

THIRTY YEARS OF BIRDING AT ABBOTSBURY SWANNERY

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I previously wrote an article about The Swannery as a birding site for the 2001 Dorset Bird Report but as I have reached the substantial milestone (in February 2019) of thirty years working at and birding the site it seemed like a good excuse to produce an update. Indeed, back then I had recorded some 240 species - now The Swannery recording area list (of species recorded during my thirty-year residence) stands at 271... although I have only managed to see 268 of these!

The Swannery recording area includes the grounds, the adjoining withy-beds, reed-beds, flood-meadows and those parts of the West Fleet, Chesil Bank and the surrounding farmland that can be viewed easily from the site. It does not include the seaward side of Abbotsbury Beach (which can't be seen) and therefore all the seabirds included on the list were seen on, or over, The Fleet.

Being the only birder with unlimited access to the site for many years, it is inevitable that I have found many of the rarities that have occurred but some have also been found by visiting and local birders and even non-birding staff! A number of rarities must also go undetected of course and indeed, just to reiterate how many I must miss, from 2018 local birder Joe Stockwell joined the seasonal staff and within a few months he had added three more species to the list, none of which I saw! I did manage to get one back a few months later though (which was also found by Joe!)

For an insight into the history and management of The Swannery, see my original article in the 2001 Dorset Bird Report but for an update on the variety of species and their changing fortunes at The Swannery please read on...

Swans & Geese...

Despite the large numbers of Mute Swans, the migratory Bewick's and Whooper Swans have always been scarce. The former of the two was once virtually annual, with the latter much less frequent but lately the situation has switched. The last Bewick's was seen in December 2010 but Whoopers are almost expected annually now (discounting the seemingly now resident released rehabilitated individual).

Dark-bellied Brent Geese, although seen annually, are relatively scarce considering how plentiful they can be further down the lagoon, with most sightings being of birds flying over. A few do settle however, including a few pale-bellied individuals, although unfortunately no Black Brants have yet wandered northwest beyond Rodden Hive Point. Two first winter Red-breasted Geese have been seen (one in November 2006, the other in October 2011) and both made the grade with the BBRC but an over-summering adult (in 2003) was clearly an escape as, no doubt, were a couple of records of Ridgway's Cackling Geese. At least some of the regular records of Barnacle Geese though are believed to involve wild birds. Canada Geese have of course greatly increased during my tenure and a few pairs now breed regularly. A slightly smaller and darker individual (thought possibly to be of the interior form, Todd's) was present in the autumn of 2013 but its origins remain a mystery. Eurasian White-fronts were once virtually annual visitors but have now become less frequent again (last seen in November 2011), while until recently the Swannery had the monopoly for records of Greenland White-fronts in Dorset (the last being part of a small influx in October 2018). Pink-feet have also occurred (last seen in October 2005), as have Tundra Bean (last seen in February 2003), while at least a few of the early spring records of the otherwise regular Greylags are believed to have been of genuine wild origin. Several records of Lesser White-fronts, Snow Geese and Ross's Geese however have presumably all been escapes.

Ducks...

Mallard and Common Shelduck are the only species that still nest regularly as Gadwall unfortunately no longer do so. Shoveler, Teal and Garganey have all nested with various frequency in the past and Tufted Duck now regularly over-summer and nest occasionally. It is of course in the autumn and winter that the greatest number and variety of waterfowl occur. Wigeon numbers vary from year to year but thankfully there appears to be no obvious decline. Gadwall seem to have declined slightly but Common Teal have most definitely increased and Pintail, Shoveler and Tufted Duck still occur in relatively good numbers. Pochard have declined around fifty percent though, as have Scaup, although The Swannery is still one of the best sites in Dorset for both species. Goldeneye have also declined dramatically, from counts of over 100 just to the east of The Swannery embayment in the early 90's to single figure counts in the last few winters but thankfully Red-breasted Merganser numbers have remained the same. Garganey, Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter and Goosander are all still pretty much annual but Smew have only ever occurred during severe and prolonged cold snaps so it's not surprising that there has been none since February 2012. Ruddy Duck after an initial increase during my tenure have also not been seen since 2012 ...sadly it seems unlikely that I'll ever see one here again!

