

# **Notes on birds in the Severn and Avon Vales (the “Severn Hams”), mainly Gloucestershire January – March 2007**

## **Weather and flooding: general**

Once again, this was one of the mildest winters on record, with hardly any frost. It was marked by not one, but two Severn floods, in late January and early March; these are events caused not simply by back-flooding of local streams but by the Severn overtopping its flood-banks in several places, and creating a continuous sheet of water covering both river and meadows. The flooding was the most extensive since November 2000, and almost reached the height of those floods. Many of the riverside meadows were more or less continuously flooded from late November until mid-March, whereas in the last few years there has been little midwinter flooding.

The year began with a continuation, through the first ten days of January, of the strong rain-bearing south-westerly winds experienced at the end of 2006, particularly strong on 11 January; conditions mild, no sign of frost. After mid January, mild anticyclonic conditions prevailed, with grey skies and little rain, though there was rain higher in the Severn catchment in North Wales. Remaining anticyclonic in early February, but colder with frost on 2 and 3 February; light snowfall on February 8 and 9 soon thawed; anticyclonic, dull, mild from 13 February, anticyclone giving way to mainly south-westerly winds with more rain from 21 February until early March (though light frost on the first couple of mornings of March); high pressure with winds westerly or north-westerly in the second week, followed by a period of cold northerly winds from 18 to 22 with very light frosts, and light snow on Cotswolds and Malverns on 19 & 20 March; high pressure and easterly winds in the last week.

At the beginning of the year, the meadows everywhere were saturated, following the extensive mid December flooding, which had only dropped in the last week of 2006. There was a slight drop in Severn levels until 6 January, but they rose again from 9 January; the meadows back-flooded again, creating a second flood soon after the December flood had subsided, with extensive flooding throughout the Severn and Avon Vales; this time the Severn overtopped its banks at Haw Bridge and Chaceley, causing much deeper flooding in the meadows than in December, at its height on about 14 January; it remained high until 25 January, when river levels began to drop, and water started to run off the meadows, most flooding having gone by early February. However, the Severn rose again in the first week of February, causing renewed extensive flooding, though not as high as the January floods; the Severn dropped, but only slowly (because of spring tides) from 18-27 February and not enough for water on the meadows to recede; the Severn overtopped its banks again below Haw Bridge on 4 March and at many other sites on 6 March, reaching levels higher than in January; the main roads at Haw Bridge and Maisemore were closed by floods on 7 March; the flooding was at its height on 8/9 March and was noticeable near the centre of Gloucester, where sites on Alney Island like Castlemeads and Oxleaze were deeply flooded for the first time for several years; the flooded main roads were open again from 10 March and smaller roads from 15 March, floods gone generally by 24 March.

## **Conditions at the main sites**

Longdon Marsh: Well flooded in mid January, with floodwater fairly shallow and suitable for water birds. Flooding not extensive on 2 March, just a few pools on fields, but by 6 March once again as in January. Longdon Marsh floods later than other areas, and is often a refuge for ducks when other sites are deeply flooded.

Kemerton Lake: Following the heavy rainfall water levels reached maximum levels and the overflow was in action for the first time for four years.

Bredon's Hardwick: On 11 January the gravel pits were indistinguishable from the Avon flood, because the whole area was deeply flooded; same situation in later flood period.

Upam Meadow, Twyning: The Avon valley above Tewkesbury was flooded in the first week of January, with the top of the flood-bank barely showing on 11 January. More high flooding in early March.

Ashleworth/Hasfield Hams: Extensive flooding for much of January (deep flooding, with Ham Road closed from 13 to 25 January); by 14 January, scarcely any grassland emerging, as the Severn broke its banks; levels dropping from 27 January and back to winter normal by 2 February. But water in the meadows rose again in the first week of February and remained high until mid March, with the Ham Road again closed for two weeks; by 6 March water was even more extensive than in January, and the hide was only accessible from higher ground at the rear; levels dropping again from mid-March, and meadows clear of floodwater by about 20 March; first boards removed from sluice on 31 March.

Coombe Hill: Extensive flooding in the first week of January (Grundon Hide inaccessible from 3 January to the end of the month; there must have been two or three feet of water inside the hide from 14 January onwards), canal banks largely under water from early January. By 14 January, water levels were the same in the river and meadows; levels dropping from 25 January but still extensive; hide briefly accessible (just!) on 3 February. Levels rose again in the first week of February, remaining high till early March, hides inaccessible from 14 February until 20 March, water levels head high inside the Grundon Hide, floor of the Long Pool Hide lifted by floodwater. Levels were at their highest in the first ten days of March (higher than in January), when both canal banks were under water; levels dropping from mid-March, and back to normal by 24 March.

Leigh Meadows: The River Chelt was very high in the first week of January, flooding Leigh and Coombe Hill Meadows, but dropping a little by 5 January when it was trickling out to the Severn; but it rose again soon after, breaking its banks on 11 January, and contributing to the flooding of Leigh and Coombe Hill Meadows, and remaining high for most of month; levels dropped fast after 30 January and flooding had gone by 2 February. New flooding occurred in the first week of February, remaining extensive throughout the month, rising again, with the Chelt overtopping its banks, from 3 March; a single sheet of water, Chelt scarcely discernible on 6 March, staying in this condition until 13 March, when Chelt was flowing out strongly to Severn.

