

Stocker's Lake Bird Report 2011

After the bitter end to 2010 thankfully the big thaw had already set in by the start of the year and the weather in JANUARY turned out to be cooler, duller and drier than average. A pleasant walk around the lake in the first few days of the year produced the expected highlights including up to four goosander (with several smart drakes), 11 goldeneye, at least 60 siskin scattered along the many alders that fringe the riverside, three Egyptian geese (an increasingly regular visitor these days), and up to 180 roosting Fieldfares in the evenings. Other familiar birds were up to 50 lapwings using the islands for refuge, one or two Red Kites, and thankfully (given the bitter weather a few weeks before) at least one kingfisher. As the month progressed goldeneye numbers climbed to 22 by 11th, red-crested pochard numbers increased to at least seven; a count of seven moorhen on 9th was unusual, although the lake no doubt plays host to many more overall. Little owls were in evidence checking out the nestbox at Stocker's Farm and at least one nuthatch was frequenting the trees along the canal side of the reserve. Finally, almost at the 11th hour the most wanted birds of the winter avifauna here (and absent until now despite their presence at the end of 2010) finally put in an appearance on 30th and 31st – a pair of drake smew.

Overall FEBRUARY proved to be a relatively mild month. Red-crested Pochards peaked with 11 birds on 5th, and reassuringly 2 kingfishers were now being seen; both shoveler (up to 20th) and teal (2) put in their first appearance of the year and a count of 43 common gulls on 5th was unexpected as was a single adult yellow-legged gull the next day. Another unusual local bird was a goldcrest near the tern hide on 9th – quite a rarity around the lake; both common buzzard and red kite were seen on a number of dates, the pair of smew were present intermittently to delight lucky viewers, but up to 20 goldeneye and 4 goosander were more easily seen. At least 3 green woodpeckers were chasing each other around the slightly flooded field at Stocker's Farm, also to be seen here were up to 4 teal and 14 wigeon. By mid-month a reed bunting was a regular visitor at the kingfisher hide where the pair of kestrels were prospecting the nestbox. One lucky visitor saw a flock of 70 waxwing along the causeway between the two lakes – it was of course an invasion year with quite a few flocks to be seen around local streets, as well as local gardens.

MARCH proved to be another dry month, with warmer than average temperatures. Quite a few winter visitors were still lingering early in the month, but there was a distinct hint of spring with nuthatch, treecreeper, little owl and kingfisher all prospecting nest sites or displaying. Goldeneye numbers remained high with at least 23 still present on 5th, as well as up to five goosander (last seen on 19th) and 30 wigeon on the flood at the farm; the first shelduck of the year was seen the same day. Another flock of waxwing was seen flying over on 6th and the first chiffchaff had arrived by 11 as well as, congruously, a lingering female smew. As the month drew to a close goldeneye totals had dwindled to nine, but two oystercatchers were seen and the first swallows and common terns of the year were back by 31st.

The first few days of APRIL saw the arrival of several blackcaps and house martins; it proved to be a super month weatherwise with temperatures well above normal. The floodgates really opened on 8th as wheatear, sedge warbler, reed warbler and willow warbler all dropped in. The next day was even better for a few fortunate observers as an osprey sailed above the quarry, the first cuckoo was 'cuckooing' loudly, a lesser whitethroat was singing near Stocker's Farm and just as good was the flock of 22 waxwings

around the café on Bury Lake (with eight still present on 10th) – some of them flycatching. Three oystercatchers flew by on 15th, the first garden warbler was back by 16th, but rather better was the grasshopper warbler reeling away (unseen) from 21st in the rough meadow on the north side of the River Colne until the end of the month. Later arrivals were a few swifts and a single hobby on 30th.

The mostly fine weather during MAY was very welcome with the breeding season well underway, Grey wagtails were feeding young by Stocker's Lock, a pair of nuthatches were feeding their voracious youngsters, Canada goose goslings abounded around the lake shepherded into crèches by various mothers and aunts, but most pleasingly of all was the pair of little egrets that started to nest on one of the islands – calling loudly and persistently during this time. Black-headed gulls were also having a successful season with seven pairs breeding, including one pair nesting (successfully) on fallen tree, sadly they have squeezed out the common terns, although five pairs of the latter managed to nest successfully. One of the most pleasant sights of the summer is the swirling, screaming flocks of swift over the lake – over 100 were present on 2nd. A few cuckoos were still around until the middle of the month, but rather unusually a pair of goldeneye remained until 15th and although the drake then moved on the female remained until 22nd.

