

MCV WALK

(Cut Bridge to the Observatory)

Wednesday 28th September 2022

Walk report from walk leader Keith Metcalf

Eight members joined the wildlife walk which concentrated primarily on the birds and coastal habitats which are under threat from sea-level rise and climate change. Keith Metcalf led the walk and was assisted by MCV Chairman David Horne.

The tide was on the rise as we walked eastwards along Saltgrass Lane first seeing about 30 lively *Turnstone* running backwards and forwards in front of pedestrians and vehicles, but always managing to run at breakneck speed to get to the other side of the busy road. It appeared that they were mostly picking up grit as there was not much vegetation where they were actively pecking at the ground. Some passerines (perching birds like bearded tit) eat seeds during the winter and swallow grit to help digestion but I have not previously noticed Turnstone doing it so perhaps they were just catching small insects around the stones? A small group of about 15 *Dunlin* were feeding on the edge of Mount Lake in one of the fast filling saline pools about 40m out. We also saw a single *Oystercatcher* resting with about 20 *Black-headed Gulls*. Probably the *bird of the day* was also seen in the Mount Lake area, but as we saw it on the return part of our journey you will have to wait till the end of this report to find out what it is? No cheating by jumping to the end!

A little further along Saltgrass Lane as we approached the flood-gate we saw a lonely *Black-tailed Godwit* feeding and a few *Meadow Pipit*, mostly flying overhead, as was a *Sparrowhawk* and the first of three *Buzzard* and a hovering *Kestrel* we saw over farmland.



Meadow Pipit

Coastal Protection: Keith explained that there were likely to be major changes along our coastal frontage of sea walls and embankments as the Environment Agency (EA) and NFDC

decide what should be done to protect properties and the two tips at Efford from future inundation. It was noted that the EA were very clear about having to work ‘with nature’ in the future rather than against it. Many sea walls and embankments were constructed several decades ago to help drain land behind them so that it could be used for farming. However, as sea-levels rise, many of these old walls and embankments are quickly eroding and being undermined. Keith spoke about the possibility of some farmland areas currently protected by these walls being allowed to breach or even removed completely to allow the sea to go where nature intended it to go! An approach known as managed retreat.

It was pointed out that **Dunford’s Pond** (north of the ‘flood gate’) had in the past regularly flooded in winter. This once wet farmland has been a haven at high-tides for waders, geese and duck but has not flooded for at least the last three consecutive years. It would therefore seem an ideal low-laying area to be a suitable site for future flooding either as a managed realigned site or maybe even as a wetland grazing marsh. We await word from the new landowners (Belpot) who are currently working on suitable management of this and other Keyhaven farmland sites that might also fit into the ‘short-list’ of options that are being considered by the EA, NFDC and stakeholders.

Just before we moved off we encountered a lonely *Curlew* a fast declining breeding bird of the New Forest and elsewhere. In an effort to increase numbers a ‘head-start’ programme has been organised by Natural England where staff remove eggs from airfields in east England. They then incubate the eggs before releasing young adults after they have been radio-tagged and ringed. Some have been released at Wild Ken Hill (of Springwatch fame), the Sandringham Estate and Dartmoor where they are best placed to survive. Do keep a watchful eye out for any colour-ringed birds including Turnstone, Black-tailed Godwit, Spoonbill and Curlew) and please report any sightings of birds with the colour-ring combination to keithmetcalf2022@btinternet.com



Saltgrass Marsh: At the Saltgrass Lane flood-gate we walked up to the top of the slope to look southwards over towards Hurst Castle and the lighthouses and north over what is known locally as Saltgrass Marsh. Back in 2013, the EA, Natural England, Hampshire Wildlife Trust and NFDC put forward plans to partially flood the grazing marsh which has over the years gradually dried to such an extent that very rarely do you see any standing water as the reeds and (the wrong type of vegetation) takes over. The birdlife here is pretty sparse with just a few water-birds using the site and a handful of reed bunting, reed warbler and the occasional water rail, little egret and mallard frequenting the site. The plans to re-wet the site had even moved forward to the point where the EA had designed, manufactured and fitted into the sea wall two excellent two-way mini-slucice valves to allow high-tide seawater in to the marsh to a controlled maximum height and also allow excessive water to drain back out again through the same gates into the Solent to maintain a constant and maximum water level.

With this proposal, the site could be so much better than it currently is for water-birds. The plans also included repositioning the sea wall footpath to the southern side of Saltgrass Lane, therefore much closer to the properties that wall and banks protect. However, despite all the above bodies supporting the idea of re-wetting the grazing marsh, a handful of residents and the parish council put an instant stop to the proposal. This was quite understandable from a local resident's point of view but the site would have become so much better for birdlife. I wonder what plans the Hurst Spit to Lymington strategy may come forward with have for the marshes long-term future. We probably won't have long to find out!

Back to the walk. Along this stretch of our morning walk we encountered very few birds but we did see a group of three *Stonechat* that seemed to delight in flying along the path in front of us and landing in the vegetation about 40m ahead. They accompanied us for most of this part of the walk.



Male Stonechat

Creeks & Saltmarsh Trips: As we approached Hurst Castle Ferry Pontoon, we reminded members that if they hadn't yet joined us on one of MCV's birding trips they could now book seats for the January, February and March 2023 trips. (See MCV's website for further details). All seats for the October and November 2022 trips sold out within the first week of being made available, but we do have just 1 or 2 seats left for the December 15th trip so first come first served.

Bird Observatory: The tide was quite high at this point in our walk around Keyhaven Harbour with very few birds in sight. However, we were making our way to the bird Observatory where we expected to see numerous ducks and waders and we were not disappointed.

Viewing the birds from the new raised decking area overlooking the Pans and Avon Water observatory we recorded; *Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Lapwing, