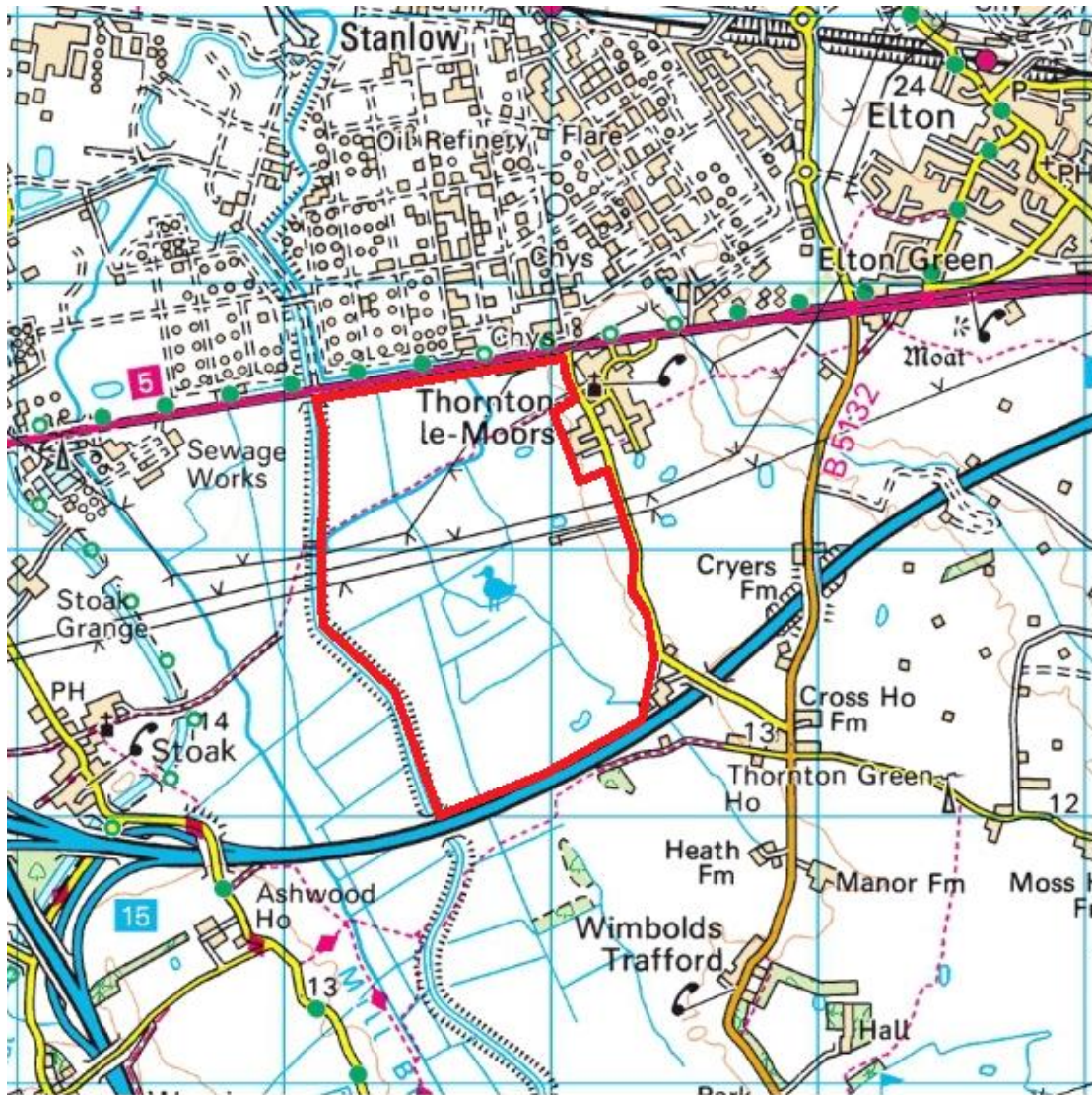


LOCAL PATCH DIARY

(Includes CWT Gowy Meadows Reserve)



2021

Steve Holmes

A short review of the on-going targets I set myself each January ... that of trying to find 100 species of bird in as many of the sixteen 1km squares I cover on my local patch as I can. Some squares increased quite well during 2019 (as indicated by the red figures) and one (SJ4574) joined the '100' club, as was predicted last January.

Out of interest, Gowy Meadows Reserve is shown as the green coloured rectangle and though there are small areas in another two 1km squares they are not shown. The river Gowy flows essentially north south through the reserve, with the presence of water accounting for the higher species totals. The pair of squares shaded grey have very little public access but I made a concerted effort to see more species in SJ4375 from about November onwards!

80 1	11 8	21 2	118 1
95 1	152 1	96 2	103 4
107 1		91 3	94 4
91 0	107 0	63 0	23 1

January 1st

Overcast and light rain for much of the time; light north to north-westerly breeze but never cold. c.10kms

The new year was heralded in by our wintering Little Owl calling away at its allotted time and shortly thereafter the first **Pink-footed Geese** came over – again right on cue. Looking out of the windows thereafter produced another seven species, including a Pied Wagtail. The weather didn't look up to much but its January the first so...needed to get out there!

Unfortunately, I'd gone too far to turn back before realising that my left pocket was empty – I'd forgotten my camera! Schoolboy error and the year isn't more than a few hours old – it was obviously going to be a good day and I'd have no way of recording any of it...and that's exactly how things panned out! Walking along Cryer's Lane the handful of Common Gulls were still in the small flooded field right next to the A5117 and then 100 Lapwing were found on the deck to the east of the Lane – both sightings paled into insignificance however as I noticed a tight flock of **Black-tailed Godwits** that had seemingly just been flushed off the first good pond – the culprit being a Heron that had just flown over them. Sadly, and annoyingly too, they circled once and then headed off to the west, where a few seconds later they would have been over Gowy Meadows...and I wouldn't be there to see them! A Sparrowhawk was sat on what I may, from this point call the raptor fence as its now held four species over the years and the little area itself has managed nine! The pond itself was much busier than the last visit I'd made, with 40 Wigeon, 15 Shoveler, 10 each of Mallard and Teal plus two Canadas, four Coot and six Moorhens; into the hedgerow came 20 Long-tailed Tits to complete the picture!

The tit flock led me along the lane and a similar improved sight awaited me at the second pond, as there were birds *everywhere*! Most numerous and in fact the only duck species was Wigeon at around the 300 mark and there were clearly many more **Black-tailed Godwits** in amongst them, at least another 100. Scanning through everything revealed 40 Lapwing, two **RUFF** and a lone Curlew! Sadly, no Pinks on the deck but I wasn't really complaining! There wasn't anything of consequence all the way around to Speckled Wood Lane other than five Stock Doves but within moments of starting to walk the lane there was the distinctive call of a **Chiffchaff**! Two noisy Jays followed but no sign of Woodcock despite some careful searching. Overlooking the main pond found it to be littered in Shoveler (40), completely outnumbering everything else by several to one as the only other duck were five Mallard! Two Little Grebes showed and in the distance a tight group of eight Snipe were going somewhere fast...such a group is usually the result of something passing over but I couldn't find anything so I headed off to put some time into seeing if the Little Bunting was still about – it wasn't but in the process of looking, a small flight of **Pink-footed Geese** flew directly over me and watching them disappear to the south-east led me to seeing a large flock fighting in from the south-east that were clearly going to land in the Hob Lane/Cryer's Lane area; there were at least 750 so I decided I'd go take a look as there might just be something in with them. I dawdled my way in their basic direction whilst still on the reserve, thinking to check out the other

favoured hedgerows for Woodcock and the newly cleared ditch for Green Sandpiper. Before that happened however there was the small matter of a *huge* flock of Lapwing off to the south-west. Some 50 did in fact come over the reserve but the more distant flocks tallied 900 birds! Adding in the 140 from earlier in the day brought about the seventh highest day total ever for the patch! The hedgerow was spectacular and well worth getting to (which was actually quite some achievement given that the area around one particular gate was so completely HORRIBLE and I had to wade across the adjacent ditch... Nonetheless, though there were no Woodcock I was soon aware of gently flushing a small group of passerines in front of me; Chaffinches and Blue Tits preceded a lovely female **Bullfinch** and a head-on finch I initially took to be a Greenfinch unfortunately morphed into a Chaffinch but on taking just a few more steps the Bullfinch was indeed joined by not one but two **Greenfinches**! It didn't end there either as the very next bird to show was a **BRAMBLING**!

