

**Notes on birds in the Severn and Avon Vales (the “Severn Hams”),
mainly Gloucestershire
January – March 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 the Great Hay Meadow at Twyning (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 are upstream, alongside the Chelt. This area also includes Tewkesbury Ham, the Severn between Lower Lode and Haw Bridge, and the Severn from Wainlodes, past Ashleworth Quay and Sandhurst, to Gloucester.
- Minsterworth Ham, on the east bank of the Severn below Gloucester.
- 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, Barrow Ponds, Sandhurst and Maisemore brick pits, and Walham Pools are all artificial excavations in the floodplain.

Weather and flooding: general

Very dry, with rainfall deficient. Nationally, only 50-70% of normal rainfall has been registered since November. No major flooding, with the Severn overtopping, in this period; the only high water levels were at times of high tides in mid January and mid February, which caused ditches to back up, and produced slightly higher water levels on meadows. Cold spells with frost and some icing, but no snow round 12 February; another cold spell from 16 February to about 8 March, with northerly winds, some snow (mainly on tops of Malverns and Cotswolds), with occasional icing; milder from 9 March, cold again 11-13 March. Biggest bores of year round 12 March didn’t cause water levels to rise, since there had been little rainfall in previous days. Mild after 14 March, with temperatures of nearly 20 degrees round 20 March. After considerable rain, both locally in the Chelt catchment and higher up the Severn catchment at the end of March, the Severn rose very rapidly (four feet in a night at Ashleworth) on the night of 31 March.

Conditions at the main sites

Great Hay Meadow, Twyning: no sign of flooding on 20 March.

Ashleworth/Hasfield: Field 23 at Hasfield Ham was lightly flooded a couple of times in the first three weeks of January, when water backed up during high tides. Ditch levels rose again with the high tide cycle peaking on 12 February; some water on field 23 on 16 February, but it soon dropped again with lower tides. Water levels in the GWT reserve remained at about 8 metres throughout the period, occasionally slightly higher when ditches were high. Because the grass had not been cut on the main

fields in the damp autumn of 2004, vegetation was much longer than usual, and ducks more difficult to see.

Coombe Hill: As at Ashleworth, ditch levels rose around mid January and mid February with high tides, but there was little or no flooding of fields; scrapes remained full of water.

Leigh Meadows: No flooding, River Chelt, Leigh Brook and Collier's Brook all very high on 15 February, but no overtopping; water levels dropped as high tide cycle proceeded; some slurry spread on fields north of Chelt.

Walmore Common: Ditch levels high on 16 February, but no surface flooding, nor on 22 February; levels in ditches low again by early March.

Elmore Back: No sign of flooding in late March.

Bird records

Grebes: At Ashleworth, one Little Grebe seen on 23 February, and heard whinnying from 12 March onwards. At Barrow Ponds, two Great Crested Grebes on 3 March; a couple throughout February at Bredon's Hardwick, rising to eight by 20 March; a single Great Crested on the Severn at Wainlodes on 30 March.

Cormorant: Biggest concentrations by far at Bredon's Hardwick pits, with maxima of 39 (16 January), 42 (20 February) and 23 (26 March). Barrow Ponds has become another favoured loafing spot: two seen over Leigh Meadows on 15 February, no doubt en route to Barrow Ponds, where 11 were perched on an oak overhanging the water on 3 March. None seen on favourite perches on trees by Severn at Minsterworth. Odd ones elsewhere, probably en route to loafing areas eg. singles over Coombe Hill on 26 February and 16 March.

Grey Heron: Small numbers (generally one or two, but six at Coombe Hill on 26 March) throughout the period at Walmore Common, Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows. At Maisemore heronry, three birds were present on 12 February, one sitting on nest, perhaps incubating; still only two birds, one incubating, on 12 March, but five at nearby Maisemore brickpits on the same day were perhaps recruits to colony. At Elmore heronry, at least 25 birds present in Scots Pines on 20 & 25 March; first estimates suggested 30 apparently occupied nests, few young hatched as yet.

Little Egret: A single at Coombe Hill on 26 and 30 March

Mute Swans: Wintering flocks at Bredon's Hardwick (37 in February), Coombe Hill (up to 16 in February, probably moving later to Leigh Meadows (18 on 13 March), and Walmore (16 on 22 February and 22 on 9 March). Pair at Coombe Hill, including familiar ringed bird AAGX, was at nest site by The Wharf on 12 & 16 March and nest-building on 23 March. Pair at Maisemore Park 12 February. Pair in residence on Handkerchief Pool from late February.

Whooper Swans: Not wintering in the Ashleworth/Leigh Meadows area this winter, after they failed to occur in dry conditions last winter. Unusually, two adults were at Slimbridge from January, staying into April.

Bewick's Swans: Numbers at Slimbridge were low this winter; a combined Slimbridge/Walmore Common count on 29 December gave 216; maximum recorded at Slimbridge in January/February was only 223, about 100 less than the maximum of recent winters. The major exodus of Bewick's from Slimbridge occurred on 7 March. As in previous years, birds generally flew from Slimbridge each morning (but in small numbers, maximum about 30) to feed at Walmore during the day, returning to roost at Slimbridge in the evening: 19 on 12 February; 22 on 16 February, all adults, only one ringed, TPY; 21 on 22 February, all adults except one yearling, TPY again present; 35 on 6 March, the highest total for the winter at Walmore; on 9 March only nine adults, none ringed. None at all recorded at Ashleworth or Coombe Hill in January or February.

Geese: No sign of any Whitefronts moving up from the estuary this year. Numbers of Canada Geese (which have exceeded 700 in the Severn Hams/Tewkesbury area in recent winters) were somewhat

lower this winter, probably as a result of a shoot at Tirley. The main concentration was at Bredon's Hardwick: 460 on 16 January, 300 on 20 February, a lot less at Coombe Hill and Ashleworth: flock of 75 at Coombe Hill on 12 February, 65 by the river at Chaceley on 19 February (no doubt same birds). Flocks broke up and numbers decreased sharply in March as birds returned to breeding grounds, presumably further up the Severn and Avon. Few breed south of Tewkesbury. There was one at Walmore on 22 February, eight at Barrow Ponds on 3 March and two at Ashleworth on 23 March, the latter looking as though they intended to breed. A single Greylag with the Canadas at Coombe Hill on 12 February and at Chaceley on 19 February, 15 at Barrow Ponds on 3 March. An Egyptian Goose with the flock at Chaceley on 19 February. Two Barnacle Geese at Ashleworth on 23 February, two on Maisemore Court Lake (same birds?) on 12 March.

Shelducks: With the lack of flooding, numbers were much smaller than usual (up to 100 in spring in previous years); only a few odd birds were found, presumably prospecting for nesting holes. At Bredon's Hardwick one on 14 January, three on 27 February, five on 27 March. At Coombe Hill, two to four on various dates in February, and March. Two over Leigh Meadows on 15 February. At Ashleworth, two on 23 February, one on 13 March. One at Elmore Back and one on Port Ham, Gloucester, on 21 March

Surface-feeding ducks:

In general, numbers poor this winter, perhaps because of mild weather in early part of winter and lack of flooding; at Ashleworth the long vegetation made counting difficult. No attempt made this winter at cannon-netting ducks, as in the previous winter at Ashleworth. The departure to the breeding area seemed particularly early this year, with a sharp decrease in numbers after early March.

Wigeon: several hundred throughout the period at Bredon's Hardwick, maxima 350 on 16 January, 600 on 27 February, 320 on 13 March. At Coombe Hill, numbers low and departures early: 120 on 26 February, 180 on 9 March, 120 grazing on 12 March, 40 on 16 March, only three on 23 March. At Barrow Ponds, 100 on 3 March, perhaps fleeing ice-covered areas elsewhere. At Ashleworth, numbers lower than usual, barely exceeding 500; 650 on 16 January, 500 on 23 February, 400 on 16 March; but grass round edges of water on the reserve was very heavily grazed as soon as it began to grow again in early March. At Maisemore Park, 10 on 12 February.

Gadwall: As usual, single digit numbers recorded: up to eight at Ashleworth in February and March. Less frequent at Coombe Hill, with two on 23 March. At Maisemore Brick pits one on 12 March.

Teal: At both Coombe Hill and Ashleworth, numbers of this species seemed to decrease quite sharply after the first week of March. At Coombe Hill, they generally keep inside the Long Pool and are often difficult to see from the hide: 350 on 12 February, but 200 in late afternoon on 2 March feeding round scrapes in front of hide, only 80 on 9 March and not above 30 after that. At Leigh Meadows never more than a dozen. At Ashleworth, 250 on 16 January and 23 February, 150 on 3 March, only 20 on 13 March. At Walmore, plenty in the ditches: 150 on 16 February, 35 on 22 February, 40 on 9 March. At Elmore, two in ditch on 21 March.