Careful searches through the flocks of the commoner species of duck have been rewarded with sightings of a few each of American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Ferruginous Duck and Ring-necked Duck, along with two Blue-winged Teal (October 1991 and April 1999), and singles of Lesser Scaup (March 2004), Surf Scoter (November 2014) and Bufflehead (March 2010). Occasional Ruddy Shelducks have also occurred but their origins remain unclear and this also applies to the far more frequent records of Red-crested Pochard. The more recent records of Egyptian Goose and Mandarin Duck no doubt refer to true naturalised birds as they are both now established in Dorset but earlier records were considered escapes. A Baikal Teal and several Wood Ducks have also occurred over the years but like the infamous Hooded Merganser, that popped over from Radipole on a few occasions, they have all been deemed to be escapes too. Frustratingly I still await my first Eider and Velvet Scoter (both of which have been recorded historically).

Land-fowl & Rails...

Another of my 'bogey birds' is Grey Partridge. When I first started at The Swannery they were still to be found in suitable habitat virtually all along the hinterland of The Fleet but then declined dramatically and seemed to disappear completely by the early 90's. A few recent nearby records, some very close to my recording area, has however given me some hope (although the origin of these birds may be in doubt). Red-legged Partridges are, of course regular, and Common Pheasants are everywhere but probably neither have true self-sustaining populations in the area as many are released annually. Even more dubious though are recent records of both Golden and Lady Amherst's Pheasants which no doubt involved birds that have wandered from the nearby Subtropical Gardens. Therefore, my only genuinely wild land-fowl species is probably Quail, with just two autumn sightings over the years and both inadvertently flushed from virtually underfoot (I didn't even hear, let alone see, the only reported singing spring bird). There are historical records of Corncrake but I doubt I'll ever get to hear one, let alone see one but I have seen several Spotted Crakes, although the last was as long ago as 2009. Water Rails are regular, particularly in the winter, but surprisingly breeding has only been proven on a few occasions. Moorhen and Coot however are common both as breeders and winterers but recently the numbers of the latter wintering has dropped from over 2,000 to just over 1,000, although they mostly occur just to the east of the recording area.

A selection of birds recorded at The Swannery

*Greenland White-fronted Goose, Scaup, Black-winged Stilt, Long-tailed Duck
(all Steve Groves)*



Large Wading Birds...

The first Dorset Little Egret was seen at Abbotsbury in 1940 and it was still a rare bird when I started at The Swannery in 1989. Now of course they are ubiquitous and in the last few years Great White and, particularly, Cattle Egrets seem to be heading the same way. Bitterns though are still a real rarity here as the semi-tidal reedbeds (which largely lack both freshwater fish and amphibians) are only attractive to them in extremely icy conditions. Grey Herons are still seen regularly but The Swannery heronry that was occupied by around a dozen pairs annually from the late 1970's to the early 2000's now lies deserted (in fact none now nest regularly anywhere along The Fleet). The only other herons to have occurred are Purple (a second calendar year and a first calendar year both in 1998) and Squacco (in 2007). Spoonbills are annual in small numbers and I finally added Glossy Ibis to the list in October 2015 when two were seen briefly before flying west, though I missed a flock of five by minutes in October 2017. It also took me awhile to notch up Common Crane but I finally saw two in April 2015 and, crucially, neither had rings! My first couple of White Storks (August 2004) were of dubious origin but a high-flying migrant in off the sea in April 2007 passed muster as did my sole Black Stork a few months later in August 2007.

Divers & Grebes...

Divers are extremely scarce no doubt due to the shallow waters of the embayment but despite this I have still managed to see a few Red-throated over the years and a couple each of Black-throated and Great Northern. Perhaps surprisingly neither Little or Great Crested Grebes nest at The Swannery, no doubt due to the fact the embayment is slightly tidal and lacks emergent vegetation. However, they are both common virtually all year round and most years (particularly in the winter months) they are joined briefly by a few Black-necked and the occasional Slavonian but Red-necked remains a true rarity.

Sea Birds...

