



A brief assessment of visible migration at
The Fleet, Chesil



Herbury Bay, Chesil. N. Gartshore

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Introduction

Discussions are ongoing as to a possible extension of the existing public footpath to the north-east of Chesil Fleet from Rodden Hive to Abbotsbury. Concerns have been expressed as to whether this could cause disturbance to birds on and around The Fleet and winter counts of the numbers and locations of birds on The Fleet and the fields to the north-east are beginning shortly. It was also decided to obtain some data on the birds within the scrub, reedbeds and other semi-natural vegetation on the northern edge of The Fleet, but with the breeding season over, a day visit to record the presence of migrant birds and their use of these habitats was commissioned. This report summarises that visit. In addition, a further visit to assess recording locations for a disturbance study during the winter was carried out on 9th September between Herbury and the Royal Engineers depot south of Lower Bridge Farm. Although not a main purpose of the visit, a note was kept of the more notable visible migration, with species and approximate numbers.

Field Visit

Date: Monday 1st September 2014

Start: 09.45am

End: 13.35pm

Weather: Overcast, light westerly wind with a brief light rain shower ca.11.45am

Observer: Neil Gartshore

Route: A vehicle was parked on the 'New Barn Road', just to the north of Tiny Barn Coppice, and a circular walk was undertaken out along the proposed route of the new path to Rodden Hive, returning along the shore line back to Shipmoor Point. The circular route was completed back to the vehicle from here.

Aim: The main purpose of the walk was to look for passage migrants along the route. Birds of interest are noted in Table 1 (land birds) and Table 2 (water birds). In addition a general list was made of all other species seen/heard (table 3). A total of **51 species** were recorded during the survey.

Summary Overall migration during the survey was light but consistent with recent movements of birds reported in the county, especially from the West Bexington area to the west of Abbotsbury (Dorset Bird Club sightings page). The scattering of passage migrants included small flocks of Linnet using what appeared to be a strip of set-aside land and Yellow Wagtails feeding amongst grazing cattle.

The open water was in the main quiet with early returning winter duck - Pintail, Wigeon and Teal - of note. The majority of waterfowl present were congregated out of the survey area in the open water adjacent to the Swannery.

Table 1: Birds in/over the fields, hedgerows & woodlands

Blackcap	Single: calling from the hedgerow on New Barn Road, by the vehicle. Single: calling from the South Slight Coppice.
Linnet	Three groups, of 14, 16 & 32: flew out of a set aside strip between Chesters Hill and Berry Coppice (and away to the west). Six: flying west between Berry Knap and Higher Barn. Two: to the south of South Slight Coppice. 26: flew east over the shoreline by VP5.
Redstart	Single: in the hedgerow on New Barn Road, by the vehicle.
Swallow	Two: west over Chesters Hill. 14: flying around grassland below Berry Knap. Three: flying around Higher Barn.
Wheatear	Three: on the ploughed field to east of South Slight Coppice.
Whitethroat	One: in the hedgerow on Chesters Hill. Two: in the scrub by the track above the landing stage.
Willow Warbler /Chiffchaff	Two: calling from southern end of Tiny Coppice. Two: calling from Berry Coppice. One: calling from Holywell ringing site.
Yellow Wagtail	Two: flying west over Chesters Hill. One: flying north-east near Rodden Hive. Nine: amongst cows north west side of Chesters Hill. Three: flying east over Tiny Coppice.

Table 2: Birds on/over the shoreline & open water

Common Sandpiper	Two: together on the shore between VP4 & VP5.
Dunlin	One group of six: on weed/shallow water(?) mid-way across from VP4 (with Redshank).
Greenshank	Seven in two groups: five on the shore below VP3 and two on the shore below VP4.
Kingfisher	One: flying/perched along the shore to the west of VP3 by the landing stage.
Little Egret	A total of 16: along the length of the study area, the majority roosting / feeding on the south shore – some birds taking short flights.
Osprey	One: watched from VP4, hovering over the water (mid-way between VP4 & VP5) before disappearing out of view to the north west.
Pintail	One group of 13: on the water close to the shore at Rodden Hive near VP1.
Redshank	One group of four: on weed/shallow water(?) mid-way across from VP4 (with Dunlin).
Teal	One group of three: on the water mid-way across from VP5 – took off and flew towards the Swannery.
Wigeon	One group of six: on the water close to the shore at Rodden Hive near VP1.

