

The Birds of Whitlingham & Thorpe 2023



Compiled by James Emerson

Version 1.3 (23/01/23)

Contents

Page 2 – Contents & contact details

Pages 3-5 – Introduction & site map

Pages 6-10 – A Dutch-ringed White Stork over Thorpe Marshes

Pages 11-12 – An Iceland Gull at Whitlingham C.P.

Pages 13-16 – A putative Baltic Gull at Whitlingham C.P.

Pages 17-27 – Aberrant Cormorants in the Norwich area

Pages 28-34 – Establishment of a colony of breeding Cormorants at Whitlingham

Pages 35-37 – An increase in the number of breeding Grey Herons

Pages 38-40 – Norwich Mute Swan colour-ringing project update

Pages 41-44 – Ringed Black-headed Gulls at Whitlingham part xi

Page 45 – Whitlingham Wildfowl Count

Page 46-79 – Whitlingham & Thorpe classified species list

Page 80 – Appendix A – Recorded species linked to reintroduction schemes

Page 80 – Appendix B – Recorded birds thought to be escapes or of dubious origin

Page 80 – Appendix C – Birds reported from the area but not accepted onto the main list

Page 81 – Appendix D – Hybrid birds

Pages 81 & 82 – Appendix E – Unrecorded but likely species

Pages 83 & 84 – Appendix F – Selected additional bird sightings from the Norwich area

Pages 85 & 86 – Acknowledgements & Further reading

Get in touch

I would welcome any comments, corrections or constructive criticisms about this report. These can be sent to me, along with any sightings for inclusion in the 2024 report, by emailing: whitlinghambirds@yahoo.co.uk.

All text copyright © James Emerson 2024 unless otherwise attributed.

All photos are attributed to the photographer and copyrighted to him/her. I am particularly grateful to Robin Chittenden, Ed Mackrill and David Ratcliffe for providing a large number of photos from Whitlingham for use in this report, and also to the other photographers who have allowed their pictures to be used (a full list of contributors can be found in the acknowledgements).

Introduction

This is the twelfth annual bird report documenting the bird life of the Whitlingham area (including Thorpe Marshes NWT reserve), covering sightings from 2023. As always, I am very grateful to all those who support the report by supplying sightings, data and photographs.

It should be noted that this bird report is independent from any of the organisations that manages the sites covered by it, notably Whitlingham Charitable Trust, Norfolk Wildlife Trust and South Norfolk Council. A map showing the recording area covered by this report can be found on page 5. Within this area most of the sightings come from Whitlingham C.P. (particularly Whitlingham Great Broad) and Thorpe Marshes.

Once again there were no confirmed records of new species for the recording area this year, although with a sighting of a Raven very close by at Postwick, it seems only a matter of time before there is a definite sighting within the recording area. Species featuring in the main species list for the first time in these reports are White Stork (see the article on pages 6 to 10 for further details) and Little Owl. The latter was a welcome sighting given the long gap since the last record – please do keep an eye and ear out and report any Little Owl sightings in 2024. Other species of particular interest included a brief Iceland Gull during January - the 3rd site record and first ‘twitchable’ one since 1997, plus a Hen Harrier at Thorpe Marshes in December. Other articles discuss aberrant Cormorants, establishment of a small Cormorant breeding colony and an increase in the number of breeding Grey Herons.

I am grateful to everyone who has reported records from the area this year. A large number of records in this report have been supplied by other local birders, either directly or via local Whatsapp groups. The report also features local records taken from eBird, which provides added detail to the commoner species and can also help providing fuller coverage of scarcer ones. I have included the majority of records in my sightings analysis, however as always, I reserve the right to decide what sightings make the final report. The sightings in this report are therefore a mixture of personal observations, directly reported records and ‘citizen science’-type records. Some may relate to birds that were only seen flying over or were heard only. As a result, I consider that for formal recording purposes the sightings in this report should be treated as unverified records, i.e., sightings should probably not be taken directly from the report to be used for any ‘official’ purposes unless they are supported by a photo – observers are encouraged to submit their records to the county recorder directly or log them on a system such as BirdTrack or eBird, to which the county recorder has access.

In general, when considering what records and details to include in the main systematic list I have adopted the following categorisation:

Resident species and regular migrants – reports have been used to write a general summary for the species, with records only omitted if they were particularly unusual, for example very early or late records. High counts or unusual records may be attributed to the observer.

Species recorded annually in low numbers at Whitlingham – species that occur in most years are dealt with as above but with more detail regarding the sightings

Species seldom recorded at Whitlingham or particularly scarce locally – records included in the report with * before the species name. As much detail as possible is included with each of these records, in particular it is mentioned if the species recorded was photographed, if it was seen by more than one individual, if there were any other sightings nearby etc. These records also have the initials of the person who reported the sighting where this is known. Note that this won't necessarily be the person who first found the species in the case of multi-observed records.

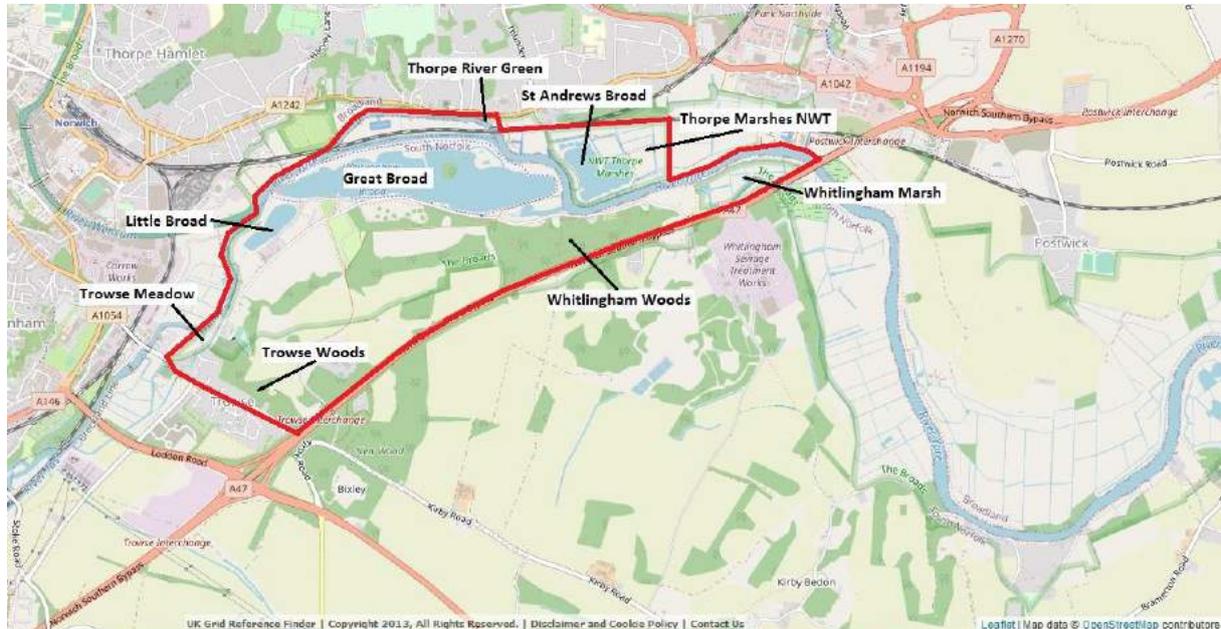
County or national rarities – included solely at the editor's discretion. Details of the record included as with local scarcities, but with an additional note as to whether the record has been submitted to and/or accepted by the relevant rarities committee, based on the latest WIP (work-in-progress) files.

Birds covered by the above process form the main systematic species list. The presence of a number of recently reintroduced species in Norfolk has necessitated a specific appendix to these reports, although no species are included on it this year. As with the past few years I have included selected additional species seen elsewhere in Norwich out of general interest. The appendices to the report are as follows:

- Appendix A – Recorded species linked to reintroduction schemes
- Appendix B – Recorded birds thought to be escapes or of dubious origin (where not already mentioned in the systematic list)
- Appendix C – Birds reported from the area but not accepted onto the main list
- Appendix D – Hybrid birds
- Appendix E – Species notably not recorded in 2023
- Appendix F – Selected additional bird sightings from the Norwich area

The Whitlingham Recording Area covered by this report

Where possible distinctive features make up the boundaries, for example the railway line along part of the north of the area and the A47 to the south.



The key sites that make up the recording area are:

- Whitlingham Country Park (including Whitlingham Little Broad and Great Broad)
- Trowse Meadow *
- Trowse Woods
- Thorpe Marshes NWT (including St Andrew's Broad)
- Thorpe River Green
- Whitlingham Woods
- Whitlingham Marsh LNR

Crown Point Estate land north of the A47 is currently included, although as most of it has no public access there are seldom any sightings from this area. Whilst Thorpe St Andrew sits just outside of the recording area, Thorpe River Green is included in the more recent reports. This area, which sits adjacent to the old course of the River Yare just north of the railway line is now the primary part of the area for reading colour rings on gulls, and was previously covered by this report despite nominally being considered outside the area. There was still no public access allowed to Trowse Meadow during 2023 following its closure by the Whitlingham Charitable Trust in summer 2022, so the only sightings from the meadow were those made viewing onto the meadow from Whitlingham Lane. There was also controversy in spring when large numbers of trees were cleared from the Deal Ground and May Gurney site just across the river from Trowse Meadow.

A Dutch-ringed White Stork over Thorpe Marshes

Introduction

White Storks are rare vagrants to the Whitlingham area. Recent records from around Norwich have been assumed on the balance of probabilities to relate to free-flying birds from Thrigby Wildlife Park, leaving only three records accepted by the relevant rarities committee. This article documents a flyover bird in March 2023 that was traced back to the Netherlands thanks to a coded leg ring, and discusses this in the context of previous Whitlingham and Norfolk records.

Sources of free-flying, rehabilitated or reintroduced White Storks

White Storks used to be considered rare visitors to Norfolk, with the 1999 edition of *Birds of Norfolk* mentioning records from only 24 of the 69 years between 1930 and 1998, i.e. on average sightings every three years or so. In some years there were multiple individuals - White Storks often range widely, so deciphering exactly how many individuals have occurred each year is difficult. In contrast, since 1994 White Storks have been reported in Norfolk every year. This increase in sighting frequency strongly suggests that whilst wild birds from the continent will undoubtedly still occur, some of the sightings are likely to be due to the number of birds that have received some form of 'human assistance' in reaching the Norfolk countryside.

Perhaps the best-known instance of this in Norfolk are birds from the wildlife park at Thrigby Hall Wildlife Gardens in East Norfolk. White Storks have been kept there from at least the 1980s, but in 1995 a free-flying pair was widely seen around Norfolk. From then onwards at least one bird was seen regularly in East Norfolk, with two or three free-flying birds in 2011 and up to four in 2013. Apparently these birds usually returned to Thrigby in the evening, which was found to be true during spot checks on three occasions (Allard, 2014).

A rather different scenario arose in 2015. During the previous year, 22 injured White Storks were brought from Poland to Shorelands Wildlife Gardens near Diss. They had been injured flying into power lines whilst migrating and it was initially thought unlikely that they would recover enough to be returned to the wild. However, several defied this prognosis and were able to fly off of their own accord. One of these had been ringed whilst still in Poland and during February and March 2016 was seen at Welney, Lyng and various Nar Valley sites.

In recent years a large-scale reintroduction project has been carried out at Knepp (West Sussex) and Wadhurst (East Sussex) on the south coast of England. White Storks from Poland were first brought over in December 2016, with 24 captive-bred juveniles released in 2019. Successful breeding took place in 2020, whilst a further 19 juveniles were released. Further captive-bred juveniles were released in 2021 (27), 2022 (33) and 2023 (33) – for further details see the White Stork Project website here: <https://www.whitestorkproject.org/>

In short, given the number of White Storks that have been kept, rehabilitated or released in England recently, the likelihood of a particular individual seen flying over being from a wild population on the continent is both reduced and very difficult to prove.

Details of the White Stork seen flying over Thorpe Marshes

On 16th March a White Stork was found near Wiveton, bearing an unusual-looking octahedral black coded 'ELSA' ring (Figure 1). Fortunately, photographs were taken that allowed the ring code to be read. Later the same day it flew west to Stiffkey, before flying south over Binham, Hindringham and Thursford. The White Stork managed to fly unreported over a large chunk of Norfolk before being found the following day at Kessingland, where it remained until 19th March. At that point it flew south, being seen over Southwold and Dunwich. After a gap of several days the stork reappeared, this time at Halvergate Marshes on 22nd March. It stayed overnight and was photographed early on 23rd March by David Bryant (Figure 2) before flying off. At this point it was seen flying west over Thorpe Marshes at 10:14, over the Avenues (west Norwich) at 10:31 and just south of Colney G.P.s at 10:38 before being seen over Wymondham. On 25th March it was found on the Cambridshire Washes, where it remained until 27th March. These sightings are visualised on Figure 3.



Figure 1 – White Stork at Wiveton. Photo: Steve Gantlett <https://www.cleybirds.com/>



Figure 2 – Dutch ringed White Stork at Halvergate on 23rd March 2023. Photo: David Bryant



Figure 3 – Sighting locations for the Dutch-ringed White Stork between 16th-27th March. Where it was seen in flight, the direction is indicated with a blue arrow.

Origins of the March 2023 White Stork

Mark Golley was one of the observers of the White Stork at Wiveton and managed to trace the bird from the code on the ring. It had been ringed as a nestling in the Netherlands at Schalkwijk, SE of Utrecht, in June 2020. White Storks had been declining as a breeding bird in the Netherlands during the 20th century, but reintroduction and conservation projects succeeded in increasing their numbers, with numbers reaching 500 breeding pairs in 2005. Storks are no longer being released in the Netherlands (Enters *et al.*, 2013) - in 2000 the main release centre was converted into an information centre. Nonetheless White Storks are long-lived birds (the Euronatur website states that the longest-lived ringed White Stork was 39), so whilst this bird was wild born, it is not possible to be sure if the parent Storks originated or descended from reintroduced birds.



Figure 4 – A satellite map showing the location of Schalkwijk where the White Stork was born © Google Maps 2023.

Previous Whitlingham & Thorpe White Stork records

There is an interesting record from the area that long pre-dates the country park. On 23rd Dec 1961 a White Stork was found at Whitlingham, where it remained until it was found dead on 2nd Feb 1962. It was ringed, and upon investigation it was traced back to Denmark. It had originally been caught in poor health at Skaerback, Jutland, Denmark in winter 1960 and rehabilitated in a barn over winter by a Danish ringer. Having made a full recovery, it was ringed and released in April 1961, not being reported again until turning up at Whitlingham.

In more recent times there were two sightings of White Storks in 1998, both accepted by the county rarities committee. The first one was on 26th June, when it was seen by several observers flying over Whitlingham STW, then over Thorpe St Andrew and north along the

eastern edge of Norwich. The second sighting was on 7th July, firstly seen over Strumpshaw Fen then over Whitlingham. These sightings might relate to the same individual.

In 2013 a White Stork was seen flying eastwards along the A47 level with Thorpe St Andrews on 12th Sept. During the year two White Storks were seen regularly between Halvergate and Breydon, including in September so it would seem possible it was one of those birds. There was also a small cluster of records in 2016. One is mentioned in the Bird & Mammal Report from Whitlingham on 13th March, whilst another was seen flying over Thorpe Marshes on 27th April having earlier flown over Surlingham Church Marsh. Nearby on 7th April a White Stork was seen flying north-west from County Hall and probably crossed the recording area boundary at Trowse. None of these sightings were accepted by the county rarities committee as likely involving wild birds (the 2013 sighting wasn't submitted, whilst all Norfolk White Stork records in 2016 were assigned to Appendix A as likely escapes).

