

COUNTY LISTING 2005

by Brian Fielding

This is an account of my Greater Manchester year list for 2005. This was my second attempt at county listing. In 2004 I saw 166 out of 188 species recorded in the county.

Having only started birding in 2000 I wasn't that experienced, didn't know many sites in the county or many birders. That changed in 2004, with many hours spent in the field my knowledge of the county grew. Previous to 2004 I had only visited Elton reservoir and Pennington flash. Elton was my local patch for a while and it was there that I met my good friend Dave Lowe. With Dave I started traveling around the country to see rare birds. The problem I found with this is that you spend most of your time on the road and not in the field. I considered going back to Elton, now although Elton gets the occasional good bird I wanted to see a bit more. I rang Dave towards the end of 2003 to see if he fancied a go at county listing. He liked the idea so we gave it a go in 2004. Dave himself despite having a full-time Monday to Friday job saw 160 species that year. I had such a great time that I decided to try again in 2005.

January

I was up and on my way to Wigan flashes before dawn on the 1st. A wintering Long-tailed duck was my first target bird of the year. It took quite a long time to find it on Scotmans. Whilst looking I found a female Scaup.

Next stop was Atherton to look for a flock of Waxwings on Crabtree lane. They flew in after about fifteen minutes, showed well for five minutes and then disappeared. The day finished with a trip to Littleborough to see the wintering White-fronted goose at Akzo pools. 54 species was my total on the 1st.

A call from Judith Smith on the 5th had me off to Astley moss. 5 Tundra bean geese had just been found. Whilst on route they had flown across to Chat moss and there I met Judith and finder Andy Isherwood. After a call from Ian Mckerchar on the 15th I was off to Heaton park reservoir. An Iceland Gull had been found in the gull roost. The light wasn't good when I arrived but Ian showed me the bird through his scope. The following evening a Glaucous Gull was found there but it was already dark when I got the news. I checked the roost the following evening but the bird didn't return.

A few days later I made the long walk up to the Twite feeding station at Light Hazzles reservoir, and many Twite were feeding when I arrived.

On the morning of the 27th I was at Etherow country park, Dipper and Mandarin were added before my phone rang. John Spottiswood had just found a Yellow-browed Warbler in the garden of 31 Clapgate in Bredbury Green. Even with the walk back to the car I was there within fifteen minutes. Other birders began to arrive on site but we couldn't find the bird. I remained on site for the next six hours but still no sign. The following morning I returned at dawn and spent another three hours looking for it but never saw it.

I met Judith on the 30th at Pilsworth sand quarry to see a Glaucous Gull, also present was a second winter Iceland Gull. Total species in January was 85.

February

Dave Lowe joined me for a day out on the 6th. We started at Wigan Flashes. At about 8.45am Dave saw a Bittern dropping into the Hawkley Hall reed bed but I missed it. On Pearson's Flash we saw Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit. We then went to Smithills Moor, Raven and Stonechat were seen but I again missed a Red Grouse which flew across the moor.

A report of 5 Common (Mealy) Redpolls had me off to Standish on the 9th. They had been found at Fairhurst reclamation park. It took a long time to pin them down as they moved around with a flock of Goldfinches. I eventually got a good view of one of them as it feed in an Alder.

The following day at Smithills Hall wood in Bolton I saw a flock of Bramblings.

That evening I received a call from Judith regarding a Long-eared Owl that had been found in the Wigan area so we met up the next morning and we managed to find it. From there I returned to Smithills Moor and this time did see Red Grouse.

On the 27th I was in Worsley woods looking for Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. I had seen a male there in 2004. It was a nice morning and I hoped it would be drumming or calling. After two hours I had heard nothing but had seen Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Great Spotted Woodpecker. I was watching a Nuthatch when a small bird caught my eye as it flew in but landed behind a branch. After a while it appeared, male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! I watched it for a few minutes before it flew off. Year list total 99 at the end of February.

March

My first addition in March was a superb summer plumaged Mediterranean Gull at Audenshaw Reservoirs on the 2nd. On the 8th Lesser Redpoll, Peregrine and Curlew were seen at Dovestones.

A quick visit to Pennington on the 19th for a summer plumaged Black-necked Grebe also added my first Dunlin and Little Ringed Plover of the year.

Next day back at Audenshaw I saw my first Wheatear of the year and was lucky enough to find a Rock Pipit whilst there.

On the morning of the 21st I was at Pennington when a call from Judith had me off to Piethorne water treatment works where a Black Redstart had been found. After about fifteen minutes I found it perched on top of a concrete post. It showed very well, at times down to six feet.

A male Hen Harrier at Watergrove towards the end of the month caused a lot of frustration. It was seen on and off for over a week but despite four separate searches of over two hours each I couldn't find it.

Dave joined me again on the 27th. We started at Audenshaw, the first Sand Martins and Swallow of the year was seen. Next stop was Castleshaw reservoirs. A male Red-breasted merganser had been returning there for a number of years around this time so it was worth a check. The first bird Dave saw on the upper reservoir was the merganser. Our luck continued later in the day when I found a Sandwich Tern at the end of the spit at Pennington which was only present for fifteen minutes. Total species at the end of March 114.

April

Four Common Scoters at Watergrove Reservoir on the 1st were followed by a Slavonian Grebe at Audenshaw on the 3rd, it was well found by Dave in the far corner of number 3 reservoir. Later that day we diverted from Wigan flashes to Pennington to see a male Garganey which was showing from Teal hide.

Back at Audenshaw on the 4th the Slavonian Grebe was still present and also 2 Kittiwakes and my first Common Sandpiper of the year were added.

The next day after sleeping off a night shift I checked Birdguides to see that a Knot had been present at Pennington that morning, luckily when I arrived at 4.30pm it was still present.

Another wader, a Greenshank was added on the 15th at Pearson's Flash after a message from Judith.

The month ended with 9 Arctic Terns at Pennington on the 28th.

In total I saw 18 new species in April for a total of 132.

May

May started with a Turnstone at Pennington on the 3rd. At Etherow on the 4th Garden warbler and Pied flycatcher were found but I couldn't find Wood Warbler. At dawn on the 8th I found a Whimbrel at Audenshaw standing on the wall near the hide. The following evening I returned to Etherow to watch roding Woodcock.

On the 10th I went to Swineshaw to look for a Ring Ouzel but couldn't find it in a three hour search, but did find a Cuckoo and a Redstart in a small copse nearby. A quick dash to Elton the next day added Whinchat

On the 21st I had just sat down to watch the cup final when Judith rang me. Steve Atkins had found a small wader at Watergrove which he couldn't identify. It sounded interesting so I left the football and headed off to Watergrove. I arrived at 3.45pm, it was raining hard and Steve wasn't there. I first saw the bird as it feed with 2 Dunlin. Compared with them it was similar sized but with slightly shorter legs, a dark cap, darker back and longer primary projection. Viewing from the hide is very limited so I climbed down the bank to the left of the hide and set my scope up. From this angle I could see it was with 5 Dunlin. To be honest I didn't know what it was so I was going to go and get the field guide from the car when Steve and Chris Johnson turned up with a camera and a field guide. They thought the bird was possibly a Broad-billed Sandpiper. We studied the field guide and all the features matched. We even saw the tail

pattern as it flew to another part of the reservoir. According to the field guide this species is only recorded 2 or 3 times a year on average in Britain and then mainly on the east coast. We checked and double-checked the features, I then rang Judith and told her we were 95% certain it was a Broad-billed sandpiper and she set off immediately from home. Judith arrived some time later and we put her on to the bird. She had seen this species before and knew what it was. The news had been put out as a probable on the bird services at first but was changed to definite once identification was certain. This was a brilliant experience, playing a small part in helping to identify a county mega will live long in the memory.

