

**Black-tailed Godwit is a regular visitor to Greater Manchester and can often be found in small flocks but the events that unfolded during spring and early summer 2010 were unprecedented on a very large scale. This short article intends to explore this exceptional occurrence and to give some detail to the history of the species within Greater Manchester.**

On May 24th 2010, Dave Broome observed a large flock of Black-tailed Godwits being flushed off Lightshaw Hall Flash as a low-flying Buzzard was mobbed by Carrion Crows. Most of this flock, 106 individuals, settled on neighbouring Dover Basin where they continued to rest and feed. With smaller numbers remaining on Lightshaw Hall Flash, a total of 139 birds were counted on that date. This set a new county record, smashing the previous best of 80 individuals but even this was to be eclipsed by the count made the very next day when Rob Thorpe discovered a magnificent 241 individuals on Dover Basin alone.

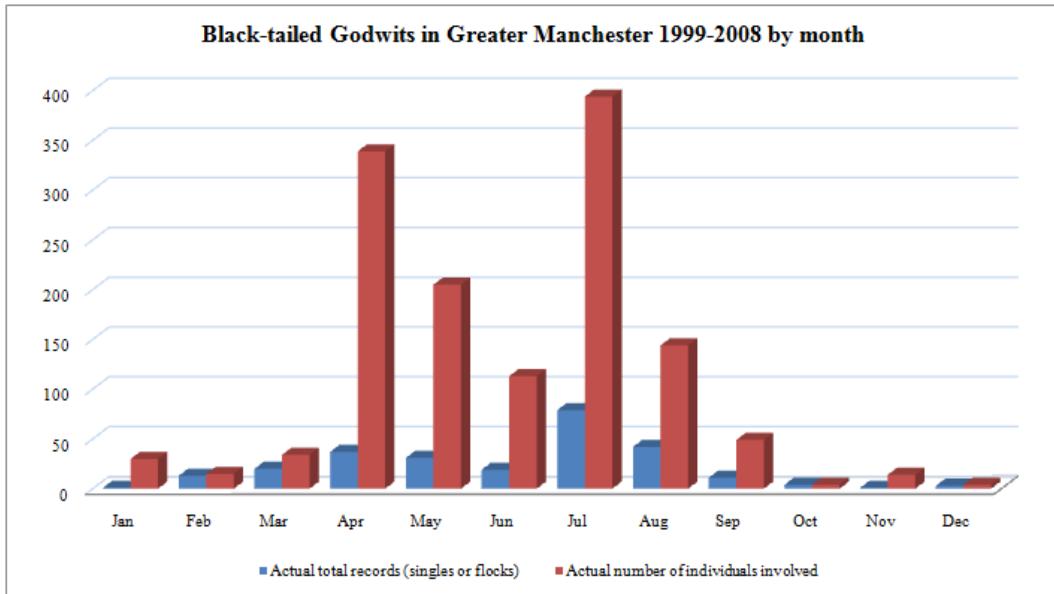


Above: Part of the record flock of 241 Black-tailed Godwits on Dover Basin, May 2010 by John Tymon.  
There are 166 individuals within this photo alone!

