

Chessel Bay Birds October '23

With Autumn well underway waders are starting to gather on the south coast and Chessel Bay has attracted a small number which may well increase as we get towards winter and the sheltered conditions here bring more in.

Our most notable seasonal visitor is a curlew, first appearing around the end of August. The bird was ringed at Weston Shore in 2012 and has been travelling between there and Hythe Point in the intervening years, with several sightings in the bay over that time. Curlews are loyal to sites and I'm happy to say that since that first sighting the bird has been present on most of my visits since, with another curlew present on the 29th October



curlew with colour bands clearly visible

We are now regularly seeing a small number of redshank and one black tailed godwit popped in at the end of August. Oystercatchers are an ever present as are a large number of black headed gulls, frequently over 100 can be seen. There are occasional visits from both lesser and great black backed gulls and usually a handful of herring gulls are present. Common sandpiper were fairly frequent visitors over the summer but I haven't seen any since the onset of autumn. Great crested and little grebe can currently regularly be seen swimming in the bay, both frequently coming close to shore to give good views of these beautiful birds.

Another notable autumn/winter visitor is the bays kingfisher. Our bird is a male. Kingfishers pair to breed in spring and summer and once their young have fledged they return to separate territories. If you're patient and have sharp eyes or binoculars he can be seen most days along the Custom Covers side of the bay.



Woodland/park/garden species spotted this month are goldcrest (at least 1 pair), nuthatch and chiffchaff as well as all the common tits, robin and house sparrows.

I have been recording birds in the bay since May and to date this year 46 species have been recorded with 34 present through October, pretty good for a small urban patch!

Di Stedman

2/11/23

Chessel Bay Birds November '23

It's been an eventful month – 39 species (a record month since May) including three new arrivals, plus a rarity in the area, the mystery of the penguin and street fighting....

New species as follows – a pair of firecrest, seen around the freshwater spring in the middle of the bay on the 20th. I suspect they've been present for longer but they're tricky to spot. I found one a few days later which disappeared across the railway line where they probably have a territory. I regularly spot a pair of goldcrest in the bay, the two species of crest sound very similar and it takes someone more expert than me to distinguish between the two calls but they are quite distinguishable from other birds so you can tell when one or other is present. The smallest European birds, either are a pleasure to see - I'll do my best to get a decent photo!

Ian Watts spotted 37 dark bellied brent geese on the 21st – it was a brief stopover and sadly I didn't see them, hopefully we'll have more visits through December. Ian also made another fantastic find the same day, spotting a black-throated diver just upstream of Northam Bridge. This one I did manage to see and what a treat, there are only approx. 560 winter visitors in England and Wales, with a further 200 breeding pairs resident in Scotland – I understand its quite rare for them to come this far up a river and it enabled good close views. A lot of long lenses, scopes and binocular clad birdwatchers appeared for the best part of the following week! Sadly, in all conscience I can't add it to the Chessel Bay list although it probably passed through, I'll leave it as a notable asterisk along with the suspected visiting sparrowhawk (I found a pile of pigeon feathers) and the 'penguin'!

Thanks to Ian for sharing his excellent sightings and his records.

The 26th saw a single drake wigeon arrive. Despite searching I haven't been able to track him down since so I think he may have moved on. They generally gather in pretty large numbers so hopefully he's gone to find his mates, he tried to hang out with the Bay's resident moorhens but they weren't too keen!

Whilst searching the water along Quayside Road in the hope that the diver was heading towards the Bay, I saw two kingfishers in front of Manor Quay flats. Kingfishers are very territorial and its unusual to see them in close proximity. True to form a fight ensued - on the footpath! Thankfully no damage was done. One resumed his perch on the wooden pier for about 30 seconds then tore off

through the marina and the other took over the same perch before also disappearing! I suspect the first is likely the Bays resident, I haven't seen either in that spot since but our boy is still present in the Bay – I see him most visits. Its well worth keeping your eyes peeled if you're walking along Quayside Rd as its easier to get a good view if any are there.

Additional species present – curlew (3 on the 11th), redshank (3), oystercatcher (13), little egret (2), grey heron (3), common sandpiper (2), mallard (21), mute swan (52), coot (1), cormorant (3), great crested grebe (2), little grebe (2), black-headed gull (200), herring gull (5), great and lesser black backed gulls (1 of each), robin, great and blue tit, long tailed tit, wren, blackbird, starling and house sparrow all present along with nuthatch and great spotted woodpecker (2 of each) plus magpie, carrion crow, jay, collared dove and woodpigeon, feral pigeon and the occasional visit of a single grey wagtail.