True sea birds tend to only occur on or over The Swannery embayment during severe gales. Despite this I have still managed to see an impressive variety. Fulmar is pretty much annual and both European and Leach's Storm Petrels have also occurred, most during well documented wrecks - but no shearwaters have ever made the list though four species have been seen on the seaward side of Chesil. Gannets are virtually annual but sadly they are usually oiled or entangled in fishing gear, while Shags occur occasionally particularly during or after big blows. Cormorants of course are ubiquitous with a roost of from twenty to fifty nightly and several pairs nested for the first time ever in 2019 (apparently all of the continental form). Guillemots are the most frequently encountered auk, probably less than annual now but again usually oiled birds are involved. A couple of Razorbills have also occurred but surprisingly they have been outnumbered by several Little Auks over the years, always looking a bit out of place amongst the rafts of duck! A few Great and Arctic Skuas are seen most years but I have only ever seen a couple each of Pomarine Skua (December 1989 and October 2007) and Long-tailed Skua (September 1993 and October 2008).

Terns...

The Chesil Bank opposite The Swannery was formerly the site of a large ternery. Common and Little Terns were the predominant species but Arctic and Roseates regularly summered - and presumably nested. Due to unknown factors the Common Terns ceased nesting on Chesil by the 1980's and the Little Terns then moved to the well-known colony at Ferrybridge. Over the years various rafts and platforms were used to try to entice Common Terns to re-colonise but with limited success. In 1984 an artificial island was built in The Fleet by The Swannery and

in 1990 fourteen pairs occupied it successfully. By 1995 the colony had built up to around fifty pairs and apart from a few blank years, when the island was deserted, at least fifty pairs still nest annually today. Little, Arctic and Roseate Terns still occur in varying numbers on passage along with numerous Sandwich Terns and occasional Black Terns. Rare terns have included Caspian Tern, with two together in September 1991 (and historically one at 'Abbotsbury' in 1974) and Gull-billed Tern, with one in June 2010. In addition, a Common Tern showing characters of one of the eastern forms has visited annually from at least 2013 but unfortunately the Forster's Tern that frequented The Fleet and adjacent coastal areas in winter 1995/96 was never confirmed in the recording area, despite being seen off the beach. The rarest terns though were well before my time, namely two Sooty Terns found by the then Swanherd Fred Lexster in May 1935.

Gulls...

Black-headed Gull has in the last few years began nesting at The Swannery, the only gulls to successfully do so during my tenure, and are of course regular all year round along with varying, and sometimes quite significant, numbers of Great and Lesser Black-backs, Herring, Common and Mediterranean. The latter species has increased significantly in recent years with counts rarely exceeding ten in the 1990's to counts now of several hundred. Less frequent but still pretty much annual are Kittiwake, Little Gull and Yellow-legged Gull. Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull occur relatively regularly but are less than annual, whilst a dead adult Kumlien's Gull was found in April 1995 and a first winter was seen in February 2014. Ring-billed Gull was fairly frequent in the 1990's, with four individuals in March 1997 for instance, but one in April 2019 was the first since November 2007. There are two records of Sabine's Gull, with one in October 2001 and another in September 2011, whilst the first two Swannery Caspian Gulls were seen in 2018, one in April and one in October (I missed the first but saw the second!) The only officially rare *larid* during my tenure was the Laughing Gull from July 1998 but there is an historical record of an Ivory Gull caught in the decoy in 1884.

Shorebirds...

During my tenure Lapwing, Ringed Plover and Redshank have all been lost as breeders despite no apparent change in habitat. Oystercatcher on the otherhand has recently recolonised with up to three pairs now nesting annually.

Redshank and Lapwing are still fairly abundant in the winter months when they are joined by Common Snipe, variable numbers of Golden Plover and occasionally, other species such as Jack Snipe and Woodcock. In addition to those already mentioned, annual passage migrants in varying numbers include Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Black-tailed Godwit (the vast majority of the latter being of Icelandic origin but a small number of the nominate form have been seen), Turnstone, Knot, Ruff, Sanderling, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, and Greenshank. Also seen regularly, but less than annual, are Avocet, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Grey Phalarope, Wood Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank while scarcities have included a few each of Temminck's Stint, Pectoral Sandpiper and Purple Sandpiper.

