

A COUNTY YEAR LISTING ODYSSEY 2002

By Ian McKerchar



More reward for doing a year list, finding the Pennington Flash Canvasback (Photo by Chris Batty)

This article originally appeared in the 2002 County Bird report and has been slightly edited here to include Yellow-legged Gull, which was not included at the time but has since been split from Herring Gull and so is included here.

I had decided to set myself two targets for 2002 in Greater Manchester. Firstly, I intended to see at least 100 species in the month of January and secondly, my main aim, which was to beat the county year list record of 172. In between these targets I intended to see as many species as possible by the end of each month.

New Year's Day was a rather late start at 10 o'clock, but covering Hope Carr, Pennington Flash, Astley Moss and Heaton Park Reservoir I managed to surpass my target of 70 species for the day by two, the last addition being a much-appreciated Iceland Gull in the roost at the latter site. Next year including more woodland habitat, 80 species should be achievable.

The rest of **January** was much of a blur, spending every available day covering as many locations as I could to see all my target species. Things went pretty much to plan with Mealy Redpoll, Ruff, Firecrest, Red-crested Pochard (a female, one day bird during a genuine UK influx of the species), Merlin, Glaucous Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Peregrine and Ringed Plover being the unexpected exceptions.

There were as expected a few misses. I raced, in the dark, to Heaton Park reservoir for 3 Bewick's Swans (the reservoir is quite well lit at night!) but they had gone, missed Dipper 9 times at 6 different locations and failed, somewhat expectedly, on Bittern 3 times. Eventually, I finished the month on 106 species but in order to achieve this I had birded 23 days

out of the month (every day off work, in between shifts and as many holidays as I could fit in) and covered 28 different sites 63 times, an average of almost 3 per day. My favourite bird of the month went to the noisy little flock of 36 Twite on the moors at Light Hazzles Reservoir.

I had expected **February** to be more of a sedate affair compared to January's hectic schedule but this was not to be the case. I still birded 18 days out of the month, covering 14 locations 42 times.

I managed to add 9 new species, including a Little Gull at Pennington Flash in near blizzard conditions and an exhausted Kittiwake there the following day, viewed in the more comfortable surroundings of the Wardens' office! Lesser Spotted Woodpecker made it onto the list earlier than expected and I finally caught up with the pair of Ring-necked Parakeets in the Pennington area. Bird of the month went to Long-eared Owl. Whilst always a pleasure to see, finding two separate daytime roosting birds makes them that bit more special.

March began well with an all too scarce Short-eared Owl an unexpected find on Little Woolden Moss. Thereafter I made a concerted effort to catch up with all the species I had missed in the previous months.

After nearly a dozen failed attempts on Dipper, I finally added one in the unlikely location of Worsley Woods, only three miles from my home! I caught up with Mediterranean Gull at Audenshaw, after more attempts than I care to remember checking Gull roosts around the county and succeeded with Bittern at Horrock's after five attempts. Summer visitors began to make their way onto the list from mid month, with Black-necked Grebe the pick of the bunch, whilst a Common Scoter at Pennington Flash was earlier than anticipated.

The longer days had allowed more birding and with this in mind I birded 26 days out of the month, covering 25 sites 71 times, adding 12 new species thus bringing the years total to 127. Bird of the month was Bittern, showing uncharacteristically well for nearly twenty minutes before slipping away into the reeds.

April began very slowly and it wasn't until the second week that I scored well with Hen Harrier at Altringham Sewage Works and a fine Red-necked Grebe at Pennington Flash the same day.

From then on the summer migrants steadily made their way onto the list but other than a Greenshank at Hope Carr, and Garganey and Whimbrel at Pennington Flash, the month, rather disappointingly, produced no further surprises. I missed few birds during the month, being very fortunate on some and putting 'overtime' in to see most. Frustratingly though, in 16 attempts, all at the counties most reliable sites, I failed to see a single Ring Ouzel and failed half a dozen times in similar situations for Redstart.

