

YEAR LISTING THE FORUM WAY

A CRACK AT COUNTY YEAR LISTING IN 2008

by Paul Heaton



The current reigning county year listing champ himself (centre)

The title says it all, for without the Greater Manchester website this attempt would never have happened. So why did I do it?

In the autumn of 2003, I sat down with my County Bird Report, and read Ian McKerchar's excellent Odyssey for 2002. What an achievement, and part of me was amazed that a total of 178 was achieved within Greater Manchester: the other part of me was filled with jealousy, where did he get his information from?! Sometimes I only found out about birds from the County Report a year later, and deep down a part of me wanted to have a go.

The foundation for year listing was set by Pete Berry in 1993 with a total of 172, but Ian shattered that record. His staggering account had me listing in Manchester in 2003, however by Easter I had given up, this record could not be beaten.

So, when the Greater Manchester website was launched I read with interest about other birders' attempts: Brian Fielding had two attempts, Rob and Sonia Adderley came so close in 2006 with their total of 177.

During 2007 I bumped into Paul Hammond as he equalled Pete Berry's 1993 record of 172. The forum and the website was in full swing, information every day, I was meeting new GM birders every week, and when I finally met Warfy Junior and Senior, plans began to form.

The first Plan was just for the New Year's Day record, and then things got out of hand.

This is how it began,

1st January 2008.

I have been New Year's Day listing since 1977, but today was very different, we had plans, timetables, lists of top species, we had even done a dry run, Team Heaford (Warford + Heaton) had done their homework.

In the very early hours, we began in the grounds of Smithills Hall.

Bird number 1: Tawny Owl. Confidence is high and as the first signs of dawn arrive, but so does the fog and rain. However, a dash across the Horwich moors gives us Red Grouse, Stonechat and Little Owl, but two top birds on our list, Raven and Peregrine, stay hidden in the fog. This is an early blow, so it's back down to the main road and 'scoping High Rid Res, we add Long-Tailed Duck - a top New Year's Day bird.

Clifton Country Park. Weeks of surveillance pay off as Dipper is added to the list and with Warfy's excellent field craft, so is Woodcock, all the finches and woodland birds are soon in the bag.

Wigan Flashes: we had high hopes for here, but who would ever have thought GM birders would be ticking off Cetti's Warbler on New Year's Day? But we did, and Whooper Swan, Brambling and a stonking Water Rail at the feeding station have us back on track.

A quick re-cap and check of the timetable and list, it's 1330 hours and Dunnock is missing. Ten minutes later I rush to see a Dunnock, this is when I know it's mad, as we jump up and down to celebrate our first Dunnock of the year.

Leaving the Flashes, we head for Astley Moss feeling hopeful we meet a number of birders on site, certain birds are pinned down quickly: Grey Partridge, Yellowhammer, Stock Dove and Fieldfare. We were bang on target, but then the pit of doom opened up, where on earth were all the birds? Buzzard, Sparrowhawk and Tree Sparrow, how on earth can you go to Rindle Road and not get Tree Sparrow? Time was running out and the list was static. We ran across the moss, we thrashed hedges, the Barn Owl seen every night for weeks had stayed in, and as the sun went down so did our dreams and notebooks. A text from Ian McKerchar telling us of a possible Caspian Gull at Heaton Park Resr came too late. So, the day ended: we ran out of time and daylight - to be honest, I was gutted.

January 2nd and a Sparrowhawk sat in my garden laughing at me, over the next few days all the missing birds from New Year's Day were bagged. On the 4th Jan I was sat in the hide at Heaton Park Resr with Ian McKerchar and Ian Woosey, and added the Caspian Gull, and began to wonder about the January record.

On January 8th, by sheer good luck, I was in Eccles when a text alert for Clifton Country Park had me taking a detour. As I scanned the water, a diver was noted in the far corner. It appeared settled, but then sprang forward and flew straight at me. As it flew overhead, it turned and headed away, Great Northern Diver, well chuffed.