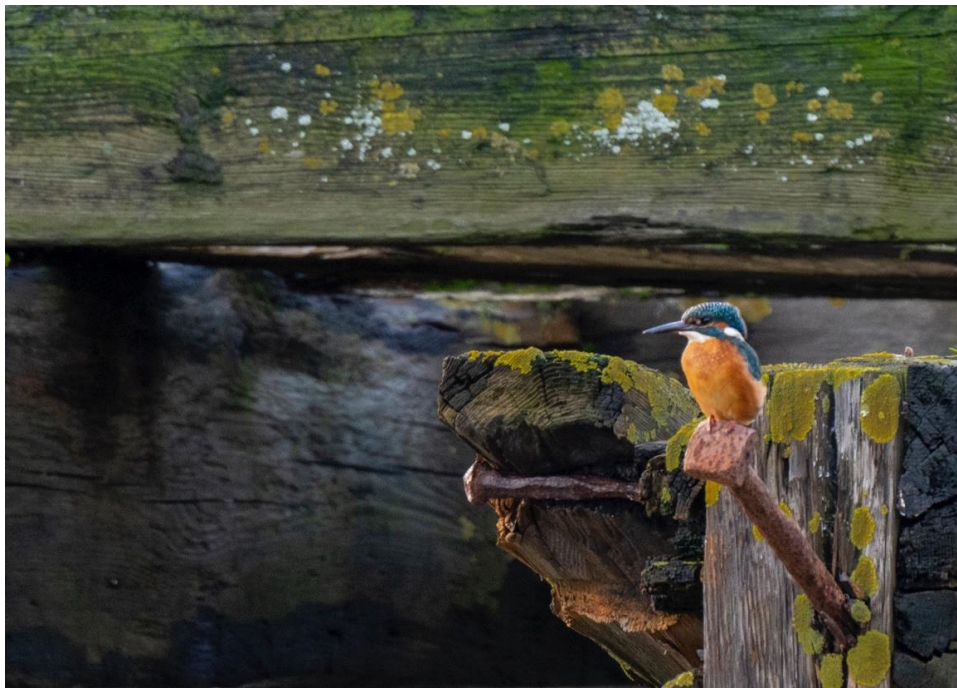
Now for the mystery – The Echo reported that Jacqui Flack spotted a 'penguin like' bird in the Bay, thankfully she was able to take a photo on her phone which was sent to experts to identify. It seems most likely to have been a guillemot - an amazing find! I've searched through recent local records and guillemots are not birds you'd expect to find around here.

The wonderful thing about birdwatching is you just never know what you might see, let's hope December brings more.....

Di Stedman, 2nd December '23



Black-throated diver just off Clausentum Quay



Kingfisher off Quayside Road



Drake wigeon in the Bay

Chessel Bay Birds December '23

December got off to a good start when the single drake wigeon reappeared and was joined by another drake and finally the sparrowhawk showed – chasing a blackbird along the footpath. Fortunately for the blackbird a failed hunt but sparrowhawks are fantastic birds to see and they're a sign of a healthy patch as they wouldn't be visiting if there was no food potential. Their successful hunt rate is 4 in 10 - the male needs to eat every four days and the female every seven, so we shouldn't mind the disappearance of the occasional garden bird too much.

The 2nd saw six dunlins in the Bay and 29 in Manor Quay but they haven't stayed. They're lovely waders especially if you're lucky enough to see a large flock in flight – if you catch them in sunlight its quite a sight as they turn in unison, the Hamble estuary is currently seeing flocks of between 300 and 800.

The 6th brought 9 dark bellied Brent Geese flying in for a short visit.

Little egrets and grey wagtails were absent through December but I did see a song thrush, the first since July. Look out for flocks of long tailed tits at the moment as they tend to drag other tits and also nuthatches along with them – there's a pair living along the wooded area in the bay and they can be seen and heard most days.

The crests are showing well, and I finally managed a firecrest photo, they're beautiful birds and fascinating to watch. Both crests come in as the smallest European birds at around 5.5g and 9cms long with the goldcrest winning by a microgram. They are perpetual motion, gathering tiny insects and larvae from the underside of leaves and between pine needles – they need to constantly eat during daylight in order to survive the long winter nights, truly crests must be among the most resilient of birds as well as having the looks!

There has been more diver news, a Great Northern made the Itchen home over Christmas week, swimming and crabbing between Northam Bridge and Bitterne Manor. I last saw it on New Years Eve and suspect the fireworks may have seen it decide to move on. Sadly – like the Black Throated – it's an asterisk as I didn't see it in the Bay but surely it must have passed through....

All together I counted 39 species this month, along with November the highest monthly count, making 53 species for the year (plus 2 asterisks)! My count started in May so hopefully 2024 will see a larger number.



Dark Bellied Brent Geese



Great Northern Diver



Firecrest



Nuthatch