After work that night I went to Audenshaw at dawn, 2 Sanderling and a Dunlin were on the motorway side.

A day on the moss lands on the 29th added Tree pipit and Corn bunting. Total at the end of May 147.

June

June was mainly spent trying to find some of the scarcer breeding birds I hadn't yet seen.

I was back at Etherow on the 7th. The Wood warbler had been reported back in Ernocroft wood. Not far into the wood I could hear it singing and soon found it. From Etherow I headed to Chat Moss to look for a Yellow wagtail near Red Challis farm. It took about twenty minutes to find it.

Another species I still needed was Grasshopper Warbler. I knew of a few sites which had them but by now they had stopped singing. I met Judith in Bickershaw and she showed me where she had seen a singing male earlier in the spring. By luck we managed to pick one out in the same area. I left Judith at 9pm and headed off to the moss lands to check out a Barn Owl site. Whilst there I met Pete Berry who said he had just seen one hunting not far away so I went for that one and saw it briefly.

With permission of a farmer at Warburton I was able to watch a pair of Spotted Flycatchers and the last new bird of the month was a Green sandpiper at Pennington on the 30th. Year list total 153.

July

July was a disappointing month with only one new species added, a Ruff at Pearsons on the 15th.

A call from Judith on the 27th had me rushing to Elton. Pete and Norma Johnson had just called her about a Little Egret they had seen. I arrived within fifteen minutes but it had flown off a couple of minutes before I got there! That evening another message from Judith telling me that 2 Red-crested Pochards were present at Watergrove; these were potentially wild. I was just leaving for work so I was at Watergrove at dawn the next morning...but they had gone.

The end of the month was mainly spent at Pennington trying to see a Bittern which had been present from the 22nd but I didn't see that either. Year list total 154.

August

The first two weeks in August I was on a family holiday in France. I hadn't missed anything whilst away and nothing happened until the 22nd. A Lesser Scaup had been found the previous evening at Heaton park Reservoir. After dropping my son off at school the next morning I went straight there. Rob Adderley was there and had already seen the bird. After a while we found it amongst many Tufteds. Once on the bird the relevant features could be seen. It was in eclipse but the paler back was just showing, and also we saw the nail tipped bill and the partial wing bar.

Two days later I made a quick dash to Rumworth to see a juvenile Black Tern – there had been no spring records.

The 28th was a bad day. After dropping my son off at school I went to Pennington. I arrived at about 9.30am and went to the visitors' centre to check the sightings board. The day before a Red-crested Pochard was present, that morning between 7am and 8.30am 2 Little Terns, a Little Egret and the Bittern had been seen. The Red-crested Pochard had gone, the Little Terns had departed at 8.30am and the Little Egret had walked into the reeds from New hide and wasn't seen again. I remained all day but never saw the Bittern either. Year list total 156.

September

Things improved in September but didn't start well. Four Curlew sandpipers flew into Audenshaw at dusk on the 3rd. I arrived next morning at 5am, it was still dark, by 5.30am I was looking for them as it started to get light but they had gone. I left there and went to Pennington. I hadn't been there long when I found a Wood Sandpiper at the top of the spit. I rang Judith and she arrived in time to see it.

A message on the evening of the 6th was a real surprise, a Wryneck had been found that day in Horwich. I was on the Isle of Man at the time but would be back the following morning. I rang Judith when I arrived back in Liverpool the next morning and she said she was watching the bird so I decided to go straight there even though I didn't have my bins' or scope with me. I rang Dave and he met me there. We eventually got good views of the bird on the path near the Hitachi factory.

On the afternoon of the 14th I got up to news of a Marsh Harrier at Wigan Flashes. It hadn't been seen since midday but I thought it was worth a try and I got there about 4pm. At 4.15pm I saw it over Horrocks Flash.

