

## A YEAR AT ELTON RESERVOIR IN 2008

by Simon Warford

With my debut in the Manchester Birding tournament, 2008 was undoubtedly going to be a year of increased coverage at my local patch of Elton Reservoir. Elton has always quietly produced some decent birds over the years but as the site usually suffers from a high level of disturbance it usually requires a lot of visits in order to find some good birds and as is normally the case the more time spent working a site the more birds that will be found. My initial aim for 2008 was simple – to find as many good birds as possible.

**JANUARY** was rather quiet at Elton with birding restricted to weekends. Many of the regular winter birds were seen during the month including Goosander, Goldeneye, Little Grebe and **Jack Snipe**. Water Rail was heard but not seen. By the end of the month a poor 57 species were seen and the only real disappointment was to miss the Daisyfield garden Firecrests on several occasions.

During what was already a very wet winter the water level, which was already high, had now reached a dangerous level. It was so high in fact that it was putting pressure on the wall side of the reservoir and due to fears of movement in the wall the decision was made to lower the reservoir considerably resulting in parts of Radcliffe being flooded in the process!

By the beginning of **FEBRUARY** the year suddenly took on a totally different feel. Given the now very low water levels and vast amount of mud exposed I considered actually going all out for a big site year list. Knowing the previous highest year list at Elton was achieved by David Lowe in 2001 when he recorded 120 species. I did some calculations and I knew I would need at least 15 species of wader to challenge what was a good total.

It was early February when things picked up and I quickly added Dunlin and **Green Sandpiper** on the 2nd with both birds quick to take advantage of the freshly exposed mud. Water Rail was also added on this date in the usual spot near Benny's. The next birds of note were added on the 16th when 4 Ringed Plovers and an Oystercatcher appeared slightly earlier than perhaps expected. With half of the reservoir frozen on the 20th Gadwall and Pink Footed Goose were present with 2 of the latter species hanging around with the Canada flock. Stonechat was added on the 28th taking my total at the end of February to 67 species and again missing out on the elusive garden dwelling Firecrests was to be the disappointment of the month.



View from the Creek showing the water level from February onwards

**MARCH** also started fairly quiet with Shelduck added on the 2nd, Redshank on the 7th and Curlew over on the 8th. The year's first Sand Martins arrived on the 16th with 3 birds present. Birding was hard going until overnight snow brought in a pair of **Pintail** on the 23rd, which turned out to be my only record of this species during year. On the 24th an adult **Kittiwake** put in a brief appearance during what was a small county passage of these birds. March saw increased coverage with a total of 19 visits during the month and my total had moved on to 79.

**APRIL** would surely see quite a few birds being added to the year list with the expected arrival of our summer visitors, which now couldn't come soon enough!

Six Little Ringed Plovers arrived on the 5th along with my first Willow Warbler and House Martin. Common Sandpipers arrived on the 9th, 4 newly arrived Wheatears were added on the 12th. Then on the 13th I found a female **Common Scoter** which turned out to be one of only two site records this year. While walking near Crow Trees Farm on the 20th I saw what could have been a flick of a red tail but couldn't relocate the bird. Later in the day I got a call from Simon Johnson who had relocated the bird and indeed it was a male **Redstart** in fine spring plumage! I quickly got back down there to be treated to great views as it was now feeding at close range on the ground. Again, on the 21st Simon Johnson found a female Ruddy Duck on the Reservoir which once again had me back at the reservoir. Once a regular bird at Elton but this one turned out to be the only record of 2008. The next highlight was on the 25th in the form of 2 **Greenshanks** present early morning which was the start a good run of records for this species at Elton. Many of the expected summer visitors were in by now and a very obliging Grasshopper Warbler was added on the 27th. Lesser Whitethroat was unfortunately heard only but Peregrine was seen with excellent views perched on the Pylon on the 29th. Garden and Reed Warblers were both added in the last 2 days of April taking the total to 99 by the end of the month with 33 visits this month.