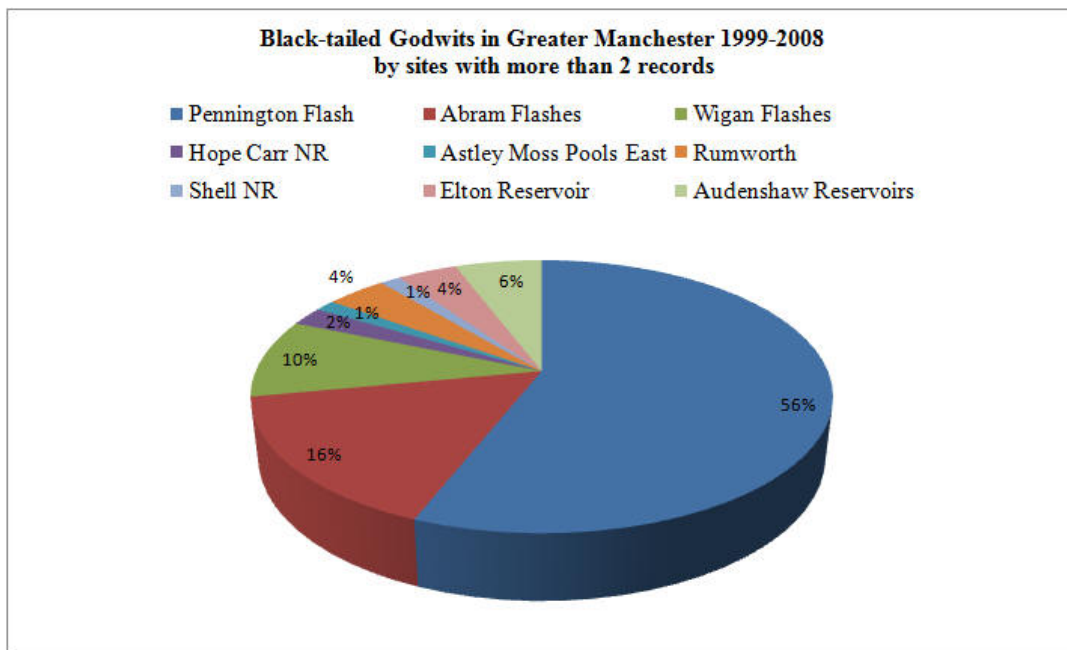
In spring 2010 at Marshside RSPB, Lancashire where there are significant numbers of summering Black-tailed Godwits on an annual basis, there were 360 present on 11th May and 210 on 15th May. Subsequently, numbers there had dropped to 160 on 26th May and this latter count coincided with the largest numbers at the Abram Flashes in Greater Manchester. Due to the prevalence of Black-tailed Godwit flocks observed in westerly/north-westerly movements through Greater Manchester, it seems obvious that a movement of summering birds was taking place between the Abram Flashes and Marshside. To illustrate this, three flocks observed flying over the Wigan Flashes by Rob Thorpe on the 26th May 2010 all came from the direction of the Abram Flashes and flew in a north-westerly direction and similarly, small flocks were occasionally seen flying strongly north-west from Pennington Flash (Barry Hulme pers.comm.). Individual numbers at key sites within Greater Manchester during the spring/early summer period varied considerably on a day to day basis and taking into consideration the apparent north-west movement across the west of the county at least, plus the smaller numbers observed at 'less godwit attractive' sites in the east of the county, it perhaps seems evident that a significant cross country UK movement occurred. Whether the events in Greater Manchester during spring/early summer 2010 involved individuals commuting between Marshside and sites in Greater Manchester or indeed involved fresh birds passing through every time (on their way to Marshside) is subject to much speculation and there is plausible reasoning for both theories. Quite why godwits should feel the need to move back and forth between food rich Marshside and sites in Greater Manchester is perplexing though but the presence of differing age group combinations on an almost daily basis plus the entirely random occurrences and individual numbers involved in those flocks may seem to support the latter theory. Indeed, spring 2010 records of Black-tailed Godwits in Holland were disproportionately high by their standards too.

Presumed cross-country passage of Black-tailed Godwits in spring has previously been noted at Brockholes, Lancashire. In 2001 unprecedented numbers occurred at this site, peaking at 305 on 27th April (White *et al* 2008). Spring 2010 however brought no significant numbers there though, with only a single on 22nd May. Oakes (1953) noted spring Black-tailed Godwit passage in Lancashire to be more inland in character than in autumn and increased numbers were noted in the 1920's. A 'small flash and sewage farm near Manchester' had fairly regular spring passage from as early as 1945. In 1946 at this latter location, observers including Frank Horrocks, recorded 2 on 9th April, increasing to 22 on 25th April, then 24 on 7th May. Continual change in flock composition was noted due to differing numbers of breeding plumaged birds. In the West Midlands region, increased passage was recorded from the early 1980's. A hundred per year were recorded by the early 1990's and during 1997-2001 the annual total had reached 240 per year. A regional record was set at Belvide Reservoir, with a flock of 172 there on 11th May 1999 (Harrison).

