

2010: YEAR OF THE IDIOT

THE MONTHLY DIARY OF A COUNTY YEAR-LISTING ENDEVOUR

By Mark Rigby



If you see this man he is a self-confessed idiot on a year-listing endeavour and needs our help!

Since 2004, there has been an annual attempt at breaking the Greater Manchester year list. In 2008, Paul Heaton smashed the existing record and managed to see an astonishing 183 species in our tiny land locked county.

Birds seen in the county in 2008 included a county first Glossy Ibis , the second county record of Cattle Egret (the first being seen in late 2007), third Great White Egret, eight Spoonbill, third Alpine Swift, third Red-rumped Swallow, third White-winged Black Tern, four Caspian Gulls (fourth to seventh records) as well as a supporting cast of scarcer birds. Could Greater Manchester Birding get any better?

No formal attempt was made in 2009, so it seemed the general consensus of opinion was 2008 was indeed a freak year never to be repeated.

Having done the majority of my birding 'out of county' chasing new and rare birds, 2007 saw the start of my Greater Manchester County list after finding this website purely by chance. Since then, I have made good friends with several members of the forum, found myself a local patch and have found a lot of enjoyment both reading the forum and its banter and finding my own birds at the birding Mecca, namely Castleshaw Reservoirs.

I had been 'badgered' by two individuals in particular, to have a go at the 'year list' in 2009. So, in what was probably the worst kept secret of 2010, I have decided to put my head over the parapet and put myself forward as the 2010 idiot.

It was my intention to keep my attempt quiet, only telling a few select people until the end of January. Then I would assess the pro's and con's of carrying on. Was it really worth membership to 'the silent meals club', my work commitments, was I still going to be married in 2011, financial implication (petrol/parking fee's at Pennington Flash), college fees for a course in 'linguistics and hand gesturing' for visits to Wigan and Bolton etc, etc? Could I find a good enough reason for actually doing it in the first place?

Things didn't go to plan however. On New Year's Day, I was greeted by 'Team Heafordcliffeanie' at Pennington Flash wanting to know how the year list was going!

Anyway, have you found a good enough reason for doing it I hear you ask?

Well, the answer is quite simple, I am an idiot. Joking apart, there is a lot of the county that I have not visited and also a lot of the county that gets very little coverage. You just never know what may turn up. Was 2008 exceptional an exceptional year or did a lot of birds get missed? Would the 2008 Glossy Ibis have been found if it had been at a moorland site for example? That is the beauty of our hobby, you just never know!

Having spoken with Ian McKerchar, it was suggested that I utilised the website for a monthly diary style update on my progress and its visitors for any help in my quest . So get your sightings posted on the Manchester Birding forum and if anybody wants my mobile number who hasn't already got it and wouldn't mind phoning/texting me if they find something, send me a private message and I will send it to you.

And finally, my target? To beat the current total would be a dream but realistically anything over 170 would be fantastic.

JANUARY

A cold and frosty early morning start on New Year's Day with John Rayner (JR). The first port of call was Hollingworth Lake for the long staying Great Northern Diver. As we arrived in the car park, we saw that the lake was 90% frozen with only two small patches of open water and most disappointingly, no Diver. Not a good start to the day!

Next stop was High Rid Reservoir for the long staying Scaup. Fortunately this bird was still present and was the highlight of an otherwise disappointing start to my year list.

Next stop was Rainfords Flash, part of the Wigan Flashes for the Green-winged Teal which had been present for 12 days and had been seen on the 31st December. Having risked life and limb on the icy paths, it became apparent that the Teal just like the Diver had decided to spend 2010 somewhere other than in Greater Manchester.

To make matters worse, a Bittern had been out on the ice for a couple of hours at Pennington Flash, but had skulked back into the reeds by the time we had got there.

On the 4th whilst on my way to work, I received a phone call from JR to tell me he had re-found the Little Egret on the river Goyt behind Chadkirk kennels. I arrived just in time before the Egret flew down stream.

Jack Snipe was added to my list at an undisclosed site in Hazel Grove, with JR and M.Chorley (MC) on the 9th. After a tour of popular GM sites adding the more common species to my list, I received a phone call from S.Warford (SW) to inform me that a Smew had been seen on the ship canal at Barton Lock. As we were at Pennington Flash at the time, the Smew was only 20 minutes drive away. However, the time was now almost 3.15pm and there was not a lot of daylight left.

We arrived with a few minutes of daylight remaining but after scanning the area where the bird had been reported, there was no sign of it. After a few minutes of searching, we found it loafing with other ducks 400 yards from the lock. This was a result, as the bird was not seen the following day and had made its way back into Cheshire.

An over wintering Green Sandpiper was seen at Hope Carr on the 18th.

On the 19th, following a three hour vigil with MC, I added Bittern to my list at Wigan Flashes, albeit a brief flight view. A skein of Pink-feet flew over head, another one on the list.

On the 20th, I decided to have a wander round Dove Stone as Siskin, Goldcrest are 'nailed on' and Brambling are quite regular at this site. After 2 hours, I had seen more dead birds than live ones. Mallard, Blackbird, Red Grouse and Pheasant had all succumbed to the weather. Only Peregrine was added.

A female Brambling was seen at Rindle Road feeding station and Wigeon at Pennington Flash which was now ice free!

Another visit to Pennington on 26th added Shelduck to the list with 5 birds present. A 2nd winter Iceland Gull was seen at Castleshaw Reservoirs and a Yellow-legged Gull was seen at Audenshaw Reservoir.

After finishing work on the 27th, I received a text from G.Hargreaves (GH) who had found 2 Whooper Swans on Horrock's Flash, Wigan. They were still there when I arrived looking quite settled. A visit to Viridor Woods with GH added Woodcock with good flight views obtained.

On the 30th, I received a phone call from SW, and it was just possible to make out between the expletives that he and his dad Alan (AW) had found a Shorelark, on a slag heap, in Bolton! The time was 1612hrs. It would be dark around 1700hrs and I was on the other side of the county, in the middle of nowhere looking for a Short-eared Owl in West Yorkshire in

the hope it would fly into GM airspace. I set off, wheels screeching and headed for the motorway. Keeping strictly to the speed limits, I arrived at Rosemary Lane, Over Hulton and parked behind a now familiar RSPCA van at 1635hrs. I headed towards the slag heap as the sun was just about setting. With my 4 year old son on my shoulders, I was greeted by an arm waving lunatic (SW) who was shouting at the top of his voice "come on, hurry up". Just as well I am built for speed, Greyhound like!

When I arrived on the slag heap, breathing normally, not out of breath at all, AS and P.Heaton (PH) had split up. The bird had disappeared. J.Smith (JS) and P.Rhodes (PR) arrived and after several minutes of searching, I began to think that the bird had gone to roost. As I turned around, a bird flew round PR and AW and landed back on the top of the slag heap. There it was, a Shorelark on the top of a slag heap, in Bolton.

It just goes to show what birds could be lurking in Greater Manchester. If wasn't for SW and AW, the Shorelark could have gone undetected. They decided to visit an area that they had not visited before, and were handsomely rewarded!

FEBRUARY

A generally quiet month with only 13 species added.

I made another trip to Mast Road on the 2nd, in the hope of Raven and Rook. It was lovely and sunny as I travelled past the Reebok Stadium but when I got to the bottom of Mast Road, visibility was down to 50 yards in the fine but heavy drizzle.

Several Rooks were sitting on the lampposts looking pretty sorry for themselves. I soon gave up on the Ravens, as I could just about see the front of my car due to the poor visibility.

On the 4th, a drive along Rindle Road produced a flock of Linnet but "dipped" Stonechat at a normally reliable site. It looks like the harsh weather has taken its toll!

Another attempt for Stonechat drew a blank on the 6th, but a pair of Pintail was a nice surprise at Pennington and Ruddy Duck also added (site undisclosed) before "dipping" on Corn Bunting. Several skeins of Pinkfeet made the day though.

A Siskin flew over my house on the 7th, another bird that is thin on the ground this winter

Long-eared Owl was added at an un-disclosed site on the 9th.

Several attempts were made for Ring-necked Parakeet at Fog Lane Park during my extended lunch breaks until a pair was seen on the 16th along with the Amazon Parrot. Oystercatcher was also added at Pennington Flash.

On the 18th, another extended lunch break. This time on Irlam Moss, in the hope that the reported Hen Harrier was still in the area. No such luck!

On the 19th, a reported Waxwing in Offerton did not show itself despite a tour with JR around all the previous year's locations. A general lack of berries means this may be a difficult bird to connect with this year.

Saturday 20th saw me at Ludworth Moor to add Raven to my list. As I was arriving in work, to make up for my extended lunch breaks, I received a text from SW, "3 Golden Plover at Rummi". After a quick dash up the M61 to Rumworth Lodge. I met SW who informed me that they had just flown and he couldn't relocate them. After several minutes of scanning and the words of IMcK ringing in my ears "it's a marathon, not a sprint", I was about to put the episode down to experience when I picked them up on the water's edge.

Ringed Plover was added at Elton on the 23rd. I had arranged to meet SW to look for Barn Owl but as I was leaving Elton a text from JS, "Marsh Harrier, Bryn Marsh, now". The time was 1515hrs. I phoned JR who needed Marsh Harrier for his County list and we arranged to meet there.

A dash to my car, and I was soon on the M62 at full speed of no more than 70mph. Then disaster, a beep from my car, "Warning- 20 miles of fuel". I had noticed that I was running low on fuel on the way to Elton but had forgotten all about it. I was on the M62 and there was no petrol station for miles. My sat-nav estimated arrival at Wigan Flashes at 1600hrs some 28 miles away. I diverted onto the East Lancs for fuel and after leaving the garage, looked at the sat-nav, arrival was now 1617hrs.

After a mad dash, I met up with JR. Rob Thorpe (RT) and Dave Broome (DB) soon arrived. It was 1630hrs and starting to snow. I was still pretty confident though. My own experience of winter Harrier roost's in Norfolk is that they all get up and have one final fly around just before dark, making for a fine spectacle of 70-80 Marsh Harriers in the air at once. However, I have never witnessed the Harrier roost in heavy snowfall!

Then JR shouted "It's up!" and we were treated to superb flight views for a good 20 minutes. A very good bird for my year list, but better still, a long awaited County tick.

On 27th, I was out with my 4 year old son, who is taking an interest in birds but an even bigger interest in trains. We had just arrived at Heywood station on the East Lancs Railway when I received a text from RT, "Hen Harrier-Rindle Road".

I spoke to the finder, Ian Woosey (IW) who said it had flown west from Rindle Road. I was soon in the area, and after several trips along Moss Lane and Rindle Road decided to stay in my car at the top of the track at the feeding station. Keiron, my son, was fast asleep by this time so I sat in my car and waited. SW sent me a text "any luck yet" and I had just sent him a reply saying "not yet, will stay till dusk". Then a large flock of Chaffinch flew from the ground in the adjacent field. As I raised my bins, there it was, a ringtail Hen Harrier, flying

across the field towards me towards me. It carried on over the road and after several half hearted attempts at a Lapwing, disappeared over the trees towards the peat works.

The month ended with another unsuccessful attempt for Barn Owl on the 28th.

MARCH

With spring migration on the horizon and the promise of better weather, things could only get better.

Another report of Waxwing's, this time in Reddish, led me on a "wild Waxwing chase". After an hour or so with JR at the reported site and no sign, we spread out the search and found a very promising bush laden with berries. With work beckoning and still no sign of any Waxwings, I gave up and went to work.

At about 1100hrs, my phone went mad. 7 Waxwing reported at Astley Bridge near Bolton. I left work and was on site within 30 minutes, but there was no sign of the Waxwings. Several people were looking but there was no sign of the birds.

I set off back to work only to receive a text "2 Waxwing at Reddish". I had a good hour of so searching but again, no Waxwings.

I had arranged to meet up with JR later that afternoon, to try for a Barn Owl. I received a phone call from JR just as I was leaving work to inform me that he was at Astley Bridge and the Waxwings were showing well in the car park of "The Range".

Traffic was horrendous, and there was no way of getting to see the Waxwings and the Barn Owl. I was nearer the Barn Owl site, so arranged to meet JR there instead.

We were treated to superb views of the Barn Owl hunting just before dark and showing to about 50 yards at times.

The following day, I had decided to wait for news of the Bolton Waxwings. As I was on my way to work, SW text me telling me the Waxwings were "showing well in the car park".

They were still showing when I arrived about 0830hrs.

On the 6th, JR had suggested a search for Lesser-spotted Woodpecker. He had a site where he had seen them for the two previous years. This site is also good for roosting Tawny Owls, a glaring omission from my list.

On the way, we stopped off for a speculative Goldcrest (seen twice this year!). However, as we entered a small wooded area, 2 Goldcrest were displaying and showing well.

After a thorough search for Lesser-pecker, we moved on to Carrington Moss for Corn Bunting. Again, no joy but Mediterranean Gull was an unexpected bonus.

The afternoon was spent at Dunham Massey in the hope of Lesser-pecker or Green Woodpecker. However, given the strong wind and general disturbance, our attempt was futile.

On the 7th, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit were added at Dover Basin. As I was returning home, JR rang me to say he had been watching the Lesser-pecker at the site we had been the previous day.

Work commitments meant that I would not be able to visit until the 9th, when it duly obliged and showed well for 30 minutes before flying off further into the woods.

A day out with JR and MC on the 11th turned out to be a very frustrating day. I had received some information of a Stonechat sighting at Chelburn Reservoir. It would appear that Stonechats have not fared well in the poor weather with numbers well down from previous years.

There was no sign of the Stonechat, but a Curlew was seen. After a couple of hours doing the circuit of Watergrove Reservoir, JR took rest on a wooden bench and stated "I am not moving till a Red Kite has flown over". After a couple minutes of ridicule, we moved on and decided to visit Carrington Moss.

As we were passing the Trafford Centre on the M60, a Manchester Birding Text Alert "Red Kite over Brownhouse Wham Reservoir, Rochdale".

There is a very good chance that this bird had flown over Watergrove Reservoir shortly after we had left. We turned around and headed for the moors. We decided that the Naden Valley would be a good vantage point, but there was no sign of the Kite.

Green Woodpecker was added at Piethorne Reservoir on the 16th whilst looking for another reported Stonechat.

Little Ringed plover was added on the 19th at Pennington Flash and Black-necked Grebe at a private site as well as Stonechat (at last!) and a Wheatear at Piethorne Reservoir.

A Chiffchaff was the only new addition at Pennington on the 22nd.

On the 24th, I received a text from Paul Hammond (PH) informing me of a Rock Pipit at Audenshaw Reservoirs. I diverted from my normal route to work and was soon on site, but after forty minutes of searching, we were unable to relocate it. A Dunlin was an addition to the list.

In the afternoon, Robert Adderley (RA) sent me a text. The Rock Pipit was feeding near the hide. I left work and met RA who was leaving but said it was still feeding near to the hide. He had heard another possible bird whilst on his way back from the hide area.

I arrived at the hide and the Rock Pipit was feeding on a wall. After watching it for several minutes, it was flushed by two dog walkers. It flew around calling and was joined by another bird. When they landed, I got my scope on them. There was now two Rock Pipits sat on the wall adjacent to the hide.

A visit to Pennington Flash on the 27th added Sand Martin and an early Willow Warbler.

On the evening of the 28th, I visited two regular Short-eared Owl sites without any joy. On my way home I stopped off at Piethorne and added Tawny Owls to my list.

At the end of the month I had added 19 species bringing my total to 124 for the year.

APRIL

After the arrival of Sand Martin and Willow Warbler at the end of March, spring was finally in the air, but there was a distinct lack of migrants. I had to wait until the 5th, when Blackcap, House Martin and Swallow were added to my list at Pennington Flash.

Common Sandpiper was added on the 6th, followed by a superb drake Garganey on the 8th, also at Pennington.