We really shouldn't expect JUNE to be flaming – and of course it wasn't, just cooler and wetter than average, although temperatures did reach 33C by the end of the month. A lesser spotted woodpecker was a real surprise near the tern hide on 2nd, a sadly declining species these days, just a surprising was another grasshopper warbler 'reeling' in the reedbed near the yacht club on 5th and presumably the same female goldeneye was still present the same day. Black-headed gull chicks continued to grow fast and kestrels were feeding young in the nestbox. By far the most unusual visitor of the year was an immature night heron discovered roosting on one of the islands early on 19th and enjoyed by many local and regional birders all day – sadly it has gone by the next day. Another unusual visitor was a little tern on 28th, our smallest and perhaps most endearing tern; just as startling was the lesser-blacked gull watched eating a tufted duck on 30th.

A family of four kingfishers seen on JULY 9th was a very satisfying sight (given the cold winter) and just as pleasing was the family of five kestrels (3 youngsters) and the pair of grey wagtails were seen feeding (presumably) a second brood of chicks. Nearby at least one juvenile little owl was being fed by its parents at Stocker's Farm.

The last traditional month of the summer, AUGUST, was really a damp squib this year being warmer and wetter than average – oh well I'm sure our gardens benefited! August is the first major month of return passage – a count of 20 chiffchaffs on 7th were clearly migrants, along with 15 blackcaps; hobbies were frequent visitors around the lake (normally their young won't fledge until mid-month, timed to coincide with the peak migration period). Two common sandpipers on 25th, as well as two whinchats and a lesser whitethroat on 28th were also obviously passing through.

SEPTEMBER proved to be one of the warmest for the last 100 years – a real Indian summer! It was, however, a pretty quiet month ornithologically. Little egrets were seen on many dates, over 100 greylag geese were counted on 15th and a group of 11 yellow wagtails on 16th was noteworthy, but somewhat rarer was the Cetti's warbler first seen on 18th (probably the same bird present at the time of writing). Other interesting sightings

included the first returning siskins on 21st, a wheatear on 24th and another count of 10 yellow wagtails on 30th.

The next month, OCTOBER, proved to be slightly warmer and drier than average. The last wheatear of the year was seen on 2nd, soon followed by the first returning goldeneye on 11th and siskin numbers had increased to 30 by 12th. Some interesting counts during the month were: 12 Egyptian geese on 8th, 16 ring-necked parakeets on 15th, 5 red-crested pochards on 28th and 100 siskin the next day. A pink-footed goose was spotted on 24th with greylag geese – a rare bird locally, but it might well have had slightly suspect origins.

As was the case with the previous two months NOVEMBER proved to be warmer and drier than usual. Three red kites drifted over on 3rd, increasing evidence of their successful spread into our area. Up to 50 golden plovers could be seen from the reserve hides early in the month, siskins remained in good numbers around the reserve and goldeneye numbers rose to 14 by 18th, the first water rail was back by 23rd, ten redwings were logged on 26th and there was an impressive count of 16 little egrets roosting on the islands on 27th. A redhead smew put in a remarkably early appearance on 28th, but nonetheless very welcome.

The end of the year slowly drew to a close and, thankfully (unlike 2010), DECEMBER proved to be a mild affair. Winter visitors slowly started to accumulate with a regular flock of up to 50 roosting fieldfares, along with a record count of 25 little egrets on 7th (clearly favouring Stocker's over their previous roost site at Broadwater); the female smew was seen occasionally throughout the month and, rather belatedly, the first three goosanders arrived on 9th and goldeneye numbers peaked at a rather modest 12. On 22nd a pair of blackcap were seen – interestingly these birds come from a different population to our summer visitors and it is generally accepted that they originate from Germany. With mild weather predominating up to Christmas many birds were thinking of spring as the grey herons started prospecting nest-sites, great spotted woodpeckers were drumming away and blackbird, song thrush and great tit were all singing

Smew – January

Goosander – February

Little Egret – March

Wren - April

Cuckoo - May

Night Heron – June

Common Buzzard - July

Kestrel - August

House Sparrow - September

Red Crested Pochard – October

Grey Heron – November

Great Tit - December











