

Notes on birds in the Severn and Avon Vales (the “Severn Hams”), mainly Gloucestershire July – September 2005

General introduction

The main sites are (from the north):

- Longdon Marsh (Worcs), a nearly enclosed basin north of the M50 motorway, flowing via the Longdon Brook to the Severn above Tewkesbury.
- Avon Meadows (on either side of the Avon north of Tewkesbury), along the border between Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, and including the restored gravel pits at Bredon’s Hardwick (Worcs) and Upham Meadow and Summer Leasow (sometimes called the “Great Hay Meadow”) at Twynning (Glos). Just to the east is Kemerton Lake (Worcs), a restored gravel pit in the valley of the Carrant Brook, which flows into the Avon just above Tewkesbury.
- The “Severn Hams” between Tewkesbury and Gloucester, in which the main wetland areas are Ashleworth and Hasfield Hams, Coombe Hill Canal and Meadows, and the Leigh Meadows between the River Chelt and Leigh Brook above Wainlodes; Barrow Ponds have been excavated alongside the Chelt, east of the A 38. This area also includes Severn Ham at Tewkesbury, the Severn between Lower Lode and Haw Bridge, and the Severn from Wainlodes, past Ashleworth Quay and Sandhurst, to Gloucester. Near Sandhurst and Maisemore there are a number of abandoned overgrown riverside brick-pits.
- Sudmeadow and the Gloucester Landfill Site (GLS), the area of urban Gloucester, once flood meadow now occupied by the Landfill site, which attracts large numbers of gulls, and has a pond attractive to passage and some resident waterbirds.
- Minsterworth Ham, on the west bank of the Severn below Gloucester, opposite Sudmeadow.
- Walmore Common, on the west bank of the Severn below Gloucester; also the little marsh at Rodley, west of Walmore, along the stream west of Boxbush Farm.
- Elmore Back, on the east bank of the Severn below Gloucester, opposite Walmore.

Most of these sites are marshes which flood when the level of the Severn is high, preventing local streams from reaching the Severn, so that they back flood. When the Severn and Avon flood, there may be extensive floods over the whole floodplain area. The River Chelt holds running water, and is small enough to have muddy edges and mud banks. Coombe Hill Canal is a long disused and overgrown canal, which runs through the centre of Coombe Hill Meadows. Bredon’s Hardwick gravel pits (by the Avon), Ryall gravel pits near Upton, Maisemore brick pits and Walham Pools (all by the Severn) are all artificial excavations in the floodplains. Barrow Ponds are created by the artificial damming of a small tributary of the Chelt.

Weather and flooding: general

Weather in general varied, with sunny and damp periods alternating; overall rainfall fairly scarce (though nothing like the drought conditions of summer 2003). Most sites retained a little surface water into September. Massive thunderstorm on 10 September produced nearly three inches of rain in an afternoon at Ashleworth.

Conditions at the main sites

Upham Meadow, Twynning: Hay still uncut over about 30% of the area on 1 July, hay cutting practically complete on 9 July.

Ashleworth/Hasfield: Hay-making at Hasfield (including Curlew nesting fields had begun in mid-June. Fields 6 and 10 of GWT reserve were cut on about 17 July, main reserve fields not cut till August (September in some fields), but most of reserve cut this year, unlike last year. Extensive cutting of young willow growth along main ditch in August. New roadside hide built 19 September.

Coombe Hill: Water in scrapes on GWT reserve lasted until early September. New scrape in Long Pool dug from 5 September in front of Wick Lane hide. On GWT reserve hay was not cut until July.

Leigh Meadows: Best ancient hayfields still uncut on 2 July, some cutting begun on 8 July, haymaking complete on 12 July.

Sudmeadow / Gloucester Landfill Site: A shallow pool near the tipping area, with extensive muddy edges, attracted quite a number of water birds, including passing waders.

Bird records

Grebes.

Little Grebe: Bred successfully for the first time on the pool at Gloucester Landfill Site, where two adults and a young one were seen on 1 August, adult still present on 30 August and 8 September, juvenile on 23 September. Great Crested Grebe: At Bredon's Hardwick up to 13 in July, ten in August, nine in September.

Cormorant: At Bredon's Hardwick, the main loafing area inland, up to nine in July, six in August, 11 in September. One in flight over Haw Bridge on 21 July. One on the Canal at Coombe Hill on 13 September. Some roosting in a tree by the Severn at GLS in September.

Grey Heron: Odd bids, maximum six together, at Upham Meadow, Bredon's Hardwick, Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Ashleworth throughout the period.

