

**Notes on birds in the Severn and Avon Vales (the “Severn Hams”)
mainly Gloucestershire
January – March 2006**

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; rather few records in this period.
- 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 Twyning (Glos); further to the north along the Avon is Gwen Finch Reserve near Nafford (Worcs), an area of shallow lakes along the Avon. Just to the east is Kemerton Lake (Worcs), a restored gravel pit in the valley of the Carrant Brook, which flows through Cowfield Marsh 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 (including Cobney Meadows at the western end), 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 brickpits.
- 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; few records available.
- 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; only a few records.

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, Mythe Hook, Sandhurst and Maisemore brick pits, and Walham Pools are all artificial excavations in the floodplain or along the rivers. Barrow Ponds are created by the artificial damming of a small tributary of the Chelt.

Weather and flooding: general

The weather in early January was mild, with a spell of easterly winds and colder weather (but no snow) from 5 to 9 January, then mild with south westerly winds to 20 January; a cold dry spell in late January and early February, anticyclonic, grey, dull. Brighter sunny days, with frost at night, causing open water to ice over, from 8 to 11 February; mild with southwesterly winds but little rain from 12 to 18 February. Cold again, with north easterlies, fog but little frost, from 19 February with light dusting of snow on hills on 24 February. Cold in first week of March, then a period of rain, with Severn higher and slightly higher water levels at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill; another period of dry, cold weather with bitter north-easterly winds in mid-March, giving way to southwesterly winds at last bringing some rain from 23 March, and releasing migratory movements. Severn levels rose slightly in the last few days of March, as high equinoctial tides coincided with rainfall both locally and higher up the catchment (245mm rainfall at Capel Curig in the week from 24 March), and were at their highest all winter on 31 March, causing back-flooding at Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and the Leigh Meadows. Because of the unusually low rainfall in January, February and early March, both locally and higher in the Severn catchment, water levels were low everywhere, with little or no flooding since early December, most unusual for the area in winter; water at Coombe Hill was restricted to scrapes and ditches. The artificially dammed reserve at Ashleworth was thus the only major area of open water in the vale for most of the period.

Conditions at the main sites

Water levels low throughout, no flooding anywhere until the last few days of March, and then only limited.

Upham Meadow, Twyning: No flooding

Ashleworth/Hasfield: Water levels maintained at usual winter level on reserve (about 7.90 on sluice) in January, February and early March with no flooding of surrounding fields; water entering the reserve from the southern end on 11/12 March, and again from 28-31 March; light flooding of surrounding fields in mid March, rather higher in late March as a result. Good count of 990 ducks on ice on 11 February. Cannon net catches of 64 ducks on 29 January and 45 on 26 February.

Coombe Hill: Water in scrapes and ditches only, no flooding of meadows in January, February and early March; water levels in front of the Grundon Hide rose in last few days of March. Conditions on Cobney Meadows excellent in mid- and late March, with some flooding alongside ditches.

Leigh Meadows: No flooding until the last few days of March, when high Severn and Chelt levels meant that smaller brooks overflowed onto the meadows.

Walmore Common: No flooding at all, though Common wet, ditch levels low.

Bird records

Grebes

Little Grebe: One at Ashleworth on 17 January. Three on the Severn at Wainlodes on 14 February. A first winter bird on the pool at GLS on 17 February. One at Nafford on 9 March. One whinnying on the Long Pool at Coombe Hill on several dates in late March.

Great Crested Grebe: Two to three at Bredon's Hardwick, January and March. One on Severn at Wainlodes on several dates in February, two on 21 March.

Cormorant: At Bredon's Hardwick, a favoured loafing spot in winter, 20 or 30 throughout the period, maximum 33 on 30 March. Few records elsewhere. At Coombe Hill, singles flew over on 4 & 10 January and 21 March. At Wainlodes one on 21 February. At Minsterworth Ham 13 (!) on 3 January, three on a riverside tree, ten on flood-bank.

Little Egret: Recorded at Walmore Common, rather earlier in the year than in previous years: two in late February and one on 10 & 17 March, two on 21 March.