Walmore Common: Floods rose again in the first week of January, as the high level drain (not cleared out last summer) had overflowed into lower system. Higher still on 8 January, still rising on 14 January, but with some grassy areas still emerging; levels dropped in late January and flooding had gone by 2 February, though fields still saturated. Levels rose again in mid-February, dropping again until rainfall from 20 February raised levels again; but more massive floods in March, the whole area under water on 7 March.

## **Bird records**

### **Grebes**

Little Grebe: At Nafford, one on 25 February. At Ashleworth one on 6 January. Two or three birds “whinnying” (the usual breeding call) during flooding at Coombe Hill from mid-February to early March, but not noted after 3 March.

Great Crested Grebe: At Bredon’s Hardwick, up to three throughout the period. At Ashleworth, one on 6 January. Records (rather unusually) of one or two birds on the floodwater at Coombe Hill/Leigh Meadows (probably the same birds) from 24 February to 17 March.

Cormorant: Odd records at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill of birds, no doubt going to and from the main loafing site at Bredon’s Hardwick, where the maxima recorded were nine in January, 21 in February, 24 in March; eight at Kemerton on 5 January. Another loafing site on a tree by the Chelt in Leigh Meadows, where there were three on 20 January, one on 17 February, three on 18 February and 3 March, an adult in full plumage on 6 March and one on 17 March.

Little Egret: In recent years, the species has appeared regularly in summer, but is now occurring in winter too, most often in sites nearest the estuary like Walmore and Rodley. At Kemerton, an early bird on 19 February. At Walmore, an early bird on 5 January, three on 15 January, one on 28 January

and 20 February, four on 16 March. At Rodley, two on 6 January. The first at Coombe Hill was on 27 March, apparently staying to roost on the evening of 28 March, and still there on 31 March.

Grey Heron: As usual, seen in ones and twos throughout the period at most sites including Nafford, Bredon's Hardwick (where there were seven on 9 January, ten on 1 February and six on 25 February), Ashleworth, Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, (four on 17 March), Walmore (eight on 15 & 21 January) and Rodley.

Mute Swan: Small flocks of wintering birds at several sites, often including pairs with last year's young in January, these flocks breaking up from February, as the adults prepared to breed again and chased away last year's young. At Nafford a pair with two large immatures on 28 January. On the Avon Meadows, the wintering flock numbered 15 on 11 January. In January, the wintering flock which moves between Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows included adults still tending last year's grown cygnets; at Coombe Hill on 11 January, given the height of the floodwaters, the sixteen local Mutes were sitting on about the only emergent grass near the Chelt at Wainlodes; on 18 February, about 25 on floods at Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows, some beginning to pair up and chase off last year's cygnets; on 27 February, and in early March the paired adults were acting territorially and beginning to return to traditional nest sites; non-breeding immatures collected in flocks away from the breeding sites – at the end of March there were about sixty in the general area. At Walmore, up to 20 present throughout, with 27 on 21 January and 33 on 28 January. At Ashleworth, one nest being incubated, a second pair mating, on 31 March. At Handkerchief Pool, Haw Bridge, the usual pair (one with darvic ring, E 35) looking territorial on 6 March. At Coombe Hill three pairs beginning to prospect for nests in late February, and on 3 March the pair that nested last year (identified by colour ring 3AY) was inspecting the old nest site by the Wharf; still there on 6 March despite massive flood, and on 13 & 20 March they were nest-building despite flood; three eggs in the nest on 27 March! Incubation under way on 31 March.

Whooper Swan: A pair had been seen on floodwater at various sites in the Severn Hams from late November onwards; two birds were seen at Leigh Meadows and two at Hasfield on 6 January, possibly the same pair at each site, or possibly two different pairs. But definitely two pairs together on floodwater at Ashleworth on 9 January. After this date the Whoopers became difficult to find because of the extensive flooding: four at Hasfield on 9 January, two on edge of flood on 12 January by Tirley Hill: all four found again near Haw Bridge on 23 January and at Hasfield on 30 January. Increase to six adults (all unringed) on 2 February, roosting at Ashleworth, flew across to feed at Coombe Hill early in the morning. The six were seen again at Coombe Hill on 4 February and at Ashleworth on 7 February. Numbers then decreased to three, often hard to find in floods, but three seen at Ashleworth on 3 February and again at Leigh Meadows throughout February and in early March; on 6 March all three were asleep on the only bit of Chelt bank emerging from the water. At the height of the March flood, when the whole of Leigh Meadows and Coombe Hill was under water, the three moved to higher ground, seen on the edge of the flood near Ashleworth (7-18 March), still at Ashleworth when the flood dropped but cold northerly winds were blowing; last sighting, after which they probably left for the return to Iceland, on 20 March (an average date for last sighting).

Bewick's Swan: At Slimbridge, a trickle of new arrivals continued in the last few days of 2006 and early 2007; on 7 January, 192 were present. The anticyclonic weather and north-easterly winds in the second half of January induced some 30 new birds to move into Slimbridge; 231 were recorded on 4 February, the peak count for this winter (compared with a peak of 246 last winter). The total number of different individuals recorded this winter was 313 (very close to the figures of 317 and 308 for the two previous winters), with a final (low) figure of 14.7% juveniles; there was little indication of departure from Slimbridge in the first few weeks of February, even though departures from eastern England to the Netherlands had been recorded by this time. But departures were noted over the weekend of 24/25 February with clear skies and westerly winds; numbers dropped from 181 on 23 February to 121 on 27 February; not all left however, as there were still 119 on 1 March; more left on the night of 8/9 March, leaving only ten on 9 March and the last birds left on the night of 17 March.

