



# Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club

Registered Charity No. 517641

**BIRD NOTES No. 7**

## JANUARY 2012 - A BIRDING TALE IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Having lost my Dad just before Christmas I spent most of the holiday period rushing around trying to organise the funeral etc., for the 30<sup>th</sup> December and as the New Year arrived the thought of going back to work on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan just didn't appeal. I've always loved winter birding in Northumberland and in the past have always tried for a decent January list, normally spurred on from 'Bird Race' attempts. My days in the field were limited by work commitments and birding was often restricted to weekends, however despite this my previous best total for the month of January was 127- this year I planned to exceed this and see how far I could go.

I read a report from 2002 by Steve Holliday about his county year list which made mention of Andy McLevy having seen 145 species in the County during January and mused that would be a good target to aim at. I thought I would have a chance to get off to a good start as there were some good rarities and scarcities available in the New Year and also unprecedented numbers of *Geese* wintering in the county. I still had to work a 3 day week but starting at 10am and finishing for 2pm meant birding could be fitted in before and after work; also during the month I never missed an NUFC home or away game so was always hoping nothing would turn up on these days (more on this later).

**1<sup>st</sup> January 2012** - A new birding year and thus up early with a visit to Newbiggin and immediately watching the long staying 1<sup>st</sup> winter male **Desert Wheatear**, a great start and this site also added **Mediterranean Gull**, **Purple Sandpiper**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Short-eared Owl** and **Red-breasted Merganser**.



A visit to nearby Druridge Bay added **Stonechat**, **Little Grebe**, **Whooper Swan**, **Bean Goose** and **White-fronted Goose**, keeping in line with the BOU I didn't 'Split' these two geese into their respective races and after a very leisurely day I ended with **58** species

**2<sup>nd</sup> January** - A trip to the north of the county starting at Fenham Le Moor saw me witness an amazing count of 200+ **Yellowhammer** in the hedgerows on the way down to the hide and lots of **Brent Goose** (no split either), **Pintail** and **Grey Plover** were out on the flats. Stag Rocks added **Red-throated Diver**, **Velvet Scoter**, **Slavonian Grebe** and a handful of **Long-tailed Duck**. Eventually head-

ing back down to North Tyneside a visit to Marden Quarry give me the my second long staying rarity - **Lesser Scaup** and a nice pair of **Goosander**.

A late visit to Prestwick Carr saw me 'dip' the next good bird on offer- **Great Grey Shrike** however today's birds had increased my total to **82**.

**4<sup>th</sup> January** - A return afternoon visit to Prestwick Carr saw me add the targeted **Great Grey Shrike** and a nice pair of **Willow Tit** which are quite regular at this site. From now on most days were planned around a target species, a great help in this planning and 'targeted' birding was the availability of various excellent local 'birding blogs', something that Andy McLevy wouldn't have had to aid him in 2002, the Birdnews service I get on my mobile phone to alert me to what was turning up in the county, and various snippets of information from my birding mates.

**5<sup>th</sup> January** - Information picked up off Phil Allott's blog, resulted in a morning visit to the Horton Burn near the Old Fire Station Cramlington, which gave me **Kingfisher** and a drive down nearby Blyth Cemetery added 16 **Snow Bunting**, **Grey Partridge** and **Reed Bunting** in the adjacent stubble. Blyth harbour gave me **Meadow Pipit**, which is never that easy in January and a more expected **Guillemot**

**6<sup>th</sup> January** - A day in the Druridge Bay area proved worthwhile and productive with East Chevington giving up redhead **Smew** and **Green-winged Teal** within 50 yards of each other on the south pool, and a female **Scaup** on North Pool. The Country Park yielded **Lesser Redpoll**, **Goldcrest** and **Mistle Thrush**. A walk along the dunes at Cresswell to Hemscoth Hill added a flock of **Twite** showing down to about 20ft, which was a nice end to the day and brought my total to **100**

**7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> January** - Football and work commitments slowed me down, but I still managed to add a few common birds and also 2 **Bewick's Swan** at East Chevington which are few and far between in the county of late, 2 **Green Sandpiper** at the traditional Whittle Dene and my first **Fieldfare** and **Red-wing** at Stamfordham, both these species these had been in short supply on the coast this winter - up to **109**



