over Fleetwood Golf Course the same day. Watchers at the Mere regularly reported up to three Short Eared Owls.

A female Hen Harrier at Lytham Marsh during February had been there since January, and a male bird on Fleetwood Marsh on the 10th might have been the same bird seen there during November of last year.

Passerine highlights during February included a Water Pipit at Conder Green on the 2nd, and a Dutch ringed Chaffinch caught at Clifton Hall. A Black Redstart at Lytham Marsh on the 3rd was the only reported sighting of that species(- what happened to the several seen at the end of last year, did they move on with the onset of the cold weather, or did they succumb to the cold as many small birds must have done?). Amongst those managing to survive the cold were Stonechats at the Mere, Fleetwood Marsh, and a newly arrived pair at L.S.A.N.R., single Rock Pipits at Rossall School, Lytham, and Conder Green, a Siskin at L.S.A.N.R., and at least eight Snow Buntings near Lytham Lifeboat Station.

On the last day of the month at least one cock Blackbird was heard singing volubly as he advertised his territory, signalling the impending arrival of the first days of the changing seasons.

Contributors:- C.J.Band, L.G.Blacow, S.Eaves, F.Ellis, M.Evans, I.Gardner, P.Guy, M.Jones, M.Meredith, Monty Myerscough, M.O'Brien, O.Roberts, P.&P.Slade, E.Stirling, M.Wilby.

Records of interest submitted too late for inclusion in the January summary included:-

On the 22nd a Water Rail flew from Lytham Marsh onto Lytham Green, then took off again and flew across the road into a garden. On the same day a Chiff Chaff was at Lytham Land Registry, whilst on the 27th a Green Sandpiper was flushed from a ditch on Royal Lytham Golf Course.

Fairhaven Lake had a drake Smew on the 28th, and a duck Scaup on the 28th.

BIRD NOTES

Blue Tit beating the severe freeze

During the severe freeze up of January 1985, I noticed on several occasions a Blue Tit entering an illuminated street lamp at dusk. Presumably the bird was roosting inside the lamp and obviously benefiting from the heat being emitted by the tube.

Tony Myerscough.

Blue Tits drinking during the severe freeze

On the 19th of January 1985, two Blue Tits were feeding occasionally on peanuts put out in my back garden. On a couple of occasions after feeding on the nuts both birds were seen to fly up to the overflow pipe from the cold water tank of the house next door. The birds were drinking from small droplets of water which were appearing at the end of the pipe.

Peter Guy.

Kingfisher passing through a built-up area

At about 08.30 on the 4th October 1975, I stepped outside the back door of my South Shore home and heard the unfamiliar call of a bird somewhere overhead, but did not consider it worth investigating.

About a minute later I heard the call again (a single metallic/piping call), then looking up I glimpsed a small bird flying with whirring wing beats, being pursued by a Starling and heading between the nearby houses at a height of about twenty feet. As the bird flew away the iridescent blue back of a Kingfisher could be seen. I leapt forward into the yard just in time to see the Kingfisher and the Starling alight on

a house gutter about a yard apart, only to shoot off almost immediately leaving me in a state of incredulity.

How the Kingfisher came to be in such an alien environment is a puzzle, although I did hear that about the same time a Kingfisher was found dead below a plate glass window on Vicarage Lane, Marton.

Of the few Kingfishers I have seen, this remains the only one I have also heard call - an unbeatable entry on one's home list don't you think?.

Ed Stirling.

Unusual behaviour of Merlins

At 11.30 on the 20th January 1985, a very cold day with a thin covering of frozen snow lying on the ground, I was searching the fields between Eagland Hill and Bradshaw Lane Head for geese, when a Merlin flew low across the road in front of my car and apparently settled in a nearby field. I reversed the car some distance in the hope of getting better views of the bird at rest. However, immediately I got out of the car there was a rush of wings, and not ten metres in front of me a Skylark was seized by a female Merlin as it tried to seek refuge in the roadside vegetation. The Merlin flew low across the field carrying the lark, but was then itself attacked by a male Merlin. I could not say if there was actual contact, but the female dropped her prey to the ground and the male proceeded to mantle the lark as if to pluck it, but probably noticing my presence took off in the direction the female had flown. I was unable to relocate either bird, but had identified both as being sub-adults.