Bibliography/references

- **Allard, Peter. 2014.** White Storks at Thrigby Wildlife Park. *Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report 2013*, Volume 47. Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society.
- **BBC website page with details of Shorelands:** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-32504476>
- **Dunmore, G. (ed.) 1999.** *Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report 1998*. Volume 32 part 2. Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society
- **Enters, A., Jonkers, D., Krüse, H., Van Nee, W., Rietveld, I. & Rietveld, R. 2013.** The White Stork in the Netherlands in 2004 – 2005. In: *NABU (2013)*. White Stork populations across the world – Results of the 6th International White Stork Census 2004/05. Berlin. Available online at: https://bergenhusen.nabu.de/imperia/md/nabu/images/nabu/einrichtungen/bergenhusen/netherlands_zensus_2004.pdf
- **Euronatur White Stork profile:** <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/bird-conservation-in-europe/profile-white-stork-ciconia-ciconia> accessed 19/12/23.
- **Seago, M.J. (ed). 1963.** *Norfolk Bird Report 1962*. Norfolk Naturalists' Trust & Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society.
- **Taylor, M., Seago, M., Allard, P. & Dorling, D. 1999.** *The Birds of Norfolk*. Helm Publishing.
- **White Stork Project** <https://www.whitestorkproject.org/> accessed 19/12/23.
- **WWT website page with details of White Stork sighting:** <https://www.wwt.org.uk/news-and-stories/news/todays-sightings-heatwave>

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mark Golley for tracing the origin of the White Stork, to Steve Gantlett and David Bryant for allowing their photographs to be used and to everyone who reported the bird.

An Iceland Gull at Whitlingham C.P.

During a cold spell in January, Robin Chittenden found an Iceland Gull on a frozen part of the Great Broad. It remained there for several hours before departing and was not seen again. This is only the third Whitlingham record, following a 3rd-summer 26-30th May 1997 and a 1st-winter photographed on the Great Broad on 22nd Nov 2020.



Figure 1 – A typical view of the Iceland Gull at Whitlingham on 22nd Jan.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)



Figure 2 – A closer picture of the Iceland Gull on the ice. Photo: David Ratcliffe.



Figure 3 – Iceland Gull in flight. Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)



Figure 4 – Iceland Gull stretching its wings. Photo: © Robin Chittenden
(www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Robin Chittenden and David Ratcliffe for allowing their photos to be used here.

A putative Baltic Gull (*Larus fuscus ssp. fuscus*) at Whitlingham C.P.

Introduction

There has only been a small number of accepted British records of Baltic Gull, *Larus fuscus fuscus* (see <https://www.historicalrarebirds.info/u20/baltic-gull>), but this situation is largely the result of strict requirements for acceptance, which exclude birds in most age categories unless they have been ringed in a known *fuscus* breeding colony. It is likely therefore that this species occurs more commonly in both Norfolk and Britain than official records suggest. This article provides brief details of a bird at Whitlingham showing plumage consistent with Baltic Gull (Figure 1), and adds some context in terms of how Baltic Gull records are considered.



Figure 1 – Putative Baltic Gull (*Larus fuscus fuscus*) on Whitlingham Great Broad. Photo: Edmund Mackrill.

Background

Three subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gulls occur in Britain, along with intergrades between them. *Larus fuscus graellsii* is the commonest subspecies, initially occurring in Norfolk as a summer visitor but now breeding and overwintering. Breeding in the county first occurred at Blakeney Point in 1978, however from 1995 onwards it has also utilised buildings and indeed can now be found breeding in Norwich city centre. The other two subspecies

occurring in Britain are *L. f. intermedius* and *L. f. fuscus* ('Baltic Gull'). Birds of the subspecies '*intermedius*' are darker-backed than those of *graellsii*. They are fairly common in Britain and are not assessed by rarities committees. Baltic Gulls are thought to be rare annual visitors, however their true status as a British species is heavily masked because of doubts as to whether it is possible to separate them in the field from *intermedius* birds. A map showing a distribution of the three subspecies is provided on the Gull Research website here:

<https://gull-research.org/indexelements/miscellimages/europe10.jpg>

In his 1998 Birding World paper, gull expert Lars Jonsson suggested that Baltic Gulls could be identified if they were 2nd calendar year birds (2cy) seen in spring, 3rd calendar year birds (3cy) seen in spring or adults seen in autumn. Further research suggested that identification was not as straightforward as this, and in a published analysis of the various subspecies assessed by BBRC (Kehoe/BBRC, 2006), the position with regards to Baltic Gull record assessment was summed-up as "*At present, BBRC does not consider this taxon safely diagnosable in a vagrant context without tangible proof of origins, most likely a ringing recovery. For reference purposes, however, we seek details of suspected fuscus when these include good images and supporting moult analysis. Based on its distribution and movements, it seems possible that fuscus is, or at least once was, a scarce migrant rather than a true rarity*".

Subsequent research has lessened the requirements slightly. It is now considered that 2cy birds seen between April and June with dark backs and second-generation (i.e. moulted) retrices, secondaries and at least eight primaries can be identified as *Larus fuscus fuscus*. For more detail on the features needed to confirm a 2cy Baltic Gull see Altenburg *et al.* (2011). Based on this, Baltic Gull was finally formally added to the Norfolk list on the basis of a 2cy bird seen at Cley Marshes on 22nd August 2017 (note the requirement for the bird to be seen in spring must have been relaxed given the August date).

Details of the Whitlingham sighting

Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers during the day at Whitlingham tend to peak in August, however there are often large pre-roost gatherings during autumn where gulls land, often briefly, on the Great Broad in the afternoon before continuing eastwards towards Breydon Water. On 19th October 2023 Edmund Mackrill noticed the small, dark adult Lesser Black-backed Gull (Figures 1-3) on Whitlingham Great Broad. As an experienced gull-watcher Ed feels that this bird is a typical adult Baltic Gull, however he is aware that as no ring was seen and it isn't a 2cy it would currently not be accepted as such by the BBRC. It is documented here firstly in case the conditions for acceptance change in the future, but also to make sure that this species is on the radar of local birdwatchers in the hope that a 2cy bird might one day be seen and fully documented in the area.



Figure 2 – putative Baltic Gull (Larus fuscus fuscus) showing outstretched wing on Whitlingham Great Broad. Photo: Edmund Mackrill.



Figure 3 – putative Baltic Gull (Larus fuscus fuscus) showing underside of the wing on Whitlingham Great Broad. Photo: Edmund Mackrill.

References/Bibliography

- Altenburg, R. G. M., Meulmeester, I., Muusse, M. J. M., Muusse, T. O. V. & Wolf, P. A. 2011. Field identification criteria for second calendar-year Baltic Gull. *Dutch Birding* 33: 304-311.
- Jonsson, L 1998. Baltic Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* – moult, ageing and identification. *Birding World* 11: 295-317
- Kehoe, C / BBRC. 2006. Racial identification and assessment in Britain: a report from the RIACT subcommittee. *British Birds* 99, December 2006, pages 619–645.
- Olsen, K M & Larsson, H 2004. Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America. Second edition. London
- Rare bird report archive online: <https://www.historicalrarebirds.info/u20/baltic-gull>
- Taylor, M., Seago, M., Allard, P. & Dorling, D. 2007. The Birds of Norfolk. Helm Publishing.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Ed Mackrill for allowing his photographs to be used and for giving his thoughts on this bird.

Aberrant Cormorants in the Norwich area

Introduction

In late August pictures began to circulate on local Facebook groups (“Secret Norwich” and “Norfolk Wildlife”) of a Cormorant with extensive pale feathering, seen swimming on the River Wensum in Norwich city centre. The distance and contrasting light bird/dark water meant that the pictures were over-exposed, however some areas, for example the hind neck, were clearly brown rather than white, eliminating the possibility that the bird was an albino. As a result, it was labelled as leucistic and thereafter was typically referred to in local circles as “the leucistic Cormorant”. Sightings continued throughout the autumn, including at Whitlingham, and there were suggestions that more than one aberrant bird was involved. This article aims to provide evidence for this theory, and also discusses the correct name for the reduction of pigment that has caused the pale feathering.

The search for aberrant Cormorants in Norwich

Various local birders set out to look for the aberrant Cormorant during the early part of its stay, one of whom was local naturalist and film-maker Liam Smith, who obtained the picture below (Figure 1) on 1st Oct and also made a short film at the same time, viewable via his A Shot of Wildlife YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=351GB3NeyDc> The key features of the individual he filmed are that the reduced pigment is largely restricted to the wings (and also the tail, which is more visible in the video) and that most of these wing feathers are actually a very pale brown rather than truly white.



*Figure 1 –
Aberrant-
plumaged
Cormorant in
Norwich,
photographed on
1st October 2023
by Liam Smith.*

Whilst Liam was looking for the Cormorant to film, he spoke to various other local birders, and as a result was confident that there was indeed at least one, possibly two, other aberrant Cormorants in the city. The second bird was described as being more extensively pale than the one that Liam had photographed. By now sightings were more frequent, but the conditions along the river made for difficult comparisons – as well as swimming against the dark water the other typical location was perched high up on buildings with a river frontage (Figure 2), limiting the areas of feathers visible to compare.



Figure 2 – Aberrant Cormorant perched up on a riverside building on 5th October 2023, photographed by James Emerson.

The easiest way of proving that multiple aberrant Cormorants were present would be if they were seen at the same time, however by the end of December there had still only been one aberrant bird seen in the Cormorant roost at Whitlingham, considered the most likely place to see multiple birds around the city. I therefore decided to try to find as many pictures as possible in the hope that I could compare photos taken of Cormorants in similar postures and light conditions to look for definite differences in plumage. I was also aware that as at least one bird had been present since late August that minor differences could perhaps be explained by moulting, so ideally comparison pictures would have been taken over a fairly short time period. Fortunately returning to the Norfolk Wildlife Facebook page, local birder Adam Lee Wicks had taken a series of photos in mid-September that clearly show a Cormorant

that not only has pale wings and tail, but also had a pale lower neck and 'shoulder' area (Figures 3 & 4), clearly different to the bird photographed a few weeks later by Liam in Figure 1 and proving the existence of at least two different aberrant Cormorants in the city.



Figure 3 – A very pale aberrant Cormorant in Norwich city centre, photographed in mid-September 2023 by Adam Lee Wicks.



Figure 4 – A very pale aberrant Cormorant in Norwich city centre preening and showing extra wing detail, photographed in mid-September 2023 by Adam Lee Wicks.

In addition to photographing that pale bird in Figures 3 & 4, Adam had also seen the bird that was being seen more frequently, also photographing it in September (Figures 5 & 6). At first the bird in Figure 5 actually looks like a third individual, with the pale feathering neatly restricted in the wings compared to the bird in Figure 1, but it is important to consider the difference in angles that the pictures were taken from (this one is slightly behind the bird, whilst Liam's picture was taken side on and looking upwards). An open-wing shot (Figure 6) also shows the true extent of the pale feathering present (and note the darker feather between the primaries and secondaries, which is referred to later). Although not certain, I haven't seen any other pictures that would prove the presence of three birds.



Figure 5 – A Cormorant showing pale wings and tail along with general pale-brown plumage, photographed in Norwich city centre during September 2023 by Adam Lee Wicks.



Figure 6 – The Cormorant shown in Figure 5 stretching its wings. Photographed in Norwich city centre during September 2023 by Adam Lee Wicks.

Robin Chittenden spent some time both at Whitlingham and along the River Wensum in Norwich city centre aiming to photograph the aberrant birds. His pictures from late October all appear to show the 'darker' of the two individuals (Figures 7 & 8).



Figure 7 – Aberrant Cormorant on building in Norwich city centre, photographed on 28th October 2023. Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)



Figure 8 – Aberrant Cormorant swimming in Norwich city centre, photographed on 28th October 2023. Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

The next task was to determine which individual(s) had been present at Whitlingham. Fortunately knowing that the paler individual had a pale lower neck and shoulder meant that even pictures taken from different angles to the photos taken in the city (e.g. Figure 9)

could be determined as being the darker individual (and note the darker wing feather seen in Figure 6 is visible in Figure 10).



Figure 9 – Aberrant Cormorant on the Great Broad on 30th November 2023. Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)



Figure 10 – Montage of aberrant Cormorant pictures from Whitlingham Great Broad late autumn 2023, photographed by Edmund Mackrill.

Naming different pigment aberrations in birds

As alluded to earlier, these birds were widely referred to as leucistic, which is a term often applied by birders as a blanket term for birds that are not albino but have black feathering replaced by white feathers or pale brown feathers. The actual situation regarding bird pigment aberrations is more complicated than this, with mutations based on different genetic pathways and often complicated by bleaching of feathers by sunlight (i.e. so pale brown feathers become lighter, eventually appearing white). Hein van Grouw has spent many years working in this area and published papers in *Dutch Birding*, *British Birds* and the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* (see bibliography for details) aiming to clarify the different pigment aberrations in birds and establish a common nomenclature for them. The insights given below all come from the papers relating to his extensive research. Given that these mechanisms are genetic, it is not always possible to determine the cause simply from observing the plumage, although it should be possible to narrow it down. In order to do this it is necessary to have a basic understanding of both the pigments involved and how they are produced.

Most (but not all) yellow and red feathers are coloured by carotenoid pigments, which are not often affected by mutations. Darker feathers are coloured by melanins, which do seem to be affected by mutations more frequently, hence why many of the aberrant birds seen are those that usually have black feathers. There are two different types of melanin that can be present in bird feathers. Eumelanin is responsible for black, dark brown and grey feathers, whilst pheomelanin produces reddish-brown in high concentrations but can also give a yellowy-brown at low concentrations. Both types of melanin can be found in the same feathers and can mix to give grey-brown. Interestingly in feathers that do contain both types of melanin, eumelanin tends to occur in the centre of the feather with pheomelanin around the edges.

Melanin is formed by a process of oxidation of an amino acid called tyrosine by the enzyme tyrosinase. Strong oxidation produces black pigments, whilst weaker oxidation produces brown. The depth of colour is also determined by the concentration of the pigment in the feathers. When understanding pigment aberrations, it is important to be aware of these two different factors, because mutations in either pathway (the oxidation of tyrosine or the production of colour cells) can affect the overall pigmentation. This means that in terms of pale birds, you can separate mutations into categories based on whether the cause of the aberration is a result of defects in the development of the melanin cells, problems in the synthesis of melanin or issues with the deposition of melanin in the feathers. Rather than try to paraphrase information about these different conditions I have instead included the very useful summary table by Hein van Grouw (Table 1), originally published in his 2021 *Bulletin of the BOC* paper which is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial licence.



| Colour aberration | Effect on melanins | Effect on plumage and skin colour |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Defects in the development of melanin cells (White Spotting)</i> | | |
| Leucism | Total absence of both melanin pigments in either parts or all of the plumage and skin due to a neural crest disorder resulting in the congenital absence of melanin cells from some or all of the skin areas. | All-white plumage all over or all-white feathers mixed with normal-coloured ones. Pink bill and feet or normal-coloured bill and feet depending on where in the skin the cells are missing. Always melanised eyes. In partial Leucism white feathers are often in patches and bilaterally symmetrical divided over the plumage. |
| Progressive greying | Total absence of both melanin pigments in either parts or all of the plumage (and skin) due to progressive loss of melanin cells in some or all of the skin areas with age. | All-white plumage all over or all-white feathers mixed with normal-coloured ones. Pink bill and feet or normal-coloured bill and feet. Always normal-coloured eyes. In an early stage white feathers are often randomly spread in the plumage. |
| <i>Defects in melanin synthesis (Albinism)</i> | | |
| Albino | Total absence lack of both melanins in feathers, eyes and skin due to the heritable absence of the enzyme tyrosinase in the pigment cells. | All-white plumage all over, red eyes and pink feet and bill. |
| Brown | Eumelanin changed in colour (qualitative reduction) due to incomplete melanin synthesis. Phaeomelanin unaffected. | Original black is brown, original reddish/yellowish brown unaffected. Plumages bleaches rapidly further in the (sun)light. Eyes normal and feet and bill slightly lighter than normal. |
| Ino | Reduction of melanin and remaining melanin changed in colour (qualitative reduction) due to incomplete synthesis of both melanins. | Original black is very pale brown/cream to dark brown, original reddish/yellowish brown hardly visible to slightly paler. Eyes, feet and bill pinkish to hardly noticeably different. |
| <i>Defects in the melanin deposit into the feathers</i> | | |
| Dilution | Normal-coloured melanin is deposited in an abnormal clumped fashion in the feather cells (both melanins or eumelanin alone). | Original black is bluish- or silvery-grey. Original reddish/yellowish brown is buff/cream or unaffected. Eyes normal and in most forms of Dilution feet and bill are normal-coloured too. |
| <i>Defects in the type of melanin produced</i> | | |
| Melanism | Aberrant production and distribution into the feather cells of normal melanin (not necessarily an increase of pigment). | Increase of black and/or reddish brown, or an altered pattern (the latter not necessarily darker). Eyes, feet and bill normal. |
| <i>Melanin aberrations do not affect carotenoid pigments which, if present in the relevant species, remains present.</i> | | |

Table 1 - Proposed nomenclature for the most common colour aberrations in birds. Reproduced from Van Grouw (2021), originally published in [Bull. B.O.C. 2021 141\(3\)](#) on page 280 and included here under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial Licence.