Grey Heron: Up to three or four at most sites throughout the period, but 11 at Bredon's Hardwick on 13 January and five on 26 January. At Ashleworth, three on 14 January, one bright-billed, perhaps from the herony. At Coombe Hill, four on 12 February; on Cobney Meadows, two on 21 March.

Swans

Mute Swan: The wintering flock roosted in early January on the scrapes at Coombe Hill, flying out in early morning to the Leigh Meadows to graze, sometimes with the Whoopers; it numbered about 20 on 4 January, 35 on 14 January, 25 (many immatures) on 8 February, 20 on 16 March; still about 20 dotted over floodwater on 31 March. In February they seemed to be roosting on the Severn at Wainlodes (13 on river in early morning on 21 February). They included several colour-ringed birds coming from outside the immediate area; unfortunately there is no co-ordinated system for checking on colour-ringed Mutes in the county: volunteer urgently needed! Some of last year's adults (notably P24 and mate) were still looking after their young at Coombe Hill on 4 & 11 February. At Wainlodes, an immature with a damaged wing, probably a result of collision with overhead wires, on 16 March; other dead birds under power lines on same date. At Minsterworth Ham five on 3 January. At Walmore only six on 3 & 12 January, only four on 24 February; seven on 17 March were all adults, looking territorial. Pair beginning nest building at Cobney Meadows on 21 March.

Bewick's Swan: The end of 2005 had seen a maximum of 228 Bewick's at Slimbridge, already more than the maximum count of 223 in winter 2004/05, with a high proportion of cygnets (49); there were few new arrivals in January or February 2006 and the peak winter counts were of 246 (49 cygnets) on

15 January and 5 February; over the whole of the winter the total number of different individuals recognised by face pattern or ring was 317 (hence the number actually visiting the area was greater than the maximum observed at any one time); this figure of 317 was slightly higher than the total for the previous winter, but well down on 2003/04 and previous years. First departures were recorded in late February, with numbers dropping from 223 on 28 February to 188 on 1 March; mass overnight departures with south-westerly winds on 4/5 March (only 70 remaining on 6 March) and on 8/9 March (only seven birds remaining; they finally left when southwest winds returned on 23 March). At Walmore, some had already been recorded making day visits in late 2005, but there was no indication of regular roosting on the pond on the Common, and this situation continued in 2006, with the maximum recorded 47, birds flying in from Slimbridge in the morning and returning in the evening; in general the same ringed individuals and families were seen (especially yellow ring 541, a yearling ringed on the Petchora in August 2005; and ZBJ, a lone parent with three cygnets, both previously recorded in late 2005). Thus on 1 January 38 (10 cygnets) four rings were read, all familiar visitors to Walmore; on 3 January, none had roosted at Walmore, but five came in from the Slimbridge direction at 08h20; on 12 January 17 (three cygnets) present, including 541 and ZBJ; on 14 January, 27 (five cygnets), including 541 and ZBJ with cygnets; on 16 January, the first birds arrived from Slimbridge at 07h45 and there were 27 birds (8 cygnets), including 541 and ZBJ; on 20 January, 20 with three cygnets; on 4 February, 31 with five cygnets, the only ringed birds being the familiar ZBJ and 541; on 6 February, 41 with seven cygnets; on 14 February, 35 with seven cygnets, including ZBJ and 541; on 15 February, 44 with seven cygnets; on 24 February 34 with seven cygnets, including 541 and probably ZBJ; numbers higher in the last week of February, and early March, until 8 March. On 16 March, when most birds had departed from Slimbridge, 10 birds were seen at Walmore, presumably migrants coming from further west, that had not wintered in the Severn area, and were just passing through (as happens most springs); they had gone by 17 March. Further north, it was an unusually poor period for Bewick's, none at all being recorded at Ashleworth, Coombe Hill, or anywhere else in the upper Severn Vale.