At Walmore, where Slimbridge birds regularly go to feed, numbers remained low throughout the period, not reaching the November/December 2006 peaks (themselves low in comparison to previous winters) of 36 and 41 individuals. Only five adults present on floodwater on 5 January, feeding by immersing their heads in shallow water. On 6 January, 12; on 8 January, 13 (three cygnets), feeding in shallow flood-water. On 14 January, 12 feeding in reseeded grass included three ringed birds TUV

("Widemouth"), its mate BCH ("Winney") and their three unringed cygnets; plus 607 ("Wylfa", one of their offspring from 2005); TUV and family had been briefly seen at Slimbridge last November but not since; 607, a yearling, has been occasional at Walmore since its first appearance at Slimbridge there last November. On 15 January, 12 (three immatures). On 21 January, 21 birds, remaining to roost on the floodwater at dusk. On 28 January, 26 (six cygnets). None recorded from 2 to 14 February after floods had dropped – they often seem to reject grass that has been inundated. On 16 February, 28 flew in high from the south-west at dusk, and almost certainly roosted there; there were nine (six adults) on 17 February and 22 (19 adults) on 18 & 19 February; it was at first thought that these might be not Slimbridge birds, but birds that had wintered further west and were now on return migration; however on 20 February there were none at Walmore; but 19 (six cygnets) at Rodley on 20 February included three ringed birds from Slimbridge recorded at Walmore several times earlier in the winter (BCH plus TUV and their three cygnets, plus older sibling 607); 13 of the group flew off towards Slimbridge, all of which suggest they were Slimbridge swans after all. None at Walmore or Rodley on 22 or 23 February, but 14 on 25 February.

At Ashleworth, at least two adults appeared to have roosted on the floodwater in the early morning of 5 & 6 January, and were feeding by submerging heads in shallow water; on 7 January, four flew from Ashleworth towards Coombe Hill; on 9 January, two had roosted, and then flew off to Coombe Hill at 08h20. None found after this date because of extensive flooding. On 5 January, four (two cygnets) arrived on the partly flooded Great Hay Meadow at Twynning at 13h00. Departing migrants were noted over Coombe Hill on 24 February, when a flock of 35 flew over high to northeast in V formation, calling (this coincides with departures from Slimbridge), while on the floodwater at Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows there were two groups of four. None at Coombe Hill or Leigh Meadows after 24 February.

#### Geese

Greylag Goose: A small feral flock of 40-50 birds was seen until early March at various sites; by late March only an odd few remained. At Bredon's Hardwick, maxima of 24 in January and 45 in February. At Ashleworth, 45 on floodwater on 6 January. At Coombe Hill, 35 on 3 January, 19 on 30 January, but maximum of only four in late March. At Cobney and Leigh Meadows 19 on 24 February, about 40 in evening on edge of floodwater in early March. At Walmore, a single on 6 January.

White-fronted Goose: At Walmore, six on 6 January were the first recorded for several years. The complete absence of records elsewhere in the Severn and Avon Vales reflects the decrease at Slimbridge in recent winters.

Canada Goose: As usual, numbers in the early part of the year (up to 550) were somewhat lower than in autumn, and there was a rapid falling off in numbers after February, presumably as birds moved back towards the Midlands to nest. At Longdon, six on 13 January. At Nafford, 18 on 28 January, 49 on 10 February, two nests on 30 March. At Bredon's Hardwick, maxima of 55 in January, 190 in February, 60 in March. Many hundred in the general area of Ashleworth in the first two weeks of January, but difficult to see and count because the flooding was so extensive: 210 on 3 January, clearly roosting there on 5 January, when at least 300 were present early in the morning, then flying off towards Tirley Court; 300 on floodwater on 6 January; staying on floodwater on 11 & 13 January, when there were none on Tirley Court Lake; 250 on 20 January; only 60 on 2 February, still 50 on edge of flood on 8 March, 80 on 9 March, but only seven on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, 450 on 3 January, 300 on 30 January (probably birds from Ashleworth), 32 on 17 February, only 12 on 17 March. At Leigh Meadows, 10 on 20 January. At Walmore, January, maximum of 57 on 28 January.

#### Ducks

Shelduck: This estuarine species often comes well inland to the meadows in fair numbers in spring, notably at times of flooding, presumably to prospect for nesting sites. In recent years, with minimal flooding, spring numbers have been low, but this year the former conditions were restored; good numbers were noted in late February with more in March and some birds showed interest in breeding towards the end of March. At Longdon, one on 16 January. At Bredon's Hardwick, maxima of seven in January, nine in February, eight in March. At Ashleworth, three on 6 January, two on 2 February, five on 7 February, two in early March. The biggest numbers were at Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows (probably the same birds moving back and forth between the two places); at Coombe Hill,

one in January, five on 11 February, 11 on 24 February, two on 3 March (looking like a pair), then 32 on dropping flood on 20 March, 68 on 24 March, 23 on 31 March; at Leigh Meadows, one on 20 January, nine on 24 February, 26 on 27 February, 32 on 1 March, two on 17 March, 18 on 20 March. A pair at Port Ham on 31 March. At Walmore, four on 8 and 15 January, four on 16 February, one on 20 February. At Rodley (much closer to the estuary), as many as 74 grazing on flooded meadows on 5 January, 65 on 6 January, 37 on 20 February, 26 on 22 February, only four in higher flood on 23 February.