I'd always appreciated that getting off the reserve by my chosen route was going to be challenging as the southern end of the main pond was clearly going to be a quagmire – and it didn't disappoint. Skirting as best I could the inevitable worst place was the last 50 metres and it was welly-wrenching to the extent that I had to change my stepping technique...had I gone with tradition, I'd have left both behind after just a few steps so switched to plan B – twisting my feet as I pulled them from the mud made life a lot easier. There was one minor issue when two Buzzards came over, disturbing a flock of 40 Fieldfares in the process. In turn, this caused me to stop to watch – big mistake as I'd lost all momentum and now both feet were stuck in the mud! Fortunately, foot-twisting came to the rescue and I was soon mobile again, though with a change of plan – I'd no longer any need to go along the ditch looking for Green Sandpiper as one of the Buzzards had flown its entire length at just about zero height – there wasn't going to be a sandpiper anywhere along there now!

I'd thought the most likely place the Pinks had landed was in the fields along Hob Lane so headed off in that direction first – only to find a dog walker coming in the opposite direction so I turned on my heels and headed back north, stumbling immediately into a **Coal Tit** in the only non-deciduous tree for a distance in any direction! Overlooking the same pond as earlier, there were a few changes – there were now two Gadwall, four Teal and a Shoveler on the water and in the field close to the road, 40 Greylags that must have been new-in since they walked just a few metres away from me then promptly sat down and went to sleep! All this was in stark contrast to the first pond, which had completely cleared out of just about everything apart from a handful of Moorhens and one Shoveler! Another nice flock of Fieldfares followed but it was quiet thereafter until I reached the end of our cul-de-sac and found two Great Spotted Woodpeckers; the **56th** species of the day and I'd somehow managed to miss both Wren and Kestrel!

January 3rd

Overcast; virtually no wind but not really cold. c.10kms

Seeing as it was showing as just 1C this morning and 1000+ **Pink-footed Geese** had already gone over the house, I had to get out there! Hastily making some lunch and yet managing not to forget anything today, I was on my way and the first birds of consequence were another small skein of **Pink-footed Geese** overhead as I reached the allotment fields. Thereafter, most of the interest centred on 'the two ponds' just to the south of home; they have certainly been performing brilliantly in 2021 already and today I spent over an hour between the two as they were again heaving with birds!

At the first there were 60 Wigeon, 25 **Shoveler**, 30 Teal and two **Pink-footed Geese** on the wildfowl side of things and the unfortunate sight of a Canada Goose corpse - it must have succumbed to the overnight temperatures. Waders were amazing, with 1,000 **Lapwing**, 250 **Black-tailed Godwits** and eight **Snipe**! The lapwing poured in and landed on the far side of the pond, displacing the godwits that had been there – I suspect the circling and eventual decent onto the pond attracted the attention of a huge flock of Lapwings that were heading north some ways off, since they changed course quite suddenly and headed my way! In the chaos that followed I thought that the godwits had left the scene but that wasn't the case; as I walked along the road, there they were, all feeding away vigorously just the other side of the hedge!



The second pond was even better, with 200 Canadas, 120 Greylags, 30 **Pink-footed Geese** as well as 200 Wigeon a handful of Teal and a single **Shoveler**. Other than wildfowl there was a lovely female Sparrowhawk sat in the first tree in front of me but sadly with her back to me so no worthy photo, Another 120 Lapwing came in from the south and another 600 **Black-tailed Godwits** were coating both the area around the pond itself and most of the surrounding field! I couldn't find any Ruff unfortunately but I was still more than happy with what was in front of me, which was added to as I left by the appearance of 15 Stock Doves and a Jay,



Between the second pond and Gowy Meadows there was clear evidence of new-in birds in the form of scores of Redwings and a nice flock of 50 Chaffinches and it may be that Great Spotted Woodpeckers were involved too, as I found three in a single tree that preceded me along Thornton Lane for at least 200 metres!

Climbing over the fence into Speckled Wood Lane I had a pang of conscience and set about working the G_E transect – the first of the year anywhere on the reserve and it wasn't bad at all! At one point I could hear geese overhead but couldn't see them so had to quicken my pace to find a hole in the trees and just in time managed to see the 200 **Pink-footed Geese** flying quite low to the west! The remainder of the lane was quiet excepting for Blackbirds but things perked up again once I was out in the open. The newly cleared ditch came up trumps with **Green Sandpiper** and the southern end of the pond came good with a lovely female Stonechat amongst other lesser species. On the pond itself the recent flush of Shoveler continued, much the commonest species of any duck on the reserve at the moment, with 32 today actually representing a reduction!



Off in the distance (yet still over the reserve) a Buzzard was beating up a **Marsh Harrier** (probably the adult female) in a mid-air dogfight and shortly after reaching the river another tiny skein of **Pink-footed Geese** came over.

It was a timely reminder of “never assume” actually as my feelings were that the noise was coming from west of me and my mind was therefore already in ‘looking or geese’ mode as I found three head-on birds coming towards me and mentally pencilled them in: [Canadas]. At that point however another mental bell was ringing louder – there were still goose noises overhead too... looking up revealed the Pinks, so I returned to the ‘Canadas’ which had now turned sideways on as they headed north – and they were Cormorants!



At this point I realised I'd actually made a more concerning mistake – that of having the Hobson's Choice of either the public footpath to get back home, or the northern permissive and since it was further to get to the permissive, I opted to use the public footpath and undertake the R_C transect at the same time. Initially, the path was quite fine, recovering well in fact from the lack of both rain and moos, though it remains very wet and...claggy!



I saw just about no birds, which was all but expected. I'd hoped for Coot or an egret species in the flooded fields to the south of the path but managed neither so it was left to a Kestrel to relieve the boredom – and then the second **Fox** of the day. By positioning myself in front of one of the hawthorn bushes on the side of Thornton Brook, I'd hoped I would look less obvious and it worked a treat as the Fox never knew I was there for the five minutes or so it was in front of me. Indeed, it came to within 50 metres without a clue I was there! It was however quite sneaky insofar as it never showed itself in the wide open for a photo and suddenly it looked intently to my right and bolted away at high speed. I'd already seen what it had seen, namely two people walking down from the orchard but they were 200 metres away at the time and clearly paid the price of seeing nothing through wearing inappropriately bright coloured clothing.



I actually spoke to the two people, having to inform them that from where they were, they could only get anywhere else by retracing their steps, since they were off public access and there is actually no way through to the river, especially when wearing shoes, even in wellies its impossible! After parting company, I had the quagmire that is the lane down from the church lay-by and it was truly horrid – I'll not be walking it again until there's been a significant change to its underfoot condition. From being 'OK' in terms of tiredness, by the time I'd reached the main road, my calf muscles were totally exhausted!

Wandering home along the A5117 was essentially birdless (and car-less too!) and I made it back home without adding anything to the notebook! At close of play, the local patch and Gowy Meadows year lists had reached 63 and 46 respectively – a fine start to the year.

January 5th

Overcast; not too cold, but over time the wind became icy. c.8kms

For the first hour or so I was very pleased to be walking south as the icy wind was behind me – I suspect my eyes would have been streaming out of control otherwise! It was quite quiet as I walked the riverbank south though the spread of species was actually really nice - just no numbers, even of gulls flying over to the landfill site. The first superb sighting was when the whole world to the south of me took to the air, both the landfill and adjacent fields - there will have been 8-10,000 assorted gulls and more specifically, 750 Lapwings, some 500 of which actually entered the reserve's airspace!



I finally made it to the main pond and since I was doing a transect, began counting the waterfowl: 26 **Mallard** all chickened out and flushed away - despite me being 150 metres away! That left 25 **Shoveler**, a handful of **Teal** and a couple of **Little Grebes**. What with there being plenty of reed cover, I count and count and count again to be sure I've 'got everything' and during one such event there was the following: "Shoveler, Teal, Shoveler, Shoveler, Shoveler, Little Grebe, Shoveler, Shoveler, **oh hello there...**" A somewhat squat-looking duck was 'asleep' but nonetheless looked interesting - moreso when it preened its tail to reveal its fan-shape and a head that was dull brown...a female **GOLDENEYE**! The first ever for Gowy Meadows and bird species number 153 for the reserve!