Mallard: Numbers insignificant: not above twenty at any of the usual sites.

Pintail: No sign of the big concentrations (up to 1500) found on light flooding during winters up to 2001/02, no doubt because of the lack of flooding. At Ashleworth there were 36 on 16 January, but in general at Coombe Hill and Ashleworth, numbers did not exceed 20 during February and March. At Slimbridge, on the other hand, there had been fair numbers (a few hundred) for most of the winter, with high numbers of 600 to 700 (birds moving through on northward passage?) in early March.

Shoveler: As usual, up to a few dozen at each of the main sites. At Bredon's Hardwick, 21 on 16 January, 25 on 27 March. At Coombe Hill, 20 on 26 February, 25 on 16 March, but only four on 23 March. At Ashleworth, 28 on 16 January, 30 on 23 February, 40 on 16 March. At Maisemore Park, five on 12 February.

Diving ducks:

As usual, few on flood-plain where water was not deep in the absence of floods, main concentrations on deeper artificial pools.

Tufted Duck: At Bredon's Hardwick, 25 on 16 January and 27 March. Never more than about 8 on the reserve at Ashleworth in February and March, perhaps prospecting for breeding sites. At Maisemore Court Lake, four on 12 March.

Pochard: Very few records: at Bredon's Hardwick sixteen on 20 February and six on 13 March; one on Maisemore Court Lake on 12 March

A North American Ring-billed Duck was reported from Bredon's Hardwick from 10 to 20 February.

Raptors:

Sparrowhawk: singles on various dates at Leigh Meadows, at Ashleworth and Maisemore brickpits.

Buzzard: Seen on many occasions, up to three or four individuals, at Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Ashleworth at the Foscombe Starling roost, Walmore and Elmore, often soaring and mewing.

Kestrel: Not recorded very frequently, occasionally at Ashleworth and Leigh Meadows.

Merlin: Only record is of one at Longdon Marsh on 20 February.

Peregrine: One regularly on pylons at Ashleworth throughout the period; one, maybe two, at Foscombe Starling roost on 22 February. One on Great Hay Meadow on 13 and 20 March.

Gamebirds and Rails:

Grey Partridge: two on Coombe Hill setaside on 3 March.

Coot: At Coombe Hill two or three on canal from mid-February, heard from Long Pool on 9 March. At Maisemore Park, two on 12 February. At Ashleworth, numbers built up, as usual in early spring, to 20 on 23 February, 30 on 16 March. At Maisemore Court Lake, 2 on 12 March

Moorhen: At Coombe Hill, regularly on canal and Long Pool; three on Chelt above Leigh Meadows on 3 March.

Water Rail: Rather more in evidence this year than of late, at both Ashleworth and Coombe Hill, usually birds calling, from January to March.

Waders:

Oystercatcher: First birds returning to Bredon's Hardwick were two on 20 February; three displaying, on the nearby Great Hay Meadow on 19 and 20 March.

Lapwing: Very few wintering flocks: 150 at Bredon's Hardwick on 15 January and 350 there on 14 February; after 380 at Ashleworth on 16 January, no numbers worthy of note at Ashleworth or Coombe Hill in the winter period. Good numbers, many flocks of several hundred, in late February and early March, presumably birds moving through from the estuaries to breeding sites further north. At Coombe Hill, 50 flew over on 8 February, 140 on 19 February, 220 on 26 February - excited, giving breeding calls, 500 on 9 March. At Leigh Meadows, 67 on 15 February, 980 on 22 February, 600 on 26 February, 250 on 3 March, all clearly migrants. At Ashleworth 250 on 23 February. At Walmore 20 on 16 February and 95 on 22 February, 130 on 3 March.

