

Stocker's Lake Bird Report 2012

As **JANUARY** 2012 rolled in it was pleasantly mild: up to 13 goldeneye, several goosander, up to 5 red-crested pochards and a few siskin were around the reserve. Over the next few days up to 6 little egrets were seen and small flocks of lapwing were roosting on the rafts or the islands, a chiffchaff seen on 7th was clearly a wintering bird. The next day a red kite drifted over the lake and a late afternoon/evening watch revealed a roost gathering of at least 383 fieldfares and an impressive collection of 49 little egrets – both on the islands. Now that little egrets have completely forsaken their previous favoured roost location at Broadwater for Stocker's, they can now be seen year round at our reserve. Two Egyptian goose put in an appearance on 9th and the red-crested pochard count rose to 11. Over the next few days overnight temperatures dropped sharply to -7C, a goldcrest on 10th was unusual and could have arrived as a result of the chillier conditions. The first smew of the year was found on 15th – a cracking drake, followed by a female the next day; they remained an intermittent presence during the rest of the month. Up to 6 goosander were now present as well as up to 180 shoveler, the latter always an attractive and entertaining duck with its mass communal feeding habits. Goldeneye peaked at 21 on 21st, up to siskin were frequenting the alders around the lake and a treecreeper was seen on 25th.

As is often the case **FEBRUARY** proved to be by far the coldest and bitterest month of the winter: snow started to fall on 4th blanketing the whole area and bringing with it seriously cold temperatures as the mercury plunged to -12C by 12th. On 1st smew reached a sudden peak of 5 birds (including 3 drakes) and rather unseasonably a blackcap was singing on 4th and 6 goosander were counted on 7th. Inevitably, water rails suddenly became apparent as they were frozen out of their usual haunts and were seen wandering around on the ice! Even more unusual was a woodcock found by several lucky observers looking out from the scrape hide – a very scarce bird at this site; up to 47 lapwing were counted on the islands. As the thaw set in at least 4 smew were still present and little owls were in evidence at Stocker's Farm and kestrels were checking out their nestbox by the kingfisher hide. Thankfully kingfishers remained very obvious after the cold snap, a species that can be very vulnerable to cold weather. The month tailed off with up to two smew (a pair) staying on site as well as up to 5 goosander.

MARCH proved to be the driest month of the year and, at times, it was surprisingly warm. A Cetti's warbler was frequently heard singing along the causeway and kestrels continued prospecting the nest box, also noteworthy were at least two bullfinches around the lake – a species that has traditionally been scarce at this site;

at least 45 little egrets were still roosting on 3rd. Five common buzzards were counted on 6th, along with two red kites – now a frequently seen resident here. A real mixture of winter and spring occurred on 19th when the first sand martin of the year appeared, along with a very tardy drake smew (it's last date), the same day an impressive total 8 common buzzards was observed. The next day 20 little egrets roosted and up to 5 chiffchaffs had arrived; the last goosander (a pair) were seen on 23rd, by which time spring migrants were really starting to trickle in with a sprinkling of blackcaps, swallows, sand martins and chiffchaffs, appropriately on the last day of the month a willow warbler was seen.

The first common terns arrived back on **APRIL** 2nd and immediately started prospecting potential nest sites and over the next few days willow warblers were very much in evidence and a few goldeneye remained all month. On the breeding front Cetti's warbler were still being heard frequently along the causeway and tree creeper and grey wagtail were also present. The best bird of the spring was an osprey which was watched drifting north over the reserve by two very fortunate observers on 12th, the same day that the first house martins were seen. Summer migrants continued to trickle in with the first reed warbler on 14th, cuckoo and wheatear on 20th, oystercatcher on 22nd, hobby on 23rd, sedge warbler on 23rd, by which time flocks of up to 70 swallows and house martins could be seen hawking over the lake. The first swift arrived on 24th and whitethroat on 27th. Sadly, April turned out to be one of the wettest months of the year with nearly 5 inches of rain and proved, merely, to be a foretaste of what was to come over the next three months.