By the time I reached the main road again I'd seen 40 species thanks to single Jay and **Sparrowhawk** along Speckled Wood Lane, so thought about trying to get to 50 – a steep challenge, but accepted nonetheless and I headed off the long way. Getting to that milestone had already been helped significantly by seeing Great Spotted Woodpecker and **Mistle Thrush** before reaching the southerly of the two ponds along Cryer's Lane and it produced once again as just as I reached it, I could see that the sky was full of one **ENORMOUS** flock of **Black-tailed Godwits** and luckily, by the time I got to be able to look at them properly, they had all come back to earth - all 700 of them! I'd hoped to see three species of geese but initially I could only see three Canadas, though I could hear some Pink-feet. After counting the 200 Wigeon

and seeing nothing else I began walking home but was stopped by one calling Greylag, sat in the same field, all alone, like Bill No Mates! Moving only another 100 metres north, and with hopes of a Curlew or two, I was once again stopped dead in my tracks - the field right next to the motorway was **covered in geese**! Problem; they were really close to the road and there's just about no cover, but through walking really slowly I did get into a position to start photographing and making a video or two of them.



A car, that had stopped on the roadside to look at the spectacle, spooked the lot into the air as it pulled away but before that I'd managed to dig out two local mega rarities, just the second ever **WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE** that I managed to photograph (above, lower left) and the second ever **TAIGA BEAN GOOSE** which I didn't get a pic of! Whilst they were in the air, I did manage some lovely video of the swirling masses though and there were *at least* 5,000 – the third highest day count ever for my local patch and the 10th ever count of 1,000+. Interestingly, in all the years I've been local patching here, this is the first time I can recall ever seeing a goose of any species in this field! Sadly, the second pond was a complete bust as farmers were collecting in their hay bales...with that went all chance of Gadwall, but there was still Wren, Great Tit, Rook and Kestrel to aim at...

Rook soon fell and the puddles in the last field before the A5117 accounted for Pied Wagtail but my last new bird for the day was a **Greenfinch** behind the Elton allotments, which was number 54 of the day; unbelievably, no Wren, Great Tit or Kestrel all day!

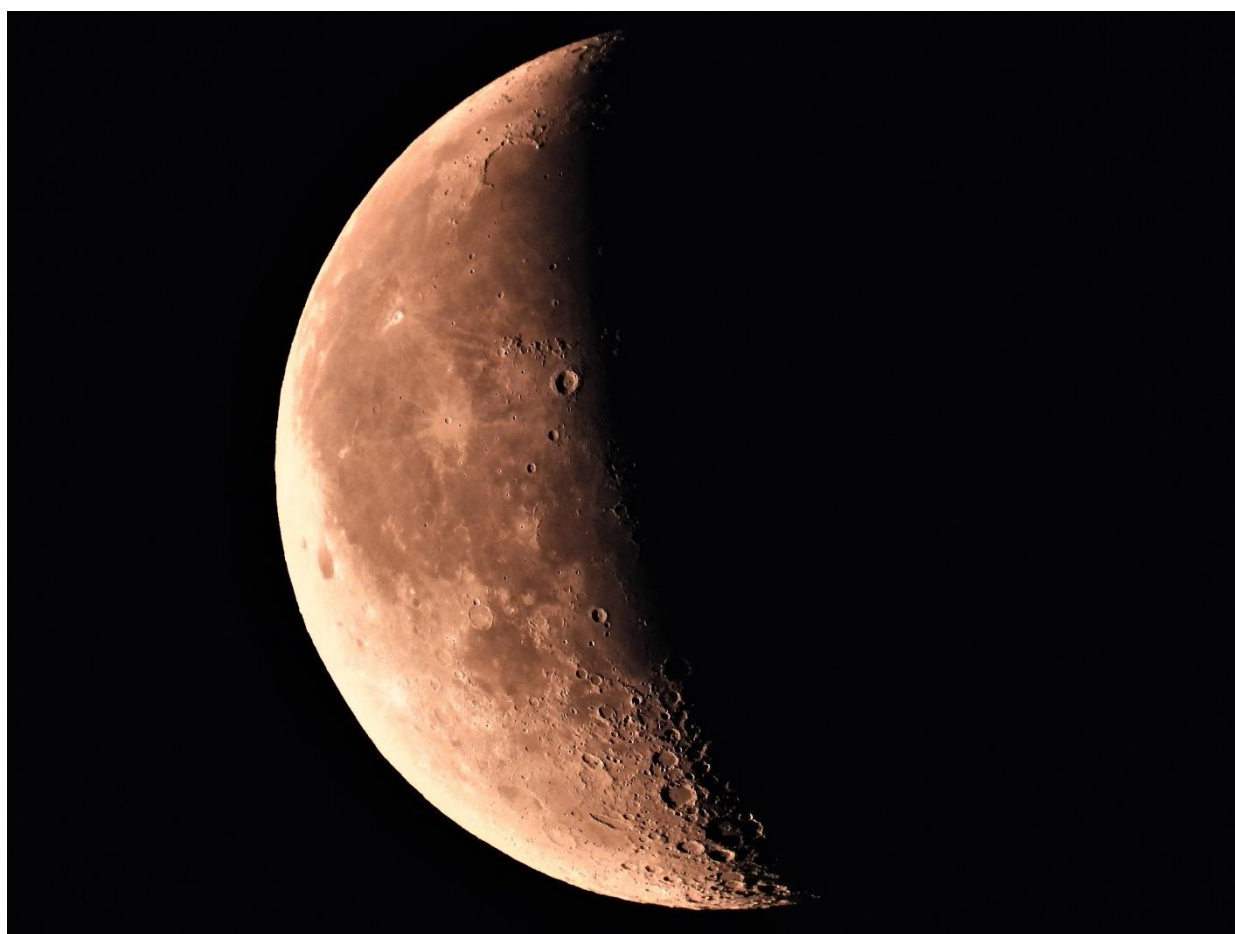


January 7th

Overcast; heavy frost overnight, plenty of ice but no mud! c.9kms

With such interest centring on the two ponds along Cryer's Lane, my wanders are pretty much the same these days, a circuit to cover them and differing parts of Gowy Meadows; the only thing that alters is the direction, clockwise or anti-clockwise!

Today it was to be clockwise and from seeing the state of the white-over caused by a very hard-looking frost I'd mixed feelings about how the day might pan out. On the one hand there's always a chance of something having been pushed in (like Redshank, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail) but on the minus side, things will almost certainly have moved out to escape the weather. That having been said, before I'd even set foot outside, we had been treated to the best ever spectacle of **Pink-footed Geese** flying over the house just before 08:00. There were many, many skeins, some passing over singly, others in line abreast over a fairly long front. The procession lasted just over 10 minutes and several times the sky overhead was filled with geese! At the end we looked to estimate how many individuals were involved and came up with a figure of 15,000! Just before it got too light to ruin it, Marion also popped off a couple of moon shots...



Having made my picnic breakfast and lunch plus padding out my feet with three pairs of socks I headed out along Cryer's Lane and it wasn't too long before I was seeing **Pink-footed Geese** drifting away from the area I'd seen thousands at two days earlier. The dribble ended up comprising just over 250 birds, all seen before I'd made it to the northern of the two ponds which I'd written off through it having to be frozen over. However, there were plenty of birds, including 200 Canadas in the field to its north, along with 40 Wigeon and



two Greylags. There was in fact a small area of open water, doubtless the result of the combined body heat of birds roosting overnight.



This scene was in fact mirrored for the southern pond, insofar as it too was mainly frozen, had a small area of clear water (filled with Wigeon) and the field to the immediate north was full of **Black-tailed Godwits** and Curlew!



Between the second pond and Gowy Meadows there was another Great Spotted Woodpecker plus one of the largest tit-flocks I've ever seen on my local patch. Remarkably, there was just one Great Tit, but 20 Blue Tits and 15 Long-tails produced a fine sight! Another five Long-tails were near the old people's home, along with 55 Redwing, 16 Stock Doves and a welcome Mistle Thrush. Disappointment awaited me at the entrance to Speckled Wood Lane as judging by the lack of frost on parts of the top rail of the gate, I wasn't the first person on site! Worse yet, the sheep farmer, who I get on really well with was also

coming along the lane in his little buggy, so I wasn't anticipating seeing too much before reaching the western end of the lane...to find the main pond 90% ice-topped and whatever was present occupying the open water. There were 20 Shoveler and an eventual 80 Teal but I couldn't find any sign of the Goldeneye and I guess it will have moved away.



