

## Alkborough Flats Monthly Wildlife Report July 2023

As climate change exerts more influence on local as well as global weather July was another peculiar month in as much as rainfall was well above average and from mid-month extended spells of rainfall re-flooded many of the grass fields and refreshed some of the areas that were on the verge of drying out. Warm and wet though means a surge of vegetation growth and an abundance of biting insects and this was particularly evident when trying to view the somewhat limited wildlife that was around during the month.

Mid-summer is the time to search out flying invertebrates and it was an unexpectedly good month for some species following the 2022 drought, but others remained in very low numbers in several cases a sign of general ongoing declines in abundance that are not limited to the Flats. Following the strong showing of **Meadow Browns** in June there were still plenty on the wing through most of July with **Ringlets** fading away but there was then a good emergence of **Gatekeepers** with 40 – 60 on decent days from mid-month. **Small Tortoiseshells** once the commonest butterfly of the summer have declined massively in recent years so even six on the 25<sup>th</sup> was a bonus and in a year that had only produced one record of **Painted Lady** on May 15<sup>th</sup> a single also on the 25<sup>th</sup> was a welcome addition. Clearly there had been a small



arrival of migrants at this time with good numbers of **Silver-Y moths** also present on the clover and the first ten pristine new generation **Peacocks** also brightened the local scene along with some equally bright **Red Admirals**. Three **Small Coppers** on the 25<sup>th</sup> formed the first multiple record of the year and close examination of the skippers revealed a number of **Essex Skippers** scattered around the site demonstrating their continuing



colonisation of the rank grassland. As most of the older water bodies have become vegetated over and limited in extent through reed expansion several species of dragonfly and damselfly have declined markedly with Black-tailed Skimmer now being very limited in range and numbers and the water quality on some of the ditches has also been badly affected in recent years. As most of the site dried out in summer 2022 things looked particularly bad for breeding dragonflies and so it was surprising to see a large emergence of **Ruddy Darters** from late June



with numbers well into the 100's on some days and lots of pairs ovi-positing. A few **Brown Hawkers** and odd

**Emperors** were located with a **Southern Hawker** on the 12<sup>th</sup> and the first **Migrant Hawkers** just making it into the last few days of the month. Damselflies were rather thin on the ground but the first **Small Red-eyed** was seen on the 25<sup>th</sup> and there was an early emergence of **Western Willow Emeralds** with one on the 9<sup>th</sup> and others from 25<sup>th</sup> confirming that this species is still present on the site



and presumably still breeding but just as exciting was the discovery of **Emerald Damselflies** on the 30<sup>th</sup> as this species has only been recorded on the site on a few occasions in the past.

The partial reflooding gave a lifeline to the broods of **Mute Swans** that were rapidly being isolated in the drying floods. It was a month lacking **Shelduck** but six fledged juveniles were present on the 20<sup>th</sup> though no broods were seen locally this year. Waterfowl numbers remained fairly high though variable with **Mallard** being the most numerous species, totals being swelled by at least 30 broods with c120 young fledging and an overall total of c300 birds. Ten **Wigeon** on the 11<sup>th</sup> was the highest count of this species but July is usually a month with very low numbers and **Gadwall** numbers also fell away to around 120 birds but most of the five broods



of 38 young looked set to fledge. Up to 150 **Teal** were joined by a **Garganey** on the 30<sup>th</sup> and there were up to 30 **Shoveler** with a flock of 42 **Common Scoter** flying west on the 23<sup>rd</sup> completing a rather mediocre showing of wildfowl. In a better year for **Coots** it was calculated that 30 broods fledge c58 young while some late broods of Little Grebes hatched in the second half of the month.

Odd **Bitterns** were seen but it was the white herons / egrets that stole the show. **Little Egrets** peaked at 80 on the 8<sup>th</sup> just three below the 2020 record and there were one or two **Great White Egrets** on most days. The first two juvenile **Spoonbills** arrived on the 8<sup>th</sup> taking the total to 16 birds but as the month progressed numbers built up to 27 by the 16<sup>th</sup> before dipping back to 22 after



which there was another arrival taking the peak to 34 on the 30<sup>th</sup> a new all-time record beating the 32 recorded in 2020 and 2021.