January 9th. Nothing on note, on a freezing Light Hazzles Res, I watched my hat blown off my head, sail across the water, mad temperatures of minus degrees and nothing to see, I was feeling low. Next day I was on a high, as in Gin Pit village I added a county tick and a year tick with a cracking Mealy Redpoll.

Sadly my Mum died that day and all thought of listing stopped, I added a few more ticks while out working, but the month ended with 104, not bad.

February 2008

After a day out with the family I had earned some brownie points, so an evening gull watching at Heaton Park Resr was on the cards. As I opened the gates Rob and Sonia Adderley were there, the next half hour was the finest "Gull Galore" I have ever had in Greater Manchester: Glaucous Gull, Iceland Gull, Yellow-legged Gull and a cracking 3rd winter Kumlien's Gull. Points for us all in the tournament, and if ever split into a separate species, a nice little armchair tick for the year list. It was a birding experience to savour all the major white winged gulls in one go.

13th February had me back on old haunts of Chorlton Water Park with Pete Hines, the finder of a lovely redhead Smew.

Later that month after a phone call from Judith Smith: a second chance of Green-winged Teal was on, I missed it the first time due to my mum's funeral. It was soon in the bag, and later that day I added Firecrest at Proctor Street, Bury.

The month ended with Team Heaford back in the field as we bagged Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Green Woodpecker in Dunham Massey Park. Green Sandpiper gave me a total of 115. Then the e-mails began to arrive.

The main content was a hit list, week by week, species by species, they began like this "right, been doing some maths, I count 43 more that you really must see, including 6 which I've classed as 'difficult', this will get you to 173 so 7 more rarities needed for 180."

The mythical 180 - could anyone ever do it, or was it a dream?

March 2008

Wigan Flashes Bittern hunting, no sign, but the Cetti's Warbler gets on the year list proper, as seen well in flight. Bar-tailed Godwit added along with a few other year ticks. On the 15th March I ran past Judith Smith on the footpath nearly knocking her over, Rob Adderley's comment was going through my head "there's no such thing as a leisurely year list, you're either going for it or not!" And I was going for it, AVOCETS on Scotmans, Ian Woosey told me they had just flown, my heart sank, how I hate those words, but a mad dash around to Ochre Marsh and there they were, just taking off and heading towards the canal. I tried to phone Warfy, but was unable to get him on them. I was now fully committed to the year list. Information about each bird meant a dash to see it, and Rock Pipit, Common Scoter, early Chiffchaff and Black-necked Grebe were soon on the list, and after countless journeys to the New Hide at Pennington Flash the Long-Eared Owl was also added.

March 26th: what a day! As part of the planning I have the Pennington £1 in a tin, always ready to get the car-park ticket, and a £1 well worth it, for on the main water like a small oil slick were 28 Brent Geese. What a sight! And what an addition to the year list! As I left, I was just coming up to the roundabout at the Greyhound pub on the East Lancs. Text Alert, and back to Pennington to see a stunning Red-throated Diver, then news from Audenshaw Resrs and off again - Paul Hammond keeps tabs on Knot and Little Ringed Plover - for a 4 tick day making the year list 130.

April 2008

A family trip to Scotland was a nerve-racking time, the birding was good but what was I missing? Thankfully due to the website information was on hand, and as soon as I got back the common migrants were soon picked up, Wheatear, Swallow, Willow Warbler, then a dash to Scotmans Flash. Where on earth was the bird I was looking for?

A solitary figure sat on a bench with bins, it must be a GM birder, and then I found myself chatting to Riggers (Mark Rigby) watching a Red-breasted Merganser.

Daily trips to sites around Manchester were adding bits and bobs, but on 19th a cracking male Redstart just outside Horrocks Hide along with Little Gulls and Reed Warbler were perfect additions to the year list.

Back on home turf of Carrington Moss and 3 Ring Ouzels showing very well, and a surprising Pied Flycatcher at a private site was a real treat.

On the 22nd a phone call from Rob Adderley had me racing to Audenshaw, where after years of writing Comic Tern in my notebooks (yes I know it was lazy Ian) I finally added 11 Arctic Terns to my county list, and the year list.

23rd Rindle Road and as I parked up I noticed some birds in a ploughed field. For a minute I am stumped, and as I got them in my bins I began to wonder what on earth they were, three odd looking birds running up and down a ploughed field, then they stood still: Cuckoos! Blooming Cuckoos! I have never seen them run around the floor like this, sights like this really make birding buzz, then a Whimbrel was found in the same field.

As I sat at home making my notes up, another e-mail "...are you on 148? you should break 150 this month easy!" Followed by another updated hit list, summer visitors still needed (14) waders (6) others (5). If you get all these - which to be honest isn't likely - that will be 173, to be honest my mind was racing. Could it be done? I was tired already.

25th April - Wigan Flashes - the Cetti's Warbler was in full song and sitting out on a post. I was becoming attached to this little beauty: every month this year I had heard or seen it, then on the back of Scotmans Flash a drake Garganey, thank you Mr Woosey, your find put me on an incredible 150.

May 2008

My expectations for this month were big! How big? Well, 3rd May had an early trip to Audenshaw for a Bar-tailed Godwit, and after a quick chat it all seemed quiet. I decided to head back home, when Paul Hammond rang me to say he had a possible ALPINE SWIFT. The call to Warfy contained few words: I knew he was out of bed and in his car, the news was out!

It felt like a dream, I had always wanted to see Alpine Swift at Audenshaw, and here it was, swooping over our heads. Soon Team Heaford was watching it together, then Mr Warford Senior said "is the Godwit still here? I need it for my county list," so we left the Alpine Swift to find a Godwit, that's county listing for you!!

The website and forum were buzzing information every day, text alerts all the time, this was fantastic, but as I settled down to put the kids to bed on the 4th, news of Red-rumped Swallow at Audenshaw had me in the car in seconds, "night-night kids, Dad has to go out!" The next text alert made me think "oh, it's gone" but no.... Cattle Egret at Wigan Flashes. I sat stunned in the car: Which way should I go? ... As I entered the 'Silent Meals Club' that night, I had dipped on both birds.

I was beginning to get very tired, there was no let-up, and the next morning I was legging it up the canal at Horrocks - this was to become a standard feature in my year list, legging it up the towpaths of Wigan.

I began to panic as I could find no bird nor birder, quick phone call to Ian McKerchar and I am told "Woosey's on it", where would we be without mobiles? Soon I am running towards the railway bridge, and CATTLE EGRET makes it onto the year list.

7th May. Detailed information with step by step guide had me on the footpaths of Etherow Country Park, and after a heavy hike I sat down under a tree and watched a displaying pair of Wood Warblers only feet above my head, a county tick and a year tick, but an experience I will never forget.

Today was my mum's birthday, and I remember one of the first books she got me as a kid, *Guide to birds of Britain and Europe*. She was fond of warblers and seeing this pair today was unforgettable. More Pied Flycatchers, Dippers and GM birders in the park: Paul Cliff, Melanie Beckford, then Riggers and Warfy. GM birders on a "Mayhem" quest.

May 9th. Pager messages of two Grey Plover in GM: one at Pennington, one at Wigan Flashes. I paid my £1 and dashed for the Horrocks Hide attempting to be calm. I scanned the flashes: no sign...a discreet enquiry: "...so anyone seen the Grey Plover?" The reply was enough to wheel spin out of the car park, as I updated the pager "Grey Plover at Horrocks *Flash*, NOT Horrocks *Hide*. I had lost time, this was not good, the race down the towpath was at top speed. This time I knew all the lumps and bumps in the path, but I was impeded by Judith Smith and another GM birder. I perhaps may have been impolite in dashing past them, and I heard "...it's only a Grey Plover", but it was not on the year list yet. As I approached Horrocks, Warfy was there, "It's flown, mate! No, only kidding, it's over there!" I vowed to stamp on the next person that said that to me, it was just not funny anymore.

Elton Reservoir and the GM birders were having mayhem with a one-legged Knot. I was at Holcombe adding Spotted Flycatcher. Hobby at Astley Moss next day: that meant the next bird had to be special.

Pennington Flash, the £1 was paid and the dash for the new hide was on. Tactics now involved no 'scope just bins, this made for a quicker run and there would always be a birder with a 'scope. I ran past Mr Woosey and Ian Mckerchar, and heard the now standard "it's just flown!" Thoughts went through my mind! But were forgotten as I entered New Hide GREAT WHITE EGRET was the 170th bird for the year and it was only 14th May, numbers now meant nothing. What was this year going to produce next??

A corking LITTLE TERN Audenshaw on the 17th - many thanks to Steve Collins. 18th May - Tree Pipit singing its head off on Irlam Moss.

TEMMINCK'S STINT at Pennington on the 19th - it was becoming a bird a day.

25th May Chorlton Water Park and the sad tale of the FULMAR. When I first saw this bird, it was attempting to fly, and a number of times we thought it was off, but as the day progressed, I had to don my work hat and the bird was caught by Pete Hines and I took it into care. Sadly it was too weak to survive, but it will now be remembered as the last new bird for May. 174: a total that even now astounds me.

June 2008

June, the pressure was staggering, the e-mails were running out as the list of birds was growing the list of 'must sees' was getting shorter.

Crossbills were not a bird I had down for June but here they were, all over Binn Green, and with news of the Black Redstarts in the city centre, the list edged closer to the record. Most of June was spent on the quest of the Holy Quail; at a number of locations I heard them, according to all other year lists calling Quail can be counted! But both Ian and Rob had seen theirs: at one point, I saw the tail of a bird disappear into a field, then the distinctive call was heard in the middle, but until I saw the whole bird it was not on the list. June ended with just 2 additions.

July 2008

I apologise now for the people I pushed out of the way on the towpath of Horrocks, as I ran in the fading light to see a SPOONBILL. The bird had gone to roost, so I did the same, then 7 hours later I was back, the whole of Horrocks before me. Now, where was this bird? The hours went by and then a flock of waders flew up from the back of the Flashes, at the same time a white flash to the left, a Mute Swan, damn! Mr Hammond turned up, and as we talked, the SPOONBILL flew straight past us, what a bird! It was only afterwards I thought about those waders, Black-tailed Godwits - at least 15, and by messing about a load of points were lost.

July 7th and the chance of Little Egret was also lost by 2 minutes, Warfy found it at Elton but a jogger flushed it before I arrived. A couple of points at Audenshaw on the 19th by way of Sanderling, but for the first time in years no Lesser Scaup in the county.

July 30th, the phone rang: I am not certain if my kids heard me say goodnight, as the car flew out of the drive, destination Audenshaw. Rob and Sonia were on watch: I ran up the centre path, and we scanned the waters.... then.... SANDWICH TERN - in all its glory!

178, the record was equalled!! The sheer joy of reaching this target was overpowering, the relief was huge, and for the first time in months I could relax a bit.

August 2008

The ups and downs of year-listing come in many forms, but the one thing I learnt to hate was the ring tone on my phone: when it went, so did I....

3rd August - Rumworth Lodge.

As most listers have a bogey bird, so did I, I had lost count of the number of times I had chased this blighter: the Flashes, Pennington and Audenshaw, to be told "It's just flown off, you missed it" how I began to hate those words, in fact I only began to hear the first three, before despair hit.

The mind plays tricks on you as well, when you are year listing. I hit the M61 and could not remember how to get to Rumworth, it began to rain... My van hit the pavement and I was there, and ran into the entrance and bumped into two birders - what must they have thought? "It's a madman!?" I raced to reach Warfy on the far side: the pressure was huge, and I stopped! "Compose yourself! Think! OK, Warfy's over there looking, that way, so 'scope...scan.... look...." And there it was GREENSHANK..... 179.....The record had been broken - the joy was immense!

The two proud GM birders standing on the shores of Rumworth shook hands.... and the job was done. But wait....it was only August, and we both knew there had to be more

The mythical 180 was up for grabs....

