



Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club

Registered Charity No. 517641

Visible migration at Budle Bay, Northumberland by Chris Knox

For today's modern birder, standing at a coastal or indeed inland viewpoint each spring and autumn, recording the migration of daylight-migratory species such as larks (*Alaudidae*), pipits *Anthus*, wagtails *Motacilla*, and finches (*Fringillidae*) is not a popular option. For most, myself included, it is during these periods that we consult weather maps for conditions that will hopefully produce an arrival of night migrants such as warblers (*Sylviidae*) or thrushes (*Turdidae*), with the chance of some scarcities amongst them, or perhaps for winds favourable for a good seabird passage.

Visible Migration can be defined as the "daylight movement of birds that can be witnessed" (Britton & Day, 1995) and mainly involves recording the numbers and direction of movement of 'common birds'. It is not generally regarded as the build up of wildfowl and waders at our local wetland or estuary, nor is it overnight 'falls' of night migrants: although this type of migration can be witnessed into the morning, or even afternoon, it is essentially an unseen movement, and will remain so until we all have access to night vision or radar!

Topography is important for productive visible migration watches, movement being best recorded when flight paths are funnelled, and/or interrupted; thus coastal headlands, estuaries, river valleys and lines of hills tend to concentrate movement. The geography of Budle point (NU166362) has proved favourable, although never a 'headland'. Birds moving up the coast in spring or arriving from the east in autumn are funnelled inland passing low over the point as they do so. Overcast conditions are best for observation, as birds can be counted and identified easier when flying at a lower altitude, however the important factor for a good movement is a light to moderate headwind.

Visible migration of one sort or another probably occurs throughout the year, however, it is during the periods of spring and autumn that movement is best observed. Two days below give a taste of the movement that can occur for each of the main 'seasons' and the type of observations I have sought to capture :

9th April 1995

Budle Point 07.30 - 11.30 hrs : 4 hours watching

Overcast, wind southwesterly f 2-3

All movement to west/northwest

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (3), Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (1), Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (3), Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* (20), Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (332), Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (6), Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* (1,400+), Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii* (115), Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* (flock 16 birds), Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (40), Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* (3), Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (25+), Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (25+), Siskin *Carduelis spinus* (460+), Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (400)

Total : 2,849 birds

5th November 1983

Budle Point 08.00 - 11.00 hrs : 3 hours watching

Clear, crisp, 1/8 cloud cover, wind southwest

All movement to west/northwest

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* (1), Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (120), Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* (2), Woodpigeon (43), Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* (1), Skylark (600+), Meadow Pipit (25), Blackbird *Turdus merula* (42), Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* (65), Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (12), Redwing *Turdus iliacus* (20), Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (840), Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* (60), Chaffinch (950), Brambling (90), Greenfinch (45), Goldfinch (8), Siskin (135), Linnet (30+), Redpoll *Carduelis cabaret* (26), Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (2), Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* (2)

Total : 3,119 birds

Spring

In warm conditions the spring season can begin in February with a light passage of Skylarks moving over the point, a handful of small groups would be a typical morning count, however on 14th February 1998, about 45 per hour were noted moving. March sees an increase in Skylark numbers, and from mid-month the first flocks of Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails; the last two species both occurring in peak numbers during this month, with day counts of 1,800 and 165 respectively. Throughout April groups of coasting Linnets are regular, with a peak day count of 750+. Greenfinch passage is a little less visible, and there is an annual passage of Siskins past the point at this time, with a large movement to the northwest of 460+ on 9th April 1995. Although some continental birds may be involved in this movement, ringing recoveries have suggested that Siskins on passage in Northumberland are birds moving north to breeding grounds in Scotland, having wintered in southern England (Jardine et al., 1993).

Early April appears to be the best time to see Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*, floating in off the sea, with all spring records falling in the period 30th March and 10th April. The last week in April and early May has proved to be the best time for Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, two species which usually pass on the same days. However, together with the Tree Sparrow, which occurs in small numbers at this time, recent springs have seen a reduction in their numbers.

Throughout May, small 'charms' of Goldfinches are noted on a regular basis, and good numbers can occur, as on 5th May 1996, when 130 were recorded during a morning watch. The spring passage of the Lesser Redpolls is prolonged and small in comparison, small groups being noted moving as late as mid June. Hirundines become the dominant species as May progresses, and on a good day mixed species flocks arrive from the southeast throughout the day, many taking the opportunity to rest on the beach before continuing inland. May has also produced some small raptor movements; Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* has occurred in three springs, with two birds on 12th May 1984, and on 20th May 2001 both Marsh Harrier and Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, together with several Sparrowhawk and Kestrel moved past the point, not large numbers, but an interesting passage nonetheless.

Summer

The months of June to August although never matching the numbers and variety of earlier and later periods can still provide interesting results. A moderate passage of Lapwings and Starlings is evident from mid June, for example 400 of the former arriving from the east on 23rd June 1996. Canada Geese *Branta canadensis* are nearly annual at this time as they undertake their moult migration from the midlands and Yorkshire to the Beaulieu Firth.

July usually sees the first return movements of hirundines, with the first groups of Sand Martins moving low past the point in a south westerly direction from the first week, followed mid month by

Swallows *Hirundo rustica*. House Martin *Delichon urbica* moves a little later, with peak numbers usually in late August to early September. The last week in July sees a large south-southwesterly passage of Swifts *Apus apus*, for example 700+ on 22nd July 1994.

Irruptive movements of Siskins and Crossbills can be witnessed during the period June to August, for example during 1985 a total of 180 Siskins were recorded between 10th-20th July, with a peak day count of 50+ on 15th, an unprecedented movement for a species more associated with early spring and autumn passage. Crossbill movements peaked at 45+ in the summer of 1990, a year that was estimated to have record numbers of the species in the county (Middelton & Davison, 2003).

August is characterised by a constant movement of waders entering and departing Budle Bay, although it is often difficult to determine onward passage from local tide-related feeding and roosting movements. It is however possible to note small numbers of Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, arriving high from the east from mid August onwards suggesting immigration from the continent. From mid month small numbers of Sparrowhawk and the odd Merlin *Falco columbarius* are regular, and on 17th August 1991 two Marsh Harriers were noted within a couple of hours of each other. A total of five Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* have been noted arriving from the east between the dates of 15th August and 20th September, and it is tempting to propose that continental birds may be involved.

Autumn

During September, the direction of passage becomes varied, with flocks of birds arriving and departing from all points on the compass. Unlike in spring, Meadow Pipit flocks in September appear to 'carry' a lot more species with them; Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, Yellow Wagtail, Tree Pipit and Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus* are all worth looking and listening for among these early autumn flocks. September has proved to be the best time for Lapland Bunting, with all seven Budle Point records occurring in this month, with a peak count of three on the relatively early date of 13th September 1987.

October through to mid November sees the largest movements of daylight migration past Budle Point, and on a good morning several thousand birds can be noted during a couple of hours. This is the time when you can expect the odd surprise; it could be a calling Great Spotted Woodpecker, not from a nearby bush, but some 50 m overhead as it comes in off the sea, or a Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*, detected as the waders and Gulls *Larus* in Budle Bay fly to greet it as it lazily flaps high over the point. Onshore winds in October often bring spectacular broad front arrivals of thrushes; however movement continues in headwinds, and I have often sat on Budle Point and witnessed Blackbirds struggling in off the sea, flying just above the waves and buffeted by the wind, the lucky ones just manage to make it, but many don't. Ringing recoveries have demonstrated that we receive autumn Blackbirds from Scandinavia, Estonia and Germany (Kerr, 2001), with these areas being the likely source of Woodcock, Tree Sparrow, Chaffinch, Brambling, and smaller numbers of Reed Bunting seen coming in off the sea at this time.

The coasting of Coal Tits *Parus ater*, Blue Tits *Parus caeruleus* and Long-tailed Tits *Aegithalos caudatus* is often overlooked; however the lack of cover at Budle Point has often highlighted movement. Small numbers of all three species occur most years in September and October, but larger numbers can occur occasionally. On such days small groups noisily work their way over the dunes and upon reaching the point, can be observed gaining height and hesitantly heading off northwest. A Coal Tit ringed at nearby Bamburgh in September 1983, was recovered the following February in Lothian, indicating that some of these birds at least push onwards and undertake take substantial autumn movements (Kerr, 2001).

Geese *Anser*, *Branta* are noted moving past the point throughout autumn period, with the main species recently being Pink footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus* and Barnacle Geese *Branta leucopsis*. Onward passage to respective wintering areas is difficult to distinguish from feeding movements, as many tend to spend a period in the area, flying out to fields inland in the early morning to arrive back in Budle Bay

at dusk. By late November passage slows down, and favourable conditions are greeted with empty skies, most birds having moved on to respective wintering areas.

Winter

Sporadic counts during the winter have revealed some light movement, probably linked to hard weather, with for example 200 Skylarks flying south west on 18th December 1999, along with small flocks of Meadow Pipits and Woodpigeons. In January 2000, 13 Waxwings *Bombycilla garrulus*, flew past the point, their 'bell like' call sounding strangely out of context whilst perched on a coastal dune looking at groups of divers *Gavia* and scoter *Melanitta* offshore, but shows what further winter watches could produce.

Conclusions

Regular counts from Budle Point since 1983 have allowed a number of conclusions to be drawn.

1. A general pattern of movement has been established, with a great majority of passage in spring to the west northwest, probably involving a return to more northerly breeding areas. Autumn movement can be more variable, however during the main period of October to November the bulk of movement is to the west-south-west, with many birds arriving from the east-north-east and continuing 'inland'.
2. A light to moderate wind from the southwest-northwest is best for movement, and calm days following strong winds from *any* direction have proved productive, as have those days preceded by a period of poor visibility or fog.
3. Two windows have been established as producing the largest day counts, in spring the period 5th to 25th April, and in autumn between 14th October and 5th November.
4. The number of birds passing over Budle Point has remained relatively small; the days of 9th April 1995 and 5th November 1983 cited above represent 'good' spring and autumn days. No attempt has been made to estimate annual or even seasonal totals, however if, and only if, the above days were representative, and occurred on only ten days during the spring and autumn periods that would give season totals of 28,490 and 31,190 respectively.
5. Raptor passage is best on days with high pressure and a light south to southeast wind, most raptors arriving high over the nearby golf course, then heading inland by following the dunes south west.
6. The spring passage of Tree Pipit and Yellow Wagtail tends to correlate with winds with a more southerly element; however numbers of both have declined in the last five years, a decline which mirrors the national picture for both species (Gregory et al., 2004).
7. Skylark flocks tend to pass at the greatest height, and hirundines the lowest, though it is not uncommon for finches to pass just over the dune tops, but this depends on the amount of cloud cover.
8. Thrushes appear to be arriving later and in smaller numbers during the last ten years or so. Woodpigeon, a staple species on many visible migration watches, seems to avoid passing Budle Point in large numbers with a peak day count of only 580.

9. Obvious omissions of 'expected' diurnal migrants are few, however there has been no record of an arriving Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*, nor passing Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*, and the lack of spring and autumn fly through Twite *Carduelis flavirostris* is both surprising and frustrating.

10. Some observations have proved a mystery, the Stock Dove *Columba oenas* heading northeast one May morning, a June Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* and the small numbers of Carrion Crow arriving from the east in spring. The latter though could involve feeding sorties from the nearby Farne Islands.

'Vismig' observations have essentially involved common migrants, during the observations to date; no national or indeed county rarity has been recorded. Target species are many, and include Rough legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*, Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* and Woodlark *Lullula arborea* in the autumn, and Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in spring.