Up to 34 **Swifts** remained to the month end and one or two **Green Woodpeckers** wandered down to the edge of the Flats on a few dates with the best **Sand Martin** count being 800 mid-month. Post fledging **Yellow Wagtails** started to gather on the drier pools with 10 by the 17<sup>th</sup> then 50 20<sup>th</sup> and 70+ 31<sup>st</sup> and the **Grey Wagtails** were

still by the car park to at least 3<sup>rd</sup>. It seems to have been another good season for breeding **Bearded Tits** with some sizeable flocks of fledged juveniles roaming the reedbeds A **Whinchat** 23<sup>rd</sup> was an early autumn migrant but two singing male **Grasshopper Warblers** in the first week were local breeders preparing for second brood duty.

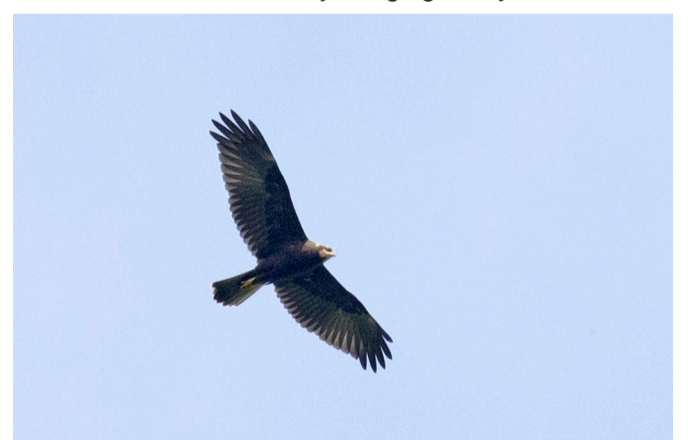


Changing conditions on the site have been reflected directly in the abundance of passage waders and this July the peak count, and only one of two records, was of seven **Avocets**. It is pertinent to recall that in July 2105 the peak count was 1202 and even as recently as 2019 580 were still using the site. **Little Ringed Plovers** actually outnumbered Avocets with peak counts of 10 – 13 birds mid-month but there was only one record of **Ringed Plover** with six on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Late broods of **Lapwing** took the fledged juvenile tally to seven birds on the face of it a better year but from at least 23 nesting attempts this level of productivity is clearly unsustainable. Post-breeding numbers of Lapwing reached 150 but there were no more than 20 **Curlew** and the only **Whimbrel** were a single 8<sup>th</sup> and three south on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The maximum count of **Black-tailed Godwits** was only 73 on the 1<sup>st</sup> compared to 283 in July 2022 and there were never more than the nine **Ruff** noted on the 11<sup>th</sup> with three or four most of the



month. **Dunlin** never reached double figures with none on most days but a single **Curlew Sandpiper** brightened the 29<sup>th</sup> standing with five **Spotted Redshanks** only the second occurrence of the month after one on the 9<sup>th</sup>. A one-off count of 38 **Redshank** on the 26<sup>th</sup> and a peak of 10 **Greenshank** 11<sup>th</sup> and one to six for the rest of the month, two **Green Sandpipers** 8<sup>th</sup> and three 11<sup>th</sup> with single **Wood Sandpipers** 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> and a **Common Sandpiper** 23<sup>rd</sup> did little to swell wader numbers in what was a very poor month for this species group. An adult **Mediterranean Gull** and **Common Tern** 8<sup>th</sup> were the best of a very poor gull and tern presence.

**Marsh Harriers** look to have had a pretty dismal season with six nests only fledging two you to date as



successive nests failed the adult left the site to undergo their post-breeding moult meaning that there were few birds present from mid-month. The first fledged juvenile **Common Buzzards** were on the wing from the third week but otherwise raptor sightings were restricted to odd **Hobbies** and **Peregrines**.

Graham Catley

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