August 24th - Elton Resr, reports of a SHAG present for two days, the phone rings, "I am looking at it now mate." "Don't let it out of your sight, I am on my way." I make a mistake and park at Buckingham Drive, the bird's on Withins so it's a marathon run past the creek, Wader Point and Capstick Marsh, down the path and round the corner. "OK, where is it?" "It's just waddled round the corner." Carefully we approach, we follow in its steps, but no sign, we searched and searched but nothing, where on earth did it go.....??

25th August.

Still running around Elton down the path to Withins and there it is, the mythical 180... SHAG.
Phalacrocorax aristotelis, (200 club members read into it what you want!)

This bird was amazing, it was so trusting and could be approached within feet, excellent photos were taken, but later that day, its welfare was discussed and it was thought best to take it into care, Judith Smith duly tackled it to the ground, and off it went for a proper celebratory meal. It received top treatment at the RSPCA Stapeley Grange wildlife hospital, and when fully recovered, was given the key to Manchester and sent on its merry way in north Wales.

So, August ended on 180, the record broken, a new benchmark set, but already people were talking of 185 or 190. I even had suggestions of 200, but that, I believe, is beyond the reach of a normal birder, and if it is ever achieved I will give over the keys of the 200 Club to that birder!

What have I missed so far? Red-rumped Swallow, Little Egret, Marsh and Hen Harrier, Red Kite and Osprey and Quail either single sightings, or missed by minutes.

September 2008

So what is it to be this month? If I get a bird a month from now it will be 184, yet I feel drained, and surely one month has to let me down...

I was just finishing up at work when on a September's evening, I received a text from Ian McKerchar: he was watching a Hen Harrier on Horwich Moors, and would stay with it. Daylight was running out, but when you are year listing the golden rule has to be ...Go... as soon as you get information, you just go: there may be no second chances.

When I arrived Ian gave me the news it had gone down to roost not too far away. Warfy Junior and Senior were there, and as we looked at the skies, the biggest storm cloud I had seen in years was above our heads. We quartered the moors hoping to catch a glimpse, and then the heavens opened up.....it was one of those moments when you just had to be there. Ian took refuge in his car, I made attempts with my broolly to keep dry (to no avail). We lost sight of Warfy in the thick fog, thoughts of calling out Mountain Rescue were going through my mind. Using my torch I shone it into the fog shouting Warfy's name...when he finally appeared he was a bedraggled species of birder, and back at the car he emptied his wellies of at least a pint of water in each boot....

Dawn the next day, and in glorious sunlight the moors looked brilliant, but hours later I left with no sighting of the harrier.

25th September. Again, I found myself in the driveway not knowing which way to go, a Mega out of county Brown Shrike at Flamborough, or White-winged Black Tern at Elton? It was a turning point in my birding life, and soon I was standing on the shores of Elton, if you are year listing you have to go.....no sign.... gutted.

26th September. Heaton Park Resr. White winged Black Tern makes it onto the year list.

September ended with an insurance bird, Pale-bellied Brent Goose at Ashworth Moor. I took a note out of Ian's book here and 'scoped it from the car, while Dave Winnard braved a strong storm to get a picture. I know this bird cannot count, but if ever split along with the Kumlien's Gull, they will push this year list attempt up by two.

October 2008

Scilly season, knowing I could go to the cabin on St Agnes having reached the record was a dream, as for the nightmare that came from closer to home....

A colleague at work picked up a bird in Manchester town centre. He did not think 'I would be interested in a pheasant thing' was the line he gave me, and as I looked at the photos of the stunning CORNCRAKE, various Anglo Saxon words were exchanged, the bird was in care and released in Norfolk to be over-wintered for an introduction scheme.

October then produced some second chances and I took a well-earned stroll along the towpaths of Wigan for a 2nd Red-throated Diver.

The last week of October was spent on Rindle Road, the second Great White Egret was showing very well, and everyone was there, Merlins and Tree Sparrow at the feeding station, thoughts of January 1st seemed a long time ago.