Little Egret: On scrapes at Coombe Hill in July and August, usually three or four, but 10 on 30 July, six on 9 August; disappeared as water levels dropped in September, last record three on 3 September. One at Nafford (Worcs) on 10 August. One on Port Ham, Gloucester, on 21 September.

Mute Swans: Pairs with cygnets at Nafford (pair with two cygnets); at Upham Meadow (a pair with two cygnets on 1 July, another pair with five cygnets on 9 July); at Bredon's Hardwick (a pair with three cygnets on 1 July); on Severn at Lower Lode (a pair with six cygnets on 14 July); at Coombe Hill a pair on the canal with four cygnets from July to September (male ringed P24) and another pair with one cygnet on Cobney Meadows (male ringed K24) on 6 July; and at Ashleworth a pair with five cygnets from mid-July.

Geese.

Greylag Goose: 6 with four goslings at Bredon's Hardwick on 1 July, 24 on 18 September. Up to six Coombe Hill in July, 35 on 19 September. Canada Goose: At Ryall Pits, 15 (including at least two goslings) on 9 July. At Upham Meadow, four (no goslings) on 9 July; at Bredon's Hardwick 25 and 20, including at least one party of goslings, on 1 July; 30 to 40 until mid-August, 150 to 170 from mid-August. At Haw Bridge, 21 on 19 July. Barnacle Goose: One at Bredon's Hardwick in July and August. Egyptian Goose: One at Bredon's Hardwick on 7 August, perhaps one of those that was at Coombe Hill earlier in the summer.

Shelduck: The only definite indication of breeding was on the pool at the Gloucester Landfill Site, where a female with six ducklings was seen on 18 July, still there with five ducklings on 27 July and two adults with five young on 1 August.

Surface-feeding ducks: No indication of breeding, other than Mallard. Gradual trickle of returning birds as autumn advanced, but no numbers because of low summer water levels. Wigeon: At Bredon's Hardwick two on 4 September, 48 on 18 September; three at Coombe Hill on 3 September. Teal: At Coombe Hill, three in 10 July, 13 on 11 September, four in late September. At Ashleworth, up to ten in September, (maybe the same birds as at Coombe Hill). One at Gloucester Landfill Site on 3 September. Mallard: 40 along Avon at Upham Meadow on 1 July; another 40 Bredon's Hardwick same date. Over 100, a surprising number, on Severn at Lower Lode on 9 September. Shoveler: Three at Gloucester Landfill Site on 3 September.

Diving ducks.

Tufted Duck: At Ryall Pits, seven on 9 July. At Bredon's Hardwick, where they may well have bred, up to ten in July, up to 15 in 18 September. A female on the scrapes at Coombe Hill until 19 July, probably the same bird on Cobney Meadows on 6 July, but no suspicion of breeding. Breeding proved at the pond at Gloucester Landfill Site on 18 July, when a female with six ducklings was seen, still present until 30 August. Pochard: A female on the GLS pool on 5 August.

Raptors.

Sparrowhawk: Pretty regular throughout the period at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill; at GLS two on 24 September. Buzzard: Regularly recorded at many Vale sites. Six at Ashleworth on 29 September. At Leigh Meadows, one flying round tree and mewing, apparently with young in tree, on 8 July; similar behaviour from one at Ashleworth on 23 July. One following tractors with Lesser Black-backed Gulls in search of mice and vole nests on 3 August at Ashleworth. Seven soaring together at GLS on 24

September. Kestrel: Recorded regularly at many sites. Peregrine: Not occurring regularly in its usual wintering area at Hasfield, but one at Coombe Hill on 15 July and one hunting over GLS on 24 September. Hobby: Very secretive, but some no doubt breeding in the general area. Two at Ryall Pits on 9 July, one chasing House Martins. Singles at Coombe Hill on five dates, mid-July to mid-September. Merlin: A female or immature at Coombe Hill on 27 August and 11 September.

Gamebirds and Rails.

Coot: At Ryall Pits, full grown young on 9 July. At Bredon's Hardwick, 10 on 1 July, 20 on 8 July. At Coombe Hill, bred on scrapes (two adults with four juveniles on 2 July, two families with young on 6 July) and on canal (family with three young on 6 July); more than 20 on 8 July. At Ashleworth, where it probably did not breed successfully, still one on 11 September. Two on GLS on 22 September. Water Rail: A juvenile in the Long Pool at Coombe Hill on 10 July suggests local breeding; an adult on 16 August.

Waders.