On the 9th, I had to attend a course in Bolton town centre and was certain that something would appear in the county on the only day I couldn't "disappear" from work. I was not wrong. Just after the meeting started, I received a text message from SJ-"Greenshank at Heaton Park" followed by a text from SW-"Ring Ouzel at Horwich Moors" and I was stuck in an office until 4pm at least.

Having finished work, I picked up my son from home and I was soon on Horwich Moors in search of Ouzels. There was no sign of any Ouzels or birds of any kind for that matter. A quick stop at Heaton Park on my way home for Greenshank also proved fruitless.

The 10th saw an early start with SJ at Elton before a search for Ring Ouzels on Holcombe Moor, again a fruitless exercise but a couple of pairs of displaying Wheatear was a nice sight.

As we were arriving back at my car, I received a phone call from RA who had got 5 Ouzels on Hobson's Moor near Hollingworth. When we arrived, the Ring Ouzels were showing well. As we were watching them, SW phoned to say he had found a Black Redstart on Horwich Moor. Another mad dash across the county and a brief search added a female Black Redstart sunning itself on a pile of building materials.

On the 13th, I had arranged to meet Matt Potter (MP) at Altrincham Sewage works. As we were leaving our cars, RA phoned to say he had just found a Greenshank at Audenshaw. A quick dash around the M60 was not quick enough, as we missed it by seconds. As we

climbed up the reservoir banking, the Greenshank flew off in the opposite direction. I was not happy-but it is a species that I should catch up with latter on in the year.

On the 18th, I was searching Carrington Moss for the elusive Corn Bunting when SW phoned to say a Little Gull had been found on Elton. I arrived some 40 minutes later and it was added to my list.

On the 19th, 3 Twite were reported at Elton late morning, but were not present at 6pm but an early Swift was seen distantly.

On the 20th, I was again in an all day training course and right on cue the text messages began to arrive. Whimbrel at Elton, Pied Fly at Pennington.....

After finishing work, I had no updates on the birds but decided that there was more chance of the Pied Flycatcher still being present at Pennington so set off and battled through the rush hour traffic. Heading from Manchester towards the "East Lancs.", I received a text from SW-"Whimbrel still present, 1645 at least". I changed direction and headed for Elton. I arrived just before 6pm but there was no sign of the Whimbrel. RT sent a text confirming that the Pied Flycatcher was still there at Pennington.

I arranged to pick up SJ who needed the flycatcher for his county list and we were soon on site but the Pied Fly was not immediately visible. We widened our search and I rang RT to check we were in the right place. As I was putting my phone away, a white flash flew around me and went back into the shrubbery. There it was perched no more than 10 feet away, and my camera was in the boot of my car!

A speculative drive onto Astley Moss on our way home produced a single Whimbrel on a ploughed field.

On the 23rd, Sedge Warbler, Common Tern and Reed Warbler were all added.

The 24th saw Redstart and Whitethroat added.

On Sunday the 25th, a report of 3 Little Terns at Pennington was confirmed by RT. I was going shopping with my wife and son. As we both work, Sunday is the only day we can spend as a family. As my wife is about as interested in birds as I am about crocheting, my mind was working overtime. How was I ever going to get to Pennington? To cut a long story short, having handed my credit card over and the promise of a meal out soon swayed her. I saw only 2 of the 3 birds present, flying over the flash in atrocious weather, but they were on my list-a must get bird if I was going to get anywhere near the record.

An evening visit with JR on the 26th produced Lesser Whitethroat at Bredbury Tip and Grasshopper Warbler on Adswood Tip.

Another evening trip with MC and MP the 27th produced a pair of Yellow Wagtails on Irlam Moss and a good prolonged flight view of a Cuckoo over Astley Moss.

The 29th turned out to be a bit of a wader fest with Sanderling added at Audenshaw and 2 Grey Plover's at Rumworth. The former site holding over 60 waders in total, a very uncommon sight these days!

The 30th proved to be a day of "high's and lows". I received an early morning text from Simon Hitchen (SH) who informed me of a Sandwich Tern at Hollingworth Lake.

I was about to set out from my house when I realised that JR needed Sandwich Tern for his county list, as did I. I sent a text message to JR and set off. I was soon on site and sure enough, there was the Sandwich Tern perched on a buoy. As it was a distant view even through my scope, I decided to drive round the lake for a closer view.

It was then that it struck me! JR had not been in contact for an update. I rang his mobile, but got a reply from the queen saying "it has not been possible to connect you call". I tried again but got the same answer. I rang JR's home number and with the tone of his voice, it was apparent that he had just woken up. I gave him the gen and said that I would stay on the bird until he arrived.

Twenty minutes passed, but there was no sign of JR. During this time, the tern started to stretch its wings and fly around but always returned to the buoy. Thirty minutes passed and there was still no sign of JR. After one final wing stretch, the tern flew round but this time it started to gain height and flew off in a north-westerly direction.

I rang JR to inform him of the situation. Unfortunately, had just arrived in the car park on the other side of the lake but didn't see it flying off! Needless to say, he was not impressed and his language was choice to say the least.

After finishing work that day, a trip to Pennington added Arctic Tern.

At the end of the month I had added 25 species bringing my total to 149 for the year.

MAY

At last, May was here and traditionally the best month for rarer bird sightings. This would be the first real test of my metal. What would I do if a Mega appeared elsewhere in the country? Could I resist the temptation of a twitch?