Shelduck cross: The hybrid Australian/Paradise Shelduck, which has been around for some years, with black head and orange back but white on lower wings, at Rodley with Common Shelducks on 5 January.

Mandarin Duck: Two on the Severn below Hempsted Weir in Gloucester on 10 March, were the first there since April 2002.

Surface-feeding ducks: During the floods of the first two weeks of January, ducks were very widespread and difficult to count at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill (still 1000+ on 2 January); after the first week of January, the water was probably too deep for them and many seen to have left the area: 500 ducks on the Avon floods at Bredon's Hardwick on 11 January, a thousand ducks on 13 January in shallower flooding at Longdon Marsh. Ducks were also hard to find in high floods of late January and February, but good numbers were present at Coombe Hill on 17 February. Same situation in the high floods of early March, but on 20 March, just after the floods had receded, a fine spectacle of some 1500 ducks (mostly Wigeon and Pintail) on the remaining shallow flood; considerable decrease by 24 March. No attempts were made at cannon-netting ducks this year because of the extensive flooding.

Wigeon: Always the most numerous wintering duck; sharp decrease after mid March. At Longdon, 820 on 16 January. At Nafford, 38 on 28 January, 110 on 15 February, 16 on 30 March. At Bredon's Hardwick, 350 on 4 January, 650 on 10 February, 45 on 22 March. At Ashleworth at least 200 dispersed on floodwater on several dates in January (perhaps an underestimate, though they may have moved off in search of shallower waters when the flooding became very deep); 500 on 30 January; about 1000 on 2 February after floods had dropped, many on Hasfield side; 492 on 17 February, 450+ on 22 March, 40 on 31 March. At Coombe Hill, 1200 on 3 January, 1030 on 30 January, 1250 on 17 February, only 100, very dispersed in floods on 3 March; but 1000 again on 20 March, then only 100 on 24 March, 40 on 27 March. At Walmore, the big numbers of late December had disappeared on 5 January, only 10 left, but 300 on 14 January when the floods rose again and 750 on 21 & 28 January, smaller numbers later: 42 on 16 February.

Gadwall: Occurs in much smaller numbers, rarely exceeding groups of 20. At Kemerton, 8 on 9 February. At Ashleworth, at least 14, in courtship display on 5 January, 15 on 30 January, ten on 2 February, 18 on 23 March. At Coombe Hill, 17 on 30 January, six on 17 February, ten on 20 March. At Leigh Meadows, eight in flight on 18 February. At Walmore maxima of 19 on 21 January, eleven on 17 February.

Teal: Generally comes second only to Wigeon, and lingers a little later; often difficult to appreciate numbers present because it hides in vegetation or ditches. At Longdon, 50 in mid-January. At Nafford, 28 on 28 January, 35 on 15 February, six on 30 March. At Kemerton, 26 on 9 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, 60 on 11 January, 150 on 15 February, 35 on 30 March. At Ashleworth at least 50 (displaying) in early January, 200 on 24 February (monthly maximum), 250+ on 22 March. At Coombe Hill, 300 on 30 January, 380 on 17 February (monthly maximum), good count of 480 on 17 March, 250 (complete count) on 31 March. At Castlemeads near the middle of Gloucester, 12 during the flooding on 12 March. At Walmore, 390 on 28 January, big group of 500 on Common after floods dropped on 2 February; 520 on 16 February in floods, 700 on 17 & 18 February, then 425 on 20 February.

Mallard: Numbers appear to have decreased in recent years. At Longdon, 50 on 16 January. At Nafford, 35 on 28 January, 28 on 10 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, 50 on 11 January, 15 on 15 February, 25 on 22 March. At Ashleworth, 30 on 11 January, 19 on 17 February, 20 on 24 March. At Coombe Hill, 120 (!!) on 30 January, 100 on 17 February, 20 on 20 March. At Walmore, 160 on 7 & 28 January, 65 on 18 February.

Pintail: Numbers had already been higher than in recent winters in the last three months of 2006, no doubt because of higher flooding, and remained on the high side, with totals of 500 and probably more in the Severn Hams throughout the period, though they moved round on floodwater and were hard to count accurately; no sign of any influx during or after the floods. At Longdon, 250 on 13 January, 330 on 16 January. At Nafford eight on 15 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, 20 on 11 January, 32 on 15 February. At Ashleworth, at least 170 on 2 January, 135 on 17 February (monthly max), 150 on 6 March, excellent count of 440 on 18 March, 80 on 22 March, 20 on 31 March. At Coombe Hill, at least 220 on 30 January, 140 on 17 February (monthly max); 310 on 20 March, but only five on 24 March. At Leigh Meadows, nine on 17 March. At Walmore, still 65 on 5 January, 128 on 21 January; 26 on 16 February, 30 on 22 February.

