

## Stocker's Lake Bird Report 2010

The cold weather at the end of 2009 rolled on into **JANUARY** with much of Stocker's Lake frozen. The 1st day of the month was a good time to wander round the lake with up to 3 smew (including 2 superb drakes), 8 red crested pochards (increasing to 15 the next day), as well as a lesser redpoll, several smew and a few siskins scattered around the alders along the watercourses. The following day up to 16 goldeneye were present, a water rail was seen, but a woodcock was a completely unexpected sighting - presumably frozen out of its usual haunts; more interestingly an impressive total of 22 little egrets were counted - 12 of which flew south, but the other 10 stayed to roost. The weather remained cold until mid-month and bird sightings changed little - up to 3 smew were still present to delight hopeful visitors, as well as up to 3 water rails. As the thaw set in up to two goosander arrived and gradually increased to 4, including 3 smart drakes; a bittern was a very fortunate sighting on 27th, though sadly all too brief.

**FEBRUARY** was generally cold; up to 3 smew remained a pleasurable feature, along with up to 25 goldeneye, 150 siskin and 3 goosander at the start of the month, although smew had crept up to 5 (4 drakes) by 7th. Nearby 2 little owls were present, as well as a snipe at Stocker's Farm: 2 red kites flew over on the 9th. By mid-month 2 nuthatches were becoming regular near the kingfisher hide and 7 ring-necked parakeets were seen on 15th, an increasingly common sight nowadays. A little flurry of interesting sightings towards the end of the month included an oystercatcher sitting on one of the tern rafts on 26th, and the next day, 2 red kites, 2 treecreepers and a lesser spotted woodpecker (a sadly infrequent sighting these days): finally a singing reed bunting gave a sign of things to come.

**MARCH** rolled in with a decidedly chilly feel, but not cold enough for the smew, which were last seen on 5th, up to 3 little grebes were visible and Egyptian geese were also present on several occasions: there was another fleeting glimpse of perhaps the same bittern on 10th. Nearby at Stocker's Farm there were 65 wigeon, 65 teal and up to 4 snipe and then the first real sign of spring on 18th when a wheatear dropped in and 2 terns (presumably common) flew through, along with 6 sand martins on 20th. Although the weather remained changeable new migrants continued to pass through with the first chiffchaff on 20th (but an impressive count of 13 on 27th), swallow on 23rd, blackcap on 26th and willow warbler on 31st; as the month drew to a close the pair of kestrels were seen entering the nest-box and up to 16 goldeneyes were still around.

The first day of **APRIL** was full of spring activity with 3 pairs of mute swans on nests and a pair of displaying kingfishers (thankfully having survived the harsh winter), a red kite drifted over the lake and up to 3 Egyptian geese were seen.

Over the next few days a redshank dropped in to Stocker's Farm, a cuckoo was heard on 6th, a sedge warbler on 9th and a lesser whitethroat on 16th; common buzzard and ring-necked parakeets were regular visitors. Two oystercatcher was seen on several dates, common terns started checking out the tern rafts and the pair of nuthatches were prospecting a nest-box; more arrivals over the next few days included a garden warbler singing on 20th, a swift and reed warbler on 21st, the same day a goshawk was reported. Transient migrants took the shape of a yellow wagtail and a wheatear. Overall the month was dry and sunny and there was no measurable rainfall.

There was plenty of interest on the first day of **MAY** with a very smart male whinchat on the overgrown meadow, a pair of mating goldeneye, up to eight singing reed warblers, as well as common whitethroat and an unusual rufous-morph female cuckoo; however the most remarkable sighting was that of a pair of mating black-headed gulls on the new tern raft! - the first of several pairs to set up residence here. Although the previous day was bright, sunny and warm, the following day was a complete washout as 2 inches of rain fell. At least 10 reed warblers were counted singing around the lake on 12th, along with 15 sedge warblers, 7 garden warblers, 7 blackcaps and 2 whitethroats; nearby there was a yellow wagtail on the flood. On 17th the pair of Egyptian geese re-appeared along with 4 goslings, but sadly the latter did not survive for longer than a few days; interestingly the pair of displaying goldeneye remained for a few more days before moving on. Up to 4 hobbies were around the lake on 22nd and at least one oystercatcher was still being seen intermittently.

