

Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report January 2012

The exceptional goose winter continued to produce surprises into 2012 as the grey goose tally rose again with the arrival of a flock of six adult **Greenland White-fronted Geese** on the 3rd. The Greenland White-front is currently classed as a race of European White-fronted Goose but the form is very distinctive with morphological,



plumage and bare part differences as well as inhabiting a totally different breeding range being restricted to south-west Greenland whereas European White-fronts breed in the high Arctic tundra from the Kanin Peninsula to the Kolyma river in Siberia. In Britain Greenland White-fronts winter mainly in southern Ireland particularly on the Wexford Slobs and in western Scotland where



the main concentration is found on the Inner Hebrides particularly Islay. The movements from the breeding grounds involves the birds having to fly over the 1.5 mile high Greenland icecap to reach their staging area in Iceland before flying to western Britain and Ireland. Greenland White-fronted Goose is one of the rarest geese now found in Britain and as shown by entries on the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust web site and the Greenland White-fronted Goose study site the reasons for the birds' rarity are varied and not as yet fully understood. From the WWT: [numbers have dropped from over 35,000 to less than 25,000 in a decade. In 2010 it became one of the first sub-species to be Red Listed in the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern report. The causes of their decline are not yet fully understood but might be related to prevailing weather conditions in](#)



[the breeding areas in west Greenland in May and June - with increased and more prolonged snowfall reducing feeding opportunities and thus preventing females from breeding - or competition with the increasing population](#)



[of the larger and more aggressive Canada Goose. What is apparent is that the Greenland White-fronts aren't](#)

[producing enough chicks to make up for the birds that die each year. Unlike their European and North American counterparts in most years they hardly produce any young.](#)



The flock remained on the Flats to the 11th but probably then moved to the nearby Whitton Sand where six white-fronted geese were still present on the 23rd. There have only been 10 previous records in Lincolnshire involving single birds but four were at Gibraltar Point on February 15th 1996. Previous records in the Humber area were an adult with Pink-footed Geese at Winteringham from October 8th – 26th 2000, a first-winter between Winteringham and Roxby from January 24th – 28th 2001, a first-winter on Barton Wolds November 1st 2003 and a first-winter that wandered with Pink-feet between Read's Island and West Halton from January 13th – February 26th 2011.

Up to 129 **European White-fronted Geese** were still commuting between Whitton Sand and Trent Falls and the upper Humber but the only birds on the Flats were with 22 on the meadows on 2nd, a first-winter with the six Greenlands from 3rd – 9th then 7 on the 4th. Other geese putting in visits were **Greylag Goose** with 130 on 3rd, **Canada Goose** 44 on the 3rd being highest total, **Barnacle Goose** two on the 3rd and **Pink-footed Goose** 37 on the 11th when 500 flew north-west and 500 were on Whitton Sand. At dawn on the 6th a party of five **Whooper Swans** flew off presumably having roosted overnight and continuing the excellent winter for this most attractive wild swan. The Whooper Swans that winter in eastern Britain of course breed in Iceland so they share a common migration route with the Pink-feet and Greenland White-fronted Geese. **Shelduck** continued their good winter showing with 440 on the 3rd and 418 on the 11th with 352 again on the 23rd. Similarly there was the best **Wigeon**



presence for several winters with a peak of 1200 counted on the 17th after 541 were on the new reedbed on the 11th. A partial freeze of the site and much of the local area now doubt concentrated birds around the reedbed where there was open water and along the Trent and Humber foreshores on the 17th; frosts were quite rare during the month and the memory of the previous two winters soon faded. Up to seven **Gadwall** returned to the reedbed pools where there were also two drake **Pochard** and five **Tufted Ducks** on the 11th with three **Coots** also back there from the 11th when the first **Little Grebe** completed the freshwater wildfowl tally. After the record numbers at the end of 2011, **Teal** remained in good numbers with a peak of 2018 on the 11th while the drake **Green-winged Teal** was also present to the 8th but it seemed to disappear when most of the Teal left the site during a few hard frosts in the following days. A total of 710 Teal had returned by the 23rd and the Green-winged Teal was back on the 27th. A fine drake **Pintail** accompanied the Wigeon on the reedbed from the 11th – 17th and **Mallard** peaked at 118 on the 11th. A species seldom receiving mention is the **Moorhen** a species that is strangely scarce on the Flats so the accumulation of 15 at the eastern end of the site during the month was noteworthy. **Little Egrets** are often absent in mid-winter so a bird from the 3rd – 11th was somewhat unusual but no

doubt benefiting from the mild conditions. **Grey Herons** were more abundant with eight on the 3rd – 5th but their presence seemed to be more connected with the gale force winds than with feeding opportunities as they sheltered behind the internal reedbeds and low hedges. Up to 20 **Marsh Harriers** were counted flying to roost with three different **Hen Harriers** producing some exceptional viewing during the month as they hunted



the fields and reedbeds and passed through the site in the morning and evening as they moved to their roost site. A second winter male was rather striking and it seemed that probably both of the ringtails seen were also first –winter males as one of them certainly had a pale iris and the other one appeared to also have pale irides. A single **Merlin** was seen from 3rd to the 9th usually on the Humber foreshore or in the northern fields by the Humber but it was seldom seen hunting no doubt a result of the lack of small passerines on the heavily grazed grass fields where there were virtually



no Skylarks, Meadow Pipits or **Reed Buntings** the only small flock of the latter species being 15 recorded on the new reedbed on the 11th. The wader presence was typically dominated by **Golden Plover**, peaking at 6000 on 3rd with 4400 11th and **Lapwing** with peaks of 4000 3rd and 5711 on a census carried out on 11th but both species then showed a reduction in numbers through the end of the month possibly as flocks moved inland onto other feeding areas away from the estuary. A flock of 130 **Dunlin** on the 11th proved to be the highest count of that species while there were 52 **Black-tailed Godwits** on the 9th but also up to 40 on several days through the



month; a lone **Ruff** remained on site to at least 17th. As usual the highest counts of **Curlew** were in the late evening or early morning with 202 on the 3rd and 212 23rd being the top totals but good numbers of birds fed on the wet grass fields on some days while others started to exploit the rough grass on the foreshore a habitat that is typically used from early spring onwards but as the weather was generally mild late January was probably early spring in 2012? Closing the wader roundup were seven **Spotted Redshank** on 3rd, the month's highest total but surprisingly the **Redshank** peak was not much higher at 12 birds. Passerines were very much a scarce commodity but **Bearded Tit** was heard on a few days though there appeared to be few birds present in the reedbeds compared to the autumn.

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