

SELF-FOUND COUNTY YEAR LISTING 2008

A PURIST'S ASPIRATION

by Ian McKerchar



Part of the joy of self-found birds is being involved in the finding or identification of birds like this White-winged Black Tern (Jill Islam)

If I'm honest, I didn't actually set out to achieve a county self-found list, instead my usual more than regular birding, particularly during the first third of the year saw me in very good stead and it wasn't until my surprise finding of some Black Terns at Hope Carr Reserve in May that I thought "you know what I've had a cracking year so far, why don't I take it further and see what's actually achievable". Of course, with efforts such as this there's no rushing about after stuff and with me it was more of a continual effort at several county sites as usual, with the odd targeting of potential locations for likely species, a sound knowledge of county birds and birding being the best weapon in your armoury. I've been involved in a fairly serious national self-finding pursuit since the mid-1990's and so followed the same rules as I apply there, that of the 'you must have found or been involved in the finding or identification of the bird', rules that apply nationally. But what of the 'commoner' county species?

I must be honest, and for me dropping into a site, such as Pennington Flash, seeing the Coots off the car park and deciding I'd found them didn't appeal, I wanted to make it as purely self-found as possible and came up with a solution which appealed to my fondness for birding unwatched locations and counting individual birds at others. Rather than claiming any Willow Tit or Moorhen I came across I had to prove an increase in numbers or record a highest count of that species for the year so far if I couldn't find one in a location they're not normally at. As the only 'all-site' counter of seemingly every species going at Pennington Flash for instance, I could generate the highest count of the year for Willow Tits, of Moorhens at Hope Carr utilising my WeBS counts there, a highest count of Goldfinches on your garden feeders would suffice or that influx of Coots on your local reservoir after a hard frost, the point was that they were self-found, I wasn't merely walking up and counting something someone else had seen before me, I was proving them off regular visits, not just isolated incidents, I was having to put the leg work in, monitoring one or two (or try four!) sites regularly, counting the birds and recording the

results. This of course has another effect, it increases your knowledge of birds and birding at those sites and perhaps on a wider scale, it contributes to improving our county avifauna and augments certain surveys or the county and national Bird Atlas's, it won't appeal to everyone and I don't expect everyone to follow suit but it certainly makes looking for birds more fun, after all, where are you going to go and put the time in to find your own Little Owls etc.? It worked for me, I covered loads of sites an awful lot of times, I even changed the family's Friday shopping venue of Asda's in Leigh to Asda's at the Reebok in Bolton, a lot further out of our way but it meant it was only a 5-minute drive to Mast Road on the moors above Horwich where the family could enjoy the evening view and a picnic whilst I could enjoy the birding, it worked too with Hen Harrier and Twite to show from just a couple of those visits. I really enjoyed producing an increase in Blue Tit numbers around Pennington Flash or Great Black-backed Gulls at Heaton Park Reservoir and adding them as self-found, I'd put the leg work in and I deserved them, it's taking it to an extreme I agree but it's getting as pure a self-found list as is conceivably possible. Imagine having to scour the mosslands to find that elusive one, two or even flock of wintering Corn Buntings you know is out there, having to regularly visit your nearest gull roost to record your own Yellow-legged or Mediterranean Gull or watching the autumn visible migration in the hope of that Tree Pipit, what else do you think you'd come across having to put in that amount of work in? And there in lie's the point, yes you can hear Water Rails squealing from reedbeds around Pennington Flash but imagine your joy of finding one at your local patch where they don't usually occur, this way everything becomes a bonus.

Anyway, after my May Black Tern epiphany things took a more serious turn and although I'd left it too late for some species (though I still tried historic locations for Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler to no reward) I spent more time consciously searching for new species, though most of the time that meant just being out and keeping my eyes and ears open! The thing with self-found listing is that there is, for me anyway, no downs, there are only ups, I didn't expect to find anything anywhere so I couldn't get disappointed, I just plodded along and enjoyed every little find, each one its own achievement. My only real advantage was that of Astley Moss East Peat Pools, a site with little birding history and where common species elsewhere were rare and could be claimed with a clear conscience, it has been one of my local patches since its inception many years ago and I'm one of only two regular observers there but there are sites like this all over the county, sites that have been forgotten and are little visited, they could be your advantage.

So, just what did I see, when and where? Can I prove that they were all self-found? Well, I have endeavoured to do just that, I can hold my hands up and say that everything on there is truly self-found. My final total for the year was **155** species and the table below represents those species, the dates represent the first dates I self-found them although during the year more often than not, I went on to self-find more of the same species at other locations, but if there are any species or locations anyone would like to query, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Ian McKerchar, January 2009

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