As far as breeding birds were concerned, the first real display activities of the year were noted north of canal at Coombe Hill on 9 March; 11 birds, all apparently breeders, on 12 March; about ten pairs, all displaying very actively, with aerobatics and display on ground, on 16 March; 30 on 23 March, displaying at first but disturbed by dog walker and later forming loose flock; none displaying south of canal on 13 or 23 March. At Leigh Meadows, none on meadows on 13 March on usual (setaside) breeding field, only one on arable land near The Leigh; the only breeding birds there on 25 March were on arable land to north and south. At Ashleworth, very little sign of display apart from eight on 20 March. No display seen at Walmore. Display over Rectory Meadows near Bredon (green field) and

Bredon Field Farm (arable) on 20 March, but none on Great Hay Meadow. None at Elmore Back on 21 or 25 March

Golden Plover: 35 at Hasfield Ham on 16 January. Not recorded regularly at Twynning/Bredon's Hardwick, where they used to winter in numbers: 150 on 14 February at Bredon's Hardwick. At Longdon Marsh, 60 on 20 February. These February birds were no doubt been passage migrants, as were some seen with Lapwings in second half of February and early March: at Leigh Meadows, 15 on 22 February, 45 on 26 February; at Coombe Hill one on 9 March. Flock of 25 at Coombe Hill on 16 March undoubtedly migrants – flying in tight flock, calling.

Dunlin: None wintering in the area; the few records probably refer to migrants: at Coombe Hill, one with Lapwings on 19 February; at Leigh Meadows two on 19 February and one on 26 February; at Ashleworth, one with Lapwings on 23 February and four on 13 March.

Snipe: Good numbers from late February onwards, more in March - no doubt birds passing through on northward migration: at Coombe Hill (Long Pool), nine on 16 January, 20 on 12 February, 40 on 9 March, 60 on 16 March, 15 on 23 March; at Leigh Meadows five on 13 March; at Ashleworth 40 on 23 February, 76 on 16 March, 30 on 20 March; at Walmore 6 on 16 February, 50 on 5 March (a high total) and 25 on 9 March. Couple on Great Hay Meadow on 20 March. No drumming birds.

Jack Snipe: Coombe Hill is usually the best spot for this species: two on 16 January, one on 12 February, two on 9 March, but five on 12 March and eight (!) on 16 March, then five on 23 March. At Ashleworth, four on 3 March, one on 16 & 20 March. At Walmore one on 5 & 9 March.

Curlew: first of spring bubbling at Ashleworth on 16 February, with singles in March, one bubbling near Haw Bridge on 23 March; at Coombe Hill, two on 19 February, but unusually high number of 13 on scrapes in late afternoon on 2 March, which presumably included migrants moving through; three or four pairs, some giving excited display calls, in March. At Leigh Meadows, first on 3 March, at least two pairs in residence on 13 March, three on 25 March. At Walmore, where they are unusual, three flew over and landed on 9 March, probably migrants. At Great Hay Meadow, first birds reported to have returned in early March: five on 13 March, eleven on 20 March, some bubbling. At Longdon March two displaying on 26 March.

Redshank: First of year were two at Coombe Hill on 16 March, four displaying on 23 March. One at Ashleworth and at Bredon's Hardwick on 20 March. Pair displaying at Leigh Meadows on 25 March. Four at Great Hay Meadow on 20 March.

Green Sandpiper: One seen occasionally at Leigh Meadows in January and February, but not on every visit despite careful searching; perhaps they move back and forwards between the Chelt and other brooks round Longford where they are occasionally seen eg. one on Wotton Brook on 2 March

Gulls: An adult and a juvenile Great Blackback were at Bredon's Hardwick on 16 January, where they have bred in previous years; two adults on 13 March.

Kingfisher: Occasionally seen at Coombe Hill, either on meadows or on the canal by The Wharf.

Owls: Long-eared Owls not found at former site, but recorded at two other sites (one of them within a mile of former site); single on 2 February at first site, up to four at other on 10 and 12 March; efforts made to avoid disturbing them. Exceedingly few records of Little Owl, which seems to have decreased sharply in recent years. No more sightings of Barn Owl. Tawny Owl widespread.

Pigeons: Only small numbers of Stock Doves, rarely reaching double figures, but very widespread: at Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Ashleworth, Chaceley, Maisemore Ham, Walmore; often displaying in March.

Woodpeckers: Great Spotted drumming at Ashleworth on from 16 February onwards and at Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Walmore and Elmore Back.. A Lesser Spotted at Ashleworth on 12 January and perhaps 5 March. Green Woodpecker yaffling at Coombe Hill from 26 February, at Leigh Meadows, Elmore Back, and near central Gloucester on Port Ham.