Whooper Swan: The pair of adult Whoopers that had been present since mid-December, were seen grazing on the Leigh Meadows, with the group of Mutes, from the beginning of January onwards. They were joined on 24 January by a family party of two adult and four young Whoopers; the eight remained together as a unit, and adopted the same pattern of feeding by day on the Leigh Meadows, roosting sometimes on the scrapes at Coombe Hill, and from late January onwards more often at Ashleworth (e.g. 26 January, 7 February); it was difficult to see them at either roosting site as they arrived late and left early: e.g. on 20 February they arrived at Ashleworth just on nightfall at 18h10 and flew out next morning at first light, at about 06h50). They often kept separate from the Mutes and sheltered close under hedgerows, which made it difficult to pick them out at times. None of the eight were ringed. One cygnet was missing on 8 February, when they had clearly roosted at Ashleworth, and was not seen again; the remains of a dead cygnet found under the power lines on 14 February at Hasfield may have been a Whooper or Mute; the seven were regularly seen grazing at Leigh Meadows in February and early March, and were last seen on 18 March. A pair, presumed to be different from the Leigh Meadow birds, was recorded occasionally at Slimbridge throughout January.

Black Swan: Unwelcome return of this species: one, presumably an escape, was seen with Mutes and Whoopers, feeding at Leigh Meadows and roosting at Coombe Hill in the second half of January and early February; present at the Leigh on 12 and 14 February, though (thankfully) not later. One pair of Mute Swans treating it with contempt and mild aggression at Coombe Hill on 4 February.

Geese

White-fronted Goose: A flock of 10 of the Greenland sub-species (a family party of two adults and five goslings, plus three odd adults) was found at Coombe Hill at first light on 15 January; they had obviously roosted there and were very nervous, clearly new arrivals (probably disturbed from wintering areas by strong winds in Ireland); they were disturbed by a passing helicopter and flew off. A most unusual observation probably a first for the area. The Slimbridge flock of Russian Whitefronts reached a winter peak of only 798, so the absence of records in the upper vale is hardly surprising; departures from Slimbridge from 17 February.

Greylag Goose: The 60 or 70, seen sometimes at Bredon's Hardwick and sometimes on floodwater at Coombe Hill at the end of last year, did not reappear at Coombe Hill, but 30-40 were at Bredon's Hardwick for most of the period. One flew over Coombe Hill on 21 February. Two at Ashleworth on 21 March.

Canada Goose: Numbers at the Severn Hams much lower than at the end of 2005, but still fair numbers at Bredon's Hardwick: 140 on 9 February, 130 on 9 March, 60 on 30 March. At Chaceley only 4 alongside the Severn on 18 February, no sign of the larger flock found there last year. January maximum at Ashleworth: 44 on 28 January. January maximum at Coombe Hill: 26 on 21 January, occasionally recorded there early in the morning after roosting overnight: eight on 4 January, six on 15 January, 54 on 4 February took off towards Apperley at 08h00; about 50 came in to roost late on the evening of 7 February. From March onwards, most birds seemed paired and territorial as though preparing to breed: four at Ashleworth on 16 March looked territorial; two on Long Pool at Coombe Hill on 21 & 28 March were perhaps preparing to breed, two pairs on 31 March. At Wainlodes a pair, perhaps preparing to breed, in second half of March. About 20 on Maisemore Court pond on 20 March. At Walmore, two looking territorial on 17 March.

Barnacle Goose: Two feral birds on Maisemore Court lake (where they are probably resident) on 20 March.

Ducks

Shelduck: Numbers very low compared with totals of up to 100 in some wet springs, reflecting the lack of flooding; a total of about 15 on floodwater between Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows on 31 March was the biggest group. At Nafford, two on 3 February. At Bredon's Hardwick, one on 13 January, up to three in March. At Ashleworth, seven on 11 March, five on 28 March. At Coombe Hill two from 12 February, both males in breeding plumage; up to five in March. A pair on the GLS pond on 17 February & 27 February, probably preparing to breed, two pairs on 21 March; four flying through Sudmeadow on 11 March. At Minsterworth Ham three on 3 January.