Common Scoter, Elton  
13th April 2008 (Paul  
Wilson)

**MAY** started off well with an Arctic Tern on the 1st being my 100th species of the year. Nothing further was added until the 10th when a breeding plumage **Knot** was found by Ian Campbell and showed very well for 2 days. Closer examination revealed the bird only had one foot. This was a very welcome addition to the year list. Despite now daily visits nothing new was added until the 17th when 2 **Black Tailed Godwits** were present in front of the sailing club. Later the same day Simon Johnson discovered a **Dipper** on the nearby river Irwell, just inside the Elton recording area and this was quickly added to the year list. Greylag was added on the 24th and then the 28th produced one of the best days for waders in a good while. Along with 21 Ringed Plovers, there was also Dunlin, Green Sandpiper, Black Tailed Godwit and a breeding plumaged **Sanderling**. In 29 visits this month I managed to push the total to 105 but crucially adding 3 more species of wader.



Knot, Elton 10th May  
(Paul Wilson)



Sanderling and Ringed Plovers 28th May (Paul Wilson)

**JUNE** was the least productive month by far and nothing new was added but I did miss a good site bird on the 8th in the form of a Cuckoo.

**JULY** produced four top quality additions to the year list. On the 3rd I got home from work and as usual checked the Manchester Birding Forum sightings page and was surprised to read news of 2 **Little Terns** present at lunchtime! I quickly ate my dinner and drove down to the reservoir to be greeted by a smiling Peter Baron and immediately saw the birds resting on the mud in front of the sailing club then they flew up and down the reservoir and then flew high east at 7.10pm. On the 7th I was thrilled to find a **Little Egret** early morning feeding on the shoreline near the Creek, unfortunately it didn't stay for long and the only other birder to see it was Peter Johnson. On the 25th I was also rather surprised to find a Juv/1st winter **Pied Flycatcher** in the hedgerow at the top of the Dip. To finish off another hectic month off I found a summer plumage **Turnstone** on the 28th hiding amongst the large flock of Black Headed Gulls in front of the sailing club taking the total to 109 at the end of July.



Turnstone, Elton 29th July 2008 (Paul Wilson)

**AUGUST** turned out to be very memorable and undoubtedly the most productive month of the year. August is usually the best month to see Willow Tit and I didn't have to wait long as one was present in the Dip on the 3rd. The next day I found a juvenile **Black Tern** feeding over the water at 5.30pm. It later transpired that this bird had been seen in the morning and was the first one at Elton for about 4 years. I had to wait 13 days until the next year tick with the expected Spotted Flycatcher present near the stream at Crow Trees Farm on the 17th. On the 19th I found a juvenile **Mediterranean Gull** in the evening amongst a handful of Black Headed Gulls. I had been looking for this species for about a month and was delighted to eventually find one. A report of a juvenile Shag present had me down at the reservoir scouring every corner of both reservoirs but I failed to find it but consolation came in the form of a 1st year **Hobby** on the 22nd flying round the back of Old Hall Farm. Then amazingly Ian Campbell relocated the **Shag** on Withins Reservoir on the 23rd showing extremely well. The bird was so tame it was eventually picked up and taken into care and released later in Wales. Calm and overcast conditions on the 29th brought in the expected Lesser Whitethroats which finally made its way on to the year list. Finally, the 30th turned out to be the best day of the year at Elton. I met up with Simon Johnson and Mark Rigby at dawn and we soon had my second Hobby of the year followed by an **Osprey** at 8.55am appearing right over our heads and even hovering allowing fantastic views. This was my third Osprey at Elton and another fantastic addition to the year list. At the end of August I had reached 117 species and despite being in Scotland for a week I visited 27 times.



Shag Elton, 23rd August 2008 (Paul Wilson)

A disappointing start to **SEPTEMBER** saw me miss two Whinchats in the space of a week. However Wigeon was finally added on the 12th with 6 birds present on the water. Then on the morning of the 16th whilst I was in the Dip I got a phone call from Simon Johnson informing me he had just found a Whinchat near wader point but it had flown across the Reservoir towards Old Hall Farm. Well within 10 minutes and third time lucky I was quickly relocating the bird below the pump house! I now only needed one more species to equal the record. This soon came on the 20th whilst talking to Peter and Norma Johnson I found a Buzzard sat on top of a hedge near Withins which equaled the Elton year list record! This rather scarce bird for Elton then went on to stay for about 3 weeks. On the 25th I had a rare day out of the county to Yorkshire to see a Brown Shrike, meanwhile I was totally unaware Elton was having its first ever White Winged Black Tern! Having only found out about it after dark I couldn't believe what was happening, this would have been the bird that broke the record - what a disaster! Despite being at Elton at first light the next day there was no sign and the bird was in fact present on nearby Heaton Park reservoir but it failed to return to Elton. However I didn't have to wait long to break the record and break it in style with the discovery of a family party of 5 **pale bellied Brent Geese** on the 28th which were only present up to about 8.40am only. This was a thrilling way to break the record. I managed 29 visits this month and finished the month on 121 with three months still to go!