My next two year ticks both came from Pennington. A brief Hobby flew over Horrocks Hide, circled the ruck once and then disappeared on the 22nd. On the 27th I was again in Horrocks Hide when I saw a brown shape in the reeds in Ramsdales. I got my scope onto it and finally Bittern was seen. I got those present onto the bird and it showed really well for about thirty minutes as it climbed up and sat on top of the reeds. I left Pennington at 3pm to go and pick up my son from school. Whilst waiting for him to come out, Judith rang to say a Little Stint was at Elton Reservoir near the creek. My son's school is two minute's drive from Elton but on the opposite side from where the bird was. I scoped across the reservoir, there were two birders

looking down at the water's edge. I could see the bird but at that range it was a poor view. I drove around to the yacht club side and walked to where the bird was and with another birder watched it from about twelve feet away.

A quick dash to Pennington the next morning added Pintail. Year list total now 163.

October

Siskin was added on the 3rd with a flock of about 40 at Broad Ees Dole, Sale WP.

The following three weeks, despite many hours in the field, nothing new was seen. I couldn't find a Ring Ouzel at Hollingworth Lake. Four Whooper swans spent 25 minutes at Pennington with a Bar-tailed Godwit present at the same time but I didn't find out about them until later.

Two new species were added on the 30th. In the morning I was at Watergrove looking for a pair of Ring Ouzels, after about an hour and a half I eventually found a male skulking in a bush. I was joined by Dave in the afternoon at the Audenshaw gull roost. We arrived at about 3pm and the heavens opened so we took shelter behind the hide. When the rain had stopped we went up to view number 3 reservoir. Audenshaw regular Paul Wren found a gull stood on the side which looked good for Yellow-legged gull. The B.O.U had recently split this species from Herring gull. We managed to get closer views of the bird and confirm its identification. This was year tick 166 equaling my 2004 total.

November

Two attempts to find Snow Buntings in early November at Blackstone Edge Reservoir failed.

On the 9th a Red-necked Grebe was found at Pennington; this was a chance to beat my last year's total but my car wouldn't start. I waited for my wife to come home and borrowed hers and finally arrived at 3.30pm. I met Judith there but we couldn't find it. I got up after sleeping off a night shift the next day to a message that the bird was still present and so went straight there. The Grebe showed really well on the lagoon behind Ramsdales.

A message on the 16th had me rushing to Pennington, 9 Whooper swans had flown in at 9.30am. I arrived at 10am but missed them by two minutes.

More car trouble was to follow on the 18th. A pair of Short-eared Owls had been discovered along Vicar's Hall lane in Boothstown so I arranged to meet Judith on site at 3pm. I arrived first and one of the owls was out hunting. Judith arrived at 3.15pm but the owl wasn't showing. I had to leave at 3.45pm so I wished Judith luck, put my gear in the boot, closed it and then realized that my car keys were in my coat pocket and now locked in the boot. It was getting dark and freezing cold. I rang for breakdown assistance, whilst on the phone Judith shouted "Hen Harrier". All I could do was watch it distantly fly across the field and land out of sight. Judith waited with me until the breakdown assistance arrived and the mechanic managed to open the car. I returned the following evening and was treated to superb views of the Harrier which at times was being mobbed by 2 Short-eared Owls.

Year list total now 169.

December

On the 4th I was again at Blackstone Edge Reservoir looking for Snow buntings - 9 had been reported on the 3rd but I still couldn't find any.

My only year tick in December came on the 18th with a redhead Smew at Heaton Park Reservoir. I was on my way to Audenshaw when I got a message letting me know it was there. This brought my list total to 170 for the year. Whilst checking my list for this article I realized that I hadn't put Willow Tit on the list so my final year total was 171.

2005 has been my most enjoyable year's birding so far. My knowledge of birds has grown to a level where I don't feel like a novice anymore. I have enjoyed the company of many local birders and I thank everyone who has helped me over the last two years. Special thanks to Dave Lowe and Judith Smith.

Brian Fielding, January 2006

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