Shoveler: Numbers pretty much as usual for the season, even though deep flooding does not really suit a bird that normally uses its large bill as a filter in shallow water. At Longdon, 10 on 13 January. At Nafford, seven on 28 January, six on 15 February. At Kemerton, 18 on 27 January and 22 on 19 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, 10 on 11 January, six on 15 February. At Ashleworth, 70 on 2 February, 55 on 17 February, 80 on 20 March. At Coombe Hill, 40 on 6 January, 45 on 24 February, 85 on 20 March. At Leigh Meadows, 22 on 17 March. Occurring near the centre of Gloucester at the height of the flood,

#### Diving ducks:

Pochard: Not usually very numerous on the shallow waters of the Hams. At Kemerton, 74 on 20 January. At Bredon's Hardwick, the usual stronghold with its deeper waters, 120 on 4 January, 25 on 11 January, 22 on 25 February. Occasionally recorded on the deeper floods: at Ashleworth, nine on 3 January, one on 27 March. At Coombe Hill, two in 20 January, three on 27 February.

Tufted Duck: Is usually more numerous than Pochard and quite respectable totals were recorded on the floodwater throughout the period, perhaps wandering from Bredon's Hardwick? Nafford, nine on 25 February. At Kemerton, 40 on 19 January, 108 on 27 January. At Bredon's Hardwick, 150 on 4 January, 40 on 11 January, much smaller numbers later: eight on 15 February, two on 30 March. At Ashleworth, three or four diving on floodwater, 9 to 11 January, 16 on 30 January, 13 on 18 February, 12 on 3 March, ten mid-March, 31 on 22 March, ten on 27 March, still four on 31 March. At Coombe Hill, 26 on 3 January, seven on floodwater on 6 January, 25 on 30 January, 24 on 17 February, as many as 34 on 24 February, 25 on 3 March, 19 on 20 March, still six on 31 March; will they breed on the scrapes this year as they did in 2006? At Walmore, one on 21 January.

Goldeneye: The only records are of female or immature one at Coombe Hill on 4 January and one at Walmore on 21 January.

Goosander: A drake at Bredon's Hardwick on 28 January was the only record of a species which normally only occurs when its favoured location in the Cotswold Water Park is iced up.

Ruddy Duck: Two pairs at Kemerton on 18 February is the only record.

#### Raptors

Red Kite: A species recorded more often each year. One reported from Tirley on 26 January, another soaring there on 8 March.

Goshawk: A single record of this large hawk at Coombe Hill: one flying over on 11 February flushed everything from floodwater!

Sparrowhawk: Much commoner, but relatively few records in flood conditions; singles only noted at Kemerton in February, Coombe Hill in February and March, and at Walmore in January.

Buzzard: Ubiquitous. Recorded throughout the period: at Bredon's Hardwick, Ashleworth (including three on 9 January and four on 6 March); near Deerhurst (six soaring at dusk and mewing on 14 January); at Coombe Hill (including, three soaring on 3 March); at Walmore, two on 14 January.

Osprey: Several recorded in Gloucestershire in late March, including a bird perched on a dead tree at Ashleworth; what was probably this bird was seen on 27 March; next evening it was definitely recorded for a quarter of an hour, before flying off towards Coombe Hill; it was never observed at Coombe Hill, however, and may have continued up the Severn, like the one seen in the same area on almost exactly the same date last year.

Kestrel: Less records than usual, perhaps because it abandoned the meadows during the flood events. Noted at Chaceley, Ashleworth and Coombe Hill.

Merlin: The only record of this elusive raptor was of one at Longdon on 13 February.

Peregrine: Frequently recorded in the Severn Hams, often on electric pylons, perhaps less than usual this year, the same bird often seen at different sites. Singles noted at Ashleworth in early January, two on 30 January; an adult female was recorded at Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows, no doubt the same bird on several dates in February, while an adult male, very white below, was seen several times in March, sitting on the grass at Coombe Hill on 31 March. At Hempsted, one on 20 March. At Walmore, at least three different individuals noted over the period.

#### Gamebirds and Rails

Water Rail: Present throughout, more often seen than heard. At Kemerton, one on 5 January. At Ashleworth, one on 7 January at dusk; one flushed on 20 March. At Coombe Hill, three on 3 February, one seen on 27 March. At Sudmeadow, where they are rarely noted, one on 6 February. At Elmore, one on 4 February. At Walmore three heard on 7 January.

Moorhen: Common, often overlooked. At Ashleworth, two on 17 February, six on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, up to 20 in February and March.

Coot: As usual, there was a considerable build-up in numbers in early spring, no doubt as a preparation for breeding. At Nafford, 15 on 28 January, 28 on 10 February, 21 on 25 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, 15 on 15 February. At Tirley Court Lake, ten on 11 January. At Ashleworth, at least 10 on 5 January, 26 on 10 January, 35 on 17 February, 110 (!) on 23 March, 80 on 31 March. At Coombe Hill, 66 on 17 February, 70 on 20 March. At Leigh Meadows, 12 on 17 March. On Port Ham near the centre of Gloucester, 17 at the height of the flood on 5 March, a nest on 31 March, with another at nearby Richard's Wood. At Walmore, ten in mid-January, 46 on 28 January.