**12<sup>th</sup> January** - Today I visited Whittle Dene South Reservoir which I knew from bird race days was a reliable wintering site for **Great Crested Grebe** and sure enough my hunch paid off with a single bird again this species is never easy in January so this pleased me. This was followed by a trip back towards the coast and a first dedicated visit to woodland habitat to mop up some of the easier birds including **Nuthatch** and **Treecreeper**. The Horton Burn Cramlington gave up **Grey Wagtail** and I located 13 **Barnacle Goose** at Maidens Hall Lake and then in response to my phone alert I gained a great Northumberland winter record of a **Spotted Redshank** at Warkworth Gut/Old Waters. I was alerted to the Spotted Redshank whilst sitting at Amble Harbour dipping the reported Iceland Gull so this proved a good bonus bird taking my total to **116**.

**13<sup>th</sup> January** - Another full day out started well with **Little Owl** at a traditional site near Dinnington, thanks to a tip off from Graeme Bowman, **Crossbill** at Thrunton Woods and **Dipper** at North Middleton Ford all on route to the Harthope Valley. The Valley was very quiet, the -2c temperature made birding hard work and cold! but **Red Grouse** and 6 **Red-legged Partridge** were welcome. A couple of hoped for target birds were missed but I would return here later in month, a quick detour over to Budle Bay added the wintering **Greenshank**, and brought my total to **122**.

**14<sup>th</sup> January** - Another visit to the wonderful Holy Island and a walk around to Beal Sluice failed to produce the reported Little Egret, the harbour proved better with **Red-necked Grebe** close inshore. Chare Ends had 6 **Skylark** and the Snook gave the hoped for **Merlin** but more surprising a wintering **Chiffchaff** feeding in an isolated bush. Happy with this my luck held out with the **Little Egret** not 10 metres off the Causeway on the way back off the island. Another visit to Stag Rocks proved unrewarding. **127**

**15<sup>th</sup> January** - A home match for the Toon but not before I squeezed in **Fulmar** at Hartley Cliffs.



**17<sup>th</sup> January** - A late afternoon to dusk visit to East Chevington saw the North Pool near frozen solid, a **Water Rail** picking about in the open was pleasing as I thought this could be a tricky bird to see, little did I know but by the end of January I would see or hear 8 of them. Information from Trevor Blake had me staked out at an undisclosed site in the south east of the county watching a ring-tailed **Hen Harrier** come into roost and 2 excellent **Woodcock** flying around my head at dusk. **131**

**18<sup>th</sup> January** - Reacting to pager information and a **Black Redstart** at Newbiggin Lifeboat Station was duly added to my list, and courtesy of Dee McKeown the adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was observed on its usual Southfield Green roundabout, scored at last after five visits here this month!

**19<sup>th</sup> January** - A business appointment in Hexham, but time for an early morning visit to Cocker Shield Hexhamshire, where 2 **Black Grouse** strutted their stuff. Late that night a trip out for the Owls added **Tawny Owl** and **Barn Owl** but not the hoped for Long Eared. **136**

**20<sup>th</sup> January** - More reading of the 'Birding Blogs' and an Alan Jack report of **Brambling**, resulted in a detour to Harwood Village on my way to Kielder and sure enough I saw my target bird coming to the same bird table as reported by Alan, thank goodness for the internet! Heading onto Kielder, the river was running high at Ridley Stokoe so no Mandarin Duck, Bakethin Viewpoint and a regular site for **Green Woodpecker** proved more reliable. I undertook a slow drive back along the river but frustratingly still no Mandarin's, so back again to Ridley Stokoe and this time out of the car, my luck was in as I found a quite pool away from the main river flow complete with a group of 21 **Mandarin Duck**!

**21<sup>st</sup> January** - A review of target birds made me realise that an easy bird was missing from my list, but I decided to keep this one in the bank for later and today reacted to Pager information of a **Glaucous Gull** and **Iceland Gull** at Newburn Haugh, an early morning visit but no sign of either bird. Despite proving to be a good month for the species **Iceland Gull** was proving difficult with three visits to Amble Harbour and four visits to North Shields Fish Quay and the 'Black Middens' proving fruitless. On my visit today as I was sitting in the car with no clear plan, the phone alerted me of yet another reported **Iceland Gull**, off to the Fish Quay again and this time yes, a **White-winged Gull** sat on the shed roof. Telescope up and the presumed **Iceland** was actually a **Glaucous Gull**, and then the **Iceland Gull** showed up 10 mins later followed by a single **Kittiwake** - result. With a total of **142** and my easy one in the bank to add my target of 145 now a distinct possibility this was getting exciting.