Oystercatcher: The pair at Bredon's Hardwick appeared to have lost its first clutch in May; it was feeding a tiny chick on the island on 9 July, but was probably predated; adults not seen after 17 July. Other records probably refer to migrants: four that flew down the Avon at Upham Meadow, calling, on 1 July, looked like birds that had finished breeding, as did two that flew downriver over the Severn at Lower Lode on 10 July in the evening. One at Gloucester Landfill Site on 27 July.

Little Ringed Plover: At Ryall Pits, three very anxious birds on 9 July, apparently two pairs with young. At Coombe Hill no sign of breeding, but several records of up to three in July, no doubt migrants, none later.

Lapwing: Some birds still had young in July. At Ryall Pits at least two pairs were behaving as though they still had young on 9 July. At Coombe Hill, a female was attending a chick round the scrapes in early July; when last seen on 12 July the chick was full grown and feathered, but not quite flying. The late pair on the maize field at Leigh Meadows still appeared to have young on 2 July. None left at Rectory Farm, where they had bred successfully, on 1 July. They do not appear to have bred this year at Upham Meadow or Bredon's Hardwick.

As usual, flocks of migrants which had finished breeding and were in moult occurred in July (some had already been seen in June), often on cut hay fields. At Bredon's Hardwick up to 120 in July, 50 in August, 35 on 4 September. A party of forty in heavy wing moult at Lower Lode on 14 July. At Coombe Hill, a flock of 20 non-breeders on southern meadows up to 100 in July, still 15 on 3 August. At Ashleworth, a flock of 100 in heavy wing moult on 23 July, 93 at Hasfield on 30 July.

Dunlin: Two in full summer plumage, feeding hard, on Severn bank at Lower Lode on 14 July, clearly migrants. A single at Coombe Hill on 21 and 23 July. One at the pool at Gloucester Landfill Site on 1 August, another on 19 September.

Snipe: No sign of breeding this year; all records are assumed to be of returning breeding. At Coombe Hill, up to four from 19 July to the end of September. At Ashleworth, two from mid September. Two at Gloucester Landfill Site in September.

Bar-tailed Godwit: One flew into the scrape at Coombe Hill on 15 July, an extraordinary record, this species being generally maritime and Black-tailed much commoner here, but no Black-tailed records.

Whimbrel: One at Lower Rea near Gloucester on 7 August was undoubtedly a passing migrant.

Curlew: It seems likely that breeding success was very low, among the many birds that attempt to nest in riverside hay fields. Although birds were *in situ* and behaving as though they had young in late June, there was a sudden disappearance in late June and early July; since young birds do not normally fledge until early July, it seems likely that the young had been killed by predators or during hay making. The only chick actually seen, still well short of flying, was on 7 July. The presence of a large flock of obviously non-breeding Curlews in early July on the Avon Meadows strengthens the suggestion that most Curlews failed. Few records after mid-July.

Only six on Upham Meadow on 1 July, not very excited, looked as though they had either finished breeding successfully (unlikely at this early date) or failed; none seen there on 9 July, but one farmer

saw a non-flying chick when hay making on 7 July. Still 26 adults loafing on cut hayfield on Avon Meadows near Upham Meadow on 1 July (where 36 had been seen on 20 June); not showing any sign of breeding behaviour, looked like finished or failed adults; only one left there on 9 July. None left at Rectory Farm where some grass had been cut, nor at Eckington, where it hadn't, on 1 July. None on Leigh Meadows on 2 or 8 July. At Lower Lode none found on 10 July. At Ashleworth, none on 23 July. At Coombe Hill, still bubbling call from Cobney Meadows on 2 July and Southern Meadows on 3 July, none on 6 July on Southern Meadows or Cobney Meadows; in the second half of July the only birds were odd birds on the scrapes rather than hayfields. Singles at Coombe Hill, probably migrants moving through, on three dates in August and on 13 September.

Spotted Redshank: A juvenile at GLS from 19-22 September, only the second ever record here (first was 1987).

Redshank: By July, most Redshank have finished breeding, so most records are of birds staying on at breeding sites. At Ryall Pits, two on 9 July, not very agitated as though young had already flown. None left at Upham Meadow or Rectory Farm in July. Two at Bredon's Hardwick, not looking like breeding birds, on 1 July. At the Coombe Hill scrapes, two, one a juvenile, perhaps locally raised in early July, one on 6 July.

Greenshank: At Coombe Hill, two in adult plumage on 15 and 19 July, three on 21 July, were clearly newly arrived migrants; one there on many dates from 23 July to 18 August. One flew over Gloucester Landfill site on 1 August.