4 of the 5 Pale Bellied Brent Geese, Elton, 28th September 2008 (Paul Wilson)



Bird of the Year White Winged Black Tern, Sept 2008, unfortunately I missed it, and it still hurts! (Jill Islam)

**OCTOBER** is not normally one of the best months at Elton but I was very pleased to add **Raven** on the 10th with two birds present on the pylon and being mobbed by the local peregrine. This remains a very scarce bird at Elton.

I got a pleasant surprise on the 16th when I walked down to the shoreline to be greeted by a juvenile **Golden Plover** feeding on the water's edge. Unfortunately now a very scarce bird at Elton and this was the first record in a few years. The 18th was undoubtedly the second-best day of the year with the early morning sky seemingly full of migrating birds, thousands of thrushes and Woodpigeons heading west and geese heading south and east. I had hoped to catch up with some of the **Whooper Swans** passing through the county so I was delighted to pick up a flock of 28 birds flying far to the north of Elton, watching and willing them to fly towards the reservoir they duly obliged and flew right over the reservoir and then headed east, a fantastic sight! Then about half an hour later another 18 Whooper Swans flew south east with a large skein of Pink feet. What a fantastic morning's visible migration. During October I spent a lot of time checking nearby fields and hedges but failed to find any partridge which sadly seem to have disappeared from the area but on the 24th I managed to add Treecreeper to take the total at the end of October to 125.

**NOVEMBER** meant birding was again more or less restricted to weekends. After several attempts 2 **Woodcock** were flushed from cover on the 8th with 1 still present in the area next day, were far easier than I could have expected. Another rare venture out of the county on the 15th came back to haunt me AGAIN when I was informed of a Great White Egret present in the field below the reservoir. Despite getting back to Elton late afternoon there was no further sign

of the bird and it was not seen again much to my anguish! Finally some good fortune on the 29th when a **Firecrest** had amazingly returned (or had never been away) to the Daisyfield gardens, which is well within the Elton recording area, thank you very much! The total by the end of November had reached 127.

My expectations for **DECEMBER** were not very high but on the 5th I was delighted to find a 1st winter **Red Breasted Merganser** on the reservoir mid afternoon. Shame I hadn't located it on my morning visit otherwise more locals could have appreciated this scarce local bird. The very next day brought another excellent addition to the year list when Simon Johnson found 5 **Waxwings** in the creek early morning. I was lucky enough to be also stood near the creek and a quick phone call from Simon enabled me to see one of the birds in flight heading towards wader point as the other 4 flew towards Bury Road. Despite regular coverage for the next three weeks it wasn't until the 28th until I added a long overdue Tawny Owl when I finally found two birds behind the hospital to make it 130 for the year!



The 130th species Tawny Owl, Elton 28th December 2008 (Paul Wilson)



Well there you have it, in 240 visits I managed to see 130 species (including 18 species of wader) out of a possible 141 recorded at the site during the year. It's been a really enjoyable year despite being a little stressful at times. It's fair to say it's been a rollercoaster of a year with many highs and a couple of huge disappointments in missing two site firsts in the form of a White Winged Black Tern and Great White Egret, both turning up while I was out of the county, but that's birding. Hopefully if nothing else Elton Reservoir is back on the birding map recording an impressive four site firsts in a single year for the first time in over 20 years and yet again Elton has proved to be very attractive to passage birds in particular passerines on autumn migration. My favorite birds of the year were the brilliant family party of pale bellied Brent Geese and the ridiculously tame Shag, both site firsts. My best self-found birds included Little Egret, Osprey, Black Tern, Pied Flycatcher and Red Breasted Merganser and several decent waders.

I would like to say a big thank you to the many people who assisted in providing me with valuable information on sightings, especially Simon Johnson, Peter Baron, Ian Campbell and Paul Wilson. A big thank you for Paul Wilson for taking so many excellent photos of the year's birds included within this report. My Dad for his support and assistance in the field, Mark Rigby for continually motivating me when birding was slow and co finding the best Osprey ever and of course Ian McKerchar for making it all possible with his wonderful website without which I would never have done such a daft thing as a year list.

**Simon Warford, January 2008**

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