Surface-feeding ducks

Numbers of surface-feeding ducks did not reach the levels of late 2005, with total numbers between Coombe Hill and Ashleworth barely reaching 1,500 in January and even lower in February and March. This may be due to the lack of flooding, and also to a general decrease in wintering wildfowl numbers, as in Whitefronts and Bewick's Swans.

Wigeon: Numbers lower than in late 2005, reflecting the lack of flooding. Up to 85 at Nafford and at Bredon's Hardwick maximum of 380 on 13 January. At Ashleworth numbers dropped from 1200 on 14 January to 950 on 4 February, with 520 counted on the ice on 11 February, and similar numbers later in the month; 360 on 4 March and up to 250 for the rest of the month. As the grass round the edges of the reserve began to grow, Wigeon came to feed just above the water line, allowing successful cannon net catches on 29 January (64 Wigeon caught) and 26 February (total of 45 ducks caught, 21 Wigeon); they continued this feeding technique into March. On the Coombe Hill reserve numbers were poor, and some appeared to move to Cobney Meadows: January maximum on the Long Pool 150, February maximum 60, 45 on 18 March; at Cobney Meadows, 150 on 16 March, 90 on 21 March. At Walmore, two on 4 February.

Gadwall: Good numbers of this species which is always less numerous than other ducks. Two at Bredon's Hardwick on 13 January. At Ashleworth 75 on 31 January, 70 on 11 February, 52 on 3 March. At Coombe Hill, 13 on 25 February, nine on 21 March.

Teal: Numbers not large in lack of flooding. Up to 30 at Nafford, 20 at Bredon's Hardwick. At Ashleworth, 350 on 15 January, 210 on ice on 11 February, 230 on 4 March. At Coombe Hill, 200 in Long Pool on 4 January, 300 on 10 January, numbers lower in February: 80 on 11 February, 60 on 4 March; at Cobney Meadows 20 on 16 March, 30 on 21 March. At Sudmeadow, 8 on 27 February, 13 on 23 March. At Walmore, numbers remained fairly constant after January: 90 on 3 January, 60 on 4 February, up to 50 in March.

Mallard: Though reputed to be the commonest duck, numbers in recent years have not been large: up to 50 at Bredon's Hardwick; at Malthouse Farm, Haw Bridge, about 30, feral, on 18 February. At Ashleworth, 43 on 17 January, 30 on 11 February. At Coombe Hill, 40 on 4 January, 26 on 11 February. At Minsterworth Ham five on 3 January. At Walmore, 10 on 3 January.

Pintail: With the lack of flooding, the large concentrations of up to 1,500 seen in some springs did not materialize at Ashleworth; the cannon net catch on 26 February produced an excellent catch of 17

Pintail (and more than usual have been caught at Slimbridge this winter in connection with investigations into avian influenza). At Ashleworth, 95 on 14 January, 60 on ice on 11 February, 52 on 4 March. Only small numbers recorded at Coombe Hill.

Shoveler: Numbers remained average, with maxima of about 100. At Ashleworth, 100 on 14 January, 80 on the ice on 11 February, 78 on 4 March. At Coombe Hill, 15 in Long Pool on 4 January, seven on 21 February, 13 on 4 March; at Cobney Meadows, six on 16 March. At Minsterworth Ham two on 3 January. At Walmore, 2 on 3 January.

Diving ducks

Few records, as is normal in the shallow water conditions.

Pochard: At Bredon's Hardwick, nine on 13 January. At Ashleworth, two males, diving in deeper water on 19 February, four on 14 March. At Coombe Hill one on 14 March.

Tufted Duck: Small numbers regularly seen on deeper parts of the wetlands. What are they doing - planning to nest? Ones and twos at Nafford and Bredon's Hardwick. At Ashleworth, up to four in January; group of seven on 19 February with Pochard, eleven on 14 March. At Coombe Hill, eleven on Long Pool on 14 March, seven on 21 March, one on 31 March; on Cobney Meadows, pair on 16 March, three on 21 March. At Maisemore Court Pond, four on 20 March. At the GLS pond five on 17 February.

