

Chessel Bay Birds January '24

My first visit to the Bay this year was on the 4th when I found 11 turnstone – my first record for the bay. They are starling sized waders and tend to wander up from the waterline so can be tricky to spot. They do exactly as their name suggests though so if you see something dashing around turning pebbles over you know what you've got! They have beautiful tortoiseshell breeding plumage but they're scarce here in spring and summer. They remained most of the month, my highest count being 17.

For the most part January was quiet, only one heron present on my visits but crests, tits, nuthatch etc all present as usual. Plenty of oystercatchers, black headed gulls, small numbers of herring gull, frequently two curlew, including our ringed friend and on the 7th four great black backed gulls. There are two who visit fairly frequently - this was my highest count. Great spotted woodpecker and great crested grebe not seen this month but kingfisher still present most visits.

Things livened up on the 31st – I saw two juvenile herring gulls mobbing a heron in flight, something I've never seen before and then a couple of minutes later several gulls and crows were mobbing something I couldn't identify, the bird disappeared behind the treetops along the railway line and seconds later reappeared with a woodpigeon in its talons – a peregrine! It headed off towards the city centre, with two herring gulls in hot pursuit. Peregrines breed in the city, I believe on the tall building by Central Station, I saw a juvenile mewing for food on the clock tower in the summer. Peregrine is a patch first for me and exciting to see. Whenever you see a crow or gull commotion its always worth having a look, most often its nothing but just occasionally you might spot a raptor.

In other nearby news I found one shelduck in Manor Quay on the 27th and on the 31st it was joined by another. On the 28th three red kites flew down the Itchen, I saw them from Bitterne Manor where they turned and headed over St Denys going west – lovely to see and again my first in this area although from the reports I've seen they do seem to be getting more numerous locally, numbers swelling at this time of year with young ones coming over from the continent.

In all I recorded 33 species in the bay this month, a drop from 39 in both November and December. Hopefully February brings some brighter weather, however we may start to see some birds drifting off to their breeding grounds with a lull until the spring migrants start to arrive. In total between May and December last year I recorded 52 species.



Peregrine being mobbed by gulls



Turnstone

Chessel Bay Birds February and March '24

What with the constant rain and generally dull weather my visits to the bay have been a little less frequent recently and so I've combined my Feb and March reports. Waders fortunately for them don't care about the rain and February saw three curlew present, I think this is the highest count I've had at any one time. I suspect they will leave us soon to head to their breeding ground, most likely in the New Forest. I also recorded the highest count of redshank in March – six, plus on the 22nd a single black tailed godwit, the last time I saw one in the bay was last August. I count a fairly consistent 17 – 19 oystercatcher in the bay and so far this year one grey heron. Little egret are scarce here at the moment with just one in March and no dunlin or common sandpiper. 40 brent geese came in on the 17th March which was lovely to see, they were last here in early December.

Mallard, mute swan, moorhen and cormorant present as ever and in Feb and March a single great crested grebe was often in the bay having not been seen throughout January. A single little grebe was seen in February but not in March. Black headed and herring gull present as ever and our regular two great black backed gulls were joined in March by two lesser black backed gulls. March also saw two common gulls in the bay – I only spotted them once on the 3rd March, a first for me here - despite their name they're not at all common.

Off the beach and great, blue and long tailed tit, robin, blackbird, nuthatch and wren are ever present. I saw goldcrest in Feb but not March and firecrest not seen. I've been hearing crests throughout though, I'm sadly not experienced enough to be able to tell gold and firecrest apart by sound alone but I suspect they're both still around.

15th February saw the first chiffchaff return and March brought my first sighting of four siskin in the bay. These lovely little birds have been really common through late winter – with some suggestions this could be due to the wet weather encouraging them into gardens to feed. I've seen a flock of upwards of 40 in Riverside Park, feeding on the seeds of alder trees around Mansbridge. March also saw two goldfinch and a single pied wagtail.

Corvids include a pair of jay plus magpie and carrion crow. The jays are pretty elusive but lovely to see.

Woodpigeon, collared dove and feral pigeons all seen.

I last saw the kingfisher on the 29th February, he's probably travelled upstream to his breeding ground for spring and summer now. I hope he's successful and returns to the bay late in the summer, I first saw him on the 12th August last year.

Two great spotted woodpeckers were present in March, one was definitely a male but I couldn't be sure of the other - hopefully a female, they were together and chasing each other which suggests it probably was.

