

Birding Highlights of the last 12 months

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December 2013 was a quiet month for birds. An immature Iceland Gull at QMR and a single WAXWING in the Vicar of BRAY's garden - the only record for the last 12 months. And we had a very soggy end to 2013, a year that saw the Berkshire list increase by two splendid species: Pallas's Warbler and Bonapartes Gull. What would 2014 bring?

January 2014, in the soggy beginning of the New Year the flooded meadows between Theale and Reading held a record numbers of Little Egret – 27 counted on the 19th near Burghfield Bridge. A single BLACK-NECKED GREBE was present for a day at THEALE MAIN PIT on the 7th. Ringtail HEN HARRIERS were seen near BURY DOWN and at JEALOTTS HILL. An adult RING-BILLED GULL at QMR on the 20th was the best gull of the month, followed by two LITTLE GULLS and four KITTIWAKES around the county. A good roost count of 320 to 400 PIED WAGTAILS in CENTRAL READING was a regular feature during the month. At SOUTH HILL PARK on the 8th January, a WATER RAIL was seen to grab a drinking GOLDFINCH, quickly drown it and then start to peck and pull at it. And one lucky observer had two calling WHOOPER SWANS flying over whilst waiting at a bus stop in WINKFIELD.

At last, some better weather in **FEBRUARY**. The first OYSTERCATCHERS of the year arrived at THEALE MAIN PIT on the 3rd and on the 22nd, 5 RINGED PLOVERS flew into the old Aggregate area at LOWER FARM. Two were metal ringed, one being a colour ringed bird from a Hampshire Coastal project. A drake SCAUP was seen at MOOR GREEN LAKES, staying only a few days from the 20th. On the 27th, at PADWORTH LANE, a GREAT WHITE EGRET was seen flying over. During January and February, one lucky observer had up to 63 LESSER REDPOLLS in her BRACKNELL garden, plus regular visits of a MEALY REDPOLL.

March brought the first LITTLE RINGED PLOVER of the year on the 16th at PADWORTH LANE FLOODS, an average date of arrival. Another drake SCAUP arrived at LOWER FARM on the 19th for a few days and 2 RED-BREASTED MERGANSERS briefly visited QMR on the 24th. There were 94 BRAMBLING in SWINLEY Forest on the 23rd March and a mobile flock of 45 CROSSBILLS there on the 27th. The first SANDWICH TERN arrived on the 25th March at QMR, interestingly the same date as the two previous years. At least 8 MEALY REDPOLL at ASCOT HEATH, of which 7 had been ringed, was the month's count. On the 26th again at QMR, a BLACK REDSTART.

In **April** there was a succession of MARSH HARRIERS, a total of 6 individuals, mostly at QMR. A single BLACK-TAILED GODWIT was at HORTON GP on 15th with a small group of LAPWING. Two BAR-TAILED GODWITS visited DINTON PASTURES and QMR on the 21st, and at EVERSLEY a group of 28 flew over the NEW WORKINGS into Hampshire. There were remarkable numbers of WHITE WAGTAILS during April, at least 50 birds at 8 different sites.

Three GARGANEY appeared towards the end of the month - a pair at BURNTHOUSE LANE and a single drake at QMR. A dozen WHIMBREL flew through QMR; 8 GREENSHANK visited BURNTHOUSE LANE. A single BLACK TERN at BLACK SWAN LAKE, DINTON PASTURES was the only spring record of this species. A single TURTLE DOVE seen at FOLIEJON PARK on the 29th was the first of the few seen this year. Only 5 Grasshopper Warblers were recorded during the month, hopefully under-recorded. And a candidate for BIRD OF THE YEAR arrived near to SPENCERS WOOD on the 24th - a WHITE STORK - which stayed that day and re-appeared a week later for a longer stay.

May is one of the best bird-watching months of the year and May 2014 did not disappoint. Two brief visits both on the 6th, a SPOONBILL over COCKMARSH and a female RED-FOOTED FALCON over SUMMERLEAZE GRAVEL PIT. A GREY PLOVER was at LEA FARM on the 10th, two AVOCETS visited QMR on the 14th and a WOOD SANDPIPER at MOOR GREEN LAKES. SANDERLING remained regular visitors to QMR, but they also visited the floods on the DOWNS on the Berkshire/Oxfordshire border, along with other waders and gulls. A summer-plumaged SPOTTED REDSHANK arrived at BURNTHOUSE LANE on the 16th. QMR had a brief KITTIWAKE on the 18th and 3 more the next day. The SECOND BIRD OF THE YEAR was at GREEN PARK, READING on the 22nd May - a GREAT REED WARBLER - only a one day bird, but how superb it was. A total of 14 HOBBIES over HORTON GP on the 31st May was the highest count this year. And another single TURTLE DOVE, this time a garden in WINNERSH.