**22<sup>nd</sup> January** - Planned a big day out with my good friend Chris Knox, who had kept hush about my quest and had been in regular contact about what was available and where. First stop at the Rocket Pools Holy Island and I located 2 **Black-tailed Godwit**, these had been missed on previous visits due to the pools being frozen so a good start. A visit to Stag Rocks was a major success, Chris picking up an early **Gannet** flying north, with another bird south later on. I picked up a **Diver** sp snorkelling in what was a rough sea but managed to get Chris onto it and as it raised its head we both called **Great Northern Diver!** a species we had both hoped for today, then Chris picked up another **Diver** close by that interested him, and after what seemed an eternity for the bird to show itself in the choppy conditions a quick check of the main features added **Black Throated Diver**. The day wasn't finished though, whilst driving back down to the Druridge bay area, the Pager alerted us to a **White Stork** at East Chevington, foot on the pedal we soon arrived only to be told the bird had flown south towards Ellington. We drove around the Cresswell and Warkworth Lane area with no luck relocating the bird. We decided to stop off in Amble and get some lunch and whilst devouring a steamy bag of chips and wondering where next to try Chris received a call from Tim Cleaves who told us the **Stork** had been re-found to the west of Cresswell Pond, chips forgotten a quick drive down and into the hide, however the bird had frustratingly walked out of sight. Half an hour later a decision to walk back up the track and through the farm paid off when Chris spotted the bird in a field to the west. **White Stork** in the bag, the bird was unringed so hopefully not an escapee. Great day out and thanks to Tim Cleaves for the phone call and Chris Knox for his good company. Total **147** and my target was now upped to 150. The next few days failed to add anything new, but allowed me to plan the remainder of the week to go for a few target birds.

**26<sup>th</sup> January** - A plan had been hatched to try for **Red Kite**, and despite numerous visits out to the Wylam, Prudhoe and Stocksfield areas I had failed to see the bird, a look at the map of the West of Newcastle gave me an idea and today saw me standing in a field in Lemington, and my idea paid off, indeed as soon as my scope was up I picked up 2 **Red Kite** flying south of the River Tyne over the Blaydon area, as my feet were firmly in Northumberland it counted.



Steve Holliday in his 2002 report counted Spotted Sandpiper from the Northside of Derwent Reservoir, so why not? I had been spending a lot of late afternoons at the Gosforth Park reserve in the hope of seeing the reported Bittern without any luck, today was no different but a **Jack Snipe** sat out in the open of a muddy stretch was a real bonus, it sat no more than 15ft from me allowing fantastic views.

**27<sup>th</sup> January**, - During my previous visit to the Harthope Valley I had spoken to one of the locals about the chances of seeing Raven in the valley; his advice was to try the valley to the North of Cheviot as this in his opinion was a more reliable site. So came about my trip to the College Valley, and having being parked up for a matter of minutes, the distinct raucous call was heard and high on the hill a pair of **Raven** were displaying, their effortless flight and dives always a highlight and a joy to watch. The Raven is one of my favourite birds and the Poyser book by Derek Ratcliffe is a must read. More importantly it was my **150** species and left me on a high for the rest of the day. A trip over to Holy Island from here also finally allowed me to catch up with **Peregrine Falcon** which had been elusive all month but incredibly I saw 4 before month end!

**28<sup>th</sup> January** - Nothing added today whilst out at Budle Bay but frustratingly a Hooded Crow was reported here on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, an early finish to the day's birding because NUFC were playing in the F.A. Cup away to Brighton, whilst sitting in Shearers Bar in Newcastle my phone alert went off at 4.30pm reporting 2 Black Necked Grebe at East Hartford having been there since 12.30pm, a number of expletives followed and I began calling the Cramlington Lads for not getting the news out earlier my mood was not helped when the 'Toon' were knocked out of the cup 1-0.