Using the definitions in Table 1 we can see that leucism results in patches of white feathers in parts of the plumage as a result of the total absence of melanin. However, it is clear from many of the photos that the pale feathers on 'our' Cormorants are in fact very pale brown rather than white, ruling out leucism as the explanation. The closest pigment match based on Van Grouw's 2013 paper appeared to be "Ino light", which gives the pigment change as "originally black is very pale brown/cream" (note that in the 2021 paper "Ino" is not split into "Ino-light" and "Ino-dark"). These birds however are meant to have reddish-pink eyes, whilst the Norwich birds had retained their blue eye colour. I therefore sent Liam Smith's photo (Figure 1) and a picture from Drew Lyness very similar to Robin Chittenden's Whitlingham photo (Figure 9) to Hein van Grouw to ask his opinion.

In his reply, Hein highlighted the dark brown newer feathers on the head and body shown in Figure 1, the pale brown (as opposed to white) tones visible in both pictures and also the darker brown feathers on the inside of the wing. Hein agreed that given the pale brown colour rather than white, the bird was definitely not leucistic, agreeing that a mutation involving melanin synthesis is responsible. He suggested that the presence of the brown feathers also ruled out the pale form of Ino ("Ino-light") leaving either "Brown" or "Ino-dark" as the choices. Based on the colour of the feet (normal rather than pink), he felt that "Brown" was the likely mutation involved here. Hein also noted that the yellow skin at the bill base was not affected because the mutations involved with melanin synthesis do not affect carotenoid pigments.

In the mutation "Brown" the overall amount of pigment is unchanged from typically plumaged birds, but the eumelanin is incompletely oxidised so its appearance is changed, making the feathers dark brown rather than black. This is clearly visible in all of the pictures, although as the birds are in juvenile plumage some of the feathering would be brown anyway, so this is not as striking as it would be on an adult bird. A key second thing is that these brown feathers with a 'qualitative reduction' of eumelanin are sensitive to sunlight and bleach strongly. This has turned some of the feathers a very pale creamy colour, and in some cases almost white. This neatly explains the presence of darker brown wing feathers where the wing bends between the secondaries and primaries (see Figures 6, 9 and 10), as these inner feathers are exposed to the sunlight less often than those either side of them and have therefore retained the brown colour rather than being heavily bleached.

Other records of aberrant Cormorants in Norfolk

Having not seen any aberrantly-plumaged Cormorants prior to this one, I checked through Norfolk Bird & Mammal Reports from 1990 onwards, none of which mention any pale Cormorants (although it should be noted that whether abnormal plumage was report-worthy would be a decision for the observer and species text drafter). An appeal for any sightings via Twitter turned up only one such record, a Cormorant from Happisburgh on 17th Oct 2016 seen by James Appleton (see Figures 11-13). It appears that this bird has a mixture of randomly-scattered white and feathers, which Hein suggests is likely to be the result of 'progressive greying', which like leucism is caused by defects in the development of melanin cells.



Figure 11 – Aberrant Cormorant at Happisburgh in 2016. Photo: James Appleton.



Figures 12 & 13 – Aberrant Cormorant at Happisburgh in flight. Photos: James Appleton.

Conclusions

Thanks to the photos supplied by Adam Lee Wicks, it has been possible to confirm that sightings of aberrantly plumaged Cormorants in Norwich do relate to more than one individual. Despite this, they were never seen together or simultaneously at different locations. All photographs taken from mid-October onwards appear to be of the same individual, suggesting that the paler bird seen in central Norwich during September (which might also have been the bird that was originally seen in August) has moved on and is no longer present locally.

Based on Hein Van Grouw's research and feedback it was possible to confirm that the aberration involved is not leucism, and is instead a melanin synthesis mutation, probably one known as "brown". For at least two juvenile Cormorants to turn up in the same place with similar plumage aberrations the most likely explanation would be that they are siblings. The brown mutation is recessive and linked to the Z sex chromosome. Birds, unlike humans, have homozygous males (i.e. two copies of the Z sex chromosome, ZZ), whilst the females are heterozygous (ZW). This means that it is highly likely that both 'brown' Cormorants are female, as they would only need to inherit one copy of the mutation from the male parent, which would look normal if it had one non-mutated copy of the gene. In order to be male, they would have had to inherit the mutated gene from both parents, which is less likely (and the adult female would have shown brown/pale plumage, making it a very distinctive bird).

Bibliography

- Van Grouw, H. 2006. Not every white bird is an albino: sense and nonsense about colour aberrations in birds. *Dutch Birding* 28, pages 79-89.
- Van Grouw, H. 2013. What colour is that bird? *British Birds* 106, January 2013, pages 17-29.
- Van Grouw, H. 2021. What's in a name? Nomenclature for colour aberrations in birds reviewed. *Bull. B.O.C.* 2021 141(3) pages 276-299.
<http://zoobank.org/pub:C2148206-C801-4A2F-94AB-48000FF0F59C>

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to Hein van Grouw for making his papers on the topic of bird pigment aberrations available open access, and more specifically for responding to my queries about these Cormorants. My thanks also to the large number of birders who have reported these birds during their stay. This analysis wouldn't have been possible without the help of those who have let me use their photographs: James Appleton, Robin Chittenden, Ed Mackrill, Liam Smith and Adam Lee Wicks.

Establishment of a colony of breeding Cormorants at Whitlingham

Introduction

Whitlingham Great Broad has long been a notable winter roost site for Cormorants in Norfolk, with peak counts often passing 80 birds and occasionally topping 100 individuals. This year however, five pairs built nests in a large willow tree on the main island (Figure 1). Early indications are that this is only the fourth active nesting site in Norfolk, along with the long-standing colony at Holkham grazing marsh, a recently established colony in mid-Norfolk and a pair further downriver in the mid-Yare valley. It is unclear whether breeding was successful, the presence of Cormorants throughout the year in those trees making it difficult to separate any fledged birds from those already present.



Figure 1 – Location of several Cormorant nests at Whitlingham Great Broad. Photo: James Emerson



Figure 2 – Cormorant nests 1 & 2. Photo: Justin Lansdell.



Figure 3 – Cormorant nests 3 & 4. Photo: Justin Lansdell.



Figure 5 – Cormorant nest 5. Photo: Justin Lansdell.

History of breeding Cormorants in Norfolk

Two subspecies of Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*, occur in Europe. Of these, *Phalacrocorax carbo* ssp. *carbo* was long considered the most commonly-occurring form in Britain, nesting on coastal cliffs, whilst *Phalacrocorax carbo* ssp. *sinensis* was a tree-nesting species more commonly found in continental Europe. Despite this, early descriptions of Norfolk's birdlife include mention of tree-nesting Cormorants in Norfolk, firstly in William Turner's book "Turner on Birds..." (1544), where he states "*I have seen Mergi (a contemporary name used to mean Cormorants) nesting on sea-cliffs about the mouth of the Tyne river, and on lofty trees in Norfolk with the Herons.*" Sir Thomas Browne mentioned Cormorants (under the name *Corvus marinus*) breeding in trees at Reedham during the time of King Charles I (reign: 1625-1649), whilst Mr Lubbock recorded breeding Cormorants at Fritton Lake on the border with Suffolk in 1825.

After an apparent gap of nearly 90-years, Cormorants bred again in Norfolk when a pair nested at Melton Constable Park in 1914. Two years later another pair bred at Feltwell, however this was followed by another large gap until 1988 when a small colony was founded at Narford Lake in west Norfolk. The first two pairs bred unsuccessfully, however the following year four pairs were successful and the colony increased to 14 pairs by 1990. These birds were apparently "discouraged" from nesting at Narford and the colony was abandoned. In 1998 two pairs once again bred at Narford, building nests in Scots Pine trees. There was no data reported from Narford in 1999, however in the same year six pairs bred at Holkham. In 2000 Holkham had become the largest county breeding colony with 39-42 pairs, whilst Narford held 12 pairs (11 in Scots Pines, 1 in an Oak tree). The only other data available from Narford was of two pairs in 2004, but the Holkham colony became well established, with numbers peaking at 196 pairs in 2017.

Until 2021 the only recent breeding record from a site other than Narford or Holkham was at Didlington Lake, a private site in Breckland, where 15-20 pairs were reported in 2006. In 2021 three active nests were reported from an undisclosed site in central Norfolk, with four pairs there in 2022. Also in 2022, a single pair of Cormorants bred in the mid-Yare valley. Figure 3 shows the number and location of breeding pairs of Cormorants in Norfolk since 1988. It is possible that further breeding sites are present in Norfolk and either have not been detected or have not been reported to the county bird recorder. Sometimes landowners take action to discourage roosting or potentially breeding Cormorants – at Fritton Lake, an historic breeding site from the 1800s, a Bald Eagle was apparently flown in the evenings during the 1980s to discourage Cormorants coming into roost (Allard & Hampshire, 2014).

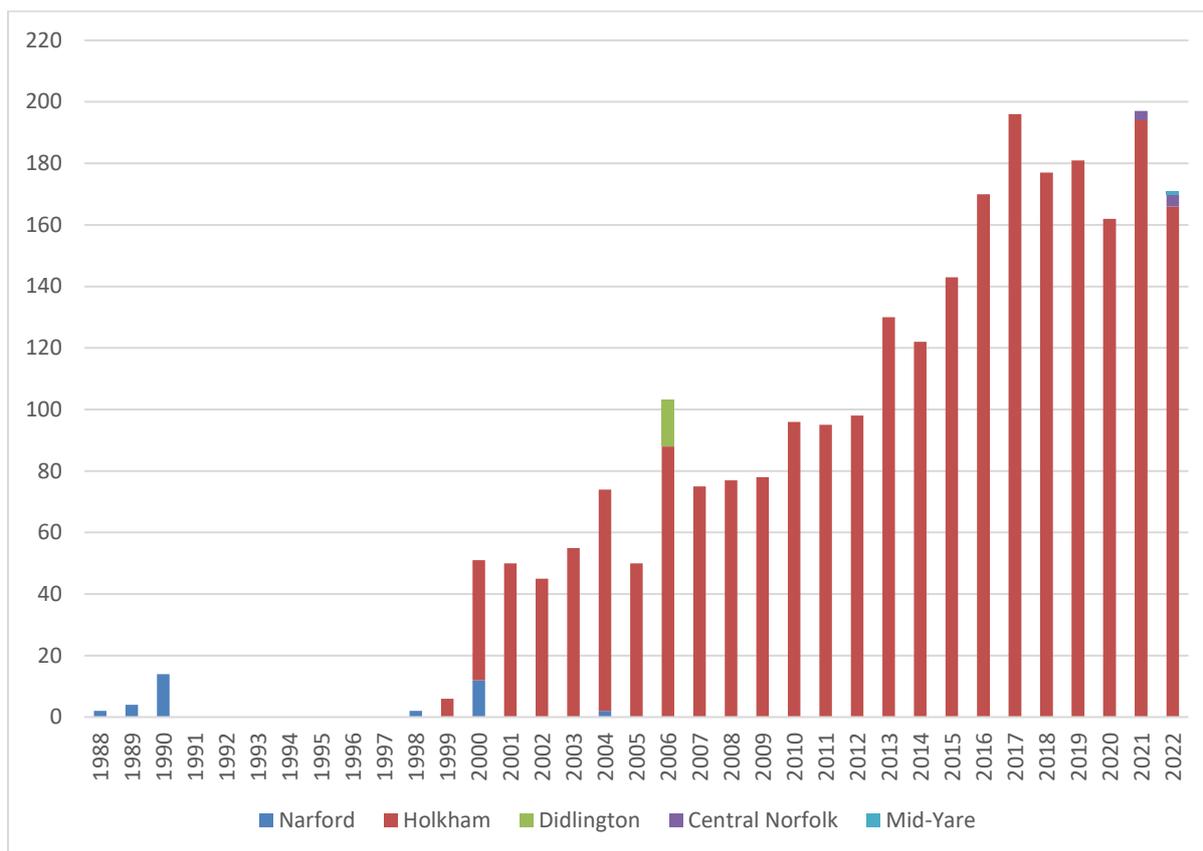


Figure 3 – Minimum breeding pairs/nests of Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* in Norfolk by year since 1988. Data obtained from the Norfolk Bird & Mammal Reports 1988-2022 with additional Holkham counts supplied by Andy Bloomfield (Holkham NNR warden).

Inland-breeding Cormorants elsewhere in the UK

It appears that the early records of tree-nesting Cormorants in Norfolk were not widely repeated elsewhere, with Newson *et al.* (2007) stating that the only other counties with records of inland nesting colonies prior to the 1940s were Cumbria, Dorset, Kent and Suffolk. In Europe, populations of *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* were kept low during much of the 20th century by a combination of persecution, habitat loss and pesticide contamination. The introduction of legislation protecting Cormorants by some countries, followed by Europe-wide legislation under Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive (1979), resulted in population growth and an expansion of their breeding range. The number of Cormorants wintering in the UK increased, and in 1981 a tree-nesting colony formed at Abberton Reservoir in Essex.

The Abberton Cormorant colony has been well studied and has provided some useful insights. The steep growth rate of the colony strongly suggested that numbers were being boosted by immigration from the continent, with ring-recoveries showed that birds were coming from the Netherlands and Denmark. Interestingly further checking of ringed birds also proved that colonies contained some *P. c. carbo* birds, a finding later backed up by DNA analysis. It appears

that the proportion of *ssp. carbo* birds is greater in older colonies, suggesting that as expected it is *P. c. sinensis* birds that found tree-nesting colonies, but once established both subspecies can occur together.

An analysis of inland-breeding Cormorant sites in England between 1981 and 2005 (Newson *et al.*, 2007) revealed successful breeding at 58 sites, with a maximum of 36 colonies occupied in any one year. New breeding colonies tend to be most likely to establish at sites where there are already winter roosts, whilst due to similar habitat requirements they are also often found with breeding Grey Herons. Both of these criteria are met at Whitlingham, where there has been a long-term Cormorant roost on the Great Broad island, and in recent years Grey Herons have begun to breed (discussed further in the next article).

Bibliography/References

- Allard, P. & Hampshire, J. 2014. Cormorant roosting numbers in east Norfolk. *Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report 2013*, Volume 47, pages 16-17. Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society.
- Browne, T. 1902 (reissue of earlier manuscript). Notes and Letters on the Natural History of Norfolk: More Especially on the Birds and Fishes
- Lubbock, Rev. R. 1879. Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk.
- Newson, S.E., Marchant, J.H., Ekins, G.R. & Sellers, R.M. 2007. The status of inland-breeding Great Cormorants in England. *British Birds*. Vol 100 pages 289-299.
- Taylor, M., Seago, M., Allard, P. & Dorling, D. 2007. The Birds of Norfolk. Helm Publishing.
- Turner, W. 1544. Turner on birds: A short and succinct history of the principal birds noticed by Pliny and Aristotle. Edited by Evans, A.H. and reissued in 1903 by Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mark Eldridge who first drew my attention to the nests and to Justin Lansdell for allowing his photographs to be used in this article. Thanks also to Andy Bloomfield who was able to fill in some gaps in the Holkham Cormorant breeding data (not all counts were included in the relevant Norfolk Bird & Mammal Report) and to Norfolk county bird recorder Neil Lawson for clarifying the current Cormorant breeding situation in Norfolk.

An increase in the number of breeding Grey Herons

An article in the 2022 bird report described the successful breeding of a pair of Grey Herons in a nest along the north shore of Whitlingham Great Broad. Herons are an early-nesting species, and from 7th February onwards an adult was seen returning to the same nest that was used last year (Figure 1). Interestingly Roger Parker also watched a third adult showing interest in the nest on several dates (Figure 2). The third bird appeared to be in adult plumage so was not one of the previous year's offspring, instead perhaps it was hoping to take over the nest.

By mid-April the established nest contained five well-grown chicks, photographed by Keith Sowter (Figure 3), at least three of which fledged. This year however two additional nests were also noted. One of these was close to the original nest (Figure 4), whilst the third pair nested on the main island on the Great Broad. The second nest was only visible from a particular spot on the path, with resurfacing work and then leaf emergence making it impossible to monitor. The third nest tucked into vegetation on the island was also difficult to view clearly, however the presence of several fledged herons perched nearby in mid-May indicated successful breeding at that nest.



Figure 1 (left) - A returning Grey Heron on the nest used in 2022. Figure 2 (right) – three adult Grey Herons showing interest in the nest. Both photos: Roger Parker.



Figure 3 – Five young and an adult at nest 1 on 12th April. Photo taken by Keith Sowter

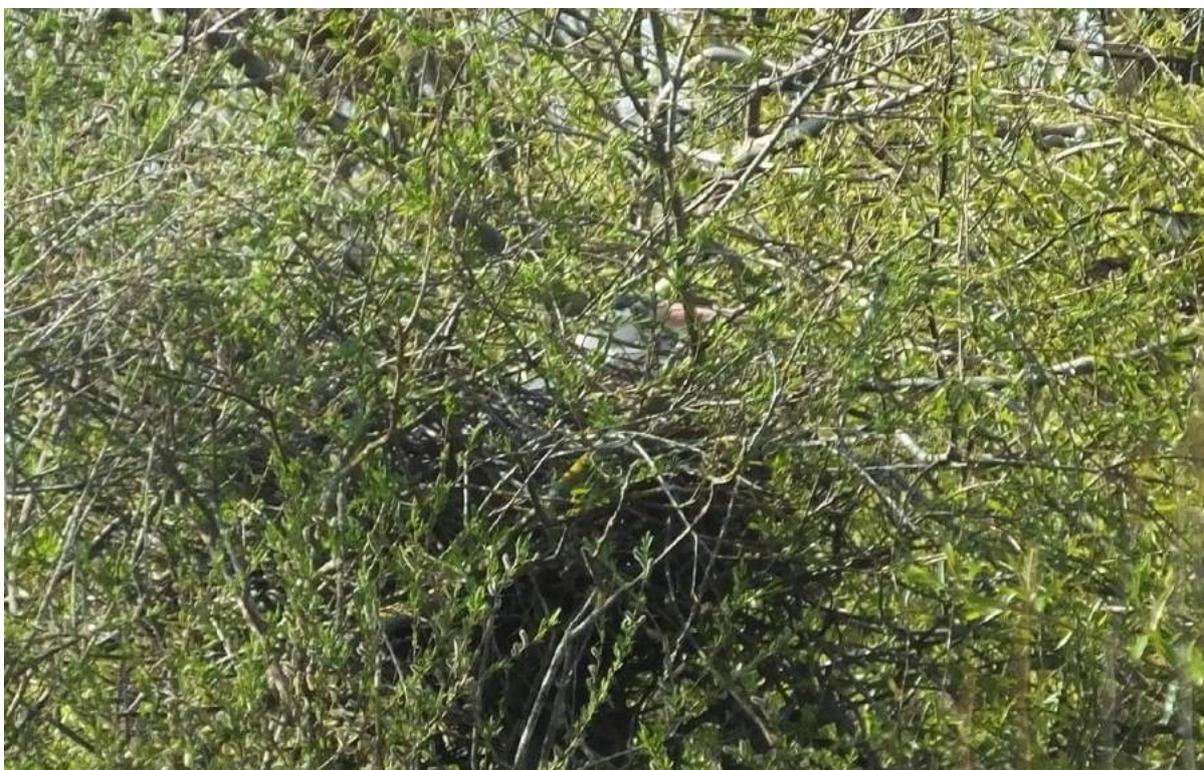


Figure 4 – An adult Grey Heron on nest 2 on 12th April. This nest was in a more concealed location and became impossible to see into as a result of developing foliage and a path closure. Photo taken by Keith Sowter



Figure 5 – A recently fledged Grey Heron in close proximity to nest 3 on 21st May. Photo taken by James Emerson.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Keith Sowter and Roger Parker for providing additional updates and photos of these birds.

Norwich Mute Swan colour-ringing update 2023

The Norwich Swan Project began colour-ringing Mute Swans in the Norwich area in June 2020, and by the end of 2023 had colour-ringed 242 individuals. Of these, 144 have been ringed at Whitlingham or Thorpe Green, including 18 ringed during 2023. In total 199 Mute Swans relating to the project have been reported from Whitlingham or Thorpe Green, with many of the birds sighted at but not ringed at those sites being individuals that were ringed upriver at Carrow Bridge. The Norwich Swan Project has also recently joined a collaborative effort with Lincoln University to study the blood parasites of our swans, aiming to give a further understanding of their health.

Birders at Whitlingham continue to contribute data to the project by reporting ring combinations read in the field – this year there were 156 reports from Whitlingham/Thorpe, relating to 52 individual Mute Swans. This is down on 2022, so do remember to report any colour-ringed swans you see to the scheme using the link mentioned below.

Colour rings used so far for this project are orange with black lettering making up a four-digit code: **4DU***, **4DZ***, **4ES***, **4EN***, **4EO***, **4EX***, **4FD***, **4FN***, **4GG*** where '*' can be any letter of the alphabet. You can report sightings of these birds by visiting <https://stephenvickers.shinyapps.io/swansubapp/> and filling in the form, which will then give you an instant sightings history for your bird.

Mute Swans are also being ringed at other locations around Norfolk (and beyond), so if you find one with a code that does not begin with the three-digit combinations listed above then you can find the scheme details by searching the website cr-birding here: https://cr-birding.org/colourprojects?tid_3=Mute%20Swan&tid_2=&tid_1=All&tid_4=All&tid_5=All&field_countr_tid=All

Figure 1 is a map showing all Norwich-area movements involving birds that have been either ringed or sighted at Whitlingham C.P. or Thorpe River Green. It shows that the large majority of local birds are remaining in the area between Bawburgh and Costessey in the west and the Mid-Yare valley in the East. There have been a handful of swans that have travelled further afield since the project (shown in Figure 2), notably to East Sussex but also birds recorded at Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, north-west Norfolk and Thetford. This year there was one notable sighting away from the Norwich area, at Cley Marshes

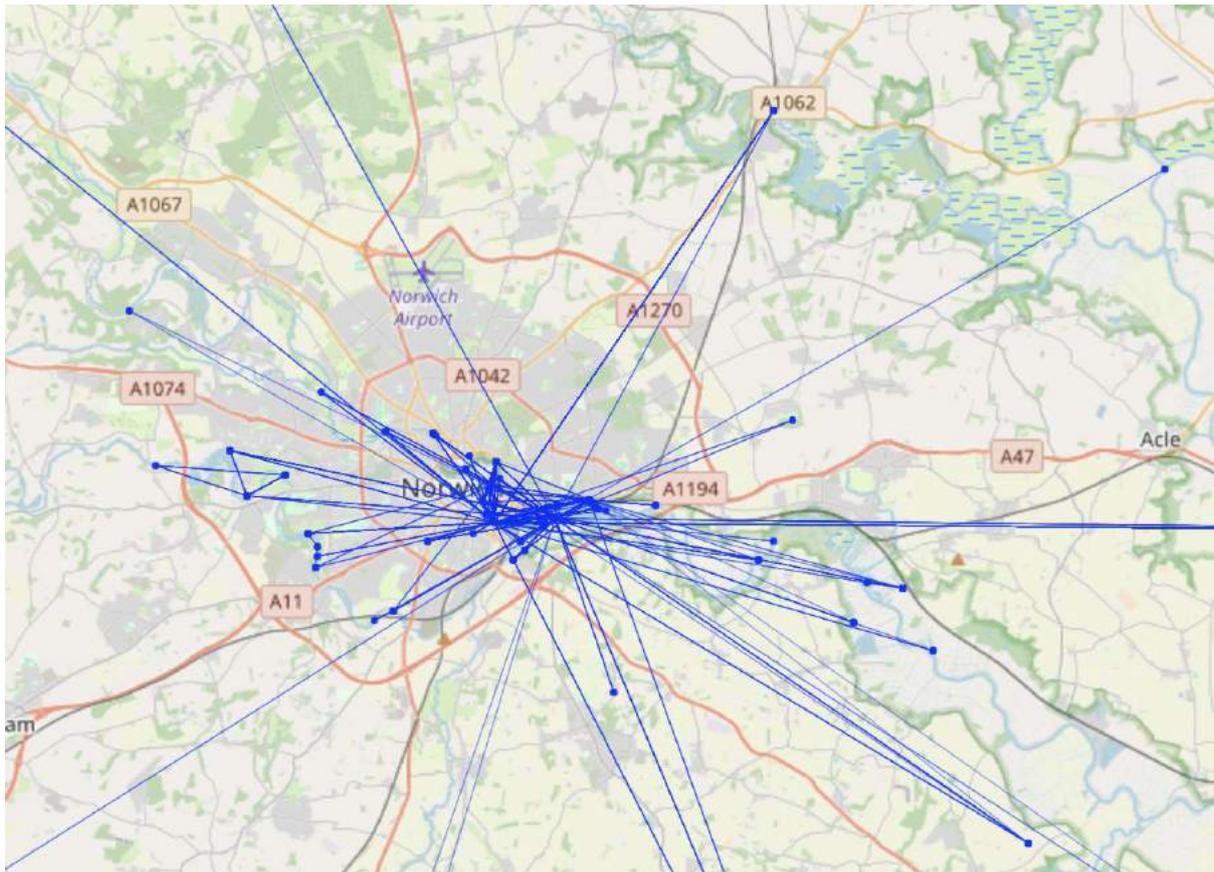


Figure 1 – Local movements of Norwich Swan Project colour-ringed Mute Swans (all years). Data supplied by Stephen Vickers on behalf of the Norwich Swan Project.

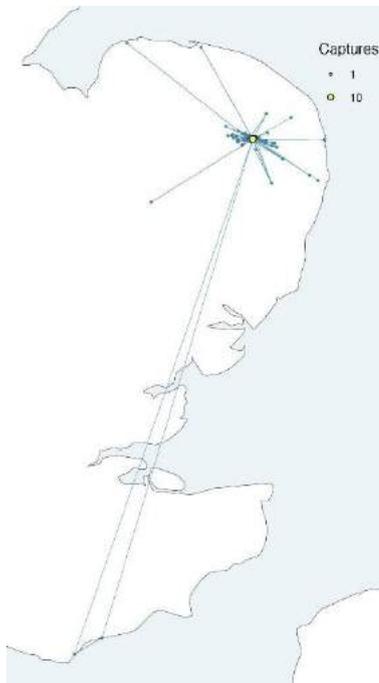


Figure 2 – Map of larger movements of Norwich Swan Project colour-ringed Mute Swans (all years). Data supplied by Stephen Vickers on behalf of the Norwich Swan Project.

One of the most interesting Mute Swan sightings of the year came from Cley Marshes, where Orange 4E0U was seen in spring 2023. This bird had been ringed at Whitlingham in 2021.



Mute Swan 4E0U at Cley Marshes. Photos taken by Mark Golley.

Acknowledgements

The Norwich Swan Project is run by the UEA Ringing Group and the author is particularly grateful to Stephen Vickers from the group who provided a Whitlingham-specific update in mid-December 2023. Thanks also to Mark Golley for reporting the ringed swan from Cley and allowing his photos to be included here.

Ringed Black-headed Gulls at Whitlingham part xi

This report is the eleventh in a series of annual articles documenting the ringed Black-headed Gulls that have been reported from Whitlingham or across the river at Thorpe River Green. Most colour-ringed gulls seen in the area are now locally-ringed birds, so for clarity I have split the article up into sections covering foreign ringed birds and then locally ringed ones.

A brief summary of gulls ringed or sighted abroad since 2012:

- **Number of foreign-ringed individuals recorded (full codes only):** 39 (1 new in 2023).
- **Countries of origin of ringed birds seen at Whitlingham:** 10 - Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Sweden.
- **Countries where Whitlingham/Thorpe ringed birds have been sighted:** 8 - Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, & Sweden
- **Furthest distance travelled:** A metal-ringed bird ringed at Whitlingham on 16th Jan 2019 by the UEA Ringing Group was recorded at Veliky Novgorod, Novgorod O., Russian Federation on 21st Apr 2023 (1555 days, 1989km ENE). This was around 50km further than the previous furthest record, which was also of a UEA-ringed bird that was observed in Russia. Of the foreign-ringed birds, metal-ringed ST305.473 from Finland has so far travelled the furthest to reach Whitlingham (1841km).
- **Most years recorded:** 7 (Yellow T2X8) – 2017-2023 inclusive. [A gull with a metal ring from Denmark has been seen between 2013 – 2022, a range of 10 years, but has only noted in five of them].
- **Most winters recorded:** 7 (Yellow T2X8) – 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24.

Black-headed Gulls ringed outside of Norfolk

A minimum of six Black-headed Gulls, ringed in four foreign countries, were noted during 2023. These countries were Denmark, Finland, Germany and Poland. Only the first two digits of a Finnish bird could be read in the first winter period, however it is likely that it was the same bird recorded in November 2022 and again in October 2023. Both of the Polish birds were returnees, first seen here in 2017 and 2019 respectively. Danish ringed 926 has been seen in the area previously, however details were never received from the ringer. Danish ringed 5NB was a new bird – likewise it has been reported but at the time of writing no details have been received. The final bird, A341, was a returning bird ringed in Germany in 2014.

If you see a colour-ringed gull (other than one of the locally ringed gulls with white codes on blue – see further down for more detail) then the best place to locate contact details for the scheme is to visit cr-birding.org and add as much detail about the ring and code as you can.

| Ring number | Date first seen | Place ringed | Date ringed | Distance travelled / Km | Seen previously? |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| T2X8 | 02/01/23 | Zachodniopomorskie, POLAND | 20/05/17 | 868 | First seen in Nov 2017 |
| Metal-ringed STxxxxxx | 05/01/23 | FINLAND | Not enough details to confirm | | |
| 926 | 18/01/23 | DENMARK | ? | ? | First seen in Jan 2016 |
| TEX7 | 13/02/23 | Mietkowski, POLAND | 24/06/19 | 1063 | First seen in Nov 2019 |
| 5NB | 24/02/23 | DENMARK | ? | ? | NEW |

Table 1 – Ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in the first winter period (Jan-Mar) 2023, excluding birds ringed locally.

Three foreign-ringed gulls were reported in the second-winter period, all returnees from past winters.

| Ring number | Date first seen | Place ringed | Date ringed | Distance travelled / Km | Seen previously? |
|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| T2X8 | 31/10/23 | Zachodniopomorskie, POLAND | 20/05/17 | 868 | First seen in Nov 2017 |
| Metal-ringed ST305.473 | 31/10/23 | Keski-Suomi, Konnevesi, FINLAND | 10/06/18 | 1841 | First seen in Nov 2018 |
| A341 | 09/11/23 | Neumunster, GERMANY | 16/12/12 | 600 | First seen in 2014 |

Table 2 – Foreign-ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in the second winter period (Oct-Dec) 2023

Locally-ringed Black-headed Gulls

At the time of writing in mid-December, three Black-headed Gulls had been colour-ringed at Whitlingham or Thorpe River Green by members of UEA Ringing Group during 2023, taking the total number of birds ringed at the two sites to 103 since the project began in November 2020.

The local Black-headed Gull ringing effort is part of a national waterbird colour-marking project using dark blue rings with white text. All codes have four digits and begin with a 2, either followed by a letter and two numbers or two numbers then a letter. Codes that have been used so far include 2K**, 2E** and 2**N where * = a number.

Sightings can be reported at <https://waterbirdcolourmarking.org/>

During 2023 there were 370 sightings across 69 individuals involving birds either ringed or previously seen at Whitlingham or Thorpe Green since the project started, with birds sighted in 8 countries (Great Britain, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Russia, and The Netherlands). These sighting locations are visualised on Figure 1, with 2023 movements shown with red lines and old movements with blue lines.

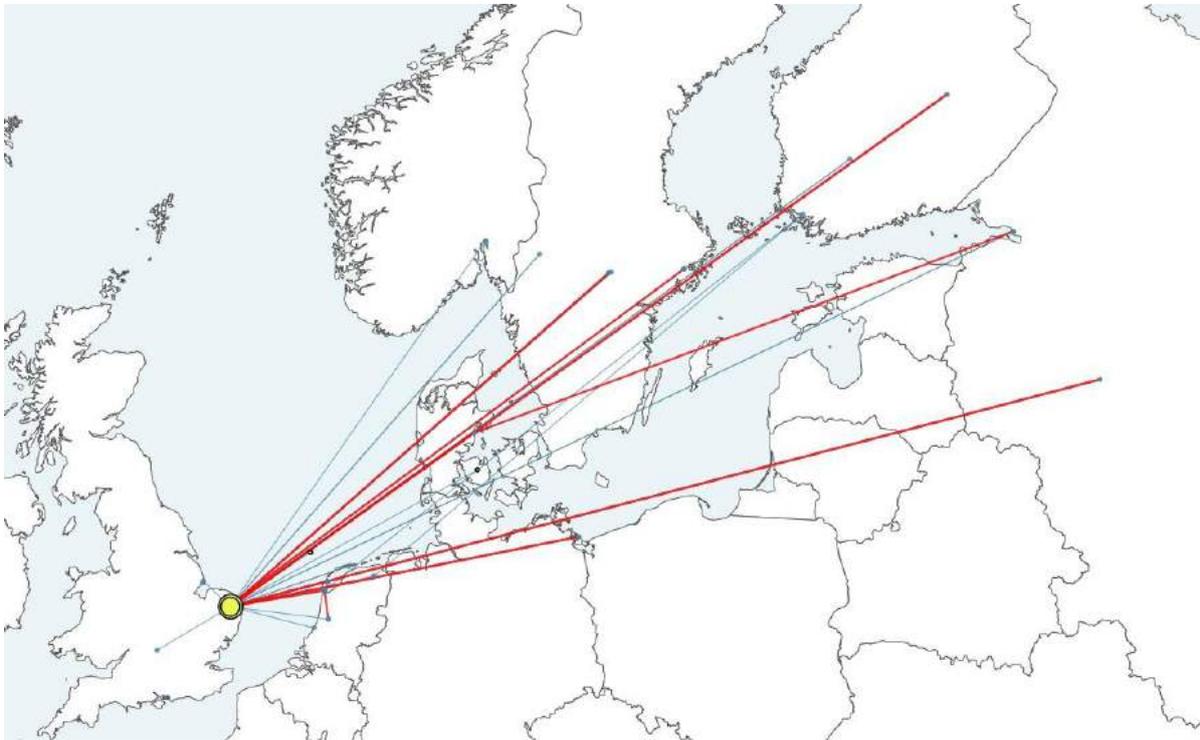


Figure 1 – Map showing re-sighting locations of Whitlingham/Thorpe colour-ringed Black-headed Gulls (red = 2023, blue = older records).

Prior to the colour-ringing project, a small number of Black-headed Gulls were ringed solely with BTO-issue metal rings. Two of these birds were sighted overseas during 2023. Of particular note is a gull ringed as an adult bird at Whitlingham on 16th Jan 2019 and seen in Veliky Novgorod, Novgorod O., Russian Federation on 21st Apr 2023 (1555 days, 1989km ENE). This sets a new record for the furthest distance travelled by a Black-headed Gull recorded at Whitlingham. A second adult Black-headed Gull, ringed at Whitlingham on 25th Nov 2020, was seen in Bromma Kyrksjö, Stockholm, Sweden on 16th Apr 2023 (871 days, 1272km NE) and it was also seen there again on 12th May 2023.

Norfolk-ringed Black-headed Gulls from other projects

Red-ringed **2C27** was seen at Thorpe River Green on 7th March 2023, having originally been ringed at Potter Heigham on 15th Dec 2022 (82 days, 31km). In addition, a metal-ringed Black-headed Gull seen at Whitlingham on 28th Nov 2023 was traced back to Marlingford Hall, where it was ringed as a nestling on 26th June 2021 (885 days, 13km E).

Local colour-ringed Black-headed Gulls seen within the recording area Jan to Mar 2023

The graphic below shows the codes of 44 colour-ringed Black-headed Gulls seen by or reported to the author within the recording area during the first three months of the year.

| | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 2K61 | 2K62 | 2K63 | 2K64 | 2K67 | 2K68 | 2K74 |
| 2K76 | 2K80 | 2K89 | 2K90 | 2K91 | 2K94 | 2K96 |
| 2K97 | 2K98 | 2K99 | 2E00 | 2E01 | 2E02 | 2E05 |
| 2E07 | 2E08 | 2E09 | 2E10 | 2E11 | 2E12 | 2E14 |
| 2E16 | 2E20 | 2E23 | 2E27 | 2E29 | 2E36 | 202N |
| 203N | 204N | 207N | 211N | 217N | 219N | 220N |
| 225N | 232N | | | | | |

Local colour-ringed Black-headed Gulls seen within the recording area Aug to Dec 2023

Fewer locally colour-ringed Black-headed Gulls were reported during the second winter period – the 24 that the author is aware of are shown below.

| | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 2K61 | 2K62 | 2K63 | 2K64 | 2K68 | 2K74 | 2K75 |
| 2K81 | 2K90 | 2K91 | 2K99 | 2E00 | 2E02 | 2E03 |
| 2E05 | 2E12 | 2E14 | 2E36 | 2E40 | 207N | 211N |
| 218N | 221N | 225N | | | | |

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Nick Elsey, Justin Lansdell, Drew Lyness, Roger Parker, Chris Small and Stephen Vickers for supplying additional 2023 information. Particular thanks to Stephen for providing details and maps of the UEA-ringed birds and to all of the ringers involved.

Whitlingham Wildfowl Survey

The monthly wildfowl counts here are based on the combined counts for Whitlingham Little Broad and Great Broad using WeBS methodology, with St Andrews Broad also counted where possible (this is more important in winter, when large amounts of ducks sometimes commute between the two sites). The counts are not necessarily high counts for the month – ad hoc and high counts are described in the individual species accounts. The species order here is that used since the first bird report (i.e. not updated each time the IOC list is changed) to allow better comparison with previous bird reports.

| Species | Jan | Feb | Mar \$ | Apr \$ | May \$ | Jun \$ | Jul \$ | Aug \$ | Sep \$ | Oct \$ | Nov \$ | Dec \$ |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Mute Swan | 7 | 12 | 9 | 10 | 35 | 58 | 49 | 19 | 9 | 16 | 20 | 17 |
| Greylag Goose | 13 | 10 | 13 | 51 | 31 | 113 | 242 | 1 | 91 | 82 | 8 | 0 |
| Canada Goose | 7 | 3 | 9 | 11 | 13 | 0 | 121 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Egyptian Goose | 4 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 25 | 47 | 66 | 41 | 29 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| Shoveler | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Gadwall | 179 | 32 | 27 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 28 | 37 |
| Mallard | 61 | 35 | 45 | 34 | 34 | 22 | 104 | 69 | 83 | 51 | 94 | 57 |
| Teal | 29 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Pochard | 4 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 18 |
| Tufted Duck | 224 | 136 | 75 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 11 | 162 | 259 |
| Goldeneye | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Goosander | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Cormorant | 14 | 29 | 19 | 18 | 13 | 5 | 6 | 12 | 22 | 17 | 39 | 35 |
| Grey Heron | 9 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 2 |
| Great White Egret | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Little Egret | 1 | 9 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 3 |
| Little Grebe | 7 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 2 |
| Great Crested Grebe | 8 | 7 | 8 | 15 | 15 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 4 | 9 | 2 |
| Moorhen | 13 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| Coot | 121 | 44 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 13 | 67 | 87 | 133 |
| Black-headed Gull | 435 | 175 | 201 | 59 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 20 | 205 | 218 |
| Common Gull | 45 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Lesser Black-backed Gull | 1 | 4 | 5 | 13 | 7 | 10 | 26 | 92 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| Herring Gull | 34 | 20 | 11 | 6 | 13 | 2 | 11 | 16 | 1 | 8 | 30 | 13 |
| Common Tern | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kingfisher | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

* Counts at Whitlingham and Thorpe conducted on different days

\$ No WeBS count carried out at Thorpe this month.

Whitlingham and Thorpe Classified List

The systematic list in this bird report follows the latest taxonomical order used by the British Ornithologists Union (BOU) and is based on decisions made by the International Ornithologists Congress (IOC). The most recent list used is IOC 13.2 (June 2023), which made no changes of particular consequence to this report. Sightings of birds that are locally scarce or rare, some early or late reports and particularly high counts have initials after them – these relate to observers, a list of which can be found at the end of the classified list.

* **Brent Goose** *Branta bernicla*

Rare winter/spring visitor

Two flew west over Thorpe Marshes on 20th Apr (DR), the first area record since 2017.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

Near-resident in fluctuating numbers



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

For most of the year no more than 20 present, with numbers increasing throughout May (highest count 39 on 31st) and June (highest count 83 on 12th) to reach a peak of 121 on 10th July. The only count of note outside of the late spring period was a flock of 70 present early morning on 23rd Jan that flew off at dawn. At least two pairs bred this year – a pair with five



goslings was seen on the Great Broad on 22nd Apr with another seen on a nest on the same date. Two returning birds with extra white on the face

were noted on 2nd and 10th July.

Photos of aberrant birds: Justin Lansdell.

*** Barnacle Goose** *Branta leucopsis*

Occasional visitor



The near-resident bird that had been present Aug 2019 to Apr 2022 (colour-ringed blue J96) has now gone. The only sightings of the year were of an un-ringed individual on the Great Broad on 23rd and 24th Jan (RC and DL) and presumably the same on 8th Feb (per eBird).

Photo: Drew Lyness

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Common resident



Numbers fluctuated throughout the year with spring monthly highs *Mar* 60 (12th) *Apr* 56 (27th), *May* 52 (1st), *June* 132 (6th) and *July* 242 (10th). The latter was the highest count of the year. The only other counts of note were 75 on 28th Jan, 91 on 17th Sept (including a pure white bird) and 82 on 14th Oct. Similarly to last year only one brood was noted, a pair with a single young gosling seen on the Great Broad on 21st May.

Photo: James Emerson

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*

Occasional flyover

Flocks noted flying over during January, February, October, November and December, the largest of which were 260 over north on the evening of 27th Feb (part of a large movement over Norwich), 210 west on 10th Dec and 150 west over on 7th Nov. There was also a record of an individual on the Great Broad on 30th Apr (ME), on its own in the conservation area bay.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Numbers lower than usual, with a maximum of 13 between January and April. Numbers increased during May and June as part of the usual spring peak, but there were no three-figure counts, with the highest total 58 on 25th June. Autumn numbers were more variable, with up to 30 present during August to December.

Two nests noted on the Great Broad during April/May, (it was not possible to confirm the presence or absence of a nest on the Little Broad this year due to poor sightlines) A pair with cygnets were present in the conservation area bay on 25th June, whilst at Thorpe Marshes a pair with three cygnets was seen on St Andrews Broad on 12th June.

The Norwich Swan Project colour-ringing scheme continued this year with a further 18 swans ringed at Whitlingham or Thorpe River Green. Interesting movements of Whitlingham-ringed birds this year included one seen at Cley Marshes on 27th March. It had been ringed at Whitlingham in April 2021 (see article on pages 38-40 for further details).

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*

Common resident.



Mostly single-figure counts in the first winter period, increasing in spring to a peak of 66 on 10th July (similar to 2022 when the peak was 69). Other counts of note included 60 on 9th July, 55 on 2nd July, 47 on 25th June and 41 on 21st Aug.

The first brood of the year was seen on 24th Mar when five goslings were seen. Later in spring a pair with young were seen on the Great Broad shore on 20th April and another pair with four goslings on 21st May (three of which were seen again on 2nd June). A pale bird was noted on 17th Sept (see picture).

Photo: James Emerson.

* **Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*

Scarce spring visitor

Two from the direction of Whitlingham, flew over Thorpe Marshes and continued along the river on 7th Apr (SW), a typical date. Possibly the same two birds then seen at Whitlingham on 15th Apr (EM).

Mandarin *Aix galericulata*

Scarce visitor

A drake, presumably the one seen regularly over the past few years, was noted at Thorpe River Green on 14th Mar and 2nd Apr, but was not reported at Whitlingham or noted again in the second winter period. One other sighting related to a pair seen at Whitlingham that then flew towards Thorpe River Green on 27th Apr (ME).

[* Garganey *Spatula querquedula*

Scarce spring migrant]

A report of two at Whitlingham on 20th Apr was erroneous and came about as the result of a data entry error into eBird (Garganey entered instead of Gadwall) that was picked up by the bird news services before being corrected.

Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Regular winter visitor



Present in small numbers at Whitlingham during January, with a maximum of 10 on 19th. After that more often recorded from St Andrews Broad, with up to seven in February and four in March. There was an influx at the start of April with 18 (11 drakes, 7 females) on St Andrews Broad on 5th Apr. Eight were recorded at Whitlingham on the same date but it is not known if these were different individuals or had moved across the

river. Last of spring was one on St Andrews Broad on 30th Apr.

First noted back on 1st Oct when five present at Whitlingham C.P. with a year-high count of 26 on 1st Dec, falling back to single-figures by mid-month. **Photo: Ed Mackrill**

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

Common winter visitor



Only around 30 present at the start of the year, but numbers quickly increasing with 153 on 19th Jan and the year's peak 179 on 21st Jan. Around 30 were still present during February and March, after which monthly high counts: Apr 7, May 4 and June 2.

On St Andrews Broad a female with two ducklings was seen on 7th July (CD). This represents the first confirmed breeding in the recording area since these bird reports began in 2012.

Returning birds noted from 17th Sept, eight days later than in 2022. The peak count for the second winter period was 70 on both 8th and 13th Dec. **Photo: David Ratcliffe**

Wigeon *Mareca penelope*

Scarce winter/passage visitor

Up to six present during January, last noted on 24th Jan. A flock of 86 present on the Great Broad before flying off east on 1st Apr was a new highest count for the site (previously 43).