A Collared Pratincole in May 1990 was the first national rarity I found at The Swannery, whilst other rare waders have included: Black-winged Stilt, with one in April 2012, a different individual in May 2012 and another in April 2015 (historically Dorset's first record was at Abbotsbury in 1956); a Semi-palmated Sandpiper in September 2013; a Baird's Sandpiper (not seen by me) in September 2017; a Lesser Yellowlegs (also not seen by me)

in September 2018, a Spotted Sandpiper from September to November 2017 and a Stone Curlew (at last) in April 2019. Historically there is also a record of White-tailed Lapwing from July 1979, although, despite still standing, there is a conspiracy theory that the record is a hoax as, allegedly, a film of 'the bird' submitted with the description does not appear to have even been taken at Abbotsbury!

Near misses (seen within the parish of Abbotsbury during my tenure but not within the recording area) include Kentish Plover, Dotterel and Long-billed Dowitcher... maybe one day!

Raptors and Owls...

Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and Little Owl all breed within or very near the recording area and are all seen regularly, although the latter is no longer as regular as it once was. Marsh Harriers have become much more regular in recent years and even attempted to nest in 2012 and 2013 but unfortunately Hen Harriers have become much less regular, being only just about annual now, with the once regular roost abandoned by the 1990's (apart that is from a blip in December 2010 when at least three were present). Red Kites though have dramatically increased with a record count of 58 on 15th May 2018! These were clearly birds originating from the re-introduction scheme but at least some of my early records, including my first in September 1989, were presumably migrants from the continent. Although not breeding in the immediate vicinity Peregrines are seen regularly, whereas Hobby and Merlin occur annually, as does Osprey. Short-eared Owls are seen less than annually but there was a record count of at least ten together in October 2018.

There have been a few records each of Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Montagu's Harrier and Long-eared Owl but the only Red-footed Falcon was seen in May 2003. In addition, a putative Pallid Harrier was seen in May 2013 and a Saker of unknown origin was seen in December 2001. Unfortunately though, I have yet to get a confirmed view of a Goshawk!

Other Non-passerines...

Collared Dove, Feral/Domestic Pigeon, Stock Dove and Woodpigeon all breed either in the recording area or in the very near vicinity and all are commonly encountered, with the latter two species often passing over in their hundreds and thousands respectively in the late autumn. Turtle Dove has always been scarce during my tenure, with only three records in the last ten years. Cuckoo has most definitely declined - it was a regular breeder to the early 90's at least, now I struggle to hear one each year, let alone see one (my last was in 2016). Common Swift has notably declined too with days when thousands filled the sky over the lagoon and reedbeds in the late spring and early summer now gone - we're lucky if we see a hundred these days. The only other swift on the list is Alpine with one seen in May 2003 but a swift seen in late October 2014 was probably a Pallid, it just couldn't be positively identified, even from photos.

There have only been a few records each of Nightjar and Wryneck during my tenure, with the last records being in 2007 and 2011 respectively (though I only found a couple of the first and none of the latter!). Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers both breed either in or near the recording area and are seen regularly but the only Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in my era was in October 1998. Kingfisher is a non-breeding visitor, although it occurs virtually all year round but there are only single records of Bee-eater (in May 2018 - which I frustratingly missed) and Hoopoe (in April 2003) - there are several other records of the latter elsewhere in Abbotsbury and even historically at The Swannery. A couple of Ring-necked Parakeet sightings are presumably related to escapes (along with those of four other parrot species).

Shrikes...

Even thirty years ago Red-backed Shrikes had already become decidedly uncommon and indeed I have only ever seen three in the recording area, all autumn juveniles (in 1998, 2007 and 2014). The only other shrike I've seen was a Woodchat in May 1989, my first good find! There have been a few others of the latter elsewhere in Abbotsbury since though, including three spring singles, all tantalisingly close to the recording area around Clayhanger Farm. There has never been a record of Great Grey Shrike at Abbotsbury though and, perhaps surprisingly, there has only ever been one confirmed for The Fleet - way back in 1952. Even more oddly is the fact that that was in June! In addition, I did find a shrike's larder one October (comprised mostly of large beetles) but frustratingly the owner had long since departed.