There was clear evidence of a fall of around 40 Meadow Pipits and the nine Snipe were the most for a while but generally it was the anticipated quiet day. Lapwings were a constant overhead, if only in ones and two but 100+ were on the motorway fields. No raptors of consequence was a little disappointing though I suspect either a harrier or a Peregrine had passed over at one point since there were suddenly plenty of duck in the air over the main pond. The river was sprinkled with duck though, particularly Teal, taking the day total to 120. A Raven headed off in the direction of its presumed nesting site within Essar and at the footbridge, there was a wonderful sight in the form of ice shapes.

Ice was just about everywhere and the ground conditions were more like concrete than the traditional winter mud. This meant I wasn't dragging a kilogram of extra weight on each foot but the downside was that I could no more walk in a straight line than I can fly like a bat! The water butts that were full were of course iced over and as tradition dictates, I cleared it off wherever there's livestock in the same field; it was over an inch thick and took some breaking!



A distant **Great White Egret** turned out to be the only new bird for the patch all day and it may have been the same bird seen by Hannah Norris on the last day of 2020. It prompted me to change plans somewhat and I continued walking north to work the northerly transect "R_N" for the first time this year. One or two further Stonechats on the way brought the day total to a very handy 11 and as with Long-tailed Tit, it was nice to see so many after such a cold few days and nights. The transect itself was utterly boring until I was practically at the end, when two Lapwing flew over – which must be a rare sight on this particular transect – for sure I didn't record it in 2020 here. There was however a Little Grebe on the river so I just made double figures of species!



As on my previous visit to the reserve, the last species I recorded was a fine **Sparrowhawk**.

Walking home was expected to produce Rook but didn't and the highlight turned out to be the fields to the south of Holly Bank House which were sprinkled with winter thrushes and perhaps 100 Lapwings.

January 9th

Overcast with dense fog until around 11am; heavy frost overnight again, plenty of ice remaining. c.9kms

The early morning **Pink-footed Goose** parade sounded enormous – but we only saw about 30 individuals because there was a pea-soup fog that reduced the visibility range to around 50 metres! It wasn't until just after 11am that the fog/mist burnt off enough to allow for the end of our cul-de-sac to finally be seen clearly, so I made some butties and headed out. SURELY the continued cold snap has dropped something....

I didn't have too long to wait before the first evidence presented itself as to the west of Cryer's Lane the fields were littered with hundreds of Lapwings - 700 in fact! Uncommon on the deck hereabouts, this is a very high count and the last time it happened two Golden Plover were in with them so I started scanning. Before I'd successfully found a **Golden Plover** however (the 13th local patch record), I'd already heard a **Redshank**! It somehow managed to fly over me unseen but I assumed it would settle with the Lapwings and that was the case... only there were two! Both are new-in for sure and both really rare species on my patch particularly the Redshank in the eastern half of it. In the fields on the opposite side of the road there were 185 Canadas, 100 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 35 Wigeon and since the nearby pond was still mainly frozen over, 15 each of Moorhen and Coot! The Moorhen count more than doubled the previous highest day count in the 1kilometre square! Looking through the Canadas revealed three Greylags, a third-winter **Yellow-legged Gull** (the first record for this particular 1kilometre square) and a Curlew!



The second pond was comparatively quiet with initially just 60 Lapwings, 10 Stock Doves and 200 Wigeon but as I was watching there was a sudden eruption of another 250 Wigeon in the field further back. Thus, with the previous small numbers, the day total was a substantial 470, one of the highest ever day counts, I toyed with the idea of walking around to Hob Lane to look for grounded geese, but had my eyes set on seeing more waders on Gowy Meadows, so I headed off there instead...

With five species of wader already under my belt I'd done a mental check on what else I *could* conceivably get on Gowy Meadows, and it was three more if I was fortunate: Green Sandpiper, Snipe and Jack Snipe. I did get three as it turned out but substituted two **Woodcock** for Jack Snipe and there were two **Green Sandpipers** to boot! I was walking along the sandpipers currently favoured ditch when not one but two **TREECREEPERS** suddenly appeared in front of me - just the 7th ever record for Gowy Meadows and bird of the day - or at least that's what I thought at the time!



I had my lunch overlooking the main pond and in so doing watched the stockmen remove their moos from the reserve - at least the part they'd been churning up for the last month or so - the commotion they caused accounted for the first of an eventual 36 Snipe and though they didn't know it, they were overflowed by a lovely adult female **Marsh Harrier**! Looking over the pond after munchies revealed 33 Shoveler and, hiding under the tree where the only open water was, sat a female **Pintail**; the female Goldeneye has certainly gone now. Shoveler volunteering to sit on the ice just didn't seem right, and made me sympathetically feel colder!

I found a nice wooden fence to sit on and for the last hour of decent birding light just stayed in the same place watching whatever came in or passed over - it was superb! A different (1st winter) **Marsh Harrier** came through, and only spooked from its flight path that would have taken it right in front of me when it saw me bringing my binoculars to my eyes; I'm sure that had I not done that, it would have simply continued on its merry way and I'd have had close view, albeit with



naked eyes. It was followed by **Little Egret**, **Woodcock**, hundreds of Starlings, the two **Green Sandpipers**, 40 Redwings, a Raven and at one time, I could see seven different Stonechats!

Leaving my perch, I instantly heard geese - skein after skein of **Pink-footed Geese** were heading back north and around 8,500 passed just to the east of the reserve, actually coming down in fields around... yes, ... Hob Lane! The reserve itself managed a paltry 124! Whilst scanning for more, another raptor hove in to view, heading south-east, a rather stunning **RED KITE**! Being just the second record for Gowy Meadows, it usurped 'bird of the day' from Treecreeper without too much trouble!!



In the gathering, dusky gloom, 14 Long-tailed Tits came by me and a Jay completed the day's activities - I got home just before it got dark, after another fabulous day local to home and another 50+species day at that.

January 11th

Overcast with light westerly wind; much warmer than of late. c.5kms

6C this morning and it didn't look particularly inviting outside but I needed a break from what I was doing so donned some clobber and went for it. The warmer temperatures would have caused two things to happen unfortunately, namely that most birds brought in by the recent cold snap will have cleared out again and secondly, the frosted ground will have become defrosted; and for that reason alone, Gowy Meadows didn't really appeal to me. So; a rare welly-free wander just back and too the fields and ponds to the south of Elton!

Much of my prophecy came true, insofar as many birds had upped and gone but there were still plenty of "local" wintering birds to enjoy, the usual suspects in the form of three species of geese plus lots of Lapwing (650) and **Black-tailed Godwits** (750). At first, I thought *everything* had moved on, but at the first pond I could hear godwits even if I couldn't see them and thanks to climbing up a gate and thereafter using the hedgerow, I got some very nice photos of just about everything that was on the squidgy western side of the pond!



Infrequently recorded birds in this same area included Mistle Thrush, Long-tailed Tits (flocks of six and seven) and three **Greenfinches**. However, my 10 minutes with 5,000 Pink-footed Geese in a field right next to the road just south of the motorway was the best time of the day. The field itself was more brown than green, there were that many in it and fortunately I managed to take about 30 photos of them all on the deck before some passing motorist did for them - but of course I was then royally entertained as they took to the air and actually most of them landed just a field or two away. Looking through the photos to confirm my estimate (through counting) produced what was probably the same **WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE** as a few days ago, but sadly, nothing else.



January 12th

Afternoon only; overcast with almost no wind; c.5kms

We'd spent the four hours from 9am doing various necessary jobs (delivering face masks and food, getting the car sorted and our weekly shop) before Marion dropped me off at the end of Speckled Wood Lane – with the threat of GBH if I wasn't back before dark! Thus it was that I moved with much more haste than I would normally do, in order to get around my theoretical route; I wanted to get to the river to see the state of it following recent heavy rain and on my way there it was obvious that there was a lot more water sitting in the fields again.

In truth, and despite noticing the first winter female **Marsh Harrier** almost immediately I'd reached the open air beyond the end of the lane, there wasn't that much about at all. I'd thought of giving the Little Bunting site a lengthy go but whilst scanning for the harrier over the main pond I was totally shocked to see hundreds of geese on the deck in the fields beyond! They *had* to be **Pink-footed** since there's never been either Canadas or Greylags in anything close to their number present on the reserve before. Sure enough, a quick photo and yes, they were indeed Pinks. Astonishing numbers but not entirely surprising

give there's been squillions around this winter. Decision time #1: what to do, continue with plan A or retrace my steps and go to get better views of the geese. A no-brainer really since there was at least a chance of one, possibly two new species for the reserve in amongst them; back I went!



Given the terrain and lack of real cover once I was getting close, it took me a while before I risked it no more and began looking more closely at them – and taking lots of photos!



Despite many scans and searching through the photos on getting back home, there wasn't anything different amongst them and after adding a **Green Sandpiper** and a nice flock of 30 Stock Doves, I thought I'd head home as the light was starting to fade. I got to the main road and turning towards Thornton-le-Moors saw that there were sheep on the road immediately south of the village. Simultaneously, I began hearing more Pink-feet and, turning to look for them saw several *huge* skeins coming north; there were *thousands*! Decision time #2: go home through the sheep or round the long way to look at the geese that,

by now, were starting to come down. The long way round and a risk of a beating when I got home in what could well be after dark also won so I started a brisk walk around to the southerly of the two ponds along Cryer's Lane...which of course was to take me right past the geese on the reserve.



Oddly, I had taken lots more photos of the Gowey birds and then walked right past them and THEN they took off all miffed for some reason! They actually came back down but they'd seen me on and off for the last hour and then lost confidence. Nonetheless, yomp over, I was rather brought back down to earth when noticing that the first pond surrounding field was only playing host to around 450 Wigeon – though there were about 300 Pink-feet in the air. Walking north, and conscious that geese could be in the field right next to the motorway, I gingerly made my way along the road, hugging the hedgerow as best I could. **BOOM**, there they were! The same field that I'd painstakingly counted about 4,000 in only the previous day was *coated* in geese once again, only this monster flock was hugely bigger, covering more ground and being much more densely packed'; further, I could see many, many more in the field immediately behind - and another huge flock was coming in!



Again, it was click, click, click with camera but once again, there was nothing to be found after studying the photos later on back at home; the conservative count in the fields was **12,000** – with another **3,000** in the air coming in to join those on the ground. Not wanting to disturb them all, I turned back, crossed over the road and walked slow by, in front of the hedgerow so as not to present a 'human figure' silhouette and it worked - for the most part. I was just about to go out of their view when something caused those nearest to the road to spook and a tidal wave of birds leaping into the air shot



across the field - the noise was deafening! I think that had it been earlier in the day they might have cleared off completely but given it was practically dusk, they merely circled around and came back down again.

By the time I'd reached the northerly of the two ponds it was getting quite gloomy but there was enough light to see **23** Moorhens and **16** Coots feeding in the field as well as another 50 Wigeon and almost 200 Canada Geese! The number of Moorhens did in fact draw an expletive as there has only been three double-figure counts in this particular one-kilometre square; all in the last four days! In fact, the top five counts have all been this year, with the maximum rising from six to today's 23; the all-time high here for Coot is 17! Hastily moving on I saw that it was 16:05...time to get a wiggle on else I'd be in trouble! Fortunately, there was nothing else to distract me along the way and by the time I was walking through the door it was still light - just!

January 15th

Overcast with almost no wind heavy overnight frost and initially a little misty; c.10kms

It was nippy for sure and quite misty too early on, so much so that the first geese I heard along Cryer's Lane I never actually saw! Out of the mist came three **Pink-footed Geese** then a Greylag and on the first pond there were 150+ Canadas, 100 **Black-tailed Godwits** and the usual duck suspects but no Lapwings, was something of a surprise. Ten Long-tailed Tits then hove into view and off in the distance an immature or female **Merlin** was sat on a fencepost.

Just before the second pond (which was completely frozen over with not a bird anywhere in sight) there was a single Curlew in the otherwise completely empty 'goose' field. And before I made it to Gowy Meadows, I came across a sizeable tit-flock that included four more Long-tailed, 18 Great and 25 Blue Tits in much the same place they've been for the past week or so. Nine Stock Doves and 125 **Pink-footed Geese** flew over too.



After having come a cropper on some black ice along Thornton Lane, that left me having to use my gloves rather than my fingerless mittens, I uhmed and ahed about doing the G_E transect that starts at Speckled Wood Lane and caved as I usually do, only to be glad a few moments later when a **Bullfinch** called - quite an unusual bird on the reserve and it wasn't more than 150 metres further when there were two more in front of me... I'd have managed to get a photo but for the appearance of a **Goldcrest** right by my arm - which I tried but failed to photograph instead and by that time the Bullfinches had done a Big Mac and burgered off! Another 10 Long-tailed Tits came and paid their respects and as soon as I got to the end of the lane to scan around, I was immediately concerned because I could see Black-headed Gulls hawking over fields which, the last time I was here, had no water in them at all! A skein of **Pink-footed Geese** came over from the north and I estimated 130 – counting them in the photographs at home revealed there were 132!



Good birds have a habit of turning up at the same time as one another and as I was trying to photograph the geese a **Green Sandpiper** flew over calling. As feared, the southerly permissive path was well flooded (right) and I knew I wasn't going to get through, even in my wellies so, after checking out the main pond (almost totally frozen over) and the very few ducks thereon, I retraced my steps and managed to get to the river through carefully navigating the Public footpath. The R_C transect was slightly above average producing Teal and three Stonechats as highlights. Thornton Brook had burst its banks in the usual two places but the water depth was only 15 centimetres or so, I was of the potential for deeper mud below and as a result it wasn't bad at all.





The river was markedly up since my last visit and was on the second level of the bank; there was a small trickle of water overflowing from the river into the fields on the west side, which were also well flooded.



Walking south (since I'd seen a female Pintail in flight and wanted to see if there were more) I was soon neck deep in birds - the air was full, so was the river, the riverbank **and** the flooded fields to the west! Starling was the most common species, numbering in the low thousands, then Lapwing at the 900 mark, followed by 200 Wigeon, 100 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 55 **Greylags**, 50 each of Mallard, Teal and Shoveler and seven **Pintail**! All the above having been said, three other species were the rarest for the reserve by a country mile: **Mistle Thrush**, **Rook** and **Collared Dove**! Starlings had been trickling through from north to south all the time I'd been on the reserve, in flocks ranging in size from 10 to 200. I suspect most were on the move ahead of the weather but some hundreds were coming down and feeding as best they could.



After numerous checks through the Lapwing revealed nothing in with them, I headed back north and on reaching the footbridge saw that the river was now belching into the fields to the west at some pace - in the short time I'd been gone, the river must have risen at least 30 centimetres and was still rising! The last birds were two Little Grebes and a Snipe - the latter will undoubtedly get decidedly uncommon now that it's too wet for them.



Rather than go back across the middle of the reserve and keeping my feet numb, I went out onto the A5117 and double-timed it home, by which time my toes had returned. All in all, a really good day once again and another of 50+ species!

January 17th

Overcast with one or two sunny moments; brisk, very icy north-westerly wind; c.8kms

Come the beginning of March I'll have been birding on Gowy Meadows for 16 years and in that time, you would have thought I'd have a good understanding of the River and its weird antics - only it turns out I'm no wiser now than I was in 2004! I was expecting it to be water, water everywhere this morning but one look was all it took to know it was almost the opposite! The Gowy was DOWN at least a metre!! That having been said, the water on the reserve itself remains high since the area is actually lower than the river and water drains away naturally at glacier speed... The Public footpath still has two places where extra care is needed however as Thornton Brook is still overflowing in two



places – though the one nearest the river has no actual flow to it. Bird-wise it was a Heinz Souper Day, with 57 varieties seen, 48 of which were on the reserve.

An early highlight was a close fly-by **Great White Egret**, followed by a fabulous mixed flock of c.1000 Lapwing (800), **Black-tailed Godwits** (45), Wigeon (45) and Pintail (3). A bullet-like male **Merlin** was next, followed by two **Sparrowhawks** that passed right over my head - and then put the fear of God up the Lapwings again! Typically, most of the gulls attracted to the flooded fields (on either side of the river) were Black-headed and one was already showing full summer plumage!



Having gone as far south as the motorway to complete the G_W transect, I returned back north and saw a nice doubler of **Little Egret** and **Marsh Harrier** before I heard what I took to be the distinctive 'kleep' of an Oystercatcher but with nothing obviously flying around I passed it off as a variant Teal bubble and continued on - only to look north and see an **Oystercatcher** heading swiftly west across the reserve!! I had my munchies overlooking the main pond, where six Gadwall were good to see as they've been in short supply for the last couple of months; one of the two Cormorants was an adult in full breeding plumage and another **400** Lapwing came in from the north, unerringly finding where the already present birds were and taking the day total to a superb 1300!