Goosander: A female or immature, first seen sitting on flotsam in Severn at Wainlodes on 8 February, stayed until 9 March; on 19 February it was disturbed from the Chelt (where local fishermen were catching good numbers of small fish) and flew back to the Severn at Wainlodes.

Raptors

Two unusual records of Red Kite and Osprey, in addition to the usual records of more familiar birds of prey.

Red Kite: One over Ashleworth reserve on 11 February may have been the same bird seen south of Gloucester earlier that morning. Despite the increase over the Cotswolds, there are still few records from the Vale.

Sparrowhawk: Odd records as usual, usually singles, from Cowfield on 20 January, Ashleworth on 21 February, Coombe Hill on 14 February, and one hunting over ditches on 21 March.

Buzzard: Very widespread, one or two seen on almost every visit to Ashleworth, Coombe Hill, Leigh Meadows and Walmore. At Minsterworth Ham two on 3 January.

Osprey: One flying strongly north-westwards over Coombe Hill on 31 March, clearly on passage, disappeared over Apperley and appeared to follow the line of the Severn to the north. _

Kestrel: Regularly seen at Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and Walmore. At Minsterworth Ham two on 3 January.

Merlin: The only record is of one at Ashleworth on 21 January; the species was no doubt present, but it takes luck to find them on rapid hunting flights.

Peregrine: One over the Great Hay Meadow on 13 January and one at Bredon's Hardwick on 2 March. One, sometimes two, seen fairly regularly from January to March, mainly at Ashleworth, but also occasionally at Coombe Hill and Leigh Meadows, often on electric pylons, sometimes in flight. Singles at Sudmeadow on 4 January, and Walmore on 10 March.

Gamebirds and Rails

Water Rail: At Cowfield Marsh, two on 5 January, one on 20 January. At Coombe Hill, calling on practically every visit from both Long Pool and Broad Mere osier beds, by day at dusk. One at Ashleworth on 25 February.

Moorhen: Regular at Coombe Hill. At Minsterworth Ham two on the Severn on 3 January.

Coot: As usual, numbers built up in the early part of the year as they prepared to begin breeding: at Ashleworth 36 on 17 January, 30 on 12 February and 20 on 21 March; at Coombe Hill in the deeper water of the Long Pool, five on 31 January, nine on 28 February, five on 21 March; perhaps 12 on floodwater on 31 March.

Waders

Numbers of wintering waders were generally poor, again no doubt because of the lack of floodwater; Snipe and Jack Snipe as usual, but few Lapwings, no Golden Plover, the odd Green Sandpiper, no Black-tailed Godwits or Ruff. As usual the main breeding species (Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank) began to reappear from mid-February. Little sign of migrants in February and early March, apart from an odd Oystercatcher and some Lapwings, with only a few migrant Golden Plover detected. But after the change of winds in late March, clear movements were noted of Little Ringed and Ringed Plovers, Snipe and Jack Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit.

Oystercatcher: An early migrant with the Lapwings at Ashleworth on 14 February. The first bird returning to Bredon's Hardwick (where they have bred for the last few years) was on 9 March, with two on 30 March.

Little Ringed Plover: At Coombe Hill, the first migrant, a probable immature still moulting into summer plumage, on 21 March; an adult (a different bird in full plumage), on 28 March; two pairs on 30 March, one pair on 31 March.

Ringed Plover: An adult alongside the Little Ringed Plover at Coombe Hill on 28 March.

Golden Plover: Usually recorded on northward migration in February and March, but few this year: one going through Sudmeadow with migrant Lapwings on 27 February, 28 at Walmore on 10 March, 11 at Coombe Hill on 25 March, one on 30 March.

