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Bird Club

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This is a short paper produced by Mike S Hodgson.

Spoonbills in Northumberland 2011

SPOONBILLS IN NORTHUMBERLAND 2011

by Mike S Hodgson

The Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* is currently considered a rare passage visitor to Northumberland, mainly in the spring (*Birds in Northumbria* 2010). The first record for the county was an adult male shot at Fenham Flats in May 1857 but between then and 1964 there were only another ten individuals reported (Galloway & Meek, 1978) though those authors considered that the species was starting to appear more frequently. The totals of birds for the period 1970-2010 are shown below and it is clear that they have been seen annually only since 1996.

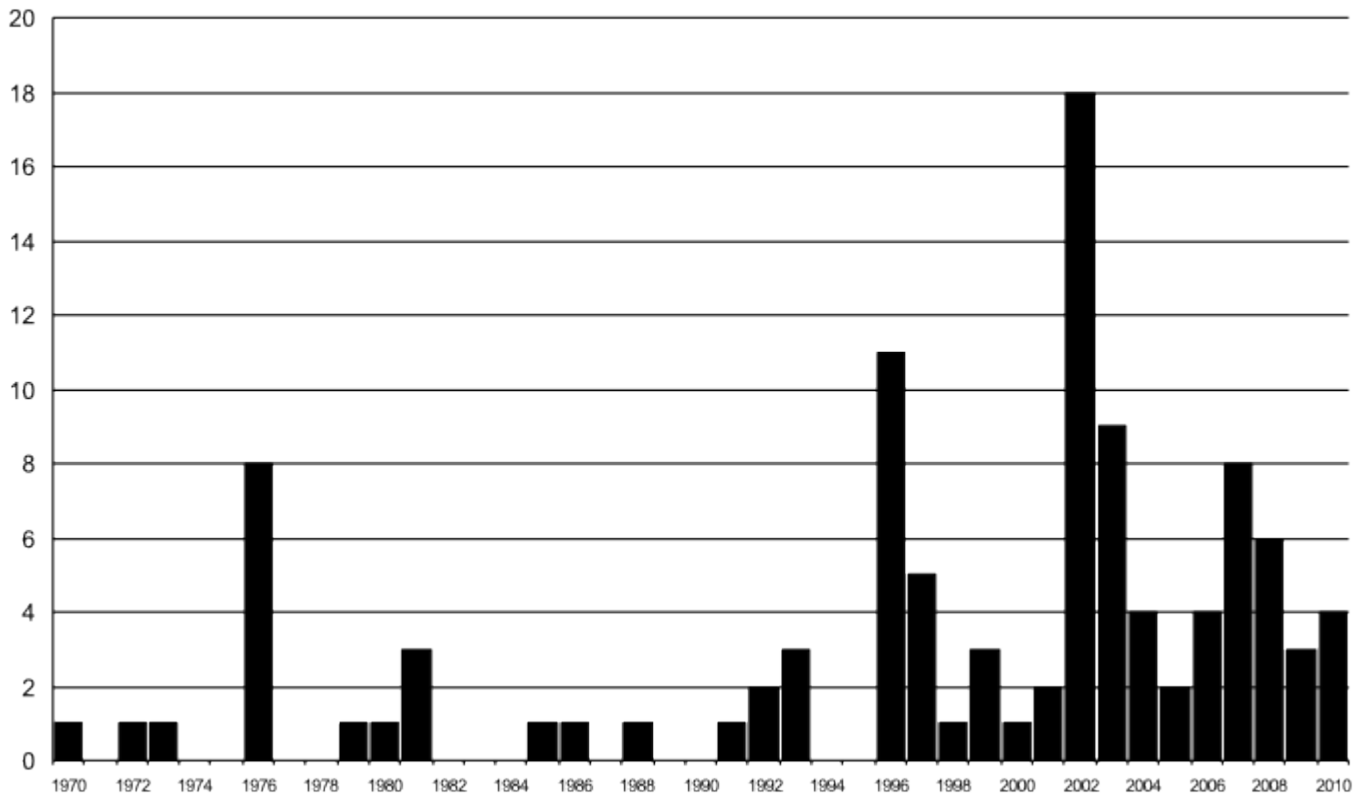


Figure 1 : No. of Spoonbills by Year 1970-2010 (source *Birds in Northumbria*)

On 21st May 2011 a party of four Spoonbills was found at East Chevington and Druridge Pools NR and this was the beginning of a serious influx into the county with many observers reporting birds at various locations throughout the late spring and into the summer months. Since Spoonbill is a species for which the County Records Committee does not require any descriptive notes I have taken all sightings at face value for the purposes of this review.