First seen again on 28th Sept when nine present on the Great Broad, with two on 18th Oct and 3rd Nov. Flocks also seen flying over Whitlingham on 19th and 20th Oct.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Numbers very variable during January, with counts typically anywhere between 30-70 with 101 recorded on 23rd. Counts more stable between Feb-June, all 20-50. Higher numbers present over summer, with a peak of 104 on 10th July plus 83 on 17th Sept and 94 on 19th Nov.

A minimum of three broods noted at Whitlingham. Firstly a pair with ducklings on 7th Apr, followed by 11 ducklings on 3rd May. Five older ducklings on 15th May might refer to the same family, however another duckling with a different female was also present on the latter date. At Thorpe Marshes two ducklings noted on 17th Apr.

* **Pintail** *Anas acuta*

Scarce winter visitor

One flew over the Great Broad with a small group of Wigeon (firstly heading west, then back eastwards) on 19th Oct (DL).

Teal *Anas crecca*

Common winter visitor.

Fewer records than usual, with a high count of 30 on St Andrews Broad on 17th Jan and on Whitlingham Great Broad on 20th Jan. Four still present on the Great Broad on 12th Mar, with one seen on 22nd Apr.

Two seen at Thorpe Marshes on 19th Aug, but not noticed back at Whitlingham until 19th Oct when four present on the Great Broad. Numbers increased back up to 30 on 10th Dec.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Common winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Numbers slightly higher than those recorded in 2022. At the start of the year seven present, increasing to 18 by the end of January. Up to 21 present during February, with numbers increasing during March to reach a peak of 28 (25 drakes, 3 females) on 2nd March. This included a particularly dark-coloured drake, which was noted on several dates during March and April. A pair were seen on 3rd and 21st May, with a drake present on 31st May.



A female was seen on the Great Broad on 2nd July and again on 14th Aug, suggesting that it might have over-summered in the area. The first returning birds for the second winter period were six on 2nd Oct, with up to five seen for the rest of October. Single-figure counts throughout Nov and Dec, numbers peaking at 18 (13 drakes, 5 females) on both 20th and 24th Dec.

Photo of dark individual: Justin Lansdell

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Common winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Around 200 present during January – 197 counted on 13th, 224 on 21st and 201 on 28th. Numbers peaked at 244 on 24th Feb, with 195 still present on 3rd Mar, 173 on 24th Mar and 110 on 21st Apr. On 11th Apr there were 71 on the Great Broad, including the pink-billed bird present since November 2022 (pictured at the front of Robin’s photo). Up to four were seen throughout the summer with the exception of August, when there were no sightings.

Returning birds first noted back on 2nd Oct, a similar date to 2022. Numbers built during the month, with 156 on 31st Oct. The pink-billed bird was seen again from 27th Oct. Numbers increased during November with a maximum of 251 on 24th, reaching 300 on 10th Dec and peaking at 310 on 11th Dec. Numbers consistently around 260 in the last week of the year.

* **Greater Scaup** *Aythya marila*

Scarce winter visitor



Above – a trio of Scaup on the Great Broad on 3rd Feb. Photo: Drew Lyness



*Left: Scaup from 17th Jan. Photo: © Robin Chittenden
(www.robinchittenden.co.uk)*

Following on from the unprecedented number of individuals seen in December 2022, between 1-3 birds were present between the start of January and 4th Feb, the sightings seemingly covering four individuals (1 ad female, 1w female and two 1w drakes). The adult female and possibly an advanced 1w drake were additional birds to the five described in the 2022 report. Sightings as follows: 1 on 4th Jan (1w drake), two on St Andrews Broad on 14th Jan (ad female & 1w unsexed bird), adult female on Great Broad 17th-20th Jan, 1w drake and 1w female on Great Broad 24th Jan – 4th Feb, with an additional more advanced plumage 1w drake also present between 1st-4th Feb.

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

Scarce winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

During January 1 or 2 birds seen on various dates, with sightings related to a mixture of drakes and females. During a cold spell on 22nd Jan five were present, 2 adult drakes, a 1w drake and 2 females (a sixth bird was reported by one observer on the same date, sex not known). Fewer sightings in February, with 2 drakes on 2nd and a single drake on 21st and 24th. Last sightings of the year were a female on 4th Apr and a drake on 13th Apr.

In October a returning bird was first seen on 16th. On 30th and 31st two drakes were present, whilst on 2nd Nov a drake and a female were on the Great Broad. On 8th Dec at least six (five drakes) were present on the Great Broad, with a year-high count of seven on 13th Dec.

* **Goosander** *Mergus merganser*

Scarce winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

No sightings until 21st Jan when a redhead was present on the Great Broad, increasing to four on 22nd and five on 24th & 25th (all redheads). From 26th-28th only one was present, whilst in February five were reported on 8th Feb, otherwise the only sightings were one on 19th and two on 28th. In the second winter period a redhead was present on the Great Broad from 11th Nov to the year end, although not reported on every visit. At times it was seen quite close in near the slipway.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Fairly common resident

Present throughout the area in low numbers – a handful of records received from around Whitlingham C.P., Thorpe Marshes and on Trowse Meadow.

Swift *Apus*

Common spring visitor

First noted on 21st Apr, about a week earlier than in 2022. The only large gathering of the year was 80 over the Great Broad on 2nd July. Last noted on 10th July. Again no sign of any breeding activity around the swift tower in the barn car park.

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Scarce spring migrant



One heard and seen on 15th Apr, firstly at the east end of Whitlingham then later at Thorpe Marshes. This is a similar date to 2022, when the first one was heard on 14th Apr. Two were seen on 22nd Apr, one chasing the other along the north shore of the Great Broad. Several other sightings in late April and May, including two males again seen chasing at Thorpe Marshes on 7th May. Last heard calling on 2nd June. **Photo: James Emerson.**

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Common resident close to the area

Records relate to small flocks either seen flying over or distantly over Trowse or Thorpe St Andrew. Noted on 14 dates, most frequently in March/April.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Scarce resident



Between 1-5 seen at both Whitlingham C.P. and Thorpe Marshes on a range of dates throughout the year.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Common resident



A common resident species with additional birds flying over early mornings. No deliberate autumn 'vis-mig' recording took place this year, with the only flock noted 46 on 16th Oct.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden
(www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Scarce – resident nearby

Seventeen records this year, one less than in 2022. All relate to either single birds or pairs, with most from Whitlingham C.P. but also records from Thorpe Marshes on 25th Apr (two flew over), 29th Apr and 29th Sept.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Secretive resident/winter visitor

Up to four heard at Whitlingham and two at Thorpe Marshes during the first winter period, both likely to be under-counts. Still heard at Thorpe Marshes on 25th Apr and again on 12th June. In autumn noted calling again at Thorpe Marshes from 3rd Oct and at Whitlingham from 12th Oct, with high counts of four (Whitlingham) and three (Thorpe Marshes).

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Common resident



Present all year round both sides of the river with a high count of 16 at Whitlingham C.P. on 26th Jan. Three chicks were seen at Whitlingham on 24th Apr being predated by a Carrion Crow.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Coot *Fulica atra*

Resident/Common winter visitor



A count of 193 on 1st Jan was the highest of the first winter period, with numbers decreasing to 150 on 23rd Jan and 100 on 14th Feb. Counts all single figures between Apr and Aug, increasing slowly to 67 on 14th Oct, 89 on 24th Nov and 133 on 20th Dec.

Colour-ringed bird L6A was seen on 19th Feb but had been ringed in situ at Whitlingham C.P. the previous year.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

*** Crane** *Grus grus*

Scarce spring flyover

One over Whitlingham on 22nd Jan (per eBird) and two over Thorpe Marshes then west over Whitlingham on 10th May (ME & CD).

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Common winter visitor

The highest count of the year was 17 on 1st Jan, the second highest count of recent years following 18 in January 2022. The only other double-figure counts received were 11 on 19th Jan, 10 on 26th Jan and 11 on 31st Jan. Up to seven seen in February and up to six in April, with the last sighting of the spring one at Thorpe Marshes on 18th Apr. In the autumn birds seen again from 19th Oct when three were on the Great Broad. Seven were present throughout November, with 10 seen on 21st Nov and nine on 5th Dec.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Resident



Photo: Ed Mackrill

Numbers largely stable in the first three months of the year at seven or eight, increasing to regular double figure counts in April. Highest monthly counts for the first half of the year were: *Jan 14; Feb 11; Mar 13; Apr 17; May 16 and June 10*. A pair nested close to the main island on the Great Broad, with a young bird seen with a parent bird on several dates in early July. A second pair bred later, with 2 chicks seen on 9th Sept. Highest counts of the autumn 13 on 27th Sept and 16th Oct.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Regular spring visitor



First seen just outside the main area at Whitlingham STW on 9th Jan, with the first one at Whitlingham C.P. on 28th Jan. There was then a gap until 21st Feb when a pair were present at Whitlingham with three on 16th Mar followed by four on 26th Mar and 13th Apr. Records of 1 or 2 birds continued until 29th Apr.

Photo: Justin Lansdell

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Scarce winter/spring visitor

A flock of 80 flew over south on 18th Jan, followed by 36 west over Whitlingham on 19th Jan. These were the only flocks of note seen this year, with five over Whitlingham on 21st Feb and one at Thorpe Marshes on 27th Apr.

* **Curlew** *Numenius arquata*

Rare passage migrant

A group of four flew west along the river on 28th Apr (DL).

* **Woodcock** *Scolopax rusticola*

Scarce winter visitor

One seen on 22nd Jan flying west over the A47 across Whitlingham Marsh (JL).

* **Jack Snipe** *Lymnocyptes minimus*

Scarce winter visitor

One reported at Whitlingham on 23rd Mar (EM).

Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Common winter visitor



Presumably under-recorded this year. Sightings from Whitlingham on 18th Jan, 19th Jan and 20th Dec. Seen at Thorpe Marshes on five dates in the first winter period, (lastly on 25th Apr) and then again on 19th Dec.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Spring migrant

Four records this year. In spring two at Whitlingham on 30th Apr and 13 May, with one on 27th May. On return passage the only sighting was of three at Whitlingham on 2nd July.

* **Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*

Scarce spring migrant

Four records. One flew over St Andrews Broad on 24th Apr (DR), one flew east along the river at Whitlingham on 16th Oct (MH) then two at Thorpe Marshes on 9th and 23rd Nov (CD).

* **Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*

Scarce spring visitor



A single record this year, of an adult seen on both the Great Broad (photographed) and St Andrews Broad on 6th Apr (DL).

Photo: Drew Lyness

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common resident



Numbers fluctuated during the first winter period, often up to 200 but with 325 on 19th Jan and 521 on 23rd Jan. There was a further influx in the second half of March, with numbers over 500 on 24th, 25th, 26th and 30th. It was estimated that about 90% of these birds were in 1st-winter plumage. Numbers mostly in single figures from May to Aug, only passing 100 from 27th Oct. The highest second winter period count was 283 on 23rd Nov.

For full details of ringed birds seen in the area this year see the article on pages 41-44. Of note was the return of Polish colour-ringed bird Yellow T2X8, which returned for its seventh year and seventh winter. One of the locally-ringed Black-headed Gulls was recorded at a location in Russia 1989km away, setting a new distance record for birds reported in these bird reports. Finally it is worth noting that the second winter period saw noticeably fewer locally-ringed gulls reported than the first winter period (24 vs 44). There is a concern that avian flu has affected breeding Black-headed Gull colonies in Europe over the summer, which might have resulted in increased gull mortality. As even please do report any colour-ringed gulls that you see to help monitor their populations.

Photo: James Emerson

* **Little Gull** *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

Scarce spring migrant



A first-winter on the Great Broad on 16th Mar (JS) is the earliest ever spring record here, a full week earlier than the previous record set on 23rd Mar 2022. Additional spring sightings came on 28th Mar (per bird news services), adults on 10th Apr (DA) and 19th Apr (DL) plus five on 21st Apr (JL). In autumn 9+ adults flew east over the Great Broad on 21st Oct (DF), part of a stormy weather movement that saw over 100 fly through Strumpshaw on the same day. **Photo: Ed Mackrill**

* **Mediterranean Gull** *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

Scarce spring migrant



A good year for this species with sightings on six days. Firstly, an adult photographed at Whitlingham on 31st Mar (DL), then two calling as they flew over the Great Broad on 11th Apr (CS) and one at Whitlingham on 13th Apr (ME). Two adults flew over Whitlingham on 22nd Apr (DL) with presumably the same two also seen flying over Thorpe Marshes on the following day (ME). Last sighting of the year was a 2nd-winter seen on the Great Broad on 18th Oct (EM). **Photo: Ed Mackrill**

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Common winter visitor



Various double-figure counts during January, with a high count of 54 on 19th Jan. Counts during February, March and April lower, all single-figures except 12 on 14th Mar and 20 on 30th Apr. Last of spring a 2cy bird on 3rd May.

Seen again from 17th Sept with 17 on 16th Oct and 20 on 18th Dec the only counts of note.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

Occasional visitor



A similar pattern to 2022, with records from 15 dates, some of which are likely to refer to the same individual(s). Most records from eBird. Difficult to assess so dates of all reports are listed: 9th Jan (adult, photographed), 27th Jan, 31st Jan (5 – particularly high for the site), 28th Mar, 13th Apr (“a few”), 6th May, 13th Sep, 16th Sep (5 – a high count), 27th Sep, 20th Nov, 23rd & 24th Nov (3 on each date), 20th Dec, 26th Dec (2 – adult & 2w) and 27th Dec.

Photo: Roger Parker

*** Iceland Gull** *Larus glaucoides*

Vagrant



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

A 3rd-winter was found on a partially-frozen Whitlingham Great Broad on 22nd Jan (RC). This was only the third Whitlingham record following a 3rd-summer 26-30th May 1997 and a 1st-winter on 22nd Nov 2020. See pages 11 and 12 for more photos of this bird.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Common winter visitor



Present in varying numbers throughout the year, mostly less than 40, although 94 on 19th Jan was notable. There were no reports of colour-ringed birds this year.

Photo: James Emerson

*** Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans*

Scarce visitor



During the first half of the year a 1w/2cy bird seen on 6th Feb, 2cy on 15th and 24th Apr and a 2s/3cy on 15th June (all EM).

In the autumn birds noted on 12 dates between 28th Sept and 5th Dec. Undoubtedly some overlap between them, although based on age categories at least six birds must have been involved, as three on 8th Oct were two 1w and one 2w, whilst on 9th Oct four were present (one 1w and three 2w) and one on 31st Oct was a 3w (all EM). The other dates were 28th Sept (1w or 2w), 17th Oct (1w), 18th Oct (two 1w) 19th Oct (1w), 30th Oct (age not stated), 4th Nov (not stated), 15th Nov (1w), 20th Nov and 5th Dec (both age not stated).

Photo: Ed Mackrill

*** Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis*

Scarce visitor



An adult at Whitlingham on 13th Jan (EM) followed by a metal-ringed bird at Thorpe River Green on 11th Feb that had previously been ringed at Whitlingham on 10th Dec 2022 (per SV).

Nine reports during autumn/winter: 1st Oct (2w), 3rd Oct (2w – different to the bird on the 1st Oct), 9th Oct (2w), 16th Oct (4cy), 21st and 23rd Nov (2w), 7th Dec (age not noted), 15th and 18th Dec (both adults).

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Common summer visitor



L. f. graellsii. Photo: Ed Mackrill.

No more than three present during January, with occasional double-figure counts during February. An arrival of birds noted on 23rd Mar when 40 present, including some apparent intergrade birds. Twenty noted on 26th Mar included the usual *graellsii* birds, but also some intergrades and *intermedius* birds (see photos). Around 200 noted dropping in to bathe on 2nd/3rd May.