June was a quieter month. QMR had a good run though - 3 adult KITTIWAKE on the 6th, a single SANDWICH TERN on the 8th and a drake COMMON SCOTER on the 14th. A farmer at ENBORNE photographed a WHITE STORK during the month. A good month for TURTLE DOVE these days, with 3 separate sightings, one of which stayed at PADWORTH LANE for nearly a week. *Turtle Dove is now a rare bird and if anyone has been lucky enough to see evidence of breeding, please send in the record. Turtle Dove along with Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are now on the national Rare Birds Breeding Panel's reporting list.*

July mustered a BLACK-NECKED GREBE at QMR, a group of 5 GARGANEY at ETON WICK, a drake COMMON SCOTER at MOATLANDS GP at Theale, and a SPOTTED CRAKE was found and photographed with a WATER RAIL at SLOUGH SEWAGE FARM. 8 BLACK-TAILED GODWITS were recorded at 3 sites, a WOOD SANDPIPER at Slough Sewage Farm and TURNSTONE at QMR. At QMR there was an amazing count of at least 28 COMMON SANDPIPER.

August began with 7 COMMON SCOTER at QMR during early morning of the 6th, whilst the Downs had the first reported QUAIL of the year the following day. 4 BLACK TERNS were at THEALE MAIN on the 8th and 4 more at QMR on the 26th. Another BLACK NECKED GREBE, this time at THEALE MAIN on the 17th. A LITTLE STINT arrived at ETON WICK for a four day stay. On the 25th August, 2 dark morph ARCTIC SKUAS spent the early morning at QMR. Two HONEY BUZZARDS were seen, one on 29th near WINTER HILL and another on 31st over ETON WICK. Two MARSH HARRIERS were seen, one over BURY DOWN, the other over the NEW WORKINGS at MOORGREEN LAKES, and three Ospreys.

September had three more OSPREYS and 2 more MARSH HARRIERS. A SANDERLING flew around the NEW WORKINGS, MOORGREEN on the 14th, a LITTLE STINT was at QMR and a CURLEW SANDPIPER and 2 Ruff at ETON WICK. A WRYNECK was at QMR on the 14th and another at GREAT SHEFFORD was trapped and ringed on the same day. The 17th September saw the first report of the GREAT WHITE EGRET at LOWER FARM, which was still present in mid-November. On the 21st a juvenile SABINE'S GULL spent 30 minutes at QMR another great bird for Berkshire. An immature GARGANEY was at HOSEHILL for a week, whilst 9 juvenile COMMON SCOTER were at QMR on the 22nd. The 18th September saw a juvenile CUCKOO fly through CROOKHAM COMMON. It was a good autumn for WHINCHAT with groups of six or seven being reported in different places.

October QMR seemed the place to be this year, rather than the Isles of Scilly (where many of the Berkshire Birders were). QMR had PURPLE SANDPIPER, GREY PHALAROPE, 2 BONXIES and LITTLE STINT, supported by RUFF, SANDERLING, KITTIWAKE and a dark-bellied BRENT GOOSE. The first GREAT NORTHERN DIVER of the second winter period arrived at THEALE MAIN. A GREAT GREY SHRIKE on the Downs from the 28th looks to be wintering there, a photogenic MARSH HARRIER was at LOWER FARM. Two YELLOW-BROWED WARBLERS were found: 1 at HUNGERFORD, trapped, ringed and photographed and another at WHITEKNIGHTS PARK, seen well by many. Perhaps the best bird was a LESSER SCAUP drake at WRAYSBURY from the 29th.

And so we move on to this month- **November**. We seem to have returned to a SOGGY weather pattern, but none the less some interesting birds. The GREAT WHITE EGRET and GREAT GREY SHRIKE are still to be seen, another GREAT NORTHERN DIVER arrived at THEALE MAIN on the 3rd and is still there and another was seen, briefly at QMR. 6 MERLINS have been claimed so far this month, another headache for the BRC. A SHORT-EARED OWL flew over LEA FARM on the 9th and one of the more spectacular sights was the flock of 920 GOLDEN PLOVER at REMENHAM HILL on the 7th.