May got off to a good start with Wood Warbler and Garden Warbler added at Holcombe on the 1st. This put my total on 151 for the year. I was actually ahead of Paul Heaton's record breaking attempt of 2008!

Should I give up and claim the most birds seen in the county by May 1st?

A Hobby had showed well for A and SW for over half an hour but it had flown off before I got there.

On the 2nd, an early morning phone call from PH awoke me from my state of unconsciousness. It didn't register at first, but when my brain came round, it struck me, must be a bird alert. I checked my phone and listened to the voicemail from PH. 2 Avocets at Audenshaw! Not quite sure why Paul was whispering-did he not want to disturb me from my sleep or was he frightened of flushing the birds?

Anyway, 25 minutes later I was watching them!

On the 4th, 3 youngsters and myself had entered the Mayhem 24 hr bird race. After visiting various county hotspots, we arrived at Rumworth. I put my binoculars to my eyes and the first bird I saw was a Greenshank. A good bird to get this early in the year and worth tournament points as well! We finished with a very respectable day total of 105.

On the 7th, I had to attend a course in Bolton town centre. What is becoming a bit of a common theme, me on a course and birds turning up, happened again. A pair of Red-breasted Merganser had been found at Elton. It was 8.30 in the morning and the course was due to finish at 5pm. That turned out to be a very long day. It dragged and dragged. They wouldn't still be present when I got there, given the amount of disturbance.

At 5pm, a quick call to SW for an update and they were still there. I had decided to drive into Bolton that day and what a good decision that turned out to be. I jumped into my car and was soon watching the birds with SJ.

As I got home and checked the forum (which forms a small part of the website, oops! you already know that if you are reading this) 6 Dotterel had been reported on Brown Wardle Hill near Watergrove. I made a few early morning calls the next day to some of the Rochdale regulars for any news. It appeared that nobody was looking for them till later in the morning, so I took a chance and made my way there. As I approached the bottom of the hill, a dog walker flushed a small flock of waders.

They were still present, but there was more than 6. I counted 8 birds for definite but did not ID them all as Dotterel. I put out the news and made my way to the general area where they had landed. I was soon watching 6 Dotterel including a couple of stonking females. I walked around the birds, giving them a wide berth to gain some height and get better views. A quick recount and there was 8, then 9.....then 10. I checked several times but could only now get 9 birds. It was at this point that I was advised to get off the hills as I may be suffering from altitude sickness.

I went home very happy; cracking birds and good company during my 4hr vigil until a certain ex-pat arrived from County Durham to twitch the birds. That's dedication or madness.....?

I had just got my son into bed that evening and I checked the forum. "Wood Sandpiper at Pennington". It was 8pm. I got Keiron out of bed and we headed to Pennington. He was happy because he knew that there was a park there with swings etc. We arrived at about 8.30pm just as the sun was setting. I had only taken my bins as I knew viewing would be difficult as the hide was shut. I looked up the spit and noticed a silhouette roosting at the far end. I made a mad

dash back to the car for my scope and managed to see the bird before it disappeared around the top of the spit. Not the best view of a Wood Sandpiper but at least it was a view.

Corn Bunting was finally added at Rindle Road after several fruitless hours of searching on Carrington and Irlam Mosses.

A quick trip to Heaton Park on the 10th added Common Scoter, a particularly uncommon bird so far this year.

A fine summer plumage Turnstone was added at Audenshaw on 13th.

On the 15th, an Osprey had been seen at Dover Basin at midday. These sightings are normally only a fly through. While I was on Horwich moors searching for a Whinchat with Keiron, IMcK phoned to say the Osprey was still present on and off throughout the day and had just been seen again. We located the Whinchat and started to make our way back to my car when I heard a scream. Keiron had gone head over heels on the gravel path cutting his knees and hand. There was blood everywhere. I had to give the Osprey a miss and hoped it stayed.

Against all odds, the Osprey was there the next day. Unfortunately, I was busy until late afternoon and had to endure a day of phone calls and phone checking. Luckily, the bird was still present later that evening.

I was now out of the county for 5 days while I visited Norfolk with the gang on our annual May trip.

Having made a contingency plan for something turning up back in GM, we enjoyed a very relaxing weekend of birding. It's just a shame I couldn't smuggle some of them back with me.

Spotted Flycatcher was added on the 25th at Dunham Massey.

On the 31st, I was on-call at work when I received a text alert from IMcK-"Turtle Dove at Haigh Country Park". I was the only person in the office, I was the quick response should someone have an incident at work. Turtle Dove is a proper county rarity these days and more importantly, not only was it a county tick but a cracking bird to get on my year list. But I couldn't leave my post, what if I was needed.....well, I would only be 40 minutes away if I did get a call out.....thanks to AW who waited with the bird till I arrived. It was in the bag

At the end of the month I had added 14 species bringing my total to 163 for the year.

JUNE

As May is one of the busier months, June is one of the quieter months for new species at least.

Hobby was my target bird for this month and anything else would be a bonus. Hours, and I mean hours of searching was spent on the mosses and other "sites". I was bitten to death with horse flies and mosquitoes.

On the 4th, as I arrived at Astley SSSI, several Meadow Pipits were feeding on the edge of the pools and flying up and perching on the Silver Birch trees adjacent. They then flew onto the moss to feed their young. As I was about half way along the pools, I heard a Tree Pipit calling. It perched on top of one of the trees adjacent to the pools.