With the breeding season well underway **JUNE** fortunately proved to be a warmer and drier month than average. Reed warblers fledged their first young by 3rd, but the presence of 3 cuckoos chasing each other around suggested that the warblers may have ended up with more than they bargained for in their nests. One of the two pairs of lapwings at Stocker's Farm hatched 3 chicks by 11th, although only one youngster survived to flying stage; common terns had 15 active nests on the tern rafts and by 6th three pairs already had small chicks. The black headed gulls produced their first chicks by 17th and the same day a pochard duckling was seen (although it probably did not survive) and the kestrels were already carrying food into the nest-box by 18th. Back at Stocker's Farm the little owls successfully fledged at least one youngster and a remarkable sighting there on 13th was of a badger foraging in broad daylight at 3pm! By 26th the first of the kestrel chicks fledged, followed by the second on 28th.

Like the previous month **JULY** proved to be warmer and drier than average, in fact by the end of the month the thermometer had climbed inexorably to 30C. The emphasis during the month remained very much on the breeding front with the pair of kestrels successfully fledging all four youngsters, the little owls at Stocker's Farm fledged two chicks and the first of the juvenile common terns

were on the wing. Finally a common sandpiper was spotted on 31st - an indication that autumn migration was starting to get underway.

**AUGUST** opened with a large influx of willow warblers, at least 16 birds were counted around the lake on 1st. One or two little egrets and hobbies were seen on most days, four common sandpipers were present on 11th and small flocks of sand martins could be seen hawking over the water. Two spotted flycatchers dropped in on 21st, one or both remained until the end of the month; nearby at Stocker's Farm there was a wheatear on 23rd and then 3 yellow wagtails on 28th. A count of 30 adult and 22 juvenile great crested grebes around the lake on 27th was impressive and an indication of how successful this waterbird is at rearing its chicks - it is quite likely that duckling and other waterbird mortality is very high at Stocker's owing to the presence of many large pike (as well as the dinner plate-sized red-eared terrapins that also lurk beneath the surface); the fact that young grebes spend a lot of time sitting on the back of the adult birds probably aids their survival. Overall it proved to be a very wet month with over 5 inches of rain falling locally.

Migration was in full swing as **SEPTEMBER** began with hobbies being seen daily during the first few days: a lesser whitethroat was present on 1st, a yellow wagtail on 4th and a whinchat on 7th. A rather fortuitous sighting on 15th was a honey buzzard that flew south over the lake helped by a strong tail-wind; flocks of hirundines were quite impressive at this time with up to 200 house martins and 100 sand martins. The following day house martins peaked at 300, when at least 16 chiffchaffs were logged around the site. About two inches of rain fell locally during the month, although this was below average and temperatures were close to normal.

The first few days of **OCTOBER** were very wet with 3 inches of rain falling in the first 4 days and night frosts had returned by mid-month. The ornithological flavour was by now becoming decidedly wintery as the first of the winter wildfowl started to return: on 8th there were 6 red crested pochards and the first 3 returning wigeon were back. The following day a solitary siskin had returned and an impressive juvenile peregrine falcon was also present: the first water rail followed on 12th. The first of the winter thrushes were represented by a flock of 50 fieldfares on 16th. By 23rd the first goldeneye was back and a brambling was a good local sighting and siskins had increased to 16: the first redwing was reported on 30th, by which time the number of goldeneye had risen to four.

An over-flying short-eared owl on 1st **NOVEMBER** was an excellent sighting. Over the next few days flocks of 30 siskin were logged, two red kites flew over (nowadays a fairly regular sight over the reserve), red crested pochard totals rose to ten and four Egyptian geese were seen. A black-necked grebe was reported on 14th, a good local record, and the first goosander of the winter was

back on 30th, by which time the weather had turned bitterly cold as winds switched from the south-west to the east with severe night frosts which are so damaging to our small bird populations, contrasting markedly with the mild first half of the month.

The cold continued into **DECEMBER** and had instant results as a pair of smew dropped in on 1st (an exceptionally early record locally), over the next few days a snipe flew over, along with 2 curlew (also a good local sighting) and 15 lapwing: a count of nine goldcrest was unexpected. As the cold spell continued the goldeneye count rose to eight and the redhead smew was replaced by another splendid drake - a real bonus - and siskin totals increased to 200. Thankfully we were initially spared the heavy snowfalls which seemed to be afflicting neighbouring counties, that was until 17th when two heavy snowfalls turned our region into a winter wonderland and the deep freeze intensified as overnight temperatures plunged to 11°C below freezing. Most of Stocker's Lake froze solid, although a few small areas of water remained open. Fortunately the river Colne stayed unfrozen allowing at least one pair of local kingfishers to survive (always a species prone to suffer in extreme conditions). The two drake smew were still present at the month's end (although spending most time on the adjacent Bury Lake in the cold spell) and up to eight goosander were occasionally seen on the lake, although they were mostly feeding on the River Colne. Although the thermometer rose slightly towards the end of the month as the snow was washed away, it still meant that December would rank as one of the coldest in the last 100 years.

*Andrew Moon*