By now my birding activity had reached an occasionally rather tiring peak and during the month I had covered 26 sites 85 times in 28 days, with birding now possible both before and after work. Intense birding like this reaps its rewards though and by the end of the month I had added 23 new species, bringing the years total to a very healthy 150. I had always intended to reach 150 by the end of May, so to achieve this a month early was a real surprise and perhaps, I thought, could lead to a slightly more relaxed May. With seemingly little to choose from the Red-necked Grebe stood out as clear winner of bird of the month, one of the year's real bonus birds and a beauty to boot.

Typically, **May** was a superb month and expectations of more relaxed birding never materialized, I should have known better!

I managed to get out birding every day of the month, covering 32 sites a total of 87 times. I added 12 species, bringing the years total to a target busting 162, way ahead of expectations.

The first week was rather worryingly quiet, but from there on I covered all points of the county in a successful search for the scarce regular breeders and those all-important 'bonus birds'. The east of the county came up trumps with Redstart, Wood Warbler, Pied and Spotted flycatcher, Goshawk at a confidential site and Ring Ouzel at last, whilst the west of the county, not to be outdone, provided Sanderling, Turnstone, Black Tern, a cracking breeding plumaged Grey Plover and, almost bird of the month, Turtle Dove, which was a real surprise find at Rumworth on the 22nd. Unfortunately, May brought my first 'serious' county dip. Although I struggled away from work early, I still missed the Little Egret, which rubbed my nose in it further by choosing my regular patch of Hope Carr in which to settle for its short stay. Of course, bird of the month was decided easily on the 21st with the adult Whiskered Tern at Pennington Flash, but for sheer surprise rating was run a close second by an immature Greater Flamingo I found at private site in the county. Needless to say, investigations into this bird are ongoing, after all, in year listing every bird counts.

As expected, **June** was easily the quietest month thus far, but the relative lack of birds did enable the year's first lie-ins (and I do mean the first!) and completion of household work that should have been done months ago!

The beginning of the month can typically produce some good birds and not to disappoint, a very rufous female Marsh Harrier at Ringley Sewage Works remained faithful to the site long enough for me to eventually see it. The month saw myself and birding companion Pete Berry mount our annual Nightjar forages on the mosslands, including a couple of attempts at Quail for good measure, but unfortunately neither species was forthcoming.

I covered 17 locations, 42 times in 19 days out of the month, adding only a single new species for the year. As for bird of the month, the Marsh Harrier remained unchallenged and walked (or should that be flew?) away with it.

July is usually expected to be another generally quiet month and although this year was no exception it did bring another of the few real rarities for the county.

A Quail (or possibly two?) was found at Partington and obliged by calling incessantly for short periods, whilst on the 11th of the month I was somewhat surprised to be the finder of the drake Canvasback at Pennington Flash. Although its origins may be contentious to some (as with most vagrant wildfowl), it showed no signs of captive origin whatsoever, being unringed, fully-winged, showing no abnormal or abraded plumage and was consistently the wariest of its accompanying Pochard flock, thus making it as acceptable as the other category A accepted records.

The lie-ins didn't last long though and with renewed vigour I covered 12 sites, 66 times in 26 days out of the month, with the year list now on 165. Bird of the month was yet another no contest, and despite its great rarity status, the Canvasback had become just another addition to the now slowly expanding county year list.

August began with my second miss of Little Egret, this time at Dunham Massey, although suitable compensation came in the form of a fine Hobby chasing Swifts there. Little Stint and Wood Sandpiper made their way on to the list, but late breaking news on the evening of the 11th of a Great White Egret at Chorlton Water Park meant a very swift drive to the site just in time to see the bird roosting in a tree before the light faded completely. An early morning start the next day to see the bird again (in full daylight!), saw a no show at Chorlton but my luck was in, as I re-found the bird at Broad Ees Dole. A pre-work dash to Audenshaw Reservoirs late in the month secured my 5th new bird for the month and 170th for the year so far, with an unexpected Purple Sandpiper.

August saw the lie-ins cease completely, with very early starts necessary to catch the birds (and not the worm, as they say!), but with the return passage perpetuating my enthusiasm I covered 20 sites 71 times in 27 days out of the month. Bird of the month was also my favourite of the year so far, not for its twilight views roosting in a tree, but unexpectedly finding a Great White Egret at close range must surely rank high on anyone's list.

Starting badly, missing a Spotted Crake at Ringley Sewage Works, **September**, albeit a rather quiet month finally saw the magic 170 species surpassed, with the addition of a late evening Sandwich Tern at Pennington Flash and later on in the month a fine Black Redstart.

During the month the lure of out-of-county birding became increasingly hard to resist, although I still managed 23 days out of the month spent (albeit occasionally only briefly) birding in the county, covering 19 sites 64 times. My year list now resided on 172, equal to the county year list record of 172, held by Pete Berry, which now looked almost certain to topple after its nine-year reign. With multiple failures earlier in the year trying to locate the species in its traditional haunts in the city centre, I had long resigned Black Redstart to the omissions list, so the obliging bird near Horwich not only came as a much appreciated surprise but also as bird of the month.

On the 3rd of **October** the year list record was surpassed, with a third time lucky attempt at Little Egret, this time near Astley (in an area viewable from my bedroom window!!) and the very next day saw me at Audenshaw, extending the new record courtesy of a couple of Rock Pipits.

Much of the rest of the month was spent birding in southwest Cornwall and with the new record under my belt I was rather unworried at what I might miss, but miss I did, with a female Velvet Scoter available at Scotsman's Flash surely an unrepeatable occurrence. With my Cornish break in mind I only covered 15 sites 37 times in 15 days out of the month, my lowest performance to date, but I was resigned to changing that in November, a month which can turn up more than its fair share of surprises.

The Little Egret was easily bird of the month after my previous frustrations with the species through the year, but my attention had turned to another prospect. After setting a new county year list record so early in the year and with, theoretically at least, a few possible and probable species to clear up on, was a county year list of 180 now really achievable?

November unfortunately brought no real surprises, but hard work and determination saw another three species added to the list in the month.

Another trek to one of my favourite county sites, Light Hazzles Reservoir, on the 5th found the usual noisy Twite flock, although this time with a single Snow Bunting an added bonus and whilst checking Hollingworth Lake on my return journey home I was pleased to find a single Greenland White-fronted Goose, one of the regular wintering (and genuinely wild) birds that frequent the area. With a lack of birds mid-month I decided to investigate the conifer plantations around the Dovestones area, which I thought might hold one or two Crossbills and not to be disappointed found a very approachable flock of 36.

During the month, with the hours of daylight becoming increasingly shorter, I covered 19 sites, 56 times in 20 days, bringing the average back up to almost 3 sites per day and the year list to 177. My favourite bird of the month was undoubtedly the Crossbills, proof that getting out and looking is by far the best tactic for finding additions to the year list and certainly the most rewarding. With now only one month to go, reaching 180 was beginning to look unlikely, and with 4 species to add I could only hope for a few timely Christmas presents.

December unfortunately, was the only month of the year, despite covering 18 locations 45 times in 20 days, that I failed to add a new species. I missed Red-breasted Merganser at Castleshaw Reservoirs and a single-evening-only Ring-billed Gull at Audenshaw Reservoirs, with Great Northern Diver, Black-throated Diver and Smew all tantalisingly missing the county by only a mile each and remaining firmly in our bordering counties!

So, there it is, was it worth almost confining myself to the county for a full year? Well, yes. I saw lots of good birds and was fortunate to find many myself, visited several new birding locations within the county and learned much about sites I thought I already knew, not to mention setting a new county year list record along the way! It was of course surprisingly time consuming, more than occasionally tiring and proved much harder work than I had originally anticipated,

I am deeply indebted to both Pete Berry and Judith Smith, without whom my list would have been far poorer and to Peter Alker, Craig Higson, Bill Foster, Andy Makin, Roy Travis, Brian Leecy (for his invaluable 'seeding' at Light Hazzles) and all the many birders, who's finds I profited from. Thanks also to my family, Angie and Jack for their encouragement and perseverance.

Finally, would I do it again? Not. Well, not unless somebody can beat 177, which will take some doing. The gauntlet is well and truly thrown down.

Ian McKerchar, January 2003

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