I only had my bins with me, but the bird obliged by dropping onto the mud. Good views were obtained and all salient points were observed. I watched the bird for a couple of minutes before it flew off east over Rindle Wood. What a bonus!

Hobby was being elusive though but I was able to watch some dragonfly's hawking over the pools.

An early morning text awoke me on the 14th, juvenile Black Tern at Pennington. I had distant views from the car park as the bird fed in front of the sailing club. A Hobby was seen later in the day on a couple of occasions!

Other Hobby sightings came from far and wide, even up on Ludworth Moor-some people have all the luck!

On the 19th, I was up on the moors following a tip off that Twite had been feeding at a traditional site. Sure enough, within 30 minutes, 3 Twite flew in and were added to my list.

Several more hours were spent in search of Hobby to no avail.

The month ended with 3 species added bringing my total for the year to 166.

JULY

The quest for Hobby continued this month and several hours of searching I was finally rewarded on the 3rd, when after a couple of hours of scanning the mosses with MC and Dennis Atherton (DA), a 1st summer bird gave crippling views for a couple of minutes hawking dragonfly's. At one point it was too close to photograph (and too fast!).

As July can also be relatively quiet, I started spending more time at my beloved Castleshaw. What a waste of time that was!

On the 6th, a text message from IMcK and RT had me chasing over to Horrock's Flash, Wigan for a Ruff. As I arrived, I was greeted by RT who informed me that the bird was still present, but

he had just lost it for the moment behind the reeds. It was soon picked up in the scope, feeding with Green Sandpiper's.

Things were looking good. 2 new birds and we were still in the first week of July.

I had a holiday booked for the last week in July, and was concerned that this can be quite productive for waders. I encountered the wrath of Mrs. Riggers and gained my first entry into the 'SILENT MEALS CLUB' when I told her that if something turned up in GM whilst we were on holiday, then I would be going home to see it.

The rest of the month was spent tramping around various sites in GM in the hope of finding something good. I might as well have been at Castleshaw!

Luckily, while I was on holiday, only Crossbill were seen and I was pretty confident of seeing them when I got back to GM. A fruitless search was made for Crossbill at Binn Green on the 31st

The month ended with 2 species added bringing my total for the year to 168.

AUGUST

A frustrating visit to Binn Green was made on 2nd. As I got out of my car, I could hear a small flock of Crossbill flying off over the reservoir before I could get on to them. To make matters worse, I could hear a small party of Crossbill deep inside Bill O'Jacks plantation but again couldn't see them.

Another visit on the 3rd, and my luck was in. I met up with MP at Binn Green car park and was explaining how I had heard them calling the day previous, when 2 Crossbill flew into the top of a tree for a couple of minutes before promptly flying off again.

Several fruitless visits to Castleshaw saw me crack on 12th. After completing an 8 hour stint and managing just 29 species, I twitched the Wood Sandpiper at Pennington Flash. Although I have already seen one in GM this year also at Pennington, this bird was showing much better, sometimes down to few feet right in front of the hide.

The remainder of the month was spent trawling the moors and reservoirs around Oldham in the hope of a fly over Red Kite or Short-eared Owl without any success.

On the 21st, a visit to the migration hot-spot that is Horwich Moors was made to cement my sighting of Tree Pipit at Astley Moss in June. I was not to be disappointed. As I got out of my car at Burnt Edge, I flushed a Tree Pipit which flew a short distance and called several times. I was relocated on a rock with another next to it, no more than 25 yards from me. Cracking views were obtained through my scope.

Horwich Moors continued to produce the goods, with very good numbers of migrants until the end of August.

On the 25th, I was rewarded for my flogging of Castleshaw, with a juvenile Greenshank which was present for 4 days. Although it was not a new bird for my year list, it was a very nice bird for Oldham.

On the 28th, a Grey Phalarope was reported at Pennington Flash. Several birders attended but there was no sign of it late afternoon. However, the juvenile Little Gull may have presented itself for misidentification, but you just never know!

A phone call from IMcK had me dashing across GM on the 29th, as he had found a Curlew Sandpiper at a private site. We searched the area but were unable to relocate it. An unexpected juvenile Marsh Harrier and Hobby, normally good county birds, were of little consolation.

The quietest month so far, with only one addition to my list, bringing my total so far to 169.

SEPTEMBER

The month got off to a slow start with the first few days spent on the moors around Oldham in the hope of a Short-eared Owl flyover. No such luck and it wasn't until the 8th that I added a much needed year list addition-the Red-necked Grebe at Pennington Flash. An early morning text from IMcK had me diverting from my normal route into work and the bird was seen along with the Black Tern that was also present.

On the 14th, I was going into work in the afternoon. I had intended to spend the morning at Castleshaw, but opened the curtains to find torrential rain. I rolled over and went back to sleep. I was woken by a text message telling me of a reported Knot at Elton. A frantic drive around the M60 in late rush hour and I was soon watching the bird in 'the creek' in torrential rain.

I made a quick detour on the way home and called in at Castleshaw to find a pair of Gadwall-an Oldham mega!

The 18th, I was just about to settle down for the night when a call from R/SA with information of a Little Stint at Audenshaw. I was now in a race against time. My wife was at work at 7pm, could I get to Audenshaw and back, more importantly, see the bird in a little over 90 minutes.