#### Waders

As usual, most waders wintered on the estuary, though there were briefly flocks of up to 1500 Lapwings around the floodwater, at Coombe Hill, and at Walmore, in late January and early February. There was a mass exodus of Lapwings and Golden Plover from Slimbridge around 1 March with light winds and clear skies, which may explain the greater variety of waders in the vales after this date. Breeding waders - Lapwing, Curlew and Redshanks - appeared in the meadows rather early. Migrant Black-tailed Godwits en route to Iceland showed much more than usual around floodwater in late February and early March.

Oystercatcher: A pair, presumably the usual breeders, was seen at Bredon's Hardwick regularly until the end of March; two at Kemerton on 20 & 26 February and two on Upham Meadow, just over the Avon on 25 February, were perhaps the same birds. At Ashleworth, one on 27 February, another flew over to the north on 17 March.

Little Ringed Plover: First adult migrant at Coombe Hill on 28 March.

Golden Plover: No sign of a constant wintering flock in the vales this winter, but as usual some birds, presumably on northward passage, noted in February: at Ashleworth/Hasfield, a flock of 25 on 20 February and at Coombe Hill, 93 on 11 February.

Lapwing: Once again, the main wintering area seems to be the estuary round Slimbridge. A large flock appeared in the Coombe Hill area when the floods abated slightly in early January and early February; during flooding at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill, small flocks were regularly seen flying

round, apparently looking for somewhere to land in the high flood; the bigger flock seemed to go to Longdon. Breeding birds gathered in rather small numbers at nesting places in March, often mixed with flocking migrants.

At Longdon, 450 on 16 January, 225 on 2 March. At Bredon's Hardwick, 230 on 15 February. At Ashleworth, up to 80 in January, 300 on 24 February, 120 on 3 March; seven displaying over Hasfield Ham in late March. At Coombe Hill, 250 on 3 January; flock of 150 sitting on the only corner of grass emerging from the floods at Wainlodes on 11 January; very big flock of 1500 on 30 January and 2 February, 1850 on 11 February, 650 on 13 February, 120 on 27 February; 35 on 20 March, some showing signs of displaying; 34 on 24 March, rather little display; 15 on 27 March, little display, only two left with a little display on 31 March. At Leigh Meadows, 80 on 11 February, flock of 60 by floodwater's edge on 18 February. At Walmore 200 on 5 January, 400 on 28 January and 4 February, 1500 on 14 February, 160 on 20 February, 50 on 22 February. At Rodley, 150 on 5 January, 250 on 6 January.

Dunlin: Odd few, generally associating with wintering Lapwing flocks. At Nafford, one on 25 February. At Coombe Hill, one with Lapwing flock on 30 January, five on 11 February, two on 27 February, and three on 3 March; birds in late March (five on 23 & 24 March, two on 27 & 28 March) were perhaps migrants passing through. At Walmore 22 on 14 February.

Ruff: Small numbers joining the Lapwings at Coombe Hill: two in the flock on 30 January & 11 February, four on 27 February, three on 3 March. A male and two females at Longdon on 17 March.

Jack Snipe: Many fewer records than usual, probably because the extensive flooding covered their usual haunts. At Kemerton, one on 9 February. At Ashleworth, one flushed from the only unflooded patch of set-aside on 6 March. At Walmore, one on 4 February, two on 28 February, 18 and 31 March. At Rodley, two on 28 January.

Snipe: As for Jack Snipe, fewer records than usual and many Snipe may have left their usual haunts in the Severn Vale to seek unflooded areas. At Nafford, five on 10 February. At Ashleworth, 15 on half-flooded set-aside on 6 January, eleven on 9 January, only one on 14 January when water was much higher; only two found 5 on 2 February after floods had briefly subsided; when they rose again, seven on set-aside on 24 February, five on 3 March, 15 on only unflooded patch of set-aside on 6 March, only three found after floods dropped on 20 March. At Coombe Hill, two on 3 January, two on 17 February, none found on 27 February, four on 24 March, a single on 27 March, four on 31 March. Near the middle of Gloucester, recorded on the Oxleaze at the height of the flood on 5 March; at Sudmeadow, 22 on 19 February, an unusually high number for this site (perhaps birds displaced from elsewhere by flooding?), but only one left on 24 February. At Elmore, 17 on 4 February. At Walmore, three on 21 January, then 54 when floods had receded on 4 February, 59 on 28 February and 46 on 31 March (!). At Rodley, 15 on 28 January.

Woodcock: At Sudmeadow, one on 12 February, the first for three years.

Black-tailed Godwit: Excellent showing, mainly in the second half of March, often round edges of floodwater. Though the flocks were often of about the same number (25-45 individuals), it is thought (on the basis of their behaviour) that it was not the same flock occurring at different sites, but a wave of small flocks moving through the area on their way towards breeding sites in Iceland; it is a pity that no coloured leg-rings or flags were seen, despite careful searches.

At Ashleworth, five (one beginning to show summer plumage) on 27 February, feeding hard in deepish water; 45 on 23 March; 28 on 29 March; three, actually swimming, in deepish water on 31 March. At Coombe Hill, one (probably one of the Ashleworth group) on 3 March, five on 17 March, flock of 36 on dropping flood on 20 March; 23 flew off to NW, calling, on 23 March; flock of 32, very agitated, thought to be recent arrivals, feeding hard in the fog on 27 March, gone by the afternoon. At Walmore 45 on 12 March, 38 on 16 March.