Black-tailed Godwit currently comprises three subspecies, the nominate *L.l.Limosa*, Icelandic race *L.l.icelandica* and the Asian race *L.l.melanuroides* (purposefully not covered in this article). The nominate race (*limosa*) breeds mainly in the Netherlands, extending to central Europe to the Yenisey River in Russia with a small UK population in the East Anglian Fenlands and during winter migrates to southern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, the Icelandic race (*icelandica*) breeds mainly in Iceland with very small numbers in the UK's northern isles and in the Faeroes, wintering from Great Britain, through the Iberian Peninsula to Morocco. All records of Black-tailed Godwits currently recorded in Greater Manchester have involved the Icelandic race, perhaps unsurprising given the very large numbers of *icelandica* encountered at north-west England coastal sites. Indeed, probably ten percent of the UK *icelandica* population winters on the Ribble Estuary alone and the large number of colour-ringed Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits (ringed in Iceland) that are found annually throughout the UK (including in Greater Manchester) provide confirmation of their racial identify. Oddly though, the first documented breeding of Black-tailed Godwits in Lancashire, in 1984, apparently involved the nominate race (*limosa*), yet this race remains genuinely very rare in the north-west of England (at the very least) even accounting for the difficulty encountered in separating the two races.



Above: Black-tailed Godwit has been recorded in every month of the year in Greater Manchester. July remains the prime month for both their occurrence and total numbers in the county but April's significant peak in total numbers of individuals is amassed from fairly low numbers of actual records.

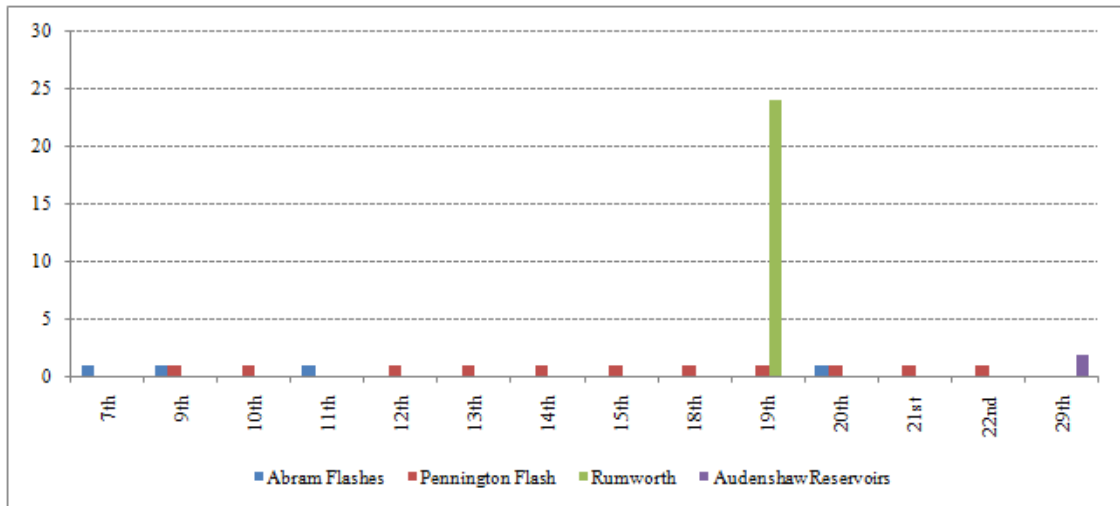


Above: Pennington Flash and its ever-present area of shingle spit has entertained the overwhelming majority of all Black-tailed Godwit records in the county over the years. Other sites in the county invariably suffer from highly variable water levels, disturbance (human or other) or simply less than favourable habitat for such a species. The 'western lowland Flashes' of Pennington, Abram and Wigan accrue just over 80% of all records alone!

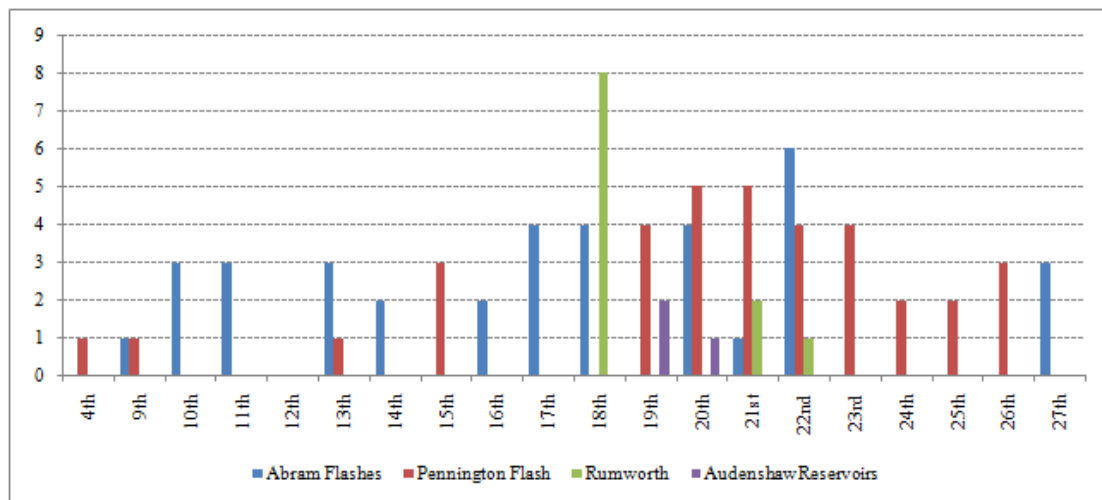
## Records of Black-tailed Godwits in Greater Manchester during spring/early summer 2010

