

Birding highlights of 2016

by Ken Moore

With only one month to go, 2016 has been rather a quiet year for Berkshire, following a rather uneventful 2015. Let's see what we can come up with:

DECEMBER 2015: On the 1st of December, a notable murmuration of more than 5,000 STARLINGS over the reedbeds at the THATCHAM NATURE DISCOVERY CENTRE (think back 50 years when winter flocks on the Downs were counted in millions!). The 3rd had a FIRECREST feeding with a Goldcrest in a Twyford garden, with another the same day at Lavells Lake. On the 6th a drake FERRUGINOUS DUCK on Sandford Lake at Dinton and then on the 7th a red-head SMEW at Searles Farm Lane, followed on the 8th by the now annual drake RING-NECKED DUCK at Bray GP. Cow Down on the 9th had 100 plus CORN BUNTING, 12 GOLDEN PLOVER, a MERLIN and a HEN HARRIER. On the 13th a LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER flew across Padworth Lane GP and a SHORT-EARED OWL was at Westley Mill, Twyford. The highlight of the month was perhaps the BLACK-THROATED DIVER at QMR on the 20th, followed by a CATTLE EGRET seen, briefly, at Spencers Wood on the 21st. On Boxing Day CASPIAN GULL and BONAPARTES GULL were reported at Lower Farm GP, no doubt an interesting discussion for the Berkshire Record Committee should any descriptions be received. On the same day, a BITTERN was at Lavells Lake, Dinton Pastures. Finally, up to 1000 GOLDEN PLOVER around Thames Valley Park- seen from Lavell's Lake.

JANUARY 2016: The first day of JANUARY had the possibly returning drake SMEW of the past two winters at Moor Green Lakes, then a single BRENT GOOSE at Lower Farm GP the following day. On the 4th, 27 GOOSANDER were at Grove Lake, Moor Green Lakes, on the 5th, a COMMON SCOTER at QMR and an ill KITTIWAKE there five days later on the 10th. The 15th January - quite an interesting day - 16 COMMON CROSSBILL seen in Swinley Forest, a single HAWFINCH 'scoped from the track up from Combe Church and a 1st winter RING OUZEL was skulking beside the Ridgeway at Bury Down. On the 21st, the Grove Lake GOOSANDERS were up to 54. On the 28th a first-winter GLAUCOUS GULL was at Knowl Hill, 2 JACK SNIPES were found at a private site in the Kennet Valley and a group of 10 RAVEN at Combe. Then on the 30th, the afternoon was enlivened at Lower Farm GP by the arrival of 14 PINTAIL and at QMR by a GREAT NORTHERN DIVER.

FEBRUARY: The first returning OYSTERCATCHERS arrived on the 3rd visiting both Hosehill and Main Pit, Theale. The following day, a SHORT-EARED OWL was seen hunting over Larks Hill. The first-winter RING OUZEL was still on the Ridgeway on the 14th - there have not been many wintering RING OUZELS in Berkshire over the years. A FIRECREST was first seen high up in the Willows opposite the Main Entrance to Padworth Lane GP on the 25th February and stayed in the area until 14th March at least.

MARCH: On the 5th a CURLEW could be viewed from the swing-bridge at Bottom Lane Floods, then on the 15th, 5 REDSHANK were at Padworth Lane GP. A single RUFF at Fobney Meadows on 19th March with a pair of GARGANEY. On the same day, a male MARSH HARRIER flew east over Woolhampton GP and two ROCK PIPITS were at QMR. A KITTIWAKE was briefly on the shoreline at Hosehill on March 29th, also a drake COMMON SCOTER on Theale Main Pit the same day whilst the following day a BLACK-TAILED GODWIT was at Hosehill and two WHEATEAR at Burnthouse Lane. At least 90 GOLDEN PLOVER were at Greenham Common on the 31st, a single WHITE WAGTAIL the same day at QMR and 27 CROSSBILL at Crowthorne Wood.

APRIL: The first Berkshire Yellow Wagtail of the year, naturally a male, and a WATER PIPIT at Burnthouse Lane GP on the 6th, and a male COMMON REDSTART at Combe Gibbet. Two pairs of GARGANEY were recorded together at the beginning of the month at Fobney, with one staying on to the end of April. On the 13th, two SANDWICH TERNS were at QMR and on the same day a

SLAVONIAN GREBE coming into summer plumage was at Woolhampton GPs. Another SLAVONIAN GREBE was at Main Pit, Theale on the 16th. On the 23rd, a SHORT-EARED OWL in the Fireplane area at Greenham Common with 3 RING OUZEL, a WHINCHAT and two WHEATEAR. On the same day, a GREAT WHITE EGRET was seen flying over Lower Farm GP.