3rd March saw two buzzards displaying over the bay and 17th March I was lucky to witness to some drama. I was watching two siskins feeding above the bridge over the spring in the middle of the bay when they suddenly froze – unusual as they are generally perpetual

motion, a wren let out an alarm call and suddenly everything went silent. Seconds later in came six carrion crow and a couple of gulls, the siskin dived into an ivy covered tree and next thing a sparrowhawk flew rapidly along the railway cutting, the crows spotted it and went in pursuit. It clearly escaped heading towards Woolston and the crows, by now joined by a gang coming into the bay from the Woolston area, searched everywhere for it for a good 15 minutes, eventually they decided the coast was clear and everything settled down again. I was still watching from the bridge and as soon as all was calm what should pop out – a lovely male sparrowhawk. He sat in one of the trees on the Athelstan Road side of the cutting completely unnoticed, had a good preen then sneaked off, I'm pretty sure I heard him having a little chuckle to himself!
I love sparrowhawks...

A sneak preview of April – today I saw a guillemot in the bay..... has the mystery penguin finally revealed itself?

Di Stedman
7/4/24



Chessel Bay Birds April to June '24

April produced an amazing sighting – a guillemot, either a juvenile or adult still in winter plumage, was swimming away from the viewing platform as I arrived. A very lucky find and a bird that at the time I'd never seen before. From available records I've been able to check there are very few sightings in the Itchen, none this far upstream and all historic. It made me remember the sighting reported in The Echo last year of someone seeing a 'penguin like' bird in the bay – I wonder whether it was a guillemot seen that day. Fortunately I was able to get a clear photograph this one so we have a definite ID. Its proof that you just never know what you might find and a good reason to keep going despite the days when all you seen are robins and woodpigeons!

Late spring and early summer months are quieter in the bay with most of the waders having left for the breeding season so most of the action has been in the woodland behind the shoreline. Several great and blue tits have successfully nested and raised young to fledgling stage, one wren family and the great spotted woodpecker pair have each raised at least one now fully fledged juvenile. I also discovered the nuthatch pairs nest site with one (at least) juvenile present, being fed by its parents. I haven't seen it fledge though and have spotted one of the adult woodpeckers on the same tree so have a doubt about a successful outcome, hopefully I'm wrong and the youngster made it safely through. I think the pair of jay have also successfully raised at least one juvenile. Starlings with their many young have been very present with numbers of 35 plus feeding in the bay at low tide. Mallards have successfully bred although numbers seem a little down on last year and I've not seen any juvenile swans in the bay as yet.

The local sparrowhawk pair have continued to visit, mostly the male – likely hunting for both his mate and their young.

As well as the guillemot I found two more new species – two swifts over the bay and a coal tit heard calling around the entrance to the woodland.

Great crested grebe can now be seen quite often and little egrets are already back in some numbers, I found seven roosting in a tree at the eastern end of the bay.

Late summer should see the return of curlew, common sandpiper, redshank and kingfisher – an August return indicates they've had successful breeding seasons.

Di Stedman
7/7/24



Guillemot 7th April 20204



Juvenile great tit 11th May 2024

Chessel Bay Birds July - October '24

Writing this at the end of October with Autumn now established, the bay has livened up considerably after the summer lull.

The ringed curlew has returned, I first saw her on the 10th September and she was also spotted over at Weston Shore in August. Hopefully she had a successful breeding season. We're now regularly hosting two or three curlew which is an improvement on last year when two was an event.

Our male kingfisher has also returned, first seen on the 16th August. On the 17th I saw two chasing each other across the bay – a situation unlikely to last. Our resident was determined to hold his territory and successfully banished the intruder; however, I have since seen them chasing each other on the other side of the marina and am pretty sure the interloper's territory is upstream of Northam Bridge between Bitterne Manor and St Denys. I suspect Manor Quay is a crossover area, I saw what quite possibly was the same two birds fighting on the footpath there last year – clearly creatures of habit!

More good news is that we seem to have established a small group of black tailed godwits in the bay, Ian Watts and I both found eight there on the 8th October, having seen a single one there a couple of times in August and September. Since the 8th there have been between two and eight present most days. They are lovely birds and its great news for the bay, last year I saw just one on two occasions.

Mallard numbers were low throughout the summer with just 6 adults and three juveniles seen in June, suggesting they moved elsewhere to breed. However, numbers have been increasing throughout July and on the 26th October I counted 48 which is my highest number over the last 18 months. May and June saw an occasional pair of Shelduck, hopefully we'll see them return with possibly some wigeon visiting over the winter. Brent geese are now returning to the south coast in large numbers and I'm hoping we may see some in the bay next month.