Curlew: Early return to meadows by potential breeders, though clearly some through passage of migrants too. At Longdon two on 7 March, one displaying on 27 March. At Coombe Hill, two on 11 February, six on 17 February, two bubbling by floodwater on 18 & 20 February, eight on 24 February; flock of 19 (presumably including northbound migrants and feeding hard) on 27 February; four

displaying on 3 March; still calling on 6 March despite extreme flooding; four resting on edge of flood on 13 March, four calling (but no bubbling) on 17 March; only one bubbling on 24 March. One heard by day on 27 March, but 13 coming to roost on the evening of 28 March (local breeders often gather at communal evening roosts by water), only one on 31 March. At Upham Meadow, Twyning, twelve on 25 February, eight on 30 March. At Bredon's Hardwick, two on 25 February. At the Severn Ham, Tewkesbury, one bubbling on 23 March. At Leigh Meadows, none on 18 February, but one bubbling from 3 March. One between Haw Bridge and Wainlodes on 24 February and 6 March.

Redshank: Return to breeding areas noted from late February. At Nafford, three on 25 February, one on 30 March. At Longdon, one on 27 March. At Coombe Hill, first of year on 3 March; one on 13 March; five running along in Indian file (as part of communal display?) on 20 March; eight on 23 March; four, very vocal, on 27 & 31 March.

Green Sandpiper: Few of the customary winter records: at Leigh Meadows, one on 11 February, and at Sudmeadow, one on 5 February.

### Gulls and Terns

Mediterranean Gull: An unusual numerous crop of records: an adult in flight over Walmore on 23 February and on floodwater at Westbury on 24 February, a second winter bird at Walmore on 28 February, with two adults there on 18 March. A first winter bird at Hasfield on 18 March.

Little Gull: A spring passage migrant through the area in very small numbers: an adult at Coombe Hill on 22 March is the only record.

Black-headed Gull: Often noted on floodwater, especially on fresh flood. At Longdon, 200 on 16 January. At Ashleworth, 1800 on floodwater on 7 January, several hundred on wet fields on 2 February, 500 on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, 250 on 17 March, 20 staying to roost on 28 March. At Leigh Meadows, 1100 on 17 March. At Walmore, 200 on floodwater on 5 January. At Rodley, 50 on floodwater on 5 January.

Common Gull: At Ashleworth, 26 on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, 15 on 17 March. At Leigh Meadows, 45 on 17 March. At Rodley, 300 on floodwater on 5 January.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Often landed on floodwater to wash and drink on their route from the estuary roost to feeding areas inland: at Longdon, 300 on 13 January, 220 on 16 January. At Ashleworth, 12 on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, 60 on 17 March. At Leigh Meadows, 35 on 17 March. At Walmore, 200 on floodwater on 5 January. At Rodley, 450 on floodwater on 5 January.

Kittiwake: A marine species rarely recorded in the estuary, let alone inland: one at Coombe Hill on 22 March (the same days as the Little Gull).

### Owls

Barn Owl: At Castlemeads, one on 10, 16 and 19 January.

Little Owl: Few records of this species which definitely seems to have declined. At Ashleworth, one on 7 January at dusk; one mobbed by passerines on 25 February. At Sandhurst Brawn, one calling on 6 January. At Elmore, one on 4 February.

Long-eared Owl: One reported roosting in a thick hedge in early February.

Short-eared Owl: More records than usual. One hunting at Ashleworth on 6 January, two flushed from small remaining unflooded area of set-aside by river bank on 14 January. One reported Wainlodes on 30 January and at Coombe Hill on 2 February.

### Kingfisher

At Coombe Hill, one on 2 January. At Alney Island, two on 26 February

## Woodpeckers

Green Woodpecker: Numerous. At Ashleworth, yaffling heard from 2 February. At Coombe Hill, one on 17 February, one yaffling on 18 February

Great Spotted Woodpecker: Common. Drumming, already noted last since November, continued. At Ashleworth, one drumming on 7 January and 24 February, two on 13 March. At Coombe Hill, one drumming from 18 February. At Leigh Meadows, one drumming on 11 February.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker: No records of this elusive species.

## Passerines

Skylark: At Ashleworth, ten gathering to roost on set-aside on 14 January; two singing over set-aside on 24 February & 3 March; five on 6 March on only bit of set-aside unflooded. At Coombe Hill, one singing on 20 February, 31 March. At Leigh Meadows, couple singing on 18 February.

Sand Martin: Early arrivals of this summer migrant: at Coombe Hill seven on 15 March, one on 20 & 27 March. At Ashleworth, 22 on 29 March

Meadow Pipit: Small numbers wintering: at Ashleworth 15 on 6 January, 20 on 9 January, 25 on set-aside on 14 January; only one in February and early March; 15 concentrated on one remaining bit of set-aside on 6 March, one or two on 31 March. At Leigh Meadows, flock of 25 with wagtails, looked like migrants, on 18 February. At Walmore, 25 on 2 February.

Grey Wagtail: One at Ashleworth on 13 March.

White/Pied Wagtail: Pied Wagtails are the British form, White Wagtails the continental form which pass through on migration in small numbers in spring. Ashleworth, 40 Pied gathering to roost on 1 January. At Coombe Hill, one White with half a dozen Pied on 28 March. At Leigh Meadows, a flock of 15 (all Pied, no White) with pipits looked like migrants on 18 February. At Rodley, five Pied feeding on fields on 5 January.