Walking the long way home, there wasn't too much to see so I mused over how to get to 50 species (from 48 on leaving the reserve!). I only needed two but surely more than that would come from the list of potential additions, that included: Song Thrush, Kestrel, Long-tailed Tit, Wren, Canada Goose, Moorhen, Robin etc; At the first of the two Cryer's Lane ponds, I found the place was littered with geese, but not Pink-feet as might be expected, to-day I only saw NINE Pinks all day so they were comfortably the rarest goose! Centre stage was actually taken by 125 Canadas and 79 Greylags both being alongside 200 Wigeon, but no sign of my hoped-for Curlew.



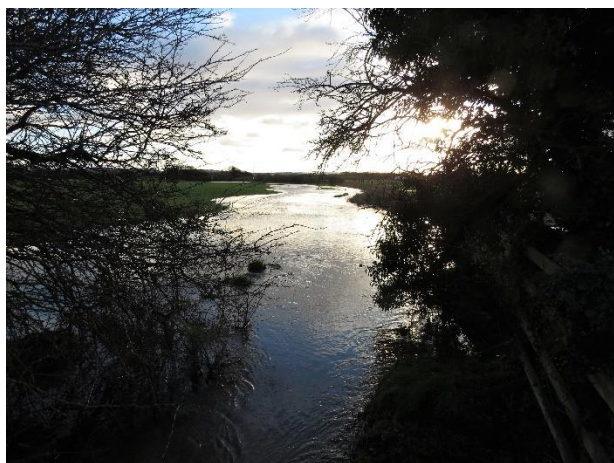
The second pond was rather good too, with 180 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 40 Wigeon, another 41 Canadas and 12 Moorhens (which I'd failed to see at Gowy Meadows!). The days' last highlights were both on the outskirts of Elton, a **Grey Wagtail** and a **Greenfinch**, the latter once again at the end of our cul-de-sac.

January 21st

Mostly sunny; brisk westerly wind; c.9kms

Waking up to just the dregs of our 1cm of snow last night was a bit of a disappointment but with pretty terrible weather elsewhere, I knew I'd some chances of finding some displaced 'migrants' so headed out with my trusty Kit-kat for fodder if I got peckish!

The first thing which had me smiling was the flock of 17 **Greenfinches** just on the outskirts of Elton - relatively speaking, a huge flock these days on my local patch, so a good sign. The first confirmatory signs of what I really already knew (that Gowy Meadows would be flooded) came shortly thereafter when I saw the first small stream had burst its banks and flooded the low-lying fields. I'd deliberately not gone out in wellies because I knew I'd struggle getting anywhere on the reserve even wearing them, so I rid myself of the temptation to try by not wearing them!



A few small flocks of Lapwings on the move came next, unerringly heading west into the stiff breeze, perhaps 200 all-told (but on my way back later in the day there were two further flocks of c.750).

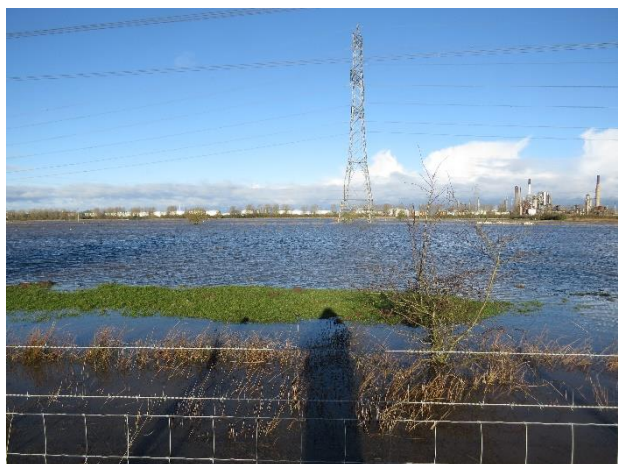
The first pond held 25 Coot, 11 Moorhens, 30 Wigeon, a new-in Little Grebe and 180 **Black-tailed Godwits**, so not a bad start. The second had another 100 Wigeon, 114 Greylags, 212 Canadas, 16 **Pink-footed Geese**, 71 **Black-tailed Godwits** and 11 Stock Doves. Between this pond and the reserve, a Raven allowed me to walk right under it as it croaked away in a roadside tree plus there were another 98 Canada Geese and six more Stock Doves. Very few small birds were on show however – thanks mainly to the wind.



Well before reaching the Gowy Meadows Reserve today I'd already seen it to be completely flooded - possibly as never before, so I was quite happy in not being in wellies as they would have been useless in any case! Walking down Speckled Wood Lane one of the three Snowdrop plants on the reserve was in flower – not fully but very close. In addition, there were four Bullfinches, including two glorious males - but not much else troubled the notebook before I peeked out from the western end of the lane and could see the extent of the waters.... extensive!



It was immediately clear that I'd be able to go only about 100 metres further west along the lane before the water would prevent me going further, which is fine, I'd had it in my head since early on that I'd be stopped in one place for a while just watching things come and go... and the comings and goings were **spectacular**!



There were three different **Marsh Harriers** (ad F and two different 1st winters that included a stunning, practically black individual), followed quickly by a female Peregrine that was beating up on something I couldn't see; she even went into a hover for a short while before continuing to hunt, heading east across the reserve at astonishing speed - or at least I thought it was that fast - because she was then **overtaken** by a male that made it look like she was parked up!! He was just a blur and then pulled up into the vertical just to show off! Wildfowl were everywhere, and in significant numbers; the 150 Canadas were a new record for the reserve, beating the 73 from a few years back. Similarly, 60 Shoveler and 300 Mallard were both the second highest counts on record and there were 100 Wigeon, 50 Teal, 29 Coot, four Tufted Ducks

and three Pintail for good measure! As earlier in the day, Lapwings were heading west, but in never seen before numbers on or over the reserve. Flock after flock came over, ranging in size from 40 to 750 and after my 90 minutes of watching, **2,530** had passed through - the previous high for the reserve was 1,500 in January 2007! Several times I witnessed gulls, corvids and even once a Marsh Harrier picking the corpses of dead mice/voles from the waters – I can imagine that there will have been hundreds, if not thousands of them perished because of the flooding but they seem to recover from such disasters in amazingly quick time.



Additional odds and ends were single **Redshank** and **Mediterranean Gull** (adult winter) as well as the first handful of Lesser Black-backed Gulls for the year! I was curious to understand what the lone Stonechat was going to be eating as well! To the west of the river and presumably when one of the harriers went there, there were hundreds more duck and Lapwings, including a (relatively) huge flock of 175 Pintail, 250 additional Mallard and 100 more Wigeon! I need to get over to the river sometime soon to check out those fields because I'm sure there will be more to be found whilst the waters remain so high.



Fifty-three species today was an excellent tally given the high winds keeping small birds down.

January 22nd

Mostly sunny again; less wind, but still westerly; c.9kms

Having witnessed what was probably the worst ever flooding on Gowy Meadow yesterday I was keen to get back today (given decent weather) to check out the large flocks of duck I'd seen flying over the fields to the west of the river – especially the Pintail.

So, I walked along the A5117 this morning with a view to following that plan. HOWEVER, when I got to the westerly Thornton-le-Moors turn-off and looked across, there was no riverbank!! I couldn't see any sign of a "green stripe" (or any sign of a river!!) within the floodwater so saved my legs and walked down Church Lane (water flowing down there too by the way), through the orchard and walked as far as I could before hitting water again. The bottom gate on the southerly permissive footpath was impassable because the water from the ditch there was too deep! So, I doubled-back and ended up walking down Speckled Wood Lane again and got to the bottom OK - only to see that the whole length of the path down to the pumping station and beyond to the river, was flooded apart from one tiny 'hill' - which is probably where I'd been standing yesterday!



The water was probably no deeper than 15-20cms so I splashed my way through for 50 or so metres but didn't bother to go as far as the "hill". Goes without saying that I've never seen the reserve so badly flooded - during the previous worst time, the river had only breached its bank on the eastern side for a distance of about 30-40 metres. Today it was more like 1500 metres!

Bird-wise, somewhat similar to yesterday apart from Lapwing - only 30-40 today. Just one **Marsh Harrier** (the adult F), but there were impressive wildfowl numbers again: 75 Shoveler (new high count for the reserve!), 300 Teal, 200 each of Mallard and Wigeon, 250 Canadas (so yesterdays' new high count lasted less than 24 hours!) and 27 **Pintail** - another new high count for the reserve! As yesterday, there could easily have been many, many more duck but I can only count what I can see – and I couldn't see very much!



