

## The Birds

.Well the first newsletter of 2010 is going to be a busy one!!!

The cold weather, snow and ice kick started a sensational cold weather movement on/over the patch. Several birders commented on how they've "never seen anything like this ever before!". It really was like autumn all over again! The birds affected most obviously were **Redwings** and **Fieldfares**, and as well as the several thousand of each that found refuge in gardens and other unorthodox places within the patch, tens of thousands of each were seen flying over west, mostly between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, in search of food. So where did they all come from? Well it's most likely that all these birds were already in the UK for the winter, it is just the prolonged cold spell made feeding difficult and they just HAD to move south to find more food sources! **Meadow Pipits**, **Skylarks** and **Lapwings** were also greatly affected. Several thousand **Skylarks** moved west over the patch like the thrushes, large flocks of **Lapwings** could be seen migrating south down the valley and straight out to sea and **Meadow Pipits**...well we had one trying to find food on our patio - bizarre!!

The freezing of many inland water bodies ensured it was an excellent period for wildfowl, but for starters the **Bewick's** and **Whooper Swan** continued to entertain just north of Axmouth. A female (redhead) **Smew** off Seaton Hole for little more than twenty minutes on 6<sup>th</sup> was the rarest duck seen, with only two previous records for the patch. It's a shame it flew off before many birders could get to see it. Also on the sea, an **Eider**, a single **Velvet Scoter**, and on 10<sup>th</sup> 17 **Pochard**, a **Tufted Duck** and a **Goldeneye** were seen. The estuary has given a superb drake **Goldeneye** which has been present from 7<sup>th</sup>, a pair of **Goosander** seen on 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, three **Pochard** on 8<sup>th</sup> up to 14 **Tufted Duck**, a female **Pintail** on 14<sup>th</sup> and a peak count of 32 **Gadwall** also on 14<sup>th</sup>. **Wigeon** numbers have exploded with this weather, with nearly 2,000 on Bridge Marsh on 13<sup>th</sup>. To finish the wildfowl off, the family party of **Brent Geese** are still present, though on 1<sup>st</sup> there was a total of eight **Brents** on the river.



Another major Axe rarity was discovered late in the day on 7<sup>th</sup> at Blackhole Marsh - a **Bittern**. There have been previous records of this species in the valley, but only from the local shooting fraternity, never has a true birder seen one here, until now! It is still present at time of writing, but - true to form - can be VERY hard to find! The 9<sup>th</sup> was the day it gave its best showing, when it sat out in a field and perched up in a nearby hedge, along the Colyford Road, for almost an hour. Thanks must go to Alan for telling us about his excellent find as promptly as he did.

The star waders of the period have been **Ruff**. On 7<sup>th</sup>, four were found on Colyford Marsh. This increased to seven by 10<sup>th</sup>, nine on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14 on 13<sup>th</sup>. **Dunlin** numbers peaked at 28 on 6<sup>th</sup> and a **Bar-tailed Godwit** was a new arrival on 10<sup>th</sup>. **Common Snipe** during the cold spell were literally everywhere in the valley, sitting out in full view trying to find food. Four **Jack Snipe** were noted, singles at Colyford Marsh (4<sup>th</sup>), Blackhole Marsh (8<sup>th</sup>), a garden in Seaton (9<sup>th</sup>) and Whitford (11<sup>th</sup>) Another bird affected by the weather were **Woodcock**, with several seen in unusual places, including many seen near the estuary - for example at least ten were in the area of Blackhole/Colyford Marsh on the morning of 8<sup>th</sup>. **Golden Plover** was a



bird we were expecting more of, though they were seen almost daily during the cold snap. The biggest flock was of 21 birds over Colyford on 4<sup>th</sup>, and the weirdest sight was one feeding on the grass of Jubilee Gardens in Beer for a few days!

Before the snow and ice set in, great news was had with the discovery of nine **Woodlark** in fields between Axmouth and Rousdon, this is the third winter in a row a flock of these birds have been seen here. The number though is a little worrying, unless there is another flock to find, the flock size in the three winters has gone from 22, to 17, to this year's nine. At least five **Black Redstarts** were seen on patch during this period, and a nice garden surprise for me on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> was a fine male **Brambling**.

Lastly, a surprise sighting at 9am on 10<sup>th</sup> was a splendid **Red Kite** which flew west over Seaton Bay before circling over Beer Head and continuing on west.



Photos: **Smew** - Gavin Haig; **Goldeneye** - Steve Waite; **Bittern** - Phil Abbott; **Golden Plover** - Karen Woolley, **Brambling** - Steve Waite.