Lapwing: Only small numbers wintering, with most birds going to the estuary in the cold weather. From February onwards, flocks of migrants, on their way back to breeding grounds, and the displaying local breeders, began to appear. At Cowfield Marsh 120 on 5 January. At Ashleworth 50 on 4 January; a flock of over 100 in February (with nearly 300 on 21 February) were noisy and active, and looked like migrants, as did 20 on Hasfield Ham on 16 March. At Coombe Hill, January maximum of 25; 20 (probably migrants passing through) on 14 February, 22 on 21 February. At Sudmeadow, 60 migrants moving through on 27 February. At Walmore, 150 on 3 January, while 60 on 24 February and 20 on 17 March looked like migrants. Displaying birds were noted as follows: at Cobney Meadows nine on 16 March, five on 21 March; at Leigh Meadows some on 16 March; at Coombe Hill, 14 on 4 March, nine on 21 March, 13 on 28 March; at Walmore 27 on 29 March. Any that had laid eggs at Coombe Hill will have lost them with the late March flooding, as last year.

Dunlin: At Ashleworth, three in winter plumage with the Lapwing flock on 17 February, one on 28 February. At Cobney Meadows, one on 16 March, probably same bird on scrapes at Coombe Hill on 21 & 28 March.

Woodcock: One flushed at Hasfield on 6 February.

Jack Snipe: At Cowfield Marsh one on 20 January. Regularly recorded at Ashleworth (usually up to five, but 13 on 25 March!) throughout the period, mainly on the same field as Common Snipe. Rather less at Coombe Hill, three on 14 February were the first for some time. Also regular at Walmore with up to three birds, four in late March.

Snipe: At Cowfield Marsh, 38 on 5 January, 37 on 20 January. Numbers about average throughout the period at Ashleworth, mainly on a field not cut in 2005 with extensive stands of canary grass *Phalaris* and wet underfoot at the back of the reserve: 50 on 4 January, 20 on 8 February, only five in icy conditions on 11 February, at least 40 on 21 February and 17 on 16 March; signs of increase through passage birds on 28 March when at least 90 present; no drumming on evening of 30 March. At Coombe Hill, where the Long Pool is usually one of the best areas for Snipe in the whole of the Severn Vale, numbers lower: January maximum only eight, February maximum six, eleven on 18 March; at

Cobney Meadows, 26 on 16 March, 15 on 21 March, 7 on 28 March. At Leigh Meadows, three on 5 March, five on 16 March. At Hempstead Nature Reserve, near Sudmeadow, six on 2 January, four on 23 March. At Walmore, 1 on 3 January, 12 on 12 January, none on 4 or 24 February (despite conditions which looked suitable), but 20 on 10 March, 5 on 17 March, 16 on 21 March, 30 on 29 March.

Black-tailed Godwit: Eleven at Walmore on 29 March.

Curlew: First of year, no doubt returning to take up territory, at Coombe Hill on 14 February; two on 15 February; one on scrape in early morning on 18 February; then seen and heard regularly to end of March. Up to eight on Upham Meadow from 2 March. Two bubbling at Wainlodes, three on Cobney Meadows, three on Leigh Meadows on 16 March. One going NE over Sudmeadow on 23 March. One near Wallsworth, an unfamiliar site, on 26 March. One each at Ashleworth and Coombe Hill on 28 March.

Redshank: Usual return of migrants/breeding birds in mid to late March. At Bredon's Hardwick, two early birds, perhaps migrants, on 9 March. At Ashleworth, where they have been few and far between in recent breeding seasons, three on 21 March, one on 25 March. More frequent at Coombe Hill from 11 March, one with some display on 21 March, four displaying on 25 March, while at Cobney Meadows one was displaying on 16 & 21 March. One on Leigh Meadows on 21 March. At Walmore, three on 29 March.

Green Sandpiper: Odd records, perhaps the same bird, from January to March at Leigh Meadows and Cobney Meadows. One at Ashleworth on 30 March. One or two regularly at Sudmeadow throughout the period. One at Minsterworth Ham on 3 January.

Gulls and Terns

As usual, the main focus of interest was the Gloucester Landfill site, where regular observations and ring-reading was carried on. The highlights were: Great Black-backed Gull: at least 28 on GLS on 1 January. Glaucous Gull: one found at GLS in mid-January. Mediterranean Gull: One at GLS in mid January, and an adult at Ashleworth (where they are rarely recorded) on 11 March. Little Gull: A first winter bird, no doubt on passage, at Ashleworth on 28 March.