Green Sandpiper: First returning migrant noted at Coombe Hill on 6 July, up to four in July, two or three in August, with singles until 13 September, as water levels decreased. At Ryall Pits, four on 9 July. At Gloucester Landfill Site two or three from 27 July, and throughout August, with five on 30 August, then three for most of September. Not at all clear whether these are the same birds, presumably moulting, or whether there is a constant turnover.

Common Sandpiper: Migrants appearing from July: one at Bredon's Hardwick on 3 July; one on scrapes at Coombe Hill on 12, 26 and 30 July, three on Severn bank at Lower Lode on 14 July, one at Wainlodes on 13 August, one at GLS on 21 & 23 September.

Gulls and Terns.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Several following tractors cutting hay at Ashleworth on 3 August, apparently in search of overturned vole and mice nests. Caspian Gull: One at Gloucester Landfill Site on 13 September. Common Tern: Two at Bredon's Hardwick in July raised two young to flying stage; three over Severn at Lower Rea on 7 August. A pair bred at another Severn site, and were present into September.

Pigeons.

Stock Dove: At Ryall Pits, several on 9 July, at Upham Meadow 25 on 1 July. Turtle Dove: Absolutely no records of this fast-declining species.

Cuckoo: Song ceased at the end of June, but a juvenile, well seen, at Leigh Meadows on 2 July.

Owls.

Barn Owl: One hunting over Cobney Meadows, Coombe Hill, in the early evening of 6 July, was probably one of the birds nesting in a barn at Apperley, as was one seen after nightfall on a roadside post at Wainlodes on 9 September. One hunting at Sudmeadow on 30 August. One disturbed from day roost at Ashleworth Ham on 29 September. Little Owl: One calling loudly in evening at Forthampton on 14 July; at Ashleworth calling on 23 July & 3 September in the early morning and 14 & 20 September in evening; one at Tirley on 6 September; one calling at midday at Wickridge, Ashleworth, on 24 September. Long-eared Owl: None in roost used last year on 20 September.

Kingfisher: One over Avon at Upham Meadow on 1 July. One on Severn at Haw Bridge on 21 July. Seen several times at Coombe Hill in September. One at Llanthony Weir Gloucester on 15 August. Two by the Severn at Maisemore on 16 August.

Woodpeckers: A Lesser Spotted, identified by voice, at Coombe Hill on 18 June.

Passerines.

Skylark: Visible migration noted at Coombe Hill in September, at least 15 going over to south on 24 September, 30 on 27 September.

Hirundines: Passage, southwards or south-westwards, noted on several occasions: at Coombe Hill, steady passage of Swallows and House Martins, with Swifts, on 31 July, of Swallows on 3 & 21 August, on 7 September (continual) & 11 September (very heavy, with House Martins and a late Swift), 500 on 15 September, about a dozen on 27 September; at Tirley on 6 September; at Ashleworth on 13 September.

Sand Martin: About 20 at Haw Bridge on 10 July, one nesting in drain below pub, the small colony in the Severn bank below Malthouse Farm held 15 birds on 21 July; about 50 birds at another colony at Lower Lode where a total of 45 birds, including some juveniles, were ringed.

Meadow Pipit: Return in September of this species, which disappears from the Vale in summer. At Ashleworth, up to six in the evening in mid-September, apparently going to roost; passage noted there on 13 September, with 20 on 24 September and 15 on 27 September. At Coombe Hill, about 15 at roosting time on 13 September, 50 on 15 September, "obvious increase" on 18 September, southward passage in late September. At GLS 24 on 25 September.

Yellow Wagtail: At Coombe Hill, one obviously a migrant, on 7 September, three with Pied Wagtails on 11 September, two on 13 September.

Grey Wagtail: One along Severn at Haw Bridge on 21 July. Three at Bredon's Hardwick on 28 August. One GLS on 23 September

Redstart: One at Leigh Meadows on 2 July. One juvenile caught at Ashleworth on 10 July and an adult female on 23 July. At Coombe Hill at least two, with another in Cobney Meadows, on 3 August, singles later in August, two on 7 September. A male seen at Wainlodes on 13 August. Three seen at Hasfield Ham on 29 August.

Whinchat: Modest southward passage: at Coombe Hill, one on 30 July, a male on 3 August, another (in Cobney Meadows) on 3 August, two on 14 August, three on 16 August, two on 23 August, one on 13, 27 & 29 September; five in a riverside maize field at Haw Bridge on 29 August.