Table 3: Other birds noted

Blackbird	Great Tit	Pied Wagtail
Black-headed Gull	Great Crested Grebe	Raven
Blue Tit	Green Woodpecker	Red-legged Partridge
Buzzard	Grey Heron	Robin
Carrion Crow	Herring Gull	Rook
Chaffinch	Jackdaw	Skylark

Coot	Kestrel	Starling
Cormorant	Long-tailed Tit	Stock Dove
Duncock	Magpie	Tufted Duck
Great Black-backed Gull	Mute Swan	Wood Pigeon
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Pheasant	Wren

Second Field Visit

Date: Monday 9th September 2014
Start: 09.00am
End: 14.00pm
Weather: Fine and dry with a light wind
Observers: Neil Gartshore & John Day

Route: A vehicle was parked on the road to the Moonfleet Manor Hotel and the coastal path was walked in an easterly direction as far as the point of Butterstreet Cove. Returning to the Hotel, the coastal path was followed in a westerly direction as far as the inner point of the bay to the south of Under Cross Plantation.

The car was then moved to the road past East Fleet and the coastal path walked in both directions for some 500m each side of the steam entrance to Butterstreet Cove.

Finally, the car was parked near the RE Bridging Hard and the path walked in an easterly direction as far as the bay near Martleaves Farm.

Aim: The main purpose of the walk was to assess suitable points for carrying out a study of potential disturbance of wintering birds on The Fleet at three locations. However, the opportunity was also taken to look for visible bird migration over and at the edge of The Fleet.

Summary of birds seen At all points there were large numbers of swallows and house martins with small numbers of sand martins flying over The Fleet and surrounding areas. The birds, which numbered several thousand were foraging but generally moving steadily in a westerly direction. Other birds seen over the Fleet or surroundings were a female/juvenile marsh harrier, a hunting kestrel and small numbers of mallard, teal and cormorants, and a few waders including curlew, greenshank and redshank.

On the arable field at Herbury there were some 30 wheatears, a dozen yellow wagtails and three whinchats foraging on the ground each side of the broken-down stone wall. In scrub along the edge of The Fleet at all the points walked there was a constant movement of small warblers, including whitethroats, chiffchaffs and blackcaps, accompanied by small flocks of linnets.

Other Observations During our visit to Herbury, we observed two dog walkers at different times, who made their way through the fringing reedbed to the edge of the Fleet with their dogs and then encouraged the dogs to enter the water by throwing toys and sticks. The dogs swam out to a distance of approximately 10m into the bay. There were no water fowl present so no disturbance was caused, but at other times, later in the winter, such behaviour would probably have disturbed waterfowl from the whole bay.

Habitats

As part of the investigation into the area that could be affected by the new path route, the main habitats close to the shore have been mapped, (Map 1). The fields running along the shoreline between Boat House plantation and Cuckoo Coppice are all open grass, unfenced along the shoreline. The only cover for migrants moving along the edge of the Fleet are a series of blackthorn thickets, bramble patches and low woodland. There are also two small reedbeds and a hawthorn hedge, all shown on the map together with approximate heights and target notes.

Risks and mitigation

It is unlikely that anyone using the proposed new footpath would disturb small passerines moving along the shoreline from cover to cover, or that loose dogs would cause disturbance as the thickets are very dense and in places growing on steep slopes or low cliffs. The existing footpath runs along the back of Boat House plantation and is separated from the existing reedbed by a fence and wet woodland. The small reedbed below South Sleight Coppice would, however be vulnerable to disturbance from people and dogs and is, moreover, next to a track running down to the shore from the hinterland. Steps would need to be taken to close this track off from the new path with a dog proof gate and suitable signage.

Conclusions

The limited evidence suggests that the inner edge of The Fleet could be part of an important migration route in autumn for birds moving along the coast from west to east. Reference to The Dorset Bird Reports suggests that the coast from Abbotsbury to Portland is an important migration route for scrub warblers in both spring and autumn, although observations specifically from Chesil are few with the exception of Abbotsbury.

There was no evidence that our presence caused serious disturbance to the migrating birds, although the wheatears etc. feeding on open ground moved ahead of us as we walked the path and then flew round to resume feeding behind us. However, if the use of the path was to be heavy with human movement along the path continuous, this would have disturbed the birds away from what was clearly a good foraging area. This might have affected their ability to feed optimally, or displaced them further into the field where they would have been more vulnerable to predators, at a time when they would be building up pre-migratory fat reserves. It seems unlikely that the scrub birds were easily disturbed as their habitat was dense and they flew from bush to bush generally moving west and feeding as they went. The hirundines (swallows and martins) seemed entirely unaffected by the presence of people on the path.



Map 1: Areas of scrub and reedbed within 100m of the waters edge and within line of sight from open water to the surveyor. For scrub elements the composition and average height is shown.

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