Stonechat: Perhaps less in evidence than last autumn, and few or no March records: moved out with floods, departed early to breeding areas? At Kemerton, one on 9 February. At Ashleworth, three on 16 January, one on set-aside on 24 February. At Leigh Meadows, three on 18 February, two on 27 February. At Port Ham, one on 26 January. At Sudmeadow, a pair on 4 February, three on 24 February. At Walmore, one on 14 January, six on 15 January, two on 23 February. At Rodley, four on 28 January.

Wheatear: An incredibly early migrant on Upham Meadow on 25 February.

Fieldfare: Only a few flocks of this Scandinavian thrush that winters in UK. At Ashleworth, about 15 on 2 February; 400 on 17 February, 60 on 27 February, 300 on 3 March, 128 on 22 March. At Wainlodes, flock of 100 on 18 February. At Coombe Hill, 50 on 17 March. At Leigh Meadows, 100 on 17 February flock of 200 on 18 February. At Walmore, 20 on 22 February. At Rodley, five on 5 January, 200 on 22 February.

Song Thrush: At Ashleworth, song from early February.

Redwing: Congener of Fieldfare, even less numerous. At Longdon, southward movement of 200 birds on 13 January. At Ashleworth, 200 on 17 February, 10 on 6 March. At Coombe Hill, 50 on 6 January, 20 on 24 February. At Rodley, four on 5 January

Blackcap: More and more records of this warbler which now regularly winters in Britain; some song in late March no doubt came from birds which had wintered, rather than arriving migrants from the Mediterranean and Africa. At Tirley, one in a garden on 10 February. Two at Haw Bridge on 8 March. At Ashleworth, some sub-song on 13 March. At Coombe Hill, four along canal bank on 2 January, one on 3 January, male on 17 February; sub-song on 6 March, one singing on 28 March.

Chiffchaff: Like Blackcap, now winters in some numbers. Some seen in January and February, first song in early March, singing birds very widely distributed by late March. At Tewkesbury, one singing in the Abbey Gardens on 23 March. At Tirley, one singing on 17 March. At Ashleworth, first singing bird in Meerend Thicket on 3 March, one singing uncertainly on 13 March, many singing in last ten days of March. At Coombe Hill, one along canal bank on 2 January, two singing on 20 March, three or more singing in last ten days of March. At Castlemeads, Gloucester, one singing on 12 March, another at Over Ponds. At Port Ham, five singing on 31 March. At Sudmeadow, one singing on 20 March.

Willow Warbler: Much later to appear than Chiffchaff; one singing at Port Ham on 31 March

Goldcrest: Often found in thick hedges in winter. At Ashleworth, 2 on 5 January, one or two on 2 February. At Coombe Hill, one or two on 6 January. At Rodley, two on 5 January.

Long-tailed Tit: Little family parties widespread in thicker willows. At Ashleworth, 10+ on 2 February. At Coombe Hill, 10 on 6 January, 15 on 18 February.

Treecreeper: At Ashleworth, one singing on 31 March. At Over Ponds, one singing on 12 March.

Jay: Often found in oaks in the hedges. At Chaceley, two on 11 January. At Ashleworth, one on 2 February. At Coombe Hill, up three in February.

Raven: At Ashleworth, two on 17 March. At Coombe Hill, one on 13 January, two on 13 February. At Alney Island, two on 28 February. At Elmore on 4 February, 142 flying towards the Walmore roost in late afternoon.

Starling: Starlings were regularly seen flying north east in the evening, no doubt on their way to the roost at Kemerton, which was estimated to contain around 7,000 birds.

Siskin: Not a common bird in the vales; one at Kemerton on 7 January.

Bullfinch: Frequent in thick hedges. At Coombe Hill, three on 18 February, two on 20 February, five on 27 February and 3 March.

Yellowhammer: At Longdon, five on 13 January, flock of 60 on 16 January. At Coombe Hill, one or two singing from hedges in meadows from 18 February.

Reed Bunting: Winters in small numbers in the meadows, others returning in early spring to breed: at Ashleworth, one on 6 January; about five, much activity and incipient song on 2 February, a few on 17 February. At Tirley, a “remarkable” flock of 11 in garden on 24 February. At Coombe Hill, three singing on 18 February, five on 27 February, two or three singing last ten days of March. At Leigh Meadows, two with migrant flock of pipits and wagtails on 18 February. At Castlemeads, near central Gloucester, two males at the height of the flood on 12 March. At Walmore, one singing on 20 February.

Corn Bunting: At Longdon, one with Yellowhammer flock on 6 March.

These are unconfirmed records, compiled by M. Smart from his own observations and those of David Anderson, Les Brown, Mervyn Greening, Andy Jayne, and Gordon Avery, and the Kemerton Conservation Trust, with some cherries picked from the Gloster Birder website.

cc: Gordon Avery, Juliet Bailey, Richard Baatsen, Emma Bradshaw, Pete Bradshaw, Les Brown, Colin Butters, Ian Carle, John Clarke, John Coates, David Evans, Colin Evers, Mervyn Greening, Mark Grieve, John Hodson, Robert Homan, Andy Jayne, Mike King, John Martin, Julia Newth, Brian Smith, Colin Studholme, Viv Phillips, Alisa Watson, Ros Willder.