I became interested in this influx as I saw a number of birds at Druridge which I felt sure were not necessarily the same individuals each time. An inevitable discussion of this with Chris Knox led him to point me in the direction of a short paper about ageing Spoonbills published on the internet by a Swedish observer, Alexander Hellquist. This concise and clear account is available at [bird identification - Ageing Spoonbills - surfbirds.com](http://birdidentification-surfbirds.com)

Spoonbills are relatively easy to identify of course, although care is sometimes needed when they are sleeping (which they seem to spend most of their lives doing when not eating!!), but accurately ageing birds requires reasonable views of various features, most importantly bill colouration and primary feather patterns. For a large bird, it can be remarkably difficult to accurately assess these and a great help here is the use of digital photographs. We have a good number of birders and birder/photographers who take many images of birds in the county and their resources are very helpful. I therefore appealed to just about everyone I know to let me have sight of their Spoonbill images to see if any kind of assessment of the numbers occurring could be calculated and just look at the possible age structure of the records. It is inevitable that many of the records received by the NTBC (and also via Rare Bird Alert) referred to birds as either adult or immature together with various, more precise age descriptions. Not everyone has the time nor the inclination to obtain a photograph or detailed description of the required points for ageing!

Current literature available to most observers is not particularly detailed in describing the various age classes. The *Collins Bird Guide* (probably the most used in-the-field guide) indicates "Adult breeding: Bushy crest (longer on male), ochre breast patch (as on pelicans), all-white primaries, black bill with yellow tip. - Adult summer/winter: As breeding but lacks crest and ochre breast patch. - Juvenile/1st winter: As adult non-breeding, but black tips to outer primaries and with initially pink legs and bill which gradually darken." (Svensson *et al*, 2009). BWP (Cramp *et al*, 1977) does indicate that some black can be present on various flight feathers after the initial moult of these and the Immature Winter and Immature Summer plumage descriptions both state 'much variation'. For anyone wishing to gain more insight in to the ageing of Spoonbills I would recommend the account available on the internet indicated above.

Having assembled a large number of digital images of Spoonbills in the county in 2011 I took a stab at trying to age as many as possible using, mainly, the criteria outlined in Hellquist's account and in particular his summary table of the most important age characters (see Table 1).

Table 1 : 'The Most Important Age Characters' (after Hellquist)

<u>Age</u>	<u>Plume</u>	<u>Breast band</u>	<u>Bill</u>	<u>Leg colour</u>	<u>Iris colour</u>
1st cy autumn	No	No	Flesh coloured	(Pinkish) grey	Brownish red
2nd cy spring	Sometimes a white tuft	No	Extensive yellow tip, grey base	Grey	(Brownish) red
3rd cy spring	Usually short and white	No (rarely faint)	Generally more yellow than in 4th+ cy	Dark grey	Intensively red
4th+ cy spring	Long yellow	Yes	Varies, but limited yellow tip	Black	Intensively red

I asked Chris Knox to try and carry out exactly the same procedure independently, for which I am very grateful. Remarkably, our two sets of results were almost identical! The gallery of photographs below has been annotated, wherever possible, with that interpretation of ageing although we both accept some may be incorrect due to our lack of experience with the features used.

Some of the features used for ageing are not straightforward to see or assess in the field. Without good detailed photographs, primary tip patterns can be difficult to establish and iris colour and even leg colour (beware mud covered or wet legs!) need careful observation. I had been told that the bill pattern and colouration could develop quickly in immature Spoonbills although Alex Hellquist (pers. comm.) told me his impression of this change was 'rather quickly in 2nd cy birds, and to a lesser degree in 3rd cy, but in adults it doesn't change over time'. To a degree, I could actually test this on a colour-ringed 3rd calendar year bird I managed to photograph twice over a 45 day period at Druridge Pools NR. On this bird (to my eyes at least) there was no change in bill pattern or colouration in that period.