Jean Kreiseler writes “I visited several times over the Christmas and New Year period. The weather changed from wet to cold and crisp. The fallen leaves have been wet and soggy, but the frost has made them crisp and crunchy – heralding our progress along the paths. On my way across the field one day **3 Roe Deer** females were in the copse outside the Woods. Another day a **Green Woodpecker** was feeding in the field and a large flock of **Redwings** and **Fieldfares** were flying over the hill. More recently, late on a snowy afternoon, as I reached the West end of the Woods I disturbed a huge flock of these birds. It was an extraordinary sight, A rough estimate was something in the region of several hundred, flying hither and thither through the trees and calling. Were they planning to roost there? A group of three spindly trees had fallen across the path up to my seat. Dave Palmer, our Countryside Ranger, will be cutting them clear of the path and leaving them to establish colonies of wild life and over time fungi will help the rotting down. The **Honeysuckle** shoots, a favourite of the **Roe Deer**, are well advanced, and there is still quite a lot of green from the **Ferns** in the undergrowth. Regular birds seen and heard include **5 Blackbirds**, **3 Mistle** and **2 Song Thrushes**, the **Buzzard**, all the **Corvids** including **Ravens, Jay, Robins, Blue** and **Great Tits**, **10 Long -Tailed Tits, Wrens, Nuthatch**, and **Kestrel**. On my late afternoon visit two **Tawny Owls** were calling from one end of the Woods to the other, their calls echoing in the valley.”

And Peter Vernon caught this unusual Blue Tit with a crossed beak feeding in is garden.



### The Trivia



The main excitement for garden watchers in the first cold two weeks of the year has been the invasion of thrushes, We have been sent many pictures, and it has been difficult to decide which ones to include. Here are a couple – a Mistle Thrush by Peter Vernon, and a Fieldfare by Malcolm Randle.



Maggie Dilley sends news from the east of our region (Morcombelake, with view towards Golden Cap).....

“Yesterday and today in the garden we have **2 Mistle Thrushes**, a mixed flock of **Redwing** and **Fieldfare**, at least 6 of each, maybe more. The **Thrushes** really like apples on a spike and are chasing the **Blackbirds** away very fiercely.

Bernice Mankelow writes “You usually correspond with my husband, John, but as I am now retired and have more daylight hours than him I saw the birds and I claim the scoop! Well scoop for me that is. I have never seen these birds before in my whole life, even if thousands pass overhead. I am now 65 and I was really excited by the sighting of a pair of unknown birds, which turned out to be **Fieldfares**, in amongst my gang of usual **Blackbirds** and **2 Thrushes** who gratefully gobble up and quarrel over the RSPB blackbird mix and 1/2 apples I put down for them daily. I am sure it is only due to the harsh conditions currently but the 2 grew to 4 by the end of the day. They fed almost non stop and the sight drew me back to the window all day. They were the last to leave feeding until well past dusk.”

Liz Knowles asks “Has anyone seen any non native owls blown in from Europe, or any Waxwings?” Please let me know if you have.

### Water Rail

Sam Carlisle, aged nearly 14, says “First, I would like to thank you for the newsletters you have been sending me. We thought you may be interested to know that we have been having a regular visitor to our small stream. It is a **Water Rail!** I have never seen one before in my life and wondered if it was anything to look in to. It took some identifying!” Sam, an enthusiastic young birder, lives in Colyford, and looks out over Colyford Common.

### Black Hole Marsh



Fraser Rush took not only this atmospheric photo of Black Hole Marsh in the snow, but was lucky enough to snap an Otter there – all this and the Bittern too!

We would like to thank all of you who sent us Christmas and New Year greetings – too many to answer individually. It is very nice to know that our efforts are appreciated.

### Diary Dates

Monday 18 <sup>th</sup> January	7.30 p.m.	“Dormice” Illustrated talk by Pat Morris. Kilmington Village Hall. AVDCS event with DWT. All welcome. Donations requested.
Thursday 28 <sup>th</sup> January	10.00 a.m.	Meet the Birds, Seaton Marshes <u>These are on Thursdays now.</u>
Thursday 28 <sup>th</sup> January	10.00 a.m.	Meet the Birds, Colyford Common. <u>These are on Thursdays now.</u>

May I commend the East Devon Countryside Service’s new Events Guide for 2010? There is a very full calendar of events, with something for everyone. Phone 01395 517557

For more information, ring EDDC on 01395 517557.

This twice-monthly email newsletter is freely available to anyone who would like it, as is a periodic one about the activities of the East Devon Local Group of the Devon Wildlife Trust. Just send me an email with Axe Estuary Birds and/or East Devon DWT in the subject line. Also, for those without a computer, I will send a copy by post if you would like to send me some stamps.

Thanks to those who keep us informed – please continue to tell us of any unusual, interesting or amusing sightings, and what is about locally, and send any photos you would like to share.

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