I set off in haste and arrived at Audenshaw in record time. A brisk walk around the reservoir and I soon had the bird in my scope along with the assembled crowd. One birder (who will remain nameless) couldn't contain her excitement and did a celebratory jig!

I made it home with 15 minutes to spare!

On the 17th, I was at work and have to have my phone turned off whilst in the driving cab. When I turned it back on at about 1500hrs, a text alert came through as did several missed calls from IMcK informing me of a Lapland Bunting on Horwich Moors.

I then received a call from JR telling me that someone had reported a small flock of Brent Geese on Greenbooth Reservoir, Naden Valley. As I had to be home to pick Keiron up at 5pm, the Brent's were manageable, just. A drive through the Friday evening rush and I found myself scanning the water at Greenbooth and seeing exactly what I had expected-nothing.

I was busy all that weekend but was not expecting the Lapland Bunting to still be present. Sporadic reports of a flighty bird kept up the interest levels, but I was not able to look for it until the following Tuesday.

On Monday 20th, a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was found in the North-East. I was going into work late afternoon on Tuesday so I could wait for news. If the Bunting was seen early morning, then I would go for that, if not, I would go for the Sandpiper. I rang JR and asked if he fancied a day out on Tuesday.

On the 21st, the Sandpiper came on my i-phone (not pager) and I awaited the arrival of JR. After successfully twitching the Sandpiper, a new bird for me, but JR's fourth! (That's what you get when you have been birding for years. Apparently, he saw the first for Britain in Norfolk, 1848) news came through that the Bunting had been seen in flight. We made a dash for it and were on Horwich moors shortly before 2 pm, but there had been no further sign of it since mid morning. An area of wall had been seeded and we were amazed to find a Grey Squirrel feasting on the seed, miles from the nearest tree!

The next two days saw me add three, yes three County Lifers.

The 27th saw another visit to Audenshaw but in slightly different circumstances. I received a text from RA at 1230pm saying a Bar-tailed Godwit was present late morning. As I was stuck at work till 2pm I rang JR who also needed it for his County List. He rang as I was leaving work and said not to bother as it was no longer there. Lots of disturbance from fishermen, dog walkers and men cutting the grass on motorised machines must have flushed it.

I went home and was just about to sit down for my evening meal when I got a phone call from IMcK saying there was a Bar-tailed Godwit present at Audenshaw. I told him it had gone, there was no sign mid afternoon. He replied that he was under the impression that KF (Karen Foulkes) was watching it now. A quick call to KF and confirmation it was still there. She agreed to stay with it while I arrived. A long awaited County Lifer, the last one of the 'easy' ones to get. Unfortunately, there was no celebratory jig this time-oops I have given that one away!

An early morning start on Horwich Moors on the 28th saw JR and myself battling against the mist and the County boundary. Having sussed out exactly what was in GM and what was in Lancashire we set off in search of the Lapland Bunting.

After 45 minutes, we were walking down the track towards Coal Pit Lane when I spotted a couple of birds on the path about 15 yards in front of us. This was on the limits of our visibility. One was a Meadow Pipit but the other bird kept moving slowly away from us into the mist. Then I got a view of two prominent 'tramlines' down its mantle. That was it, surely! Another couple of tantalising moments and the bird turned and walked towards us out of the mist. Bingo!

After a few expletives and a few steps backwards so as not to flush the bird and we put the news out. The path was seeded and the bird fed happily for 15 minutes until it had a couple of wing stretches, it then flew low past us, with its distinctive 'prrrrt' call.

We walked back up the path and bumped into Andy Makin (AM) who said the bird had not flown past him. So we walked slowly back down the path and picked the bird up again, calling in flight. It flew in between our group and appeared to land on the path. Sure enough, it was located on the path and showing to a few yards. We watched the Bunting continuously till lunchtime. A brief recce was made to our cars for food and my camera. When we returned, there was a 15 minute period where the bird became a little more elusive before showing incredibly well down to a few feet at times, even the mist lifted for the photographer!

Later that evening, I endured my first real visit to the 'silent meals club'. I was going to my sister-in-laws to drop off a birthday present. Just after I arrived, I received a phone call from IMcK, a Gannet had been found on Crompton Lodge. The time was 1830hrs, it would be dark in 30 minutes and I was on the wrong side of Rochdale. With the wise words of IMcK ringing in my ears-you have to go for these things! I bid my farewells and left. Shortly afterwards, I received a call from my wife, telling me how rude I was! Ah well, 2 days of peace and quiet is another way of looking at it!

Not knowing the exact directions, and having nobody in the car to navigate, I rang AW for directions. I was soon on the motorway travelling at the speed limit? When I received a call from SW, "Where the hell are you? It will be dark in 5 minutes". I hadn't a clue where I was. I had come off the motorway a junction too early and was driving on some sort of instinct. I could have been driving in the wrong direction for all I knew, and then out of the darkness came a sign "Moses Gate Country Park". I rang SW back and said I was there. He said "I can see your headlights, dump your car, it's in my scope". I dumped my car in a disabled parking space (sorry-but this was an emergency at the time) and walked casually over to SW and looked down his scope. If it wasn't for the car headlights illuminating the water, it would have been completely dark!

