

AN ELTON YEAR

by Ian Peters



Little Bittern, Elton Reservoir, May 2014 (Paul Wilson)

I didn't mean to do it! So how did it happen? Well, it was all about my promise to keep submitting Birdtrack records made to myself two years ago and if ever there was an advert for keeping records...but more about that later.

Before I go on to the description I would like to pay my respects to previous record holders for Elton. It seems hard to believe that Dave Lowe's 120 was achieved in the days before we evolved our text network and so it was for Simon Warford's 130 also achieved against work commitments. Who could forget the dedication of the 300-day-ish efforts of Brian Fielding for 130 also? So how do I compare? Well, three serious bouts of illness made sure my actual time on site was roughly the same in days as Brian although technically, I had 365 days because I live within the Elton recording area. I was largely unemployed apart from part-time work at the start of the year and that meant I was available for any alerts...not that I always made it, as will become plain. Finally, the number of species reported must of course, have a link to any record total and for Simon and Brian it was 130 from 141, for me it was 133 from 143. There are two parts to this and the first one is that I guessed that Elton would not have such a poor year as it did in 2012 and 2013 so it was always a reasonable shout to try for the record once I made the decision. However, the second part is less positive because whilst 143 is slightly above average for the site, a significant number of records refer to single reports,

one-day or fly-through records. Sadly, this is a testament to the disturbance at Elton these days and the future prospects are not encouraging either but that is for another discussion.

January 1st saw a modest start of just 29 species, raised to 47 on the 2nd, with the 50 being passed on my next visit on the 9th. The first red letter day was on the 16th and a brief few days when one of the occasional Elton winter visitors chose to roost out on an open fence line. The total by the end of January was 63 with only a further six species for February. I was still involved with work and would be for another month and I had yet to decide on an attempt at the record. Naturally, March saw a pick up in scoring with 17 species added to take the total to 87 including a run of Iceland Gull records for the site first found by Simon Warford and Paul Wilson but eventually seen by all the Elton regulars. It is still not clear how many birds were involved but descriptions suggest possibly three individuals with the interval between records suggesting more and therefore, a possible passage rather than just daily visits. It is difficult to believe that these were probably the first Iceland gull records for Elton.

The 100th species was Yellow Wagtail achieved on the 15th April and a bird that is sometimes hard to connect with at Elton these days. In fact, 2014 provided a very good total of records, I was present for four and there were others. Up to the 26th of April, all species had been ones annually recorded or expected with the exception of the Iceland Gull(s). The 26th added Whinchat, Whimbrel and Bar-tailed Godwit but much, much better was just round the corner. March ended with a total of 109 and with a little cajoling from Brian and Ian Campbell, the record attempt began to be a reality. The interval between 115 and 116 and eight days 17th May to 25th May with no species added but those two turned Elton into something special. Ian Campbell found the White-winged Black Terns on the first of those dates followed by Brian Fielding with the little bittern on the second date. It has to be said that apart from a few minor incidents, the behaviour was excellent especially by visitors who were probably unfamiliar with the site. Tremendous praise must go to Bill at Old Hall Farm for opening a gate to admit a disabled birder and to Elton Sailing Club who were excellent in providing some extra parking. Only six species to reach 116 by the end of May but it seems churlish to complain...in fact it was to begin a period where I seemed to score in batches as I had in April. June ended with a surprise male cuckoo to make 119. July was a blank month partly because I suffered a bout of tendonitis and unfortunately, saw the end of my Birdtrack submissions until December (I promise to do more in 2015). However, August produced the long-staying Ruff and three Black-necked Grebes to end with the total at 124.



White-winged Black Terns, Elton Reservoir, May 2014 (Paul Wilson)

It has to be said that at this stage, I feared a poor autumn migration and I was partly right, and I suspected that I would not actually pass the record. Just three species for September included (surprisingly) the only record of Black Terns with two juveniles staying just 30 minutes before being chased off by a young Peregrine. It seems ironic that White-winged Black Terns stayed longer than Black Terns this year. A fly-through Merlin on the 28th September saw me to 127 and past my own personal Elton record with a stonechat out of the groups passing through being ticked off on the 10th of October. The shocker was on the 22nd when I finally managed to connect with a (the only) Golden Plover either flying through or just leaving from Capstick's marsh area following an overnight storm. A Whooper Swan arrived shortly afterwards to level my total at 130, a fact that hardly sunk in at the time. Steve Higginbottom joined me to confirm the Whooper Swan and we decided to head off for the Marsh Tit at Watergrove. However, we were delayed by Malcolm near the overflow and Steve happened to scan the hedges by the road and picked out the Black Redstart for 131 and the record. I have to confess that I punched the air at that point, perhaps more in relief than in triumphalism. Two Rock Pipits were added on the 1st of November at the same time as Horwich Moor was having a late running vis-mig, albeit different species. Indeed, Elton seemed to experience Autumnal runs on the same days as the guys were recording massive numbers up at Horwich Moor. Final bird of the year was Long-tailed Duck on the 17th of November on one of two visits from another nearby site. With nothing common outstanding, it was a wait to see if anything unusual would turn up in December but as the storms all stayed to the north of the country and there was no cold weather block apart from three days during the Christmas break, there was nothing likely to arrive.

It is perhaps not surprising that a year list has some similarities with a 24 hour bird race in that it is time-sensitive but whereas darkness all but ends bird racing in some circumstances, theoretically there is no such limitation for a year list. Yet, with a very mild end to the year, to get the final two species was extremely fortunate. Then again, any time-limited list has to have some heavy elements of luck and so it was for most of the 10 that I missed (you should have been here five minutes ago), one of which, was missed while I was on site (I now officially hate Greenshanks with a passion). There is a long list of thanks for help and companionship and some very enjoyable days (as well as some that I would rather forget). In that respect, all the Elton regulars and quite a few others had a hand at some point and how nice it is to see NW and county birders at one's own local patch.

The final question is – would I do it again? The answer is an unequivocal, NO! Whilst it was an interesting experience and I learned a lot about my local patch, I also discovered some uncomfortable truths about its future. However, the spur for getting out and entering Birdtrack or Mapmate records is that every day is a bird race and it is amazing how personal totals can be built up by this simple method. If ever there was an argument for promoting what Ian McKerchar has been urging us to do and what everyone at GMBRG should be doing then this is it. As I write this, Ian Campbell is planning a new assault on the record for 2015 so I wish him good luck...records are made to be broken and time is arguably running out for Elton. Also good luck to Ian Campbell/ Steve Higginbottom for the GMRC submission for Temminck's Stint and Richard Thew/Steve Higginbottom for the Yellow-legged Gull record.

Ian Peters, 31st December 2014

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