The tables below represent the distribution of Black-tailed Godwits throughout the county from March to July 2010. They illustrate individual numbers at all sites recording the species and are as comprehensive as possible considering the occasional dates when key sites might not have been checked by observers.

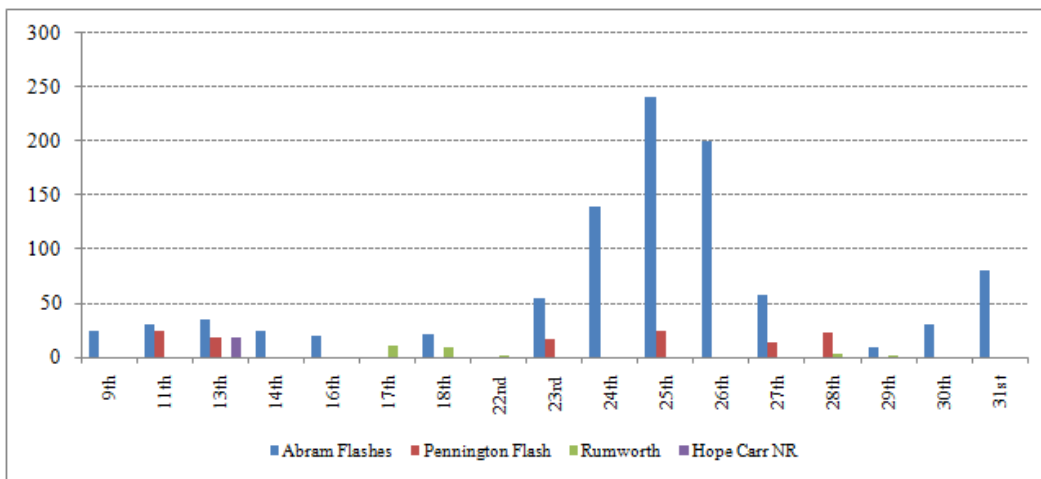
The months prior to March and post July recorded insignificant numbers of Black-tailed Godwits which were not considered to be involved with the phenomenon throughout spring and early summer.



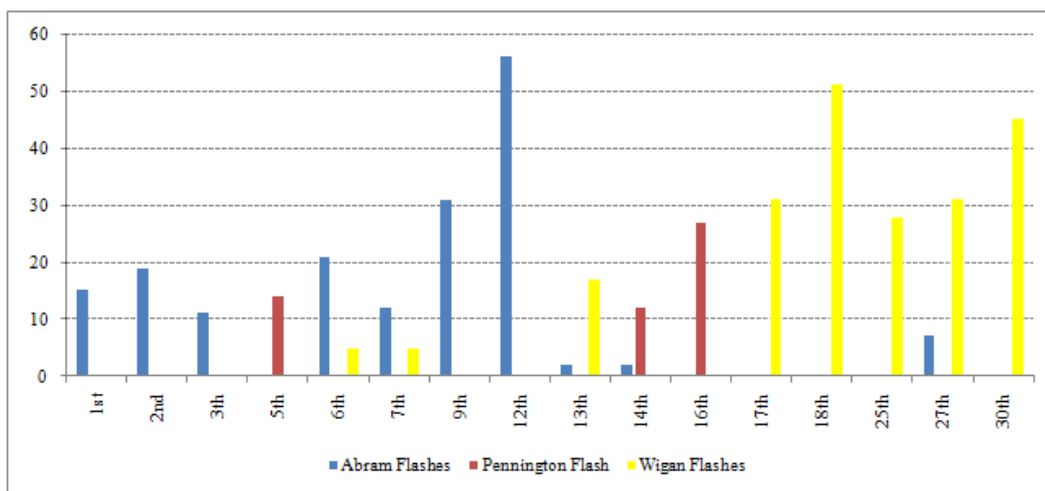
Above: **March 2010**. Black-tailed Godwit records of ones or twos prevailed during the month but for a single flock of 24 birds at Rumworth, perhaps the prelude for things to come?