Crows...

All the regular Dorset corvids - Raven, Carrion Crow, Rook, Jackdaw, Jay and Magpie breed either in or very near to the recording area and perhaps all but the former and the latter are seen in varying numbers on passage too. Numbers have remained pretty constant with the exception of Raven which has definitely increased. There are historic records of Hooded Crow for Abbotsbury but I still await my first, though a hybrid frequented the beach opposite in the winter of 2012/13.

Tits...

Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit and Coal Tit are pretty much resident and all breed within or very close to the recording area (and after being suspected a few times in autumn the first definite Continental Coal Tit was seen in May 2018). Marsh Tit once bred regularly but has declined dramatically during tenure with sightings becoming fewer and fewer through the 90's and there have been none at all in the last ten years at least. Willow Tit has also occurred, mostly historically but I saw three in the early to mid-90's. Bearded Tit has also had a change of fortune. In the late 80's and early 90's they were a common winter visitor and a few pairs even bred but now they are mostly only an autumn visitor, with even winter records few and far between. The only Penduline Tit was seen in October 2003.

Larks, Pipits & Wagtails...

Skylark is still a relatively abundant breeding species on the surrounding grassland and adjacent beach and large numbers appear on passage too. Woodlarks occasionally turn up on autumn passage, mostly fly-overs, but one or two have settled briefly. Unfortunately, Meadow Pipit is no longer a regular breeder, although breeding numbers have fluctuated widely over my time so hopefully, they will breed again soon. They are however still a common passage migrant and winter visitor. Tree Pipit occurs regularly on passage too, although in considerably smaller numbers, as does Rock Pipit, with a few of the latter regularly over-wintering (including birds of the Scandinavian form). Water Pipits though are perhaps surprisingly rare here with only around half a dozen records. There have been four Richard's Pipits, the last being two that over-wintered from December 2016 to April 2017. As for other pipits, a heard only Red-throated Pipit did not pass muster and I still await a Tawny! Pied Wagtail still breeds regularly and is a common passage migrant and winter visitor, whilst White Wagtail is an annual visitor. Grey Wagtail has been lost as a breeding bird though, with the last nesting here in the 90's but they still occur regularly on passage and in winter. Yellow Wagtail had already ceased nesting at Abbotsbury when I arrived but they are still a relatively common passage migrant, particularly in the autumn when the reed bed roosts can still hold several hundred. Several Blue-headed Wagtails have also occurred and even a few autumn Grey-headed Wagtails have been mooted but it will no doubt take a spring male to finally add this form to the list. Unlike the latter, a description of a Citrine Wagtail was submitted but unfortunately it got the not proven verdict!

Swallows...

Sand Martins are a common passage migrant (sometimes roosting in the reedbeds in their hundreds) as are Swallows, with several pairs nesting annually. House Martins are still common on passage too but at their nearest breeding site in the village they have declined considerably during my tenure. I still await confirmed views of a Red-rumped Swallow though - my best candidate was when it was still a BBRC rarity but my description of a brief flyby did not seem worthy of submission. There have been at least two other 'probable' sightings but my only confirmed Abbotsbury bird was frustratingly outside of the recording area.

Warblers...

Cetti's Warblers were already well established as a breeding species when I arrived and other relatively abundant breeding warblers today are Chiffchaff, Reed Warbler, Blackcap and Whitethroat. Willow Warbler have been lost though, and Sedge Warbler has declined dramatically. A few pairs of Lesser Whitethroat breed most years and there has been the odd breeding record of Grasshopper Warbler but otherwise all of the above, along with Garden Warbler are still relatively abundant passage migrants. Aquatic Warblers were regular passage migrants in the 90's but the last one was in September 2004. Scarcer migrants include Dartford Warbler, 'Siberian' Chiffchaff, Wood Warbler and (increasingly less scarce) Yellow-browed Warbler, while there have also been a few each of Dusky Warbler (three individuals, the last in November 2018), Radde's Warbler (one, October 2009), Marsh Warbler (five individuals at least during my tenure, the last in May 2009 - although historically the Swannery was a regular breeding site), Melodious Warbler (one, August 2001) and Icterine Warbler (one, September 1997). In addition, there have been unconfirmed records of Arctic Warbler, Great Reed Warbler and Savi's Warbler.