Passerines:

Skylark: Singing birds widespread: at Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows from mid February, at Ashleworth and Walmore in March

Meadow Pipits: As usual, small numbers wintering in the meadows. Up to five at Coombe Hill; 15 at Leigh Meadows on 3 March and the same number at Walmore on 22 February were perhaps migrants, odd ones at Ashleworth.

Pied Wagtail: 45 at Ashleworth on 2 March, perhaps birds from the roost at Tesco's Gloucester?

Grey Wagtail: singles seen now and then on the Chelt at Leigh Meadows. At Maisemore, one by the Severn on 12 March.

Stonechat: Wintering at almost all sites, really well distributed this winter, and appeared to move out around mid-March. At Coombe Hill, pair on 12 February on former set aside; at Leigh Meadows up to three; at Ashleworth one on 16 February, four on 23 February, three on 3 March. At Walmore, two on 5 March.

Redstart: An unusually early returning summer migrant at Ashleworth on 30 March.

Fieldfare and Redwing: Generally, no large flocks and numbers small, with few flocks of 100 birds. At Ashleworth quite good numbers in evening of 10 March gathering to roost, 150 Fieldfares and 100 Redwing, 100 Redwings and 30 Fieldfares on 16 March; at Leigh Meadows fifty Fieldfare feeding on the ground with Lapwings and Starlings on 15 February. At Walmore 80 in orchards on 9 March. Departures early, very few after mid-March.

Willow Warbler: a single bird singing at Ashleworth on 30 March

Chiffchaff: After a single bird singing on 13 March at end of period of easterly winds, many were found singing from 20 March onwards, with onset of southwesterly winds. At Ashleworth, the first one singing was in a hedge on 13 March in a flock of tits and tree-creepers, perhaps a bird that had wintered; not found on 16 March. Rapid increase in singing birds with westerly winds after 19 March: two singing Great Hay Meadow, one Chaceley, two Ashleworth, all on 19 March; two at Elmore Back, one at Over on 21 March; five singing at Coombe Hill on 23 March; two Leigh Meadows and one at Elmore Back on 25 March.

Goldcrest: Several singing in hedges at Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Ashleworth and Elmore in mid-March.

Long-tailed Tit: Parties of up to ten seen regularly throughout the period at Coombe Hill, at Leigh Meadows, at Ashleworth.

Treecreeper: Odd ones seen regularly at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill. Song on Maisemore Ham on 12 March.

Raven: Singles at Coombe Hill and Ashleworth in early January. As usual, mainly seen at Walmore, with 6 on 16 February. Four over Elmore on 21 March and two on 25 March, perhaps nesting in heronry wood??

Jay: couple at Coombe Hill on 16 March

Starling: Big roost of over five thousand birds behind Foscombe in February, birds assembling from 17h00 onwards and doing aerial evolutions before settling, attracting attention of numbers of raptors. At Leigh Meadows, 100 feeding on ground with Lapwings and Fieldfare on 15 February, 300 on 22 February, 150 on 26 February; at Coombe Hill with Lapwings on afternoon of 2 March.

Linnet: one singing Leigh Meadows on 25 March.

Greenfinch: 70 at Coombe Hill on 1 January

Brambling: One with 75 Chaffinches at Ashleworth on 2 March

Bullfinch: Up to half a dozen in small parties in thick hedges throughout the period at Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows, Ashleworth, Chaceley, and Walmore.

Reed Bunting: Most Reed Buntings nesting locally move away in winter, though small numbers stay to winter; and the return is observed from February when they begin to sing and take up territories. At Coombe Hill on 12 February, one singing timidly, one singing on 19 February, four or five singing more persistently on 26 February, 5 singing on 9 & 12 March, two singing south of canal on 13 March, two or three singing on 16 March; at Leigh Meadows on 15 February one singing tentatively, at Ashleworth two or three, one singing feebly, on 16 February. At Walmore one on 16 February, four on 9 March. Two singing at Elmore on 21 March

Yellowhammer: Not often found in lower-lying meadows, but two singing at Ashleworth on 23 February near Stonebow, and another low down on 10 March; one at Leigh Meadows on 26 February, three singing on 3 March, two on 25 March; one singing on 13 March in The Leigh village. At Coombe Hill, unusually large flock of 50 on old setaside field on 3 March. At Elmore, at least two singing on 21 March.

Compiled by M. Smart from his own observations and those of Les Brown and Andy Jayne. This note does not claim to be a complete record, simply a digest of records by a number of regular observers in the area, aimed at giving an impression of birds present in this period.

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