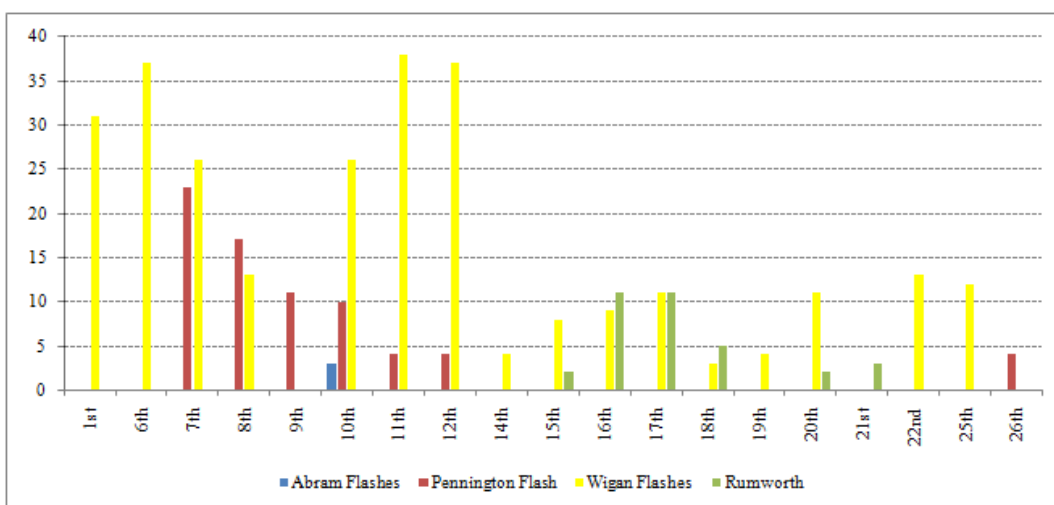
Above: **April 2010**. Although there were no significant flocks during the month, small groups were ever present, especially at the 'western lowland flashes'.



Above: **May 2010**. Despite the continued state of low water at the Abram Flashes attracting the lion's share of Black-tailed Godwits throughout the month, the events of the 24th-26th could not have been envisaged, even by the most optimistic of county birders! The extraordinary but short-lived three-figured flocks that transpired were a sight to behold at such a small inland water.



Above: **June 2010**. Note how changing water levels directly affected the distribution of Black-tailed Godwits at the two key sites. Whilst Pennington Flash suffered little, the rising water levels at the Abram Flashes combined with the lowering levels at the Wigan Flashes had a dramatically obvious effect, leading to the latter site recording its first numbers of the year.



Above: **July 2010**. The dominance of the Wigan Flashes in attracting Black-tailed Godwits throughout the month is patently evident here and whilst Pennington Flash continued to attract sporadic numbers the Abram Flashes held virtually none. Rumworth and its very attractive low water levels during the month also managed to record small numbers during its latter half.



Above: A small section of the record 241 Black-tailed Godwit flock at Dover Basin during May 2010 by John Tymon. The bird second from the right of the Shelduck on the mud bank was an Icelandic colour-ringed bird. Note especially the high proportion on first summer birds. Black-tailed Godwits do not breed until they are two years old and so these first-summer birds (along with many non-breeding adults) often tend to stay around the wintering grounds. A further colour-ringed adult Icelandic bird was also observed at the Wigan Flashes on the 5th July 2010 (Rob Thorpe pers. comm.)



Above: Fourteen first-summer Black-tailed Godwits at Pennington Flash, June 2010 by John Tymon.



Above: Twenty Black-tailed Godwits at Pennington Flash, May 2010, by John Tymon



Above: A small flock of eleven Black-tailed Godwits at Rumworth during May 2010 by Ian McKerchar. Again, note the high percentage of first-summer birds.

### References

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### Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to those county photographers whose images are reproduced in this article but more so to the many observers who submitted their sightings to the Manchester Birding Forum which recorded this outstanding county affair. In particular, we would like to thank Rob Thorpe for his concerted effort at both Abram and Wigan Flashes as his sightings compile the bulk of the data utilised in the tables.

Dave Broome and Ian McKerchar, April 2011

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