Thrushes...

Blackbird, Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush all breed regularly within or very near the recording area, although, as a breeder, the latter declined considerably from the late 90's but thankfully it appears to have recovered well just in the last year or so. All occur even more frequently in the winter months as their numbers are swollen by continental birds along with varying numbers of Redwings and Fieldfares. Ring Ouzel however is very scarce with only around half a dozen records.

Flycatchers & Chats...

Spotted Flycatcher was a regular breeder when I arrived but now breeding records are few and far between. It is still a regular passage migrant though, as is Pied Flycatcher - but I still await my first Red-breasted.

Robin is now the only regular breeding chat as Stonechat is no longer an annual breeder but back in the 90's there were regularly four or five pairs around the recording area. Whinchat, Wheatear and Redstart are still all relatively regular on passage but Black Redstart is less than annual here but more frequent in the village. Nightingale has only occurred on three occasions during my tenure but Dorset's second ever Thrush Nightingale was trapped and ringed at The Swannery by Steve Hales in May 1996 - which thankfully I saw in the hand at least. Perhaps surprisingly though I have only ever had one definite Bluethroat and that was back in October 1999.

Sparrows, Finches & Buntings...

No sparrows breed regularly in the grounds now and indeed for a while in the 90's none bred in the recording area at all. There is currently a small colony of House Sparrows in adjacent Grove Lane and these are seen regularly in The Swannery. Apparently there was once a thriving Tree Sparrow colony too but the latter have now long gone and indeed I have only ever seen a handful, the last being in November 2016.

There are still healthy breeding populations of Chaffinch, Linnet and Goldfinch, with one or two pairs of Bullfinch most years but Greenfinch is only just hanging on as a regular breeder now and the once fifty strong wintering flock has gone. Brambling, Lesser Redpoll, Siskin and to a lesser extent Crossbill, all regularly occur in varying numbers on passage with occasional winter records, whilst rarities have included a few Serins (but none since June 1992), a Common Rosefinch (June 1992) and a couple of Twite (the last in November 1993). I have never knowingly seen a Common Redpoll (a few late spring fly-over redpolls heading northwest were probably Iceland or Greenland bound so therefore Common rather than Lesser but the jury is out). Hawfinch too is a glaring omission despite several recent records elsewhere in Abbotsbury!

During my tenure both Corn Bunting and Yellowhammer have been lost as breeding species but the latter still breeds nearby and occurs annually. I have not seen Corn Bunting at The Swannery now for nearly twenty years though, but they are at least back along The Fleet hinterland again after being absent for several years and a singing male was present elsewhere in Abbotsbury in 2012. There have been two Ortolan Buntings (the last in August 2018), a single Snow Bunting (November 2011) and three Lapland Buntings (the last in October 2018) but despite a recent record elsewhere in Abbotsbury no Cirl Bunting!

Other passerines...

Starling is another species that has been lost as a breeding bird but a few still nest in the village and on nearby farms. Thankfully they are relatively common in the winter months and although the regular roost is not as regular, or as large, as it once was we still sometimes get in excess of eight thousand birds bending the reed-stems! There has only been one Rose-coloured Starling, a juvenile in September 2003 but The Swannery has hosted three Golden Orioles in the last thirty years, a first-year male in May 1990 and two together, including an adult male, in June 1992.

Dunnock, Wren and Treecreeper all breed regularly, whereas Nuthatch does so sporadically. Goldcrest also breeds most years and Firecrest occurs annually on passage and occasionally over-winters.

It is perhaps fitting that in my thirtieth year I finally added one of my most wanted birds to my Swannery list... When I started in 1989 I had missed the last of the once resident Dippers by seven years and for near on thirty years I still checked out their once favoured spot by Grove Lane Bridge on an almost daily basis. My patience finally paid off when one reappeared in September 2018!

It's been a brilliant bird-filled 30 years, I hope the next 30 will be just as good!