On 31st October after days of staking out the Great White Egret, it flew past my head and out of sight. Moments later a car pulled up, "Any sign of the Egret mate?" ... "err no! But it has been seen today" (I couldn't bring myself to say "It's just flown".) I was staking out the Hen Harrier, and as the day ended I got into my car: it was cold, dark and raining. Through the windscreen, a large raptor flew over the road in a classic V and drifted over the trees, "Was it? Wasn't it?" Blast! For the first time this year I ended the month without adding a bird to the list.

November 2008

Audenshaw Resr Number 3 bed, yellow boat, with number 6 on it? Now that's what I call perfect directions.

I was actually driving past when I got the news, so it was an easy park up. There it was, just like it said on the text, PURPLE SANDPIPER: no 3 bed, yellow boat no. 6. The bird was well tucked up, and we had plenty of time to wait, but this was Saturday and the boat people would be here soon. At 10 o'clock they came, a speed boat came out to collect the rest of the sailing boats, and we waited for it to fly.... It hopped out of one boat into the next, then again and again, till it was in the last boat.

As they dragged the boats to the shore, a line of birders picked up their scopes and followed a PURPLE SANDPIPER being towed into shore. 15 plus birders following in the same direction, I ran to meet the boats: a group of dumbstruck kids in lifejackets, "you've got a rare bird in the back of your boat mate!!" It flew out onto the shore, an experience that will stay with us all forever and we will never look at a Purple Sand again without thinking of a yellow boat.

The next day saw huge number of Pink feet moving through the county, on the 7th November I took my wife on a twitch for Waxwing in Stockport. We could not find them, and later that day Judith Smith rang me someone had just told her of SNOW BUNTING 20 minutes from my house, it was my turn to pick up the kids, we then had family commitments, I was told "you can go tomorrow," and as the fireworks went off that night I knew it would not be there the next day. However, I sat for hours looking at the wall that Riggers said it was sitting on, the biggest dip of the year. The rest of the month was spent chasing Waxwing - Bolton, Stockport, Hulme and Ardwick, "...just flown mate....."

As for the report of 21 White-fronted Geese at Etherow I knew I should not bother but you never know, it was a wild goose chase.

Early hours of 29th November and the sun begin to rise in Oldham, I am in place again, on the hunt for WAXWINGS: I wait. I search all the berry trees I can find, and just as I am about to give up, a woman with bins walks across the car park... I don't know her, but hey "any luck with waxwing?" I ask, "oh yes, we are ringing them in the college." Oh my!!! I follow her like a lost puppy, I am stopped at the gates by security, "RSPCA mate, just checking on the welfare" I am in, and Waxwing in the hand, what a way to get them on the year list. Thank you ringers.

December 2008

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would ever be on 183 for the year with 28 days to go.

6th December found me back at Daisyfield gardens enjoying a cup of coffee with Paul and Sue watching the Firecrest again.

7th December: Pennington Flash £1 paid and dash for Horrocks, "don't bother running mate, it's just flown". I looked at the woman who just said that. Then I looked at the photo of a GLOSSY IBIS sat on the spit, what a bird, and what could have been a classic end to a perfect year was not to be. What a bird to miss, but what a record for Greater Manchester.

The list was becoming second now to the comradeship of GM birders, I had met some great people, and made many a new friend, the knowledge of GM birders had become a talking point among many other birders.

I continued to search for other additions to the list.

I found some more Waxwings in Salford later that month but for the second time that year, I failed to add anything else to the list, so it ended on ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY THREE.

I owe a massive thanks to the boss Ian McKerchar and his outstanding Manchester birding website, to Warfy for all his e-mail support and advice, to Judith Smith, Rob and Sonia Adderley and all GM birders who helped me either by phone text, or information on the forum. It would not have been possible without you all.

I have been asked was it worth it, did it make you a better birder and would you do it again? The answer is the same to all three questions.

But can it be beaten? Yes, and **you** can do it. It drives you mad, there are highs and lows, but the experience is one I will never forget (my wife won't let me!). I urge someone to have a go, and I know you will have the help and support of all GM birders. Good luck to the next year-lister, as for me I will always.....KEEP BIRDING.

Paul Heaton, January 2009

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