Pigeons

Stock Dove: Biggest flock was 50 at Longdon Marsh on 4 February. At Ashleworth three on 29 January, 10 on 8 February, one doing display flight. At Coombe Hill, one or two on 21 March; at Cobney Meadows, five on 21 March. At Minsterworth Ham five on 3 January.

Owls

Barn Owl: A very welcome increase in records at several sites. One at Corse/Staunton on 5 & 19 March, one at Tirley on 12 March. One recorded several times in the Ashleworth area: flushed from willows early in the morning, and hunting at sunset, on 14 January; one hunting at Hasfield on 6 February; in late afternoon on 17 February and 5 March; one on 11 March. Also on the opposite side of the river (same bird??): one on 2 February, and in early morning at Wainlodes on 21 February when it appeared to choose trees on the cliffs at Wainlodes as the site of its day roost; one hunting in same place in evening of 2 March and at Haw Bridge on 3 March. One seen hunting at dusk near Pamington (Tewkesbury) on several dates from 17 February to 22 March. One seen hunting several times around Castle Meads on Alney Island, Gloucester from 25 January to 4 March, also at Sudmeadow (same bird?) on 5 & 9 March. One hunting at Elmore on 10 February. One by Severn Bore Inn on 19 & 31 March (the one recorded from Walmore last year?).

Little Owl: Few records once again. One at Elmore Lane on 1 January and near Stonebench on 14 February.

Long-eared Owl: None found during visits to traditional winter roosts

Short-eared Owl: One at Coombe Hill on 7 January. One flying over A38 at Twigworth just north of Gloucester on 10 January; same bird?

Kingfisher: Rather few records, though they were probably about. At Walmore, 1 on 3 January. A pair displaying by the Ham at Gloucester on 30 March.

Woodpeckers

Green Woodpecker: One yaffling at Coombe Hill, from 4 January onwards.

Great Spotted Woodpecker: Very widespread, clearly likes willows. Drumming recorded quite early: at Ashleworth from 20 January, at Coombe Hill from 15 January, at Wainlodes from 8 February.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker: One at Lower Lode, Tewkesbury on 15 January. At Highnam Woods, one on 20 January. At Walmore, a female (!) calling on 29 March.

Passerines

Skylark: One singing at Coombe Hill on 21 March. One singing at Walmore on 24 February.

Sand Martin: None until the winds went south west in late March, then 15 on 27 March and about 100 on 28 March at Ashleworth, 25 at Coombe Hill on 28 March, 16 on 30 March, 15 going to northwest on 31 March; none round Haw Bridge colonies yet. One at Walmore on 29 March.

Swallow: Two with Sand Martins at Ashleworth on 28 March; one at Coombe Hill on 30 March.

House Martin: One at Ashleworth with Sand Martins and two at Haw Bridge on 28 March.

Meadow Pipit: Only small numbers wintering, slight increase in March as migrants began to appear. At Ashleworth, up to five in February, 20 on 28 March. At Coombe Hill, 15 on 4 January was a higher number than usual in winter; six on 28 March; at Cobney Meadows, 10 on 21 March. At Leigh Meadows one or two in January, but 12 on 16 March. At Walmore, six on 3 January, 10 on 17 March.

Pied Wagtail: At Coombe Hill, up to 13 in January; three on 21 March, two males on 28 & 31 March, all definitely Pied, not White.

Grey Wagtail: At Leigh Meadows, one on 10 January, 8 February and 11 March. At Minsterworth Ham one on 3 January. At Walmore, 1 on 3 January

Stonechat: Still a welcome number of winter records, numbers perhaps dropping off in March as birds left for breeding areas; will any stay to breed this year? At Cowfield Marsh one on 5 January, a pair on 20 January. At Ashleworth, two in January, one in February. At Hasfield a male on 6 February, and a pair on 12 February, still one on 29 March. At Leigh Meadows, one on several dates in February. At Hempstead and Sudmeadow, up to four from early January until late February. At Walmore, two or three on 3 January, one on 12 January, one on 17 & 29 March.