A **Goldcrest** was also along Speckled Wood Lane but as yesterday, small birds were relatively few and far between. My choices of my way home were twofold but not really – had to go the long way to check the ponds! With there being so many Canadas on the reserve I'd had notions that all the several flocks I'd seen yesterday had somehow gathered together but that was as far from the truth as imaginable! Littering the fields around the first pond there were no less than 175 more Canadas and 110 Greylags, which puts the number of Canadas on the patch well over 400 at the moment! Many of the Wigeon usually present on or near the pond were clearly on an away day as there were only 50 on view – and not much else either. The second pond was just about bereft of birds for some reason – had there been a raptor pass through? Whatever the reason, there were just TWO Wigeon and no other duck whatsoever, no waders, no geese and only half the numbers of Coot and Moorhen seen yesterday! A Curlew called and there were small parties of Great Black-backed Gulls and Wood Pigeon in the fields but basically, that was that for another day; 43 species was less than yesterday but still a decent return for three hours 'in the pond'!

January 24th

Snow – not much but enough; light easterly breeze; c.9kms

Looking ahead a few days in terms of weather, today looked a good bet to be at worst snowing, which is way better than raining as you don't get wet. So, out I toddled and of course even before I'd gotten to the bottom of the front garden it had started snowing - weird little polystyrene ball-type flakes that weren't quite hail, but definitely not snowflakes either! A graphic illustration of how regular feeding helps out bird communities came about 50 metres from the front door as I stopped at a fairly new feeding station that someone had set up in their front garden... about a month ago there were up to six Goldfinches but that number has been steadily rising to today's **35**! That was just about the best thing I managed in the first hour or so, save for half a dozen **Greenfinches** at what is their regular haunt too. Fields on either side of Cryer's Lane were empty, as was the first pond save for a few Teal, Coot and Moorhens and the second wasn't much better in fact it was worse - it was frozen and there was snow accumulation on the ice...everything from the previous few days was gone. Overhead came 125 **Pink-footed** and three Greylag Geese whilst the obligatory flock of Lapwings heading west numbered just 20. I began wondering if bringing my scope along today might have been a mistake as I headed off towards Gowy Meadows! Just north of the old people's home there were some fresh tracks in the snow that I took to be Pheasant and a male flying over the road shortly after somewhat lent credence to that.



I reached Gowy Meadows without birds troubling my notebook any further and simultaneously the snow stopped falling, so, not all bad. One of the sheep farmers was taking some new hay down to his flock (all in fields that never flood) and he showed me photos he'd taken of the bottom of the lane the previous day - it was even worse than my visit from the 22nd! Nonetheless, as I got to the bottom of the

lane today it was instantly clear that water levels had reduced to the tune of at least 15 or more centimetres, which meant I was able to get a lot further west than for a few days, even though I deliberately wasn't wearing wellies once more. All the water in the east was frozen (because of being shallower) which was annoying because it meant all the wildfowl had moved west to the un-iced areas. It was actually thawing and numerous times I jumped out of my skin as some nearby ice-shelf or other broke!



With the scope I could at least see further to ID birds and though I came up blank looking for Mediterranean Gull, I did manage a new reserve record of 32 **Pintail**! Duck numbers were well down overall however - at least those I could see were significantly less in number than over previous days. There were handfuls of both Snipe and Pied Wagtail and as I was leaving (after two hours on site) the adult female **Marsh Harrier** hove into view, putting



the world into the air: 1,500 **Lapwings** were quite some sight in their numerous tight formations but I became more focussed on the duck she had disturbed - especially since they were headed my way! It wasn't long before they were identifiable, a mix of Mallard (50), Wigeon (50) and best of all a spectacular 100 more **Pintail** that homed in on their kin as if magnetised!



Enjoyable though the wildfowl were, (which were eventually added to by 150 **Canada Geese** flying in) I was delighted to see two each of Wren, Dunnock and Stonechat and a nice spread of other passerines in addition - the only downside was failing to find Long-tailed Tit anywhere today. Species number 40 was along the A5117 on my way home, when a female **Sparrowhawk** flew over my head - and it stopped snowing as I was opening the front door!

January 25th

Snow – not much but enough; light easterly breeze; c.9kms

An unexpected and certainly unplanned return to Gowy Meadows today as Marion had to go somewhere urgently - so she dropped me off at the river Gowy on her way!

What a difference since I was last able to walk the riverbank; the Gowy was down by something approaching two metres!! Not only that, water was now pouring FROM the still flooded fields to the west into the river, despite most of them being iced over. Fortunately, the ground was iced too, which made my life so much easier – I'd rather be crunching my way on top of the mud than carting a kilo or so around with me all day! In truth, I'd been trying to undertake this walk since ever the flooding began days ago, so I was quite looking forward to seeing what I might find; answer - a lot! :-). Black-headed gulls were *everywhere*, in their hundreds, there could easily have been 2,000 and in dribs and drabs-sized skeins there was an eventual 206 Canada Geese congregated unfortunately off the reserve. Equally, there were 150 Teal, 50 Wigeon, 10 Pintail, 70 Shoveler and 40 Mallard, all stubbornly on the wrong side of the river and therefore uncountable.

As I continued further south, I positioned myself so as to be able to work through another large duck host on an open water flood and going through them five times with my scope raised the duck numbers more than substantially! The Teal count rose to 250, Pintail to 110, Shoveler to 105 and Wigeon to a staggering 619! There were also 1,000 or more Lapwing, some on the ground on the reserve but mainly flocks heading west; three of the flocks passing over to the west hosted **Golden Plover**, (five, three and one!). A **Redshank** called, several small flocks of Snipe (68) hurtled around as if possessed and in with one of them was the much bulkier form of a **Woodcock**. Completing the wader side of things, three or four small flocks of **Black-tailed Godwits** (59) were regularly on view and again, about half were grounded on the reserve. Walking back along the public footpath I decided to undertake the R_C transect and found that there were still two breaches in the northern bank, both still pouring water into the fields to the north. Given water levels elsewhere were so much lower, it was a little surprising to find these two places still had overspill water 15 centimetres deep. There were another 300 Teal on one open stretch of water; the

second of today's **Marsh Harriers** (a 1st winter female) actually came quite close, as did a **Little Egret** and a female **Sparrowhawk** but other than for yet more Black-headed Gulls there wasn't much else of note. From the lane down from the lay-by I cut back on the southern permissive footpath to find that the water on the extension of Speckled Wood Lane had receded another 50-60 metres, though it would still have been impossible to get beyond the pumping station. Overlooking what was the main pond until recently, there were hundreds more Teal present, some 600 in total when added to those seen from Thornton Brook and therefore the complete day total was 850! Similarly, there were more Wigeon and Pintail, taking their day totals to 750 and 180 and the days total for all duck combined to a staggering 2,235, with 1,350 actually on the reserve!!!

Odds and ends during the morning were a, 60 Jackdaws, three Ravens, the first Reed Buntings (2) for a while, **Brambling**, Bullfinch and two Jays! Annoyingly no photos today - I had my camera with me but its battery was still in the charger...yes, fully charged!

January 26th

Overcast and progressively more and more rain; light southerly breeze; c.6kms

It's not often that I get really wet when on my local patch but today was one of those days - the rain eventually causing me to call a halt and head for home before I'd managed to check out the main pond on the reserve. Sometimes it's just not meant to be!

I suspect I might not have missed too much however as, with further reductions in water levels, a fair chunk of yesterdays' record-breaking numbers of wildfowl had moved away. There were still comfortably over 1,300 duck (but only 300 Teal actually on the reserve) and practically ALL the Shoveler have gone. If that was the downside then the plus was of even more Lapwings, with *at least* 750 on the reserve (with five **Golden Plover**) as well as 2,750 to the west, along with another eight **Golden Plover**. A similar increase had happened to **Black-tailed Godwit**, with 200 passing over the reserve eventually joining forces with birds already down to the west of the river to end as a massive single flock numbering 450! I spent quite some time stalking the same fields as yesterday since they again held a large flock of mixed duck and things were going according to plan until the adult female **Marsh Harrier** decided to show her face! On her arrival the world took to the air and thousands of birds (including many, many Starlings) were hurtling all over the place – but the harrier showed no interest in trying to take anything!



Fortunately, some of the wildfowl and the majority of non-wildfowl simply did a few circuits before returning to the same field they had just been disturbed from and it wasn't too long thereafter before I'd found two further **Golden Plover** in with the Lapwings and Godwits and heard an **Oystercatcher** in flight, presumably behind one of the hedgerows! Whilst it was also a really good day for Pied Wagtails, with 30 to the west of the river and at least seven on Gowy Meadows, the same was not true of Snipe. Yesterday it would have been easy to assume that there must have been hundreds on the reserve (if access would have allowed full coverage) but, with more prime habitat available today, I could find only six.



