

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER

The early autumn period is a period which all local birders look forward to, as it is a period when anything can turn up in the area.

Early September is one of the best times of the year for duck passage through the area. Numbers of **SHOVELER** often build up at the usual lowland sites such as Catcliffe Flash, Orgreave, Rother Valley CP and Thrybergh CP. However, birds are also regularly reported at this time at well watched upland sites such as Middleton Moor and Redmires.

This is probably also the best time to see **PINTAIL** locally. These are passage birds, and, again, as well as the lowland areas of water, they are often seen on the uplands, with Middleton Moor a particular favourite, with birds sometimes lingering for a few days.

Wader passage through the area, if it can still be called that, usually ends by mid-September, with birds continuing to trickle through. This is probably the best time, however, to see **CURLEW SANDPIPER** and **LITTLE STINT** in the Sheffield area. These birds are almost invariably juveniles of both species, the former noticeably more upright and long legged than Dunlin, with a peachy tinge to the breast, the latter a tiny, short billed wader with richly coloured upperparts and the classic white "V" formed by pale edges to the mantle.

Those of us with long memories can remember parties of these birds remaining for days at Barbrook Res and Redmires. Sadly, neither species is now annual in the area.

The Sheffield area is about as land locked as you can get in the UK, but seabirds do sometimes turn up, and September is the most likely month. If the west coast has seen a period of gale force north-westerlies, followed by the wind veering westerly, birds will be blown inshore and if you are ever likely to see **GANNET**, **MANX SHEARWATER** or a skua or petrol in the area, September is likely to be the time.

Raptor passage through the area continues from late August into September, with many of the birds mentioned last month still likely, but a particular species to look out for is **HONEY BUZZARD**. This is the main time when birds are moving south through Scandinavia and the Benelux countries, and a period of prolonged easterlies in late September 2000 produced an amazing run of over sixty birds in the area. Whilst this was exceptional, most Septembers usually produce one or two records of this odd raptor, soaring on flat, long, narrow wings with its long, narrow tail and small head.

Visible migration is in full swing by now, with subtle changes in the species on the move. This is the peak month for movements of **MEADOW PIPITS**, and, although it may not seem exciting, the sight and sound of hundreds of these

small birds moving south-west over the traditional “vis-mig” sites as they vacate the uplands for the winter is worth seeing. September also sees the main movement of **SWALLOWS** and **HOUSE MARTINS** over the area. There is often a trickle of birds early in the month and then, often, a “big” day or two when birds seem to be constantly passing throughout the morning.

By October, there is definitely a more autumnal feeling to local birding. A bird to look out for at this time is **ROCK PIPIT**. A darker, altogether sturdier bird with stronger flight than the meadow pipits moving at this time, the bird often gives itself away with its single, loud, “fsst” call as it is disturbed. Any rocky shoreline could hold one, with Barbrook Pools, Redmires, Orgreave Lakes and Thrybergh CP likely sites.

Visible migration should now be in full swing, with the majority of birds being arrivals from further east, rather than local birds moving out. At some point early in the month there will be a big movement of **REDWING** and **FIELDFARE**. Although the first birds may have been recorded in late September, October is when big movements occur, and being on the moorland fringe seeing hundreds of these birds moving up the river valleys, often resting up and then setting off south –west over open moorland is a superb sight. The parties often hold small numbers of **RING OUZEL** and it is worth listening to parties of winter thrushes which are grounded for the distinctive metallic call, and looking out for a “silvery” blackbird as they move off.

Finch numbers moving are at their peak in October, and this is a good time to catch up with **BRAMBLING**; indeed, with the lack of wintering parties of the species in recent years, this may be your best chance of a year tick. This species is slimmer than chaffinch in flight, often in tight, small parties, with the characteristic thin white rump as they bounce away, and listen for the nasal “shreep” call, very different from the softer contact call of chaffinch.

Two of the most sought after visible migrants in late October are **SNOW BUNTING** and **LAPLAND BUNTING**. Almost invariably picked up on call, these large buntings show up most years. Lapland Bunting is usually seen singly; listen out for the “ticky-ticky” call, followed by a soft “peu”, and then try to find a long – winged, lark like bunting flying over strongly. Snow Buntings are, again, usually seen singly, although small parties are occasionally seen moving over. The flight call is a loud, ringing “teu” and, if you are lucky enough to pick the bird out in an apparently empty blue sky, you should see some of the white plumage of this species.

One bird that is a particular favourite of mine which, hopefully, turns up in late October is **GREAT GREY SHRIKE**. Ounce for ounce possibly the most aggressive bird we see in the area, it is great to scan across local moorland with scattered trees and suddenly see the distinctive upright, black and white shape in the top of a birch tree as it looks for its next victim. Renowned for being able to move between perches without being seen, the best sites in recent years have

been Leash Fen, Big Moor, Topley Moss and Blackamoor, and also the moorland fringe in the Strines /Ewden area.

ROUGH LEGGED BUZZARD is not a species seen every year in the area, but when reasonable numbers hit the east coast in mid-October, it is worth getting out to look for them locally later in the month. Although there are records from areas such as Big Moor and Redmires, the species usually favours the higher moorland. Traditionally Upper Derwentdale was the best site, and still gets records, but recent years have seen the moors in the Agden/Ewden area as the premier spot. The birds are often juveniles and, with luck, will stay around for a few weeks. The species is larger and more eagle like than common buzzard, with a white rump with, underneath, dark carpal patches and breast band. Beware, however some common buzzards are very pale, and most hover occasionally.