Wheatear: Lots on the estuary and the Cotswolds in late March, but the only one in the river valley was at Port Ham Gloucester on 30 March.

Fieldfare: Numbers remarkably low, with scarcely any flocks over 100. At Ashleworth, 100 on 8 & 25 February, were the biggest flocks for some time; 50 on 25 March. At Tirley, 55 on 28 February. At Coombe Hill, only 10 on 10 January and 4 February; at Cobney Meadows 50 on 21 March. At Leigh Meadows, 80+ on 5 March, 20 on 16 March. At Minsterworth Ham 50 on 3 January

Redwing: As for Fieldfare, numbers very poor. At Ashleworth, 10 on 8 February, 50 on 25 February, 30 on 25 March, a few still roosting on 30 March. At Coombe Hill, only 10 on 10 January; at Cobney Meadows 50 on 21 March. At Leigh Meadows, 70 on 16 March. At Minsterworth Ham 20 on 3 January. At Walmore, 10 on 3 January.

Blackcap: At Coombe Hill, two different females on 2 January, male by Wharf on 12 February. No singing birds heard by the end of March.

Chiffchaff: At Ashleworth, one on 17 and 20 January. Regular at Sudmeadow in January, often two birds. Very little early song, no doubt because of the cold weather in February and March; sudden outbreak of song after winds went south west in late March; at Ashleworth, one singing on 25 March, two on 28 March, at Coombe Hill five on 28 March, three on 31 March.

Goldcrest: Odd few, often with tit flocks. At Ashleworth, two on 8 February, one insecting like a Chiffchaff on 12 February. At Coombe Hill, one on 4 January. At Walmore, 1 on 3 January

Long-tailed Tit: Usual winter flocks of up to 30 birds at Ashleworth, Coombe Hill and Wainlodes.

Treecreeper: Occasionally seen, usually with tit flocks. At Ashleworth one on 4 January and 21 February.

Jay: One at Coombe Hill on 14 January and 12 February, couple on 31 March. At Leigh Meadows one on 16 March. At Sudmeadow, where they are unusual, two on 13 February.

Rook: Flock feeding in field of *Deschampsia* at Ashleworth on 12 February, presumably looking for insects in the ground. On 21 February several hundred roosting in rookery wood above the Red Lion at Wainlodes, with no sign of breeding activity, though this had begun by mid March.

Raven: At Tewkesbury, one over supermarket car park on 14 January. At Ashleworth one on 17 January. At Leigh Meadows, two flying over on 14 January, one on 28 February. At Lassington Woods, overlooking the Leadon, a pair recorded almost daily in January. At Tuffley, Gloucester, one on 23 January. Walmore was as usual the most reliable spot: 15 on 3 January, flying west early morning as if going to GLS; up to 20 throughout the period.

Jackdaw: Large and noisy roost of several hundred birds at Coombe Hill on evening of 7 February.

Starling: Roost of more than 10,000 birds in evenings on Castle Meads from January onwards. Small flocks arriving in early morning from southwest, no doubt from Castle Meads roost, over Wainlodes on 21 February. Two flocks totalling 4,000 at Twigworth flying towards Gloucester in the evening of 25 February. Roosting birds also seen over east Gloucester (Sainsbury's) in late March; same roost?

Lesser Redpoll: Rather less records than last autumn. At Coombe Hill, four on 12 February, two on 4 March.

Bullfinch: Regularly recorded in thick hedges. At Coombe Hill, two or three on 4 January and 21 February. At Walmore, one on 3 January.

Reed Bunting: Very few seem to winter in the vale (in contrast to the situation on the top of the Cotswolds), and begin to return from February; still rather few singing by late March. At Ashleworth none on 4 January, only one on 14 January; pair, quite perky, on 8 February, one singing early morning on 18 February. At Coombe Hill, just one on 4 January, none on 10 January; timid song on 11 February, much more in evidence with perhaps five birds on 14 February, three on 21 February, two on 21 March; at Cobney Meadows, two on 21 March. At Leigh Meadows, one singing on 5 March, only two singing on 16 March. At Minsterworth and Walmore, none on 3 January

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