Although **MAY** proved to be a slightly drier month there were still some heavy downpours at the beginning and end. Garden warbler and yellow wagtail were first seen on 6th and by 9th 50 swift could be seen hawking high over the reserve and a pair of greylag geese with four young (which had first appeared in April) were still around. A count of singing warblers on 16th came up with 8 garden, 7 blackcap, 5 sedge, 2 reed and 6 common whitethroat and one little egret was watched sitting on a nest. The next day a common sandpiper dropped in, a pair of mute swan had hatched four cygnets and Canada geese were appearing with their broods, although one pair that chose to nest on the new tern raft with raised edges were unable to get their goslings into the water and they consequently perished. At least 2 cuckoos were still looking for foster parents (probably mostly reed warbler around the reserve) and pleasingly by now at least three pairs of little egrets were now on nests with youngsters, although mostly very difficult to see from the footpaths.

Rather surprisingly a female goldeneye was seen on **JUNE** 2nd (and remained until 23rd); unfortunately the rain returned with a vengeance at the start with many heavy downpours, indeed it was the wettest month of the year. The highlight of the year was found on 10th in the shape of a little bittern, although it took a few days for the news to filter out, by which time a steady stream of admirers visited the lake to pay homage, it was last seen on 17th. Despite the poor weather the pair of Cetti's warblers successfully raised at least one young and the Stocker's Farm pair of little owls reared 2 youngsters.

JULY was not as quite as wet as the previous month, but it was still pretty dismal. Little egrets remained a constant presence around the lake and the four little owls were often on show at Stocker's Farm. A common sandpiper dropped in on 7th and two oystercatchers on 21st.

Finally as **AUGUST** began it proved to be a much drier month than the previous four, which was perfect timing considering that the London Olympics was already underway – and of course a substantial distraction to birdwatching! On 9th 9 little egrets were counted and another common sandpiper was seen, swifts took advantage of the more inclement weather to hawk over the lake before they departed for Africa and their wintering haunts. Greylag geese started to flock together, with 21 being counted on 11th. Great crested grebes were commonly seen with small stripey youngsters often clambering onto their parent's backs for protection – certainly a strategy that works here to prevent predation by the many pike present, which undoubtedly reduce the success rate of pochard and tufted duck, although red-eared terrapins probably take their toll as well.

Autumn starts during **SEPTEMBER** and certainly it is one of the quietest months of the year ornithologically on the reserve, it was also relatively dry. Greylag goose flocks reached 40 and chiffchaffs were frequently seen as they started to head south; small flocks of sand martins, swallows and house martin were hawking low over the lake. Ten siskin put in an early appearance on 29th and provided a taste of birds to come.

With the Olympics now safely completed the rain returned in **OCTOBER** with another 4 inches this month. Greylag geese totalled 60 on 1st and winter wildfowl started to reappear with both shoveler and wigeon starting to build up; a whinchat was a pleasant surprise on 14th. By 20th up to 30 meadow pipits were around Stocker's Farm and around the lake 50 siskins were counted, along with a single lesser redpoll and an impressive flock of 250 redwing, a count of 4 red kites was also noteworthy.

The first goldeneye was back by 25th and up to five were counted on 27th along with 7 egyptian geese.

NOVEMBER proved to be another wet month and another 5 inches fell. Nuthatches, nowadays a common sight around the lake, were very much in evidence especially around the feeders, goldeneye slowly increased and by the end of the month had reached 10, wigeon totals reached 22 and red kites continued to be a common sight and siskin numbers remained at around 50, along with at least 4 lesser redpoll; the first goosander was back by 11th.

The final month of the year, **DECEMBER**, proved to be another wet and mild month. Red-crested pochards reached a peak of 13 on 6th, 3 goosander were seen on 10th when 21 little egrets roosted. The highest total of the year for red-crested pochards was achieved on 14th when a remarkable 18 were counted. With Christmas over and the count down to the New Year closing in, the first smew (a redhead) arrived on 27th. This was followed by an, appropriately, all white snow goose on 29th (with the canada geese), although it seemed suspiciously tame and approachable it was nevertheless a remarkable sight, the same day also saw the arrival of a super drake smew, as well as the first (and only) lesser spotted woodpecker of the year. The last few days of the year were predictably damp, but goldeneye reached a peak of 17 on 30th and the drake smew lingered right up until 31st, when at least 500 jackdaws and 25 little egrets were roosting. The final rainfall tally for the year was an astonishing 900mm (3 feet!) – the wettest for many years, so let's hope from a breeding bird viewpoint that 2013 is not quite so wet.