JR who also needed Gannet for his County List could not make it that evening and said he would try at first light. JR, SW and myself met at first light but there was no sign of the Gannet initially. SW soon picked it up in his scope but it appeared motionless. As we were walking around the lodge, the Gannet appeared to move slightly, it may still be alive. It then drifted motionless towards the assembled group, showing to a couple of feet from the banking with its head tucked in, motionless. It was agreed that the poor Gannet had in fact died. One of the group bent down to retrieve the corpse but as soon as he touched it, out popped its head and it took flight back to the middle of the lodge! Amazing!

The month ended with 6 species being added. My year list is now at 175.

OCTOBER

After a flurry of good birds in September, it was back down to earth with a bump in October.

Endless scanning of the moors above Oldham for Short-eared Owl proved fruitless. On the 15th, SW sent me a text, telling me that a Short-eared Owl had been seen at Elton. It was about 1820hrs and light was fading fast. Unfortunately, my parents had just set off from their home to visit me. It would have been rude of me not to be home when they called and the light was fading. I had just made my first mistake of my year list-I decided to stay at home and try for the bird in the morning.

Arrival at Elton at first light on the 16th with MC proved fruitless, so we decided to carry on with plan B, a trip to Spurn. We would set off back from Spurn early to be at Elton before dusk.

A cracking day at Spurn was had with Red-breasted Flycatcher, Rose coloured Starling and no less than 3 Rough-legged Buzzards being seen as well as some of the more common migrants. On the down side, I have since received a speeding ticket from Humberside police!

Arrival back at Elton saw the assembled crowd stand in disappointment, it looked like the Owl had moved on to some more exotic location by the seaside.

Horwich Moors was still producing some good birding and the 20th saw JR, MC and myself having a mooch after having twitched the Great Grey Shrike in Lancashire. One of the Black Redstarts duly obliged, but in Lancashire, when I received a text from RA informing me of a Slavonian Grebe at Audenshaw.

A quick dash around the M60 and we were soon watching the bird on number 1 reservoir. This turned out to be my only tick in October!

On the 25th, another mad dash to Horwich Moors in search of a Short-eared Owl proved fruitless. On my way there, AM had found a Rough-legged Buzzard but it was not relocated and didn't manage to cross the border into GM anyway, but a cracking find never the less!

Another very quiet month with only one bird added to my year list on the 9th- but what a bird!

NOVEMBER

It was another day in the office when I received a call from SH who informed me that JS had received a photograph of a Grebe at Hollingworth lake. It would probably just be a Little Grebe but it might be worth a look. Both myself and SH were tied up at work until later that afternoon.

I rang JR who said he would take a look after he had lunch. In the meantime, IMcK had arrived at the lake and found the bird in question and identified it as a Pied-billed Grebe.

Needless to say, I dropped everything at work and set off across Manchester to Hollingworth Lake. It was 1230hrs and I had an important conference call to make at 1430hrs so time was of the essence.

Several desperate calls were made to JR who had ditched lunch and was now watching the bird. The bird was showing well but in the nature reserve area which was not viewable from the access road. I dumped my car with the few others on double yellow line which were conveniently covered by leaves and was soon watching the bird.

What a stunning little bird. It was about time that we had another true Mega in the county. A County first at that!

Time was now getting on and I had to leave the bird and race back to work-made the conference with 15 minutes to spare.

I returned on the 10th with MC and JR for a proper look and again, like most of its stay, it was showing very well. It was also nice to see some familiar faces from around the country. Don't get me wrong, it was not because I was missing them or anything, it was just nice to see them travel to our county for a change, instead of the other way around.

I finished the month with my year list total at 177.

DECEMBER

I entered into the last month of the year with any chance of beating the year list well and truly gone. I had resigned myself to that fact a couple of months ago to be honest.

Several attempts to find the Mealy Redpoll at Hale Barns proved fruitless as did the search for Short-eared Owl and the moors and several lowland locations. An afternoon vigil near Woodford was my last real attempt for a "Shorty", and then the snow arrived.

A Bewick's Swan was found at Pennington on the 23rd, but unfortunately I didn't find out about them until it was dark. An early morning visit on the 24th drew a blank, which was expected as the flash was frozen over with only a small amount of water near the car park. A brief search for the reported Firecrest was also in vain.

On the 31st, I was at work and received a call about a possible Brent Goose at Elton. I didn't finish work till 1410hrs, and a quick dash to Elton provided very close views of a confiding Brent Goose. So that was it, almost dark, on the last day of the year and my year list was at 178. That meant I had finished in joint 2nd place in the attempts list, although it now appears that some new rule has come into play and I have finished 3rd, although I am currently speaking to my lawyers about the legality of this claim!

So, did I enjoy it, would I do it again, etc I hear you ask?

Well the answer is Yes, I did enjoy it in a funny sort of a way. It's a challenge, that's for sure and requires dedication. You just don't relax, wondering when the next phone call will arrive for you to drop everything and rush to the other side of the county. As for doing it again, I will be up for another attempt in the future, but it is time to relax and do some proper birding. Being able to leave the county at will and not have to bother about what might turn up in GM when I am away.

I have decided to keep another list next year, and will be concentrating my efforts in the borough of Oldham. No high speed journeys across the county, no silent meals club outings, all locations within 10 minutes from home or even within walking distance.

Anyway, before I sign off, thanks to you all who found the birds on my list, you know who you, but a special mention must go to IMcK who has kept me in the loop and without the website and forum, the year list would have been a lot harder.

Cheers and all the best for the New Year.

Mark Rigby (Riggers), January 2011

www.manchesterbirding.com