DRURIDGE POOLS NR - known-age 3rd calendar year bird (*M.S. Hodgson*)
bill pattern 27/05/11 (left) & 11/07/11 (right). Note no obvious change over a 45 day period

The first Spoonbills in 2011 appeared on 21st May and the last was seen on 26th September and were reported from about 15 different localities. The number of 'bird-days' per month (the number of days Spoonbills were present/reported in the county regardless of number or location) is given in the table below.

	<u>No. Of 'Bird-days'</u>
May	9
June	21
July	9
August	6
September	1
TOTAL	46

Table 2 : No. of 'Bird-days' in 2011

So, do we have any better idea from the above about how many birds may have been involved in 2011. The answer, without definitive photos of every sighting and/or detailed notes, is no but from the available information (mainly bill patterns) there would appear to have been at least seven 2nd calendar year birds, five 3rd calendar years and six 4th calendar year/adults, a total of 18, involved. The actual total was almost certainly much higher given the number of days that Spoonbills were reported over a five month period. What we do know is that a party of four Spoonbills at a specific locality on one day does not necessarily mean the same birds will be involved on subsequent days!

There was a comparable, estimated total of 18 birds in 2002 (see Figure 1) but all ageing descriptions then were either 'adult' or 'immature'. The maximum number of birds identified separately on any one day was eight (23rd May 2002). The 2002 influx started much earlier but lasted a shorter duration (extending from 18th April to 2nd June) with a maximum number of 21 'bird-days'.

Colour-ringed Birds 2011

There were sightings of two colour-ringed birds in 2011 during the spring/early summer and both were traceable providing the following details :

3rd Calendar Year bird -

Left Tibia Yellow above Metal ring above Lime

Right Tibia Yellow above Yellow Flag above Red

Ringed : Nestling 25/06/09 Schiermonnikoog, Oosterkwelder, Netherlands

06/09/09 Lauwersmeer, Achter de Zwarten, Netherlands Movt 12 km

12/09/09 Lauwersmeer, Jaap Deensgat, Netherlands Movt 14 km

16/09/09 Cantabria, Bahia de Santona, Spain Movt 1323 km

26/05/11 RSPB Saltholme, Cleveland, England

27/05/11 Druridge Pools NR, England Movt 544 km

30/05/11 Druridge Pools NR, England

10-11/07/11 Druridge Pools NR, England

Note the long southward movement to Spain in just four days during its first autumn.

4th Calendar Year bird -

Left Tibia Red above Yellow

Right Tibia Lime Flag above Red above metal ring

Ringed : Nestling (prob. female) 22/06/08 Hauke-Halen-Koog, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany

Reported 12 times at ringing site or within 16 km between 03/07/08 - 21/08/08

23/10/08 Oued Sous, Agadir, Morocco Movt 3071 km

08/08/10 Nierdersachsen, Eckwardersiel, Germany Movt 128 km

28&29/05/11 Frampton Marsh, Lincolnshire, England Movt 603 km

02/06/11 Druridge Pools NR, Northumberland, England Movt 658 km

12&13/06/11 Hauxley NR, Northumberland, England Movt 658 km

21/06/11 Gibraltar Point, Lincolnshire, England Movt 578 km

24/06/11 Holkham, Norfolk, England Movt 553 km

Interestingly, the bird was sexed as a female at the Holkham site.

I hope that this short review is of interest to Northumbrian (and other) birders and may make us look a little harder at Spoonbills in future years. There have been a number of breeding attempts by Spoonbills in the UK since 1989 with eggs laid in 1998 and 2007 with no outcome, but three young were fledged in Dumfries & Galloway in 2008 (Holling *et al*, 2010). No breeding records were submitted for 2009 but, of course, there was the widely known event of the establishment of a colony in Norfolk in 2010 (Holling *et al*, 2011). On 27th May 2011 I watched two 3rd calendar year birds adding material (reeds and sticks) to an empty Coot nest at Druridge Pools. Displacement activity or just practising? It's surely not inconceivable that one day we may add Spoonbill to the county breeding birds list.