Stonechat: No sign of breeding this year. The first returning birds, passage migrants or winter visitors, were one at GLS on 24 September, and a pair at Coombe Hill on 27 and 29 September.

Wheatear: At Coombe Hill, one seen sitting in the top of a tree (!) on 3 August, a more orthodox bird on the ground in September, two on 17, singles in late 27 September. One at Tirley on 21 September.

Grasshopper Warbler: No records whatsoever: none bred and no migrants trapped during ringing operations at Ashleworth this year.

Sedge Warbler: Still singing Upham Meadow and Coombe Hill in early July, though not much song. At Ashleworth still singing on 10 July, nineteen caught, including 14 juveniles; three juveniles caught on 3 September; seems to have been a poor breeding season this year. Last seen at Coombe Hill on 13 September.

Reed Warbler: Five singing along Avon at Upham Meadow and Rectory Farm in early July. Still singing at Leigh Meadows on 2 July and at Coombe Hill on 12 July, but not heard 3 August. At Ashleworth some song on 10 July, but none caught; on 23 July, no song, none caught; no proof of breeding this year. Two at GLS on 5 August, the first since May 2002!

Blackcap: Widespread as breeder in higher trees. Subsong from hedges at Coombe Hill on 27 September.

Garden Warbler: Scarce in the Vale. Three trapped at Sudmeadow on 15 August.

Whitethroat: Widespread breeder, though probably had a poor breeding season this year. Still singing, Rectory Farm and Coombe Hill in early July. At Ashleworth, eleven caught (including seven juveniles) on 10 July, eight (mainly juveniles) on 23 July.

Lesser Whitethroat: Still singing at Rectory Farm and Coombe Hill in early July; at Ashleworth an adult and two juveniles trapped on 10 July, another adult and two juveniles on 23 July. Singles seen at Coombe Hill on 30 July, 30 August and 13 September.

Willow Warbler: Widespread breeder. Several adults in moult (hence breeding season over) caught at Ashleworth on 10 July.

Chiffchaff: Widespread breeder. One still singing at Leigh Meadows on 8 July and at Coombe Hill on 19 July. As usual, very much in evidence in autumn: at Coombe Hill and Ashleworth, often with tit flocks, in September, with some song.

Goldcrest: One or two with tit flocks at Coombe Hill on 27 September.

Spotted Flycatcher: Seems to have been a movement through the Vale of this declining species. One at Coombe Hill on 3 August, two on 23 August, two on 13 and 18 September. Two adults at Wainlodes on 13 August, one of them with two juveniles; one at Ashleworth on 18 August and 13 September.

Long-tailed Tit: 15 at Ashleworth on 24 September.

Treecreeper: Short burst of song on 24 September at Ashleworth.

Raven: One Coombe Hill on 30 August. One Ashleworth on 3 September, five on 24 September. Always present at GLS, at least 10 on 22 September.

Jay: At Coombe Hill, three or four on several dates in September.

Crossbill: Following the most unusual record at Coombe Hill in June, a flock was heard at Ashleworth on 6 July; the two observations suggest an invasion.

Bullfinch: Regular at Coombe hill and Ashleworth in thicker hedges.

Reed Bunting: Breeds in many sites in the Vale, but this seems to have been a poor breeding season. Small numbers stay on to winter. Song and many seen at Upham Meadow on 1 July. Several singing at Leigh Meadows on 2 July, some song there still on 8 July. Still singing on Severn bank at Lower Lode on 14 July. At Ashleworth only six caught on 10 July, and only two on 23 July; two or three left on 14 September. At Coombe Hill, only one or two left during September. .

Yellowhammer: Song, Rectory Farm, 1 July and Leigh Meadows on 2 July. At Coombe Hill, some passage in late August and September, often with skylarks and Meadow Pipits: seven on 30 August, ten on 7 September, 15 on 15 September, more on 24 & 27 September.

Corn Bunting: At Ryall Pits at least four singing on 9 July. One singing Upham Meadow on 1 July, none on 9 July.

Compiled by M. Smart from his own observations and those of Les Brown, Andy Jayne, and Gordon Avery, with some cherries picked from the Gloster Birder website.

cc: Gordon Avery, Juliet Bailey, Richard Baatsen, Les Brown, Colin Butters, Ian Carle, John Coates, David Evans, Colin Evers, Mervyn Greening, John Hodson, Robert Homan, Andy Jayne, Helen Lancaster, Brian Smith, Colin Studholme, Viv Phillips, Ros Wilder.