The incident was unique in my experience, and conflicted with my existing knowledge of Merlin behaviour. Merlins are thought to hunt exclusively alone outside the breeding season, and are not known to attack one another for prey items (indeed incidents of them depriving other species of prey items are very rare). I can only conclude that the immature twosome had formed a pair bond very early in the year, but I would appreciate comments from other members on the incident.

Owen Roberts.

Bird recording and contributions to the Fylde Bird Report

Having received most of the records for inclusion in the Fylde Bird Report for 1984 (Divers to Short Eared Owl), I feel it necessary to bring certain species to the attention of members, which have for some reason been poorly represented:

GANNET - most observers records gave no indication of the ages of birds seen. Such information enables a more detailed analysis of Spring and Autumn passages to be carried out, and would of course be available should any National Body require the information.

CORMORANT - only one observer submitted regular counts from one locality (monthly max. roosting on the Wyre Light). The Ribble was very poorly covered, with only one count received.

GREY HERON - very little information submitted.

SHELDUCK - despite being present in good numbers on the Ribble no counts were submitted. Similarly no breeding records were received.

KESTREL - few breeding records submitted.

MOORHEN - no details of breeding or regular counts from any site.

LITTLE GULL - very few observers aged individuals.

GLAUCOUS GULL - some observers did not age or make brief plumage details of individual birds to aid the separation of individuals.

KITTIWAKE - few observers aged birds.

WOODPIGEON - no details of breeding, and very few other records submitted.

COLLARED DOVE - no breeding records, and coverage of roosts was very patchy (No details of the Stanley Park/Zoo roost).

Despite the recent "A few Guidelines to Contributors to the Fylde Bird Report" issued to all members, which was intended to aid members in the type and details of records required for the Bird Report, many members still submitted vague or incomplete notes regarding age, sex, duration of watches etc. This was especially the case for

seawatch records, in many cases those submitted gave no indication of duration of watches or the direction of movements of birds.

Content of the Report is governed by the quality of the observations submitted by members. I would therefore urge all members to record all species accurately and carefully, because in so doing they will help to build up a more complete picture of the birds of the Fylde. Such information is vital if sites are to be conserved for their ornithological value.

Richard Hall.

Information is also urgently required for Sand Martins, Yellow Wagtail, Sedge Warbler, and Whitethroat.

All observers of any rarity are requested to complete a "record form", even when the bird has been seen by many observers. Everyone sees birds differently, so by completing a form details missed by one observer may have been highlighted by another. A further point worth remembering is that if a bird stays around for some time then subtle changes in plumage may occur, or it may do something totally out of character etc., points wellworth recording for posterity.

N.B. The completing of these "record forms" is not a test of your ability to identify birds, it is an attempt by the Recorder to standardise the Club's methods for submission and storage of information. There is no intention that anyone should sit in judgement on the "record forms", records used in the compilation of the Fylde Bird Report are at the discretion of the Recorder anyway.

MORE ON COUNTING BIRDS by PHIL SLADE

In seeking volunteers to count waders in south Morecambe Bay for the Winter Birds of Estuary Survey, and for the imminent B.T.O. Spring Passage Count, I have been disappointed by the general lack of enthusiasm from members. This is somewhat surprising in view of the excellent birdwatching which is available.

It is important to remember why we must count waders. Besides the obvious reason of simply enjoying the transformation of apparently desolate and lifeless mudflats to a spectacular mass of feeding and roosting waders and wildfowl, there are other more valuable objectives.

It was during the mid 1960's that barrage schemes were suggested for the Solway and Morecambe Bay, and ornithologists were quick to appreciate the dangers that such schemes would generate for the vast numbers of waders using the estuaries. The available literature revealed that our knowledge of the distribution and numbers of waders was wholly inadequate to provide conservationists with the necessary ammunition to refute the arguments of the would be despoilers of these unique habitats.

Out of this potentially catastrophic lack of knowledge grew the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, instigated by the N.C.C., the R.S.P.B., and other bodies. The aims of the Enquiry were to record the numbers and species using each estuary and comparing them, then should a barrage scheme be suggested, information would be available to present a reasoned argument in terms of that particular estuaries' importance, should it be of local, national, or even international importance. At the present time the conservation movement has succeeded in preventing many of the most damaging schemes from bearing fruit, but there can be no doubt that the threats on estuaries will continue, from industrial and agricultural reclamation to recreational pressures, this latter is already a severe problem in our own area.