MAY: GREENSHANKS arrived on the 5th May - two at Lea Farm and one each at New Workings, Moor Green Lakes and Hosehill Lake. Two BLACK TERNS were at Fobney Island on the same day. Three days later (8th May), possibly the same two BLACK TERNS were at Main Pit, Theale. A WOOD SANDPIPER was at New Workings, Moor Green on the 6th, with at least six GREENSHANK. On the 10th, 2 TURNSTONE, 4 DUNLIN, 2 SANDERLING, a GREY PLOVER, a COMMON SANDPIPER and finally 3 RINGED PLOVER were at the New Workings too. On the next day, at the New Workings were 2 GREY PLOVER, a WHIMBREL and a REDSHANK. At Theale Main Pit, also on the 11th, there were two BLACK-NECKED GREBES, a BLACK TERN and six ARCTIC TERNS. Twenty HOBBIES were around the Rowney Predator Lake at Woolhampton GPs on the 15th. A STONE CURLEW was located by the Fireplane at Greenham Common on the 20th. Then at QMR on the 21st May there were 2 WHIMBREL, 5 SANDERLING and 4 RINGED PLOVER. On the 23rd at Main Pit, Theale were a total 9 OYSTERCATCHERS including four adult-sized juveniles.

JUNE: On the 3rd a female MARSH HARRIER was hunting over East Marsh, Dorney Wetlands and a HONEY BUZZARD was photographed over Windsor Great Park on the 5th. There was a notably high count of MUTE SWAN at Windsor Promenade on the 8th June: a total of 251. On the 11th a pair of GARGANEY arrived at Lower Farm GP - starting to moult into eclipse.

JULY: On the 23rd July, there was an adult BLACK-TAILED GODWIT on Hosehill, seven more on the flood at Eton Wick on 25th and on the 27th another five at BURNTHOUSE LANE.

AUGUST: The summering COMMON REDSTART at Lower Farm was present until at least 9th August, with a GREAT WHITE EGRET arriving on the 10th and staying for quite a while. On 15th another HONEY BUZZARD was seen well and notes and photos taken - at New Workings, Moor Green Lakes. A juvenile GARGANEY arrived at Hosehill on the 20th and stayed until the 11th September at least. Yet another HONEY BUZZARD at Moor Green Lakes was reported on the 27th.

SEPTEMBER: A total of 25 ARCTIC TERNS were at QMR on the 5th, mostly juveniles. The New Workings at Moor Green had a total of three LITTLE STINTS on the 6th. On the 8th, alternating between Main Pit, Theale and Moatlands, four SANDWICH TERNS. On the 10th there was a KNOT at QMR and perhaps the bird of the year - a LEACHES PETREL. Moor Green Lakes did not want to be left out - held a CURLEW SANDPIPER the following day. Then it was back to QMR for the rest of the month - two AVOCET very briefly on the 14th, followed by an immature SABINES GULL on the 20th and finally for the month, on the 29th, a PECTORAL SANDPIPER.

OCTOBER: A YELLOW-BROWED WARBLER was trapped and ringed at Moor Green Lakes on the 9th and a ringtail HEN HARRIER was seen over Combe Gibbet the same day. A late OSPREY drifted over Lavells Lake, Dinton on the 14th, eight GOOSANDER flew into Lower Farm GP, staying for just three minutes on the 20th. On the 26th GREAT GREY SHRIKES arrived at both Wishmoor Bottom and Cow Down. On the last day of October seven WATER RAILS were counted at Fobney Meadows.

NOVEMBER: In Swinley Forest, between the Upper and Lower Star Posts, on the 8th were 14 CROSSBILL. On the 9th three COMMON SCOTER were on Main Pit, Theale. Returning BITTERNs were first seen at Dinton Pastures on the 18th. On the 23rd a possible drake SCAUP was reported from Moatlands GP, seen again on the 24th - but was it a genuine SCAUP, or a hybrid? That debate continues..... However, on the 24th it was in close company with a juvenile SCAUP. On the 25th a female/immature FERRUGINOUS DUCK was reported from Moatlands and on the next day, the first winter period male FERRUGINOUS DUCK returned to Dinton Pastures.