The first divers are also now returning to the coast for winter, I'll be keeping everything crossed and my eyes peeled in the hope we're lucky enough to get one or two visiting. Two great crested grebe were present in June but not seen since but a little grebe, last seen in February, is now showing fairly regularly again.

Oystercatchers are ever present, although numbers dipped over summer to between three and five and then increased to between 14 and 22 or so in August. Redshank left at the end of April and returned in September, with turnstone returning in October with a high count to date of 20 on the 12th

Gulls are ever present with numbers varying, I think dependent on the tide, my highest black headed gull count is 133 at a lowish tide late in the day. Herring gulls are fewer in number, generally around eight adults with several juveniles. We have a regular great black backed gull visiting and very occasionally a common gull can be found in the bay. Herring,

common and great black backed gulls are all red listed with numbers having declined alarmingly in recent years - we are lucky living on the coast to be able to see them regularly.

Robins, wrens, great and blue tit all successfully bred over the summer and are ever present, gold and firecrest can be heard if not seen most days. Great spotted woodpecker, nuthatch, long tailed tit and jay are all frequently present. The coal tit I heard back in the spring is still around, I've now actually seen it and blackbird, blackcap, starling and house sparrow are also resident. Chiffchaff have been with us since February and are leaving now but numbers are down with just one or two this year compared to four last. Magpie numbers are around 10 and crows vary but I think there are three resident supplemented by more when trouble is afoot.

Speaking of which.... I've occasionally seen a buzzard overhead but on the 13th October I found one perched on the fallen tree trunk in the middle of the bay. It stayed for a good three hours, moving around, perching in the trees and on the old jetty's. The corvids were harassing it continually so it couldn't settle anywhere for long. The following day it was still there, and still being harassed! Sadly, I've not seen it perching in the bay since but have heard it nearby a couple of times. I've spent many years living in central London – a buzzard flying over was an event so to see them perched in the city here is an amazing sight, I hope it becomes a regular visitor!



Di Stedman
31/10/24

Chessel Bay Birds

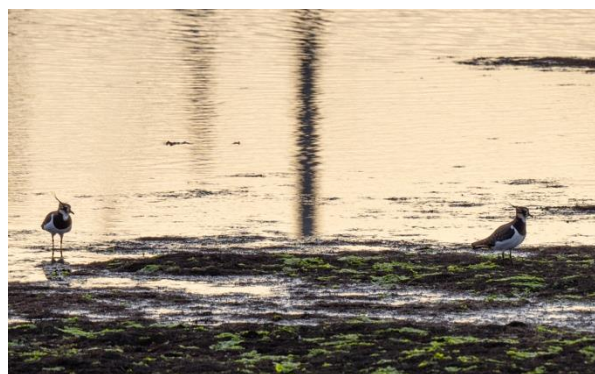
Nov and Dec '24

It's been a good winter for birds in the bay, black tailed godwits remained through to November, curlew numbers have increased to four on a regular basis and turnstone numbers stayed constant at between 16 and 20. Brent geese returned in November and have been frequent visitors since with a high count of 12 and between 2 and 3 common sandpiper can often be found. Two dunlin came in for a short visit in December, one shelduck in November and three in December and one wigeon on the 11th November.

We have also had three patch firsts for me (historically not firsts for the bay) in two lapwing on the 11th Nov, a mistle thrush I found several times through December and a black-throated diver present daily at the Woolston end of the bay during the last week of December. As you'll know if you've read my previous reports divers are a favourite of mine and highly unusual in river estuaries, we are incredibly lucky to be able to see these amazing birds at such close quarters and from the reports I've been seeing I believe there have only been two present on the Hampshire coast this winter. I've put a photo I took from the end of Hazel Road in this report but I'd recommend looking online for images of them in breeding plumage – almost unbelievable!

Great tit, blue tit, robin, wren, starling, great spotted woodpecker and nuthatch all bred successfully in the wooded area or nearby, although I don't think the nuthatch made it through. The two resident pairs of moorhen have previously bred in the bay but I saw no evidence of that this year, and mute swans and mallard all brought their juveniles in to the bay, mallard numbers were down on last year though.

The total number of species I've recorded this year equals 62 and the total since my records began in May 2023 is 64. While my records are not nearly sufficient to draw any conclusions it's been heartening to see wader numbers slightly up on last year and passerine numbers looking constant, although chiffchaff were down this year, possibly due to a difficult migratory journey. There's no doubt however from looking at historical records and through conversations with local birders who know the area very well that over the long term numbers have declined, sadly consistent throughout the south coast and nationally.



Lapwing 11/11/24



Black-throated diver 26/12/24

Di Stedman
10/1/25