**29<sup>th</sup> January** - Up early nursing an hangover after drowning my sorrows, it didn't help when I reached West Hartford to find it completely frozen solid and no sign or hope of Black-necked Grebe.. The day picked up though and on a 3<sup>rd</sup> visit to the Mitford area of Morpeth, finally **Marsh Tit** gave itself up. I finally bottled it early afternoon and went for my 'Bird held in the Bank having failed elsewhere, so' off to Big Waters and a nailed on **Tree Sparrow**. Another late afternoon /dusk visit to Gosforth park, my 6<sup>th</sup> time sitting in the hide, a chap there told me I had just missed the Bittern, typical, but less than 20 mins later the **Bittern** jumped out of a nearby reedbed into a shorter reed area and proceeded to stand there for a few minutes showing only the classic head and neck pose pointing skywards before slinking off into the deeper cover. I had spent 15 hours with often freezing toes trying for this bird and finally perseverance paid off. Delighted with this my day was made better when later that night reading the 'Bird Blogs' the reported Black-necked Grebes at West Hartford had been an error. A big apology to the Cramlington lads, I should never have doubted you. Total now **154**

**31<sup>st</sup> January** - The last 2 days were spent full time at work but a last minute phone call to Alan Tilmouth had me out at dark, and some accurate information received allowed me to connect at 11.45pm with **Long-eared Owl** at an undisclosed site. A big thanks to AT and a cracking way to end an unbelievable birding month in Northumberland and bringing my final January 2012 total to **155**

## **In Summary**

A big thanks to the following people, some who knew what I was doing and some who put information on their 'blogs', in your own way you all proved very helpful. Chris Knox, Alan Tilmouth, Tim Cleaves, Trevor Blake, Graeme Bowman, Phil Allott, Alan Jack, John Malloy, Dee McKeown and Steve Holliday who's report from 2002 stimulated my big month and a report I have long kept and read.

Will I use this for an attempt at a 'Big Year' in Northumberland...who knows so let's see what Spring Migrants visit us? All I can say is I loved every minute of it and I visited all points of the compass in our fabulous county, some areas I hadn't been to for a good few years. I especially enjoyed planning days in the field and especially when those plans paid dividends. I travelled over 2000 miles during the month, so now have shares in my fuel supplier and with this declaration I must say sorry to all the ecologists out there for all the emissions from my car and my big carbon footprint.

A big help was the weather in Northumberland during January, although there were some very cold spells, causing the ponds to freeze, we didn't have any significant snow falls to hamper my travels and I could readily access most areas I planned too.

Finally thanks to my Dad who first took me out to the countryside and coast when I was a lad in the 'Hillman Minx' and sparked my interest in birds...top bloke R.I.P and sadly missed.

My total of 155 was pleasing but I still missed a few birds in the county as follows :

**Grey Phalarope** - Seen on the 1<sup>st</sup> Beadnell (GW), and 2 by (TAC et al) on the 7<sup>th</sup> during the 'Bird Race'

**Waxwing** - 1 over Marden Quarry on the 1<sup>st</sup>, and 2 in Walker on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Little Auk** - Not a classic year thus far but a few seen offshore during the month.

**Ring Necked Parakeet** - Fenham, Newcastle on the 10<sup>th</sup>. I did observe this species in Cowgate but it was sat on an Aviary, didn't think this would get passed the CRC!!!!!!!

**Lapland Bunting** - Holy Island Causeway by Beal on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**'Mealy' Redpoll** - 2 Longbenton on the 12<sup>th</sup>

**Hooded Crow** - The most frustrating bird of January, present all month. First observed at Rock by Tim Dean and missed by me everytime I was in the north of the county. Most elusive especially around Budle Bay on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. I finally caught up with this bird on the 15<sup>th</sup> February.

**Little Gull** - Newbiggin and North Shields on the 31<sup>st</sup>

**Rough Legged Buzzard** - A single reported over Ellington on the 4<sup>th</sup>

**Great Skua** - Single north past Beacon Point, Newbiggin on the 5<sup>th</sup>

**Blackcap** - Visiting a few gardens during the month

**Yellow Legged Gull** - One reported on the Tyne at Newburn on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

So there you have it, with a lot of effort and planning it is possible to get over 150 species in our county in the first month of your birding year, and with a degree of luck and being in the right place at the right time it could be possible to break 160 species, anyone up for the challenge next year?

Paul Stewart, February 2012