Despite the lack of scarcities, species variability and relatively small scale of movement at Budle Point, don't let this discourage visible migration watches over your local patch. It is a pursuit that can provide an exciting day in the field, during weather (in coastal Northumberland at least), when both the bushes and sea don't need staring at, and the data recorded can prove very purposeful. Regular 'sky watching' from Budle Point has revealed a series of patterns of local bird movements, and annual comparisons have identified both short and long term trends among migrants. Above all else, from a personal point of view, to sit at Budle Point on a crisp autumn morning, picking out silhouetted flocks of migrants, with geese breaking roost noisily in the background, is an enjoyable birding experience.

The table below show day maximums, typically a 3-4 hour watch, in spring and autumn for sixteen years counts between 1983-2003. As stated in text, species such as most geese and waders have been excluded because of difficulty in determining types of movement.

Species	Spring Day Maximum	Date	Autumn Day Maximum	Date
Grey Heron	3	09/04/95	5	21/10/95
Canada Goose	38	30/05/93	28	26/08/84
Marsh Harrier	2	12/05/84	2	17/08/91
Sparrowhawk	-	-	5	10/09/95
Common Buzzard	1	09/04/95	2	04/09/94
Osprey	1	20/05/01	-	-
Kestrel	4	06/04/85	3	15/10/96
Merlin	3	06/03/93	2	01/09/96
Snipe	1	14/04/84	12	22/10/85
Woodcock	-	-	9	23/10/85
Stock Dove	1	14/05/94	2	02/10/00
Woodpigeon	20+	31/03/85	580	21/10/94
Collared Dove	4	09/05/99	8	10/09/95
Short-eared Owl	1	20/04/02	3	18/10/96
Swift	600+	25/05/85	700+	22/07/94
Green Woodpecker	1	07/06/98	-	-
Great Spotted Woodpecker	-	-	2	06/10/85
Skylark	400	31/03/85	850	02/10/00
Sand Martin	120	04/05/02	100+	16/07/99
Swallow	500+	25/05/85	500+	04/08/91

Species	Spring Day Maximum	Date	Autumn Day Maximum	Date
House Martin	150	09/05/99	300+	09/08/98
Tree Pipit	9	05/05/86	2	01/09/96
Meadow Pipit	1,800	30/03/85	1,200+	17/09/87
Yellow Wagtail	8	27/04/96	3	08/09/85
Grey Wagtail	-	-	7+	06/10/02
Pied Wagtail	165	13/03/97	25	20/09/97
Blackbird	-	-	280	18/10/96
Ring Ouzel	-	-	5+	15/10/01
Fieldfare	1	05/05/86	2,800	14/10/01
Redwing	-	-	4,800+	23/10/85
Song Thrush	5	31/03/97	220+	21/10/94
Long-tailed Tit	-	-	17	21/09/97
Coal Tit	-	-	20+	15/10/01
Blue Tit	-	-	40+	29/09/85
Jackdaw	12	06/04/85	30	25/10/85
Rook	8	04/05/02	15+	02/10/00
Carrion Crow	16	09/04/95	5	06/10/02
Hooded Crow	1	06/04/83	-	-
Starling	200+	20/06/96	840	05/11/83
Tree Sparrow	5	09/05/99	56	05/11/83
Chaffinch	40+	09/04/95	950+	05/11/83
Brambling	4	24/04/84	120+	14/10/01
Greenfinch	30	20/04/02	45+	05/11/83
Goldfinch	130	05/05/96	25+	20/09/97
Linnet	750	06/04/85	330	30/09/03
Siskin	460+	09/04/95	350	22/10/83
Redpoll	12	09/05/99	30	09/10/83
Crossbill	25	11/05/03	20	20/09/86
Lapland Bunting	-	-	3	13/09/87
Snow Bunting	-	-	21	09/10/83
Yellowhammer	2	23/04/00	6	02/10/00
Reed Bunting	1	23/04/94	10+	15/10/01

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