So now we know the desirability for counting waders, but what about the mechanics of the operation. How accurate can we be or how accurate can we be expected to be, and is accuracy absolutely essential?. Whilst it would be commendable and be scientifically accurate to count wader flocks to ± 1 , or in some cases ± 1000 , it is impossible, no counter could hope to be so precise. One might expect a counter to show with a certain degree of accuracy the changes in numbers that take place, firstly over a twelve monthly cycle following normal seasonal movements and weather induced factors. Secondly to show the strong migration patterns of some species, and third to prove any long term declines in overall populations due to pressures which may be beyond man's control.

I would suggest that anyone considering counting a particular roost should surround

himself with likeminded people. Dependent upon the difficulties associated with any particular roost, two observers must be a minimum, with probably three or four needed on some tides at the Pilling/Cockerham/Preesall roosts. Potential wader counters must familiarise themselves with the area they intend to count, and then to count it regularly so that they become accustomed to particular flight lines to the roosts at any state of the tide. By positioning themselves at vantage points it should be possible to count the waders as they alight or leave sub roosts formed during incoming tides. Counting or estimating numbers in flight is infinitely more easy than counting "carpets" of sleeping grey birds at a tightly packed roost. In attempting to count a roosting flock on our local saltmarshes I have invariably found that I underestimate the density of the flock. A group of what I took to be say 20-30 birds turned out to be 40-60 when the flock took flight, a potential error of 100%. The roosting group may also contain members of other species which were hidden in the closely packed formation. It is clearly preferable to attempt counts at earlier sub-roosts as birds pass the observers on their way to the eventual high tide roost. Difficulties still arise of course, the flocks are invariably mixed - this is the time when a group of observers is invaluable. Each counter should be allocated two or three species to help overcome this particular problem. Another problem occurs when a sudden rush of birds arrives at the roost, and once again the count becomes dependent upon more than one observer. Other obstacles to accurate counting are inclement weather, or the presence of a hunting raptor driving birds to areas containing uncounted birds. One must then decide to either estimate further or to start again.

After counting a site over a period of time one is able to get a "feel" for the numbers involved. It is possible to be confident about a flock of say 2000 Dunlin or 4000 Knot, and a logical progression to say that the next time you visit the area those flocks have increased or decreased by X%, or as the case may be. After watching a fairly consistent number of 5-6000 Knot at Pilling throughout the winter of 1983/84, I noticed a marked increase in March to what I felt to be near 8000. During April there was a further increase to at least double the original number to probably 12000. Later in April the numbers involved were clearly phenomenal, with numbers approaching 18-20000 Knot. Returning to a point made earlier regarding scientific accuracy, by visiting the site regularly, using consistent methods and the same counters, we can see that the Spring migration of Knot through the southern part of Morecambe Bay involves many times the normal wintering numbers. Unfortunately we have no way of discovering the day to day turnover in individual birds, save catching and marking each one.

Soon we will be attempting to determine the numbers of Dunlin, Ringed Plover, and Sanderling, which pass through the Fylde in large numbers during April and May. I am confident that the knowledge we have gained from the Winter counts, tides, and roosts, we will be able to gather the necessary information with a fair degree of accuracy. The collection of this information will of course depend upon those hardy volunteers who have braved the elements throughout the cold months of Winter, and those other members who in the past have shown no inclination to get involved.

We already know that the populations of some species on this part of the Fylde coast are of National importance (i.e. If at least 1% of an estimated wintering or passage population are regularly present, e.g. Oystercatchers regularly exceed the criteria of 3000, as do Grey Plover(100), Knot(2500), and passage numbers of Ringed Plover(300), Dunlin(2000), and Sanderling(300), are far exceeded in April and May.

We are indeed fortunate to be able to witness these phenomena month after month, therefore it is important we continue to count and record these birds, so providing ourselves and future generations with the necessary information which will hopefully preserve this ancient Fylde coastal habitat. You as a member of The Fylde Bird Club can do your bit by carrying out counts along the southern end of Morecambe Bay at any time between the 1st of April and 10th of June. Species of particular interest are Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Turnstone, Bar Tailed Godwit, Knot, and Grey Plover, also take particular note of any colour dyed birds (birds have been colour dyed on parts of their bodies whilst in wintering areas).

Please submit results of all counts made to me at Club meetings or by post to,
Phil Slade, 79 Garstang Road West, Poulton-le-Fylde.