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SPOONBILL PHOTO GALLERY



1. DRURIDGE POOLS 21st May 2011 (*P. Fletcher*)

The 'original' four with at least one adult/4th cal year+ bird (l/h bird).



2. DRURIDGE POOLS 22nd May 2011 (*C.W. Pears*)

Three of four present - two 2nd cal year birds and a 3rd cal year+ bird (see also below).



3. DRURIDGE POOLS 22nd May 2011 (*C.W. Pears*)

Presumed same 2nd cal year bird (perhaps the top left hand bird in flight photo above)



4. DRURIDGE POOLS 22nd May 2011 (*C.W. Pears*)
Presumed two 3rd cal year+ birds from party of four



5. DRURIDGE POOLS 25th May 2011 (*R.S. Forster*)
4th cal year+/adult (right) & 2nd cal year birds



6. DRURIDGE POOLS 25th May 2011
(*R.S. Forster*)
4th cal year+/adult (r/h bird above)



7. DRURIDGE POOLS 25th May 2011
(*R.S. Forster*)
2nd cal year (l/h bird above)



8. & 9. DRURIDGE POOLS 27th May 2011 (*M.S. Hodgson*)
3rd cal year (colour-ringed) bird & presumed 3rd cal year bird



10. DRURIDGE POOLS 29th May 2011
(*R. Dunn*)
one of three birds present - possibly 3rd cal year

11. DRURIDGE POOLS 30th May 2011
(*J. Clark*)
colour-ringed bird - almost certainly the 3rd cal year bird present 27th May 2011



12. CASTLE ISLAND 11th June 2011
(*M.S.Hodgson*)
2nd cal year bird

13. CASTLE ISLAND 11th June 2011
(*M.S.Hodgson*)
3rd cal year bird



14. CASTLE ISLAND 11th June 2011 (*A. Curry*)

2nd (right hand bird) & 3rd (left hand bird) cal year birds (same as two above)



15. HAUXLEY NR 12th June 2011 (*F. Golding*)

Colour-ringed bird is in its 4th cal year. This had also been reported from Druridge Pools NR on 2nd June. Other two presumably also 4th cal year+

Front right bird is presumed 2nd cal year and is possibly the same as at Castle Island on 11th June (bill pattern).



16. HAUXLEY NR 12th June 2011

(*F. Golding*)

Left hand bird in 15. above - possibly 4th cal year



17. HAUXLEY NR 12th June 2011

(*F. Golding*)

Right hand bird in 15. above - prob 2nd cal year



18. & 19. CASTLE ISLAND 20th June 2011 (*M.P.Frankis*)
Possibly two 2nd cal year birds?



20. HAUXLEY NR 23th June 2011 (*I. Fisher*)
Adult & three 2nd cal year birds?



21. HAUXLEY NR 23th June 2011 (*I. Fisher*)
Two of the four - adult & 2nd cal year (left)



22. HAUXLEY NR 23th June 2011 (*I. Fisher*)
Two of the immature birds



23. CASTLE ISLAND 29th June 2011
Adult/4th cal year+



24. CASTLE ISLAND 29th June 2011
2nd cal year bird



23. - 25. Three birds present at Castle Island
29/06/11 (*M.S. Hodgson*)

25. CASTLE ISLAND 29th June 2011
2nd cal year bird



26. EAST CHEVINGTON 11th July 2011



27. EAST CHEVINGTON 11th July 2011



26.-28. Adult/4th cal year bird
(Note tiny black primary tips)
(*M.S. Hodgson*)

28. EAST CHEVINGTON 11th July 2011



29. CASTLE ISLAND 1st August 2011



30. CASTLE ISLAND 1st August 2011



31. CASTLE ISLAND 1st August 2011

29.-31. Adult/4th cal year bird
(*M.S. Hodgson*)

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