L. f. intermedius. Photo: Ed Mackrill.

Other high counts included 100 on 6th June, 150 on 12th June and 92 on 21st Aug. Single-figure counts only during November and December with the exception of 10 on 18th Dec.

A first-year bird with a black legring and white code JL65L was seen on the slipway on 16th Oct. It had been ringed near Oslo, Norway, on 29th Sept, a distance on 1005km.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Common spring migrant



the hope that Common Terns might breed at the site.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

First of the year 4 at Whitlingham on 10th Apr, the same arrival day as in 2022. Up to 3 seen over the next 2 weeks, before increased tern passage on 24th Apr with up to 9 seen until 30th Apr (and forming a mixed flock of 25+ terns on 28th Apr). Last noted at Whitlingham on 9th July – one at Thorpe Marshes on 16th Aug was presumably a migrant. Funding has been secured for the installation of a tern raft on Whitlingham Great Broad in spring 2024 in



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

The first sightings of the year were two on the Great Broad on 9th Apr and still there on the following day. One was also reported on both 13th and 14th Apr. There was a large passage on 24th Apr, with 7+ at the start of the day with numbers peaking at 14 in the evening. Seven remained on 25th, whilst there was a second wave of birds on 28th Apr when 18 noted.

* **Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger*

Scarce spring migrant

A single record this year, of a juvenile seen and photographed on the Great Broad on 27th Sept (SS).

* **White Stork** *Ciconia Ciconia*

Vagrant

A Dutch-ringed bird present earlier at Haddiscoe flew over Thorpe Marshes (ME) before being seen at several locations over Norwich. See the article on pages 6-10 for further details.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Common winter visitor

The only roost count received was 88 on 15th Feb. The roost is now hard to count as birds roost all around the island so are not all visible from a single location on the south or north shore. Cormorants bred for the first time at the site this year – see the article on pages 28-34. Also of interest was an aberrantly plumage bird with pale wings and a brownish body. It is thought that this bird has a plumage mutation known simply as ‘brown’ – for more detail see pages 17-27.

Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

Scarce but annual winter visitor



A similar pattern of occurrences to 2022. Sightings of one bird made regularly, usually in the evenings, between 7th Jan and 16th Mar. It was suspected these involved more than one individual, which was confirmed on 27th Feb when three were seen (two together and one further along the north shore). Three were also seen here in 2022 and prior to that in 2013. One seen in flight between Whitlingham and Thorpe Marshes on 30th Mar and 2nd Apr, with one seen again in reeds along the north edge of the Great Broad on 16th Apr. There were no sightings received during the autumn/second winter period.

Photo: Justin Lansdell

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

A maximum count of nine noted on 24th Nov. Three pairs seen with nests this year. The success of one nest not known, but in last years nest five large chicks were seen and at least three birds fledged, whilst on the island nest at least two birds fledged. For more pictures and discussion see the article on pages 35-37.

* **Great White Egret** *Ardea alba*

Scarce flyover/winter visitor



One record in the first winter period, a bird that flew over the Great Broad on 27th Mar (DL) and was then picked up flying over Norwich. In autumn one seen at Whitlingham on 21st Oct (DF) then seen again on the Little Broad with Little Egrets on 17th Nov (DL). It remained there until the end of the year, where it was joined by a second bird from 20th Nov (RC/EM), which remained until the end of the year.

Photo (top) Ed Mackrill, photo (left): Drew Lyness.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Regular winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Present until 20th Apr and again from 1st Oct (also one seen at Thorpe Marshes on 26th and 28th June). A count of 14 on 8th Dec (per eBird) was a new site record count. Monthly high counts, mostly of roosting birds seen in late evening or early morning are shown below:

| Month | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Count | 7 | 9 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10 | 14 |

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Resident



Reported in all months of the year except July and August, most frequently in March and April.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

[* **Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis*

Local vagrant]

A possible flew over Thorpe Marshes on 23rd Mar.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Fairly regular flyover

After two sightings in mid to late January there were several sightings in late March and early April, including a displaying male on two dates and 3-4 birds in the air to the east of Thorpe Marshes. Later in spring a male was seen over Whitlingham C.P. on 2nd May and 31st May, plus a bird over Thorpe Marshes on 4th June. In the second half of the year the only sightings were a female-type over Whitlingham on 16th Oct and one over there on 29th Dec.

* **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*

Rare winter visitor

A juvenile flew over a flooded Thorpe Marshes on 14th Dec (CD), disturbing Teal off the marsh and being mobbed by crows as it flew off eastwards. This is the first record here for ten years, with the only previous records covered by these reports also from Thorpe Marshes, on 20/01/13 and 27/04/13.

* **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus*

Scarce flyovers

Despite this species becoming commoner throughout Norfolk, Red Kite remains a scarce bird in the Whitlingham area. A record of five at Whitlingham C.P. on 27th Jan (via eBird) is unusual as multiple birds would only usually be expected here during spring passage. Other records were one at Whitlingham on 20th Mar (DL), one at Thorpe Marshes on 23rd Mar (ME) and on 11th Apr (DL) and finally one over Whitlingham Marsh on 14th May (per eBird).

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Resident nearby

Between 1-5 seen regularly throughout the year, with sightings from every month except July and August (likely to be the result of low observer coverage rather than genuine absence). No sign of any passage noted, with all sightings likely to relate to resident birds nearby.

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

Scarce resident

Records concentrated into two clusters, firstly sightings at Thorpe Marshes on four dates during May and what was probably the same bird seen at Whitlingham Marsh on 3rd June . At Whitlingham there were three sightings from the meadow south of Whitlingham Lane on 3rd Oct, 5th Nov and 15th Nov.

* **Little Owl** *Athene noctua*

Rare wanderer

There have been sightings of Little Owls at Whitlingham in the past, although to my knowledge none of them have ever been photographed and this species has not featured in past Whitlingham bird reports. It was a surprise therefore when at least one individual (possibly two) was heard calling from the meadows south of Whitlingham Lane on 19th Feb (DL). There were no further records, although this could be down to the lack of night-time visits. The author is keen to hear of any further Little Owl records in 2024.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*

Scarce resident

A presumably under-recorded species due to the lack of visits after dark. Two heard on 1st Oct and one calling on 5th Nov, both at Whitlingham C.P.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Scarce resident

Recorded throughout the year, most frequently at Whitlingham but also occasionally at Thorpe Marshes. All records refer to either one or two birds this year, with no higher counts or indications of breeding.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major*

Resident



Recorded during each month with the exception of July (although undoubtedly present all year round). Drumming first heard on 19th Feb. All records of one or two birds except three on 11th Apr and 1st Oct.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Resident

Regularly seen at Whitlingham, with a scattering of records from Thorpe Marshes. Most records of 1-2 birds but three were reported regularly during April, continuing into early May.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Resident



The pattern of sightings rather mirrors that of Barn Owl (but with many more sightings), which is perhaps a result of a shared food resource (voles). A large number of records throughout April and early May, mostly from Thorpe Marshes, then another cluster of records in October and early November, this time at Whitlingham. There was also an interesting record of one attempting to hunt a small flock of hirundines on 13th April (n.b. this was several weeks before the first Hobby record).

Photo: David Ratcliffe.

* **Hobby** *Falco subbuteo*

Scarce passage migrant

Another poor year for this species within the area. First seen at Whitlingham C.P. on 3rd May (EM), with another there on 16th June (EM). The only other report was of one at Whitlingham Marsh on 29th July (per eBird).

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Scarce flyovers

The pair at Norwich Cathedral did not successfully rear any young this year – of three eggs one did not hatch whilst the other two chicks died. Only three records this year – one over Thorpe Marshes on 15th Feb and individuals over Whitlingham on 12th and 21st Apr.

Ring-necked Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

Scarce visitor



Regular sightings from the start of the year until 30th Apr, and then again from 21st Sept to the end of the year. Most sightings relate to either roosting or loitering in trees near the car park area, however a bird was also heard calling from north of the river, with two at Thorpe River Green on 28th Oct. Two were also noted at Whitlingham on 25th Jan.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Common resident



Between 1-5 seen throughout the year. A count of 12, made up of groups of 3, 4 and 5 on 7th Apr was noteworthy.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Magpie *Pica pica*

Common resident

Present throughout the recording area. Only one complete roost count carried out this year, with 100+ counted on 24th Feb. The only other count of note was 55 on 14th Feb.

Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Common resident

Present throughout the year. Highest roost or pre-roost counts 900 on 24th Feb, 780 on 1st Oct, 550 on 15th Mar and 510 on 23rd Mar.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Resident nearby but scarce flyover here

Not resident within the recording area but they nest nearby at Postwick where assessment by JL during spring 2023 revealed 43 occupied nests on Oaks Lane with another two on Broadland Business Park. At Whitlingham they are periodically seen flying over but perhaps over-recorded by casual visitors. This year recorded on 31 dates, the most in recent times. Fifteen of these were in March/April and could be explained by the activity of the birds breeding nearby. A further five were in February, with the other 0-3 sightings from the other months.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

A common species, with several usually present on each visit. The high count this year was 12 on 16th Oct. On 24th Apr one was seen predated three Moorhen chicks.

[* **Raven** *Corvus corax*

No confirmed records]

In 2021 and 2022 there were records of possible Ravens within the recording area. This year one was seen mobbing a Buzzard just outside the area over the Postwick junction on 1st Feb. It seems only a matter of time before a confirmed sighting is made within the recording area – if it is you that finds it, please get a photo/video/sound recording to confirm the record!

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Scarce resident

Records received on 26 dates, all during January to April except two on 16th Oct, two on 25th Dec and one on 26th Dec. Most records were from Whitlingham C.P., but three sightings from Thorpe Marshes - 22nd Mar, 27th Mar plus 17th Apr.

* **Marsh Tit** *Poecile palustris*

Scarce resident

After 11 sightings in 2022 there were only three this year, all at Whitlingham C.P. – one on 13th Jan (EM), two on 22nd Jan (per eBird) and two on 9th Nov (EM).

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Common resident

Common throughout the recording area.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common resident



Common throughout the recording area.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

* **Bearded Tit** *Panurus biarmicus*

Rare winter visitor

Three records, all likely to relate to the same individual(s). Firstly, on 10th Oct when at least one was heard calling from vegetation near the east end of the Great Broad (DL). The next sighting also came from the Great Broad north shore, but this time a bit further west on 14th Oct (JE) and finally one was heard then seen at Thorpe Marshes on 22nd Oct (CD).

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Scarce flyovers

One singing over the meadows south of Whitlingham Lane on 22nd Apr was of note, but not heard again. Otherwise just a handful of autumn flyover birds noted, over Whitlingham on 16th and 27th Oct and over Thorpe Marshes on 22nd Oct.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Common spring visitor

An early first arrival date this year, with two high over Whitlingham and later three at Thorpe Marshes both on 17th Mar. Small numbers were then seen regularly from 20th Mar onwards. In the first half of April 30-40 regularly seen over the Great Broad, with larger counts of 100 (17th), 300 (24th), 200 (25th) and 200 again (28th). A flock of 20 over Thorpe Marshes on 4th June were the last of spring, with no autumn records this year.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common summer visitor



First seen at Whitlingham on 1st Apr, the same date as in 2022. Small numbers (typically single-figure counts) present throughout April, with larger counts of 40 (24th) and 70 (25th). Last spring record on 11th June, although a slightly unusual summer record of one at Whitlingham on 9th July. As with Sand Martin no autumn records received.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Common spring visitor



First seen on 6th Apr, a day earlier than in 2022. Numbers followed a similar pattern to Sand Martins and Swallows, with low numbers in early April, increasing on 24th to 30, then peaking at 100 at Whitlingham on 25th (50 also noted from Thorpe Marshes on the same date). After that 30 present on 28th Apr then small numbers seen on-and-off until 11th June. One autumn record, four flew east over the Great Broad on 17th Sept ahead of a rain shower.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Common resident



Common at both Whitlingham and Thorpe Marshes. Highest counts of calling birds noted at each site were six and five respectively.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Common resident



Common throughout the recording area. A high count of 60 recorded on 16th Oct, comprising a flock of 33 and two smaller flocks.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Declining summer visitor



Following a late arrival in 2022 it was back to normal this year with the first singing bird back at Whitlingham on 29th Mar.

Number of singing birds recorded was the same as in 2022, with up to three reported from Whitlingham and another two at Thorpe Marshes.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Common summer visitor



At least one bird overwintered at Whitlingham C.P., with sightings on 22nd Jan, 6th Feb and 27th Feb. Singing birds first noted on 14th and 16th Mar with a big arrival on 17th Mar (7 singing birds) and more later that week with 12+ on 20th Mar.

Two present on 9th Oct and at least one still on 31st Oct, whilst one on 25th Dec was presumably an overwintering bird.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Common summer visitor



First of the year at Thorpe Marshes on 5th Apr (five days earlier than 2022) and first singing at Whitlingham C.P. on 11th Apr. About 30 seen or heard singing at Thorpe Marshes during counts on several days in late April and early May (maximum 33 on 30th Apr), whilst the maximum count at Whitlingham C.P. was four, heard on multiple dates. Last noted at Thorpe Marshes on 16th Aug.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Common summer visitor



First noted at Whitlingham C.P. on 18th Apr with records from Thorpe Marshes from 24th Apr. Peak counts from both sites seven at Whitlingham (1st May) and three at Thorpe Marshes (19th May).

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*

Scarce summer visitor



First reeling bird at Thorpe Marshes on 15th Apr, two days later than 2022 (this bird was a new arrival as it was noted as not present the previous day). The maximum number of birds reported reeling was five (on 7th May) although typically only two or three were audible at any one point. One was heard reeling at Whitlingham Marsh on 3rd June, but other than that there were no reports of reeling birds during June or July this year.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Common summer visitor



First singing bird heard at Whitlingham on 21st Mar, the same date as 2022. A further arrival on 30th Mar when six in song. Highest counts of singing birds at Whitlingham was 12, plus five at (or heard from) Thorpe Marshes. One at Whitlingham on 9th Oct could have been passing through or an overwintering bird.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

Scarce summer visitor



First seen at Thorpe Marshes on 23rd Apr and at Whitlingham on the following day. At least five singing birds were present at Whitlingham during May, with two noted at Thorpe Marshes.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

*** Lesser Whitethroat** *Curruca curruca*

Scarce summer visitor

One reported from Thorpe Marshes on 18th Apr (per eBird), an early date, then nothing until 29th Apr when two again at Thorpe Marshes (per eBird), one of which still present on 30th Apr (DR). The only other record of the year was again at Thorpe Marshes, singing all day near to the railway bridge (CD, SW).

Whitethroat *Curruca communis*

Common summer visitor



First seen on 22nd Apr at both Thorpe Marshes and Whitlingham C.P. The highest count for Thorpe was six, whilst up to five were recorded from Whitlingham C.P. No sightings were reported after 28th June.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Common resident

Reported from Whitlingham until the end of April and again from October, although presumably present throughout the year in Whitlingham Woods. Unlike the past two years there were several records from Thorpe Marshes, with a pair noted in a large conifer just across the railway line from the reserve in late April.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

A common species recorded throughout the year from both Whitlingham C.P. and Thorpe Marshes.

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Scarce resident

Very under-recorded this year with only six records. This species is presumably still resident in Trowse Woods and other areas of woodland around the C.P. but these habitats are not visited as much as the area around the broads. One record from Thorpe Marshes, of a bird heard calling from the area north of the railway line.