By around midday there looked to be a break in the grey clouds to the south but this was just a mirage and it disappeared just as quickly as it had presented itself – time to head for home! Just before I physically left the reserve, I spent a few drippy minutes successfully looking for the female Hazel flowers as there are now three trees with male catkins - and I also managed to confirm that all three Snowdrop plants known to be on the reserve are now in bloom.



January 28th

Overcast but no rain; almost no wind. c.2kms

Just a bijou bimblette this morning, in the eastern half of my local patch, so no Gowy Meadows to-day. It turned out to be a really good 90 minutes and only two kilometres walking - and no wellies required!!!
YAY!!

Hob Lane is about as far to the south-east of my patch as I can get and the pond there can be excellent for all sorts of stuff - and so it was today. In the field surrounding it were 170 Canada Geese, 37 Pink-feet, 50 Wigeon a few Teal and three Linnets flew over. Surprisingly yet fortuitously for me, the departing Wigeon somehow managed to flush another 200 from a pond in the next field over! However, the undoubted highlight, was a pair of **Mandarin Ducks**! In the fields on the other side of the road were 100 Greylags and 165 more Pink-feet!



Moving around to Cryer's Land and heading north for home the first of the two really good ponds was all but empty but there were nonetheless 50 Wigeon and another 100 Pink-feet (interestingly all the Pinks today were feeding right up against hedgerows. Perhaps it's a cow thing and they were expecting poor weather!) One **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was in with the Greater Black-backs (35) and Herrings.

The second pond appeared empty at first glance but the usual suspects (Canadas, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Coot and Moorhen) all eventually showed, be it in only small numbers (<20). Whilst



scanning for anything else I picked up a large raptor moving slowly across in the background, along the far edge of the pond. About the size of a Buzzard but actually a **GOSHAWK**! An immature bird, but on size alone it was almost certainly a female too; just the seventh on my local patch. In the fields opposite a fair gathering of Rooks were foraging for food and I actually managed a photo of one - not something that happens that often. Almost immediately after this, I got lucky for the third time in the morning as Marion

just happened to be passing by on her way home from her errand and I got a ride the rest of the way home, which included a brief stop off at Greggs for a steak slice!

January 29th

Overcast but no rain; stiff westerly breeze. c.7kms

Well, some flooding has returned to the Goway Meadows reserve - not too much at the moment but I suspect more is on the way as the rains accumulated from the catchment area upstream works its way downstream...

I was going to undertake the G_E transect today but, in the end, backed out as I didn't fancy another day of welly-pulling my way to exhaustion! In truth, I'm hard-pressed to recount any really significant sightings from my jaunt today. For sure, almost all the congregations attributable to the flooding of late have dispersed away (not a single Pintail today for example) so it was a case of a return to 'normality' - or slightly up on the norm. Things kicked off quite nicely though with the two snowdrop clusters along Church Lane in full bloom now, so all three plants on the reserve are alive and kicking.

Around 800 assorted wildfowl shouldn't really be sniffed at but Mallard numbers remain startlingly low - a month ago they were just about the commonest duck (along with Teal), but these days they are the rarest, with just 10 today being just about the lowest they've been since the end of the breeding season. The same is true of Gadwall, which have been extremely scarce for weeks now. Teal themselves stole the limelight, 500 being a strong showing with Wigeon next at an encouraging 175 then a very healthy 100 Shoveler. In any other year 59 Canadas would have been exceptional too, as would seven Mute Swans that included just one immature bird.

The adult female **Marsh Harrier** was today being a nuisance, the root cause behind 95% of all duck on the main pond clearing off. During her second pass through the area there were hundreds of ducks all around her but she didn't make any sort of move towards any of them; at one point there was a second bird on view, circling over the oil refinery. Sometimes her (or any other harrier appearance) can be very helpful, causing birds out of my view to take to the air and thus become countable. To-day however it was the complete opposite as all the duck were nicely in full view but I'd only done the Shoveler and Wigeon before she turned up to cause the mayhem! Fortunately, Teal tend to be least likely to clear out completely so during their numerous circuits I was able to get a good count of their numbers. I thought for a while about lingering, in the hope of something turning up but, in the end, opted not to so started the walk home, initially up Speckled Wood Lane. I didn't actually make it into the lane as I was obliged to stop to admire a nice adult female Kestrel that had come down the fields and landed in the last tree. I was in full view so was expecting her to just land, notice I was there and then move off again but nothing of the sort. She perched up and just sat there for a good minute or two, allowing for several photos; which revealed a ring!





The last birds of note on the reserve were singles of Bullfinch and Jay, as I headed off towards yesterdays 'hot-spots' along Cryer's Lane.

The ponds were again on form, though it was really just the usual suspects of **Pink-footed** and Canada Geese in the main (I didn't see a Greylag all day!) that dominated proceedings. At the first pond they littered the ground (enough to displace all the Wigeon!) and at the second, there were none on the deck but around 2,700 **Pink-feet** flew north in one practically continuous flock stretching out over two kilometres. Some 30 skeins were involved and it was a sight impressive enough to make me want to find out the flock length when I got back home! Before then, another 400 had passed almost directly over my head!



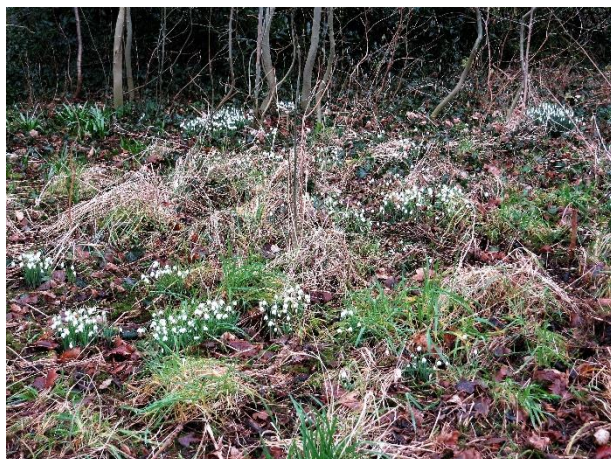
Despite no real highlights (couldn't even find a Collared Dove today) the day list was still a decent 40 species, so I can't really grumble too much

January 31st

Overcast again but no rain; light southerly breeze; cold initially. c.8kms

The last bumble for January already! After a short wander around Thornton-le-Moors Wood (to look at the masses of Snowdrops and my first Lesser Celandines of the year, plus hearing a Nuthatch) I continued onto Goway Meadows reserve.

It was tough work today (even excluding the mud!) as even more stuff has cleared out and nothing obvious, other than more Lapwings, and a **Kingfisher** have come in by way of replacements...the new-in Lapwings (600 from the north) joined up with 1,200 already in the area, but there were no Golden Plover today and just five **Black-tailed Godwits**.



Surprisingly, there were still patches of ice on sundry shallow water bodies but all the deeper pools were totally free. I walked across to the River along the Public Footpath and actually managed (with due care!) to get back across using the southerly permissive footpath; the water is still 15 centimetres deep in some places on that particular route but it remains mute testimony nonetheless that water levels are getting back to a semblance of normality. All over the place there were 'tide-wracks' of broken off rush accumulations – quite an impressive sight to be fair and Clive Washington has been down to examine for beetles therein.



I undertook two transects (R_C and G_W) and for once, R_C performed the better, by far! Both produced Mistle Thrush and in-coming Lapwings, a total of 600 which, when added to the 1,200 already present (to the west of the river) gave a total that in just about any other year would have been very impressive! It was nice to see Stonechats (3) again and now the waters are lowering more Snipe are in evidence (or perhaps it was because I could get to where they were today!) and there were still nice numbers of Shoveler (86), Teal (200) and some Wigeon (10+) on and around the main pond.



A female **Sparrowhawk**, three female Kestrels and three Jays were also nice to see but there was no sign at all of any harrier.

Most of the reserve was still sporting patches of ice from the last one or two days, which indicated the drops in overnight temperatures as well. The plus side was of course that the mud was in the main also frozen still, which made walking about easier than it might otherwise have been. Though the river remains well down, its still up above normal, possibly helped in some small way by the fact that water is now gushing out of the pipes put in place to do exactly the opposite!



By the time I'd gotten back to the end of our road I needed one species to get to 50 for the day – should have been a shoe-in as I was to pass a feeder that's been attracting up to 30 Goldfinches of late; of course, today there were none!