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Common resident



A similar pattern of records to 2022, reported throughout the year with the exception of June-Aug, although presumably still present but not vocal. The high count was four on 16th Oct.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Scarce wanderer from local populations

Only recorded on 11 dates, which given the number of people submitting complete lists to eBird does appear to make this species genuinely scarce here at the moment rather than simply under-recorded. Eight of those records came during February and March (7 from Whitlingham, 1 from Thorpe Marshes), with the others from Thorpe Ferry on 11th June, 2 large flocks totalling c200 birds west over the Great Broad on 7th Nov and a murmuration of 5000 birds over Thorpe Marshes on 10th Dec.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Common resident



Recorded from both Whitlingham C.P. and Thorpe Marshes throughout the year, all between 1-3 except 4 at Whitlingham on 9th Apr and 5 at (or heard from) Thorpe Marshes on 20th Apr. Singing specifically mentioned from 20th Mar, but earlier birds might have been singing but not noted as such.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Scarce resident

Following a poor 2022 with only five records received, this species was reported on 15 dates in 2023, all between 16th Jan and 1st May. Four of these sightings were from Thorpe Marshes, with singles on 27th Jan, 3rd Feb and 25th Apr plus two on 30th Apr. At Whitlingham C.P. singing birds were noted on 10th Apr, 14th Apr and 1st May (2), with additional sightings on 16th Jan (2), 22nd Jan (3), 23rd Jan (2), 30th Mar (2), then 10th, 14th, 17th, 19th and 22nd Apr (all singles).

All records of this species are welcomed for future reports.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

Common winter visitor



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Single-figure counts of birds received regularly from Whitlingham C.P. until early March. Some signs of birds preparing for migration in late March, with 24 at Thorpe Marshes and 40 at Whitlingham C.P. on 23rd Mar. Last of the spring was one at Thorpe Marshes on 14th Apr.

In the autumn first seen back on 16th Oct, when 56 flew over in small flocks, after which occasionally seen in small numbers until the year end.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common resident



Common throughout the recording area.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden
(www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Scarce winter visitor

A single record from the first winter period, of six at Whitlingham C.P. on 22nd Jan. In autumn 85 flew north-west on 16th Oct and 40 flew over on 27th Oct.

All records of this species are welcomed for future reports.

* **Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata*

Rare spring migrant (former breeder)

An elusive bird seen around scrub adjacent to the Little Broad on 6th and 7th May (both sightings via the Norwich Whatsapp group) was the first reported at Whitlingham C.P. since one on 6th May 2016 (birds were also reported from Thorpe Marshes on two dates in 2017). A sighting along the northern shore of the Great Broad on 21st May (per JE) suggests that it might have remained in the area for several weeks, however there was no sign between the sightings or after the 21st.

Robin *Erithacus rubicula*

Common resident



Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Common throughout the recording area.

Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

One resident breeding pair



A pair present at Thorpe Marshes throughout the first winter period and spring, with an additional female noted on 21st Jan. A male with two fledged young birds was seen on 27th May, making it the third successive year that there has been successful breeding in the area.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

* **House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*

Rare wanderer from local populations

Two records this year, both from Whitlingham C.P., firstly on 22nd Mar (EM) and again on 14th Apr (per eBird). Observers are reminded that this is a rare species within the recording area, so all records are welcomed, ideally photographed.

Duncock *Prunella modularis*

Common resident

Common throughout the recording area.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Scarce resident

A scattering of records throughout the year, with a spring peak in March and April then several records in October. All records of singles except on 16th Oct when three were seen at Whitlingham C.P. (two at the west end of the Great Broad and another at the east end).

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Common resident



Between 1-4 noted on many visits throughout the year.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden

(www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Passage migrant

Presumably under-recorded, although after another year of few records perhaps now genuinely scarce here. Records from Thorpe Marshes on 27th Mar (3), 15th Apr, 18th Apr (3) and 22nd Oct. At Whitlingham two flew over on 16th Oct.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common resident



Seen throughout the year in low numbers. A small flock were noted feeding on the path along the south shore of the Little Broad on 19th Feb.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

* **Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla*

Scarce winter visitor

One seen at Whitlingham on 13th Apr (per eBird) was the only record this year.

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

Scarce resident



Only four records this year, all from Thorpe Marshes within a seven-day period from 25th Apr to 2nd May. Presumably this species is still resident – locals are encouraged to look out for this species during 2024.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Fairly common resident



Recorded regularly in the first six months of the year from both Whitlingham C.P. and Thorpe Marshes. No roosting flocks seen this year, with a maximum count of seven.

Photo: David Ratcliffe

Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Scarce resident



Recorded on 15 dates, all from mid-March to the end of April. A pair was noted (including a singing male) at Whitlingham on several dates in April. Numbers all between 1-4 with the exception of a flock of 20 at Whitlingham on 21st Mar.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

*** Common (Mealy) Redpoll** *Acanthis flammea*

Scarce winter visitor

In the first winter period one present with Lesser Redpolls on 21st-22nd Mar (per eBird, EM) and at least two present on 30th Mar (EM). In the second winter period at least three seen within a 30-strong Redpoll flock on 24th Dec.

Lesser Redpoll *Acanthis cabaret*

Fairly scarce winter visitor



A flock of up to 12 present at Whitlingham C.P. and reported on various dates in Jan, Feb and Mar, last seen on 3rd Apr. A flock of around 30 Redpolls, either all or mostly Lessers were present in trees near the gas compound on 18th Dec and noted again on 24th Dec.

No records from Thorpe Marshes throughout the year.

Photo: © Robin Chittenden (www.robinchittenden.co.uk)

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Common resident

Present throughout the year, flocks almost all in single figures, with the exception of 10 on 7th Feb.

Siskin *Spinus spinus*

Common winter visitor



Flocks mostly 10-30 in the first winter period, although sometimes combining into larger flocks, including 80 on 5th Jan, 10 on 13th Jan, 80 on 25th Jan and 100 on 28th Jan. A singing bird was noted at Thorpe Marshes on 25th Feb. Last seen at both Whitlingham and Thorpe on 22nd Mar.

First reported back on 14th Oct. Numbers initially low but building up and reaching 90 by the end of the year, split across multiple flocks.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

* **Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella*

Scarce flyover

One reported from Thorpe Marshes on 27th Mar (per eBird).

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Common summer visitor



Present at Thorpe Marshes from the start of the year. The first singing birds were reported at Whitlingham on 19th Feb then at Thorpe Marshes on 25th Feb. Maximum number of singing males reported at each site were seven at Thorpe Marshes and four at Whitlingham C.P.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Total: 130 species

Appendix A – Recorded species linked to reintroduction schemes

Species listed here are those that would otherwise have appeared in the main species list but are either known or suspected to have originated from reintroduction schemes rather than self-sustaining natural populations. Species most likely to count under this appendix are Corncrake, White Stork and White-tailed Eagles, but schemes for several other species are at various stages of development.

None this year (White Stork record included in the main systematic list)

Appendix B – Recorded birds thought to be escapes or of dubious origin

Note that species on Category C of the British List (for example Barnacle Goose and Mandarin) without captive-type rings are typically given the benefit of the doubt and included in the main systematic list, so this category typically covers things like Black Swan, Muscovy Duck, Ruddy Shelduck etc.

None this year.

Appendix C – Birds reported from the area but not accepted onto the main list

Species listed here are those where the observer was certain of the ID but have not been included on the main species list (typically ‘probable’ species are included within the main list in italics). This will typically be national or county rarities, species not previously recorded in the area (or species that have been reported second-hand with insufficient detail) that have not been photographed or seen by multiple observers.

* **Baltic Gull** *Larus fuscus fuscus*

National rarity



Birds showing characteristics of Baltic Gull were noted on the Great Broad on 12th Apr (ME) and 19th Oct (EM).

This subspecies is a BBRC rarity and neither sighting have been submitted for assessment – see discussion in the article on pages 13-16.

Photo: Ed Mackrill

Appendix D – Hybrid birds

Canada x Greylag Goose

Occasional visitor

Six of these hybrid geese were present on Whitlingham Great Broad on 2nd July along with the two Canada Geese with extra white on their faces.

Appendix E – Species notably not recorded in 2023

These are a selection of birds that have been seen frequently in the recording area (here defined as having occurred in at least three of the previous five years, 2018-2022) but were not reported during 2023.

*** Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina***

Occasional winter visitor

Seen 2018-2020, but now absent for three years in a row

*** Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra***

Near-annual visitor

Seen in three of the past five years, including 2021 and 2022.

*** Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa***

Scarce spring visitor

Seen in four of the past five years, and still present in the area around Norwich

*** Avocet *Recuvirostra avosetta***

Rare spring visitor

Recorded in three of the past five years, although rarer locally than many of the other species within the appendix.

*** Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria***

Scarce spring visitor

Seen in four of the past five years, albeit only as flyovers.

*** Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius***

Scarce spring visitor

Was recorded every year 2012-2020 but not seen since.

*** Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus***

Scarce flyover

Seen in 2018, 2020 and 2021.

*** Dunlin *Calidris alpina***

Scarce spring visitor

Recorded from the previous eight years so a notable omission in 2023.

* **Redshank** *Tringa totanus*

Scarce spring migrant

Recorded in four of the previous five years, only absent in 2019.

* **Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia*

Scarce spring flyover

Recorded in 2018, 2019 and 2020 but not since then. One flying south over Thunder Lane in Thorpe St Andrew on 19th July was headed towards the recording area.

* **Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapilla*

Scarce spring migrant

Recorded in three of the past five years. At one point it looked like this species would be recorded here regularly in spring, but no records received in 2022 or 2023.

* **Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Rare spring visitor

Recorded from three of the past five years, usually short-staying birds.

* **Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava*

Scarce spring flyover

Recorded from the previous seven years, so a notable omission in 2023.

* **Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta*

Rare winter visitor

Recorded in three of the previous five years. Most sightings related to birds roosting with Meadow Pipits in the evenings at Thorpe Marshes, but there have been no sightings of pipit roosts this year.

Appendix F – Selected additional bird sightings from the Norwich area

These are species with no accepted records from within the Whitlingham recording area this year, but seen elsewhere around Norwich. Details are included here for general interest and in some cases as it might help to establish future patterns of occurrence within the area. Many of the sightings relate to flyover birds, including some recorded overnight.

* **Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis* *NEW FOR NORFOLK*

The long-overdue first Lesser Scaup for Norfolk was found at Bawburgh Lakes (Colney GPs) in late June. It was first seen on 20th June but assumed to be a Greater Scaup at the time, before it's true identity was confirmed on 28th June. It remained until at least 22nd July, although as access to the private lake complex is by permit, it could only be viewed distantly from a gateway with a limited vista, so was often not visible.

* **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* *Escapee/potential C5.2 addition*

Three (one of which was photographed) on Bawburgh Lakes (Colney GPs) on 22nd July.

* **Red-legged Partridge** *Alectoris rufa* *Occasional wanderers from resident population.*

Resident in the Colney area, elsewhere one on Vulcan Road on 16th Dec.

* **Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula* *Rare flyovers*

Flyover records from several locations around the city on 24th July, 13th Sept, 17th Sept and 8th Oct.

* **Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* *Scarce flyover*

One over Earlham Marsh 10th May, with further flyovers over urban areas on 14th May and 17th Aug.

* **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* *Spring migrant/flyovers*

One heard over New Costessey on 18th Mar.

* **Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria* *Occasional flyovers*

One flew south-west over Lakenham on 18th Sept.

* **Redshank** *Tringa tetanus* *Spring migrant/flyovers*

Reported flyover an urban location on 21st July and 18th Aug (2).

* **Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* *Spring migrant/flyovers*

One over Thorpe St Andrew on 19th July and one over Lakenham on 9th Sept.

* **White-winged Black Tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus* *Vagrant*

An adult was found and photographed at Bawburgh Lakes (Colney GPs) on 19th June and was visible periodically throughout the day. This is probably the first confirmed Norwich-area record, although there have been several previously in the mid-Yare valley.

* **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* *Recent coloniser but rare locally*

One at Colney on 4th Dec is possibly the first Norwich record, but flew off shortly after being found and was not relocated.

* **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* *Rare winter visitor*

One seen at Earlham/Bowthorpe Marshes on several dates in February.

* **Waxwing** *Garrulus garrulus* *Annual winter visitor*

The second winter period saw a large arrival of Waxwings, with flocks of anywhere up to 80 seen at various locations around Norwich including Costessey, the Avenues and Edinburgh Rd.

* **Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapilla* *Scarce spring migrant*

One in a New Costessey garden on 30th Apr and then two singing in south Norwich gardens in June, present for at least two weeks.

* **Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* *Spring migrant/breeding species*

An immature male was seen singing at the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital on 4th Apr, with an adult male singing in the city centre on 2nd May (no further sign or territories noted this year) and one also seen in the city centre on 31st Oct.

* **Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava* *Spring migrant/flyovers*

Flyovers from UEA on 28th April, Earlham Marshes on 6th May, Earlham Cemetery on 19th Aug and New Costessey 9th Sept (4).

* **Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* *Rare spring flyovers*

One in the area of Hellesdon Mill on 26th Apr and another flew over Earlham Marshes on 6th May

* **Water/Rock Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta/petrosus* *Rare passage/winter flyovers*

One flew over the city centre calling on 7th Nov (exact species not confirmed).

* **Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra* *Irregular flyovers*

A series of flyovers between June and Nov. Dates: 11th June, 22nd July, 7th Aug, 15th Aug, 26th Aug, 31st Aug, 11th Sept, 16th Oct, 21st Oct (4), 23rd Oct (a small flock) and 7th Nov.

Acknowledgements & initials for scarce/rare species

I am grateful to everyone who has reported birds from the Whitlingham area this year, be it directly to myself, to the bird news services, via WhatsApp groups or by posted sightings on Twitter. I am also grateful to all of those who have provided additional information and answered queries about their work. I would particularly like to thank the following for providing records, information or photos:

D. Andrews (DA), D. Appleton, A. Bloomfield, D. Bryant, S. Buck, R. Chittenden (RC), N.M. Collins, L. Curson, C. Durdin (CD), M. Eldridge (ME), N. Eley, J. Emerson (JE), D. Farrow (DF), S. Gantlett, M. Golley, A. Greenizan, M. Hoit (MH), D. Holman, K. Langdon, C. Lansdell, J. Lansdell (JL), N. Lawton, D. Lyness (DL), E. Mackrill (EM), M. McCarthy, J. Morris, R. Parker (RP), J. Prochera, D. Ratcliffe (DR), J. Sharpe (JS), C. Small (CS), L. Smith, S. Smith (SS), K. Sowter, S. Vickers (SV), W. Walmsley, P. Walton, S. White (SW), G. White and S. Woodhouse.

This year I have included sightings taken from eBird to enhance the report. These were provided as a download and records were anonymised. Records of common species were used to create the summaries in the species accounts. Records of scarcer species from this dataset were assessed using the same criteria as records from named observers and if included are listed as 'per eBird'.

Citations for the eBird dataset used is:

eBird Basic Dataset. Version: EBD_relOct-2023. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Oct 2023.

Photographers of pictures used in the report are: David Bryant, Robin Chittenden, James Emerson, Steve Gantlett, Mark Golley, Justin Lansdell, Drew Lyness, Edmund Mackrill, Roger Parker, David Ratcliffe, Liam Smith, Keith Sowter and Adam Lee Wicks.

Local information

The following websites regularly contain sightings from the Whitlingham area:

<https://jamesbirdsandbeer.blogspot.co.uk/> (The author's blog, containing updates from Whitlingham & Thorpe, and a site guide and a site bird list)

<http://www.honeyguide.co.uk/thorpemarshes.htm> (Thorpe Marshes NWT unofficial site)

<http://yarevalleywildlife.synthasite.com/> (Yare Valley Birding website)

Bird information services

Several sightings and dates relate to sightings reported to the bird information services. If you are fortunate enough to find a rare or locally scarce bird, please report it to one of them. Contact websites and phone numbers of the main providers can be found below.

[Rare Bird Alert \(0207 0382820\)](tel:02070382820), [BirdGuides \(0333 5772473\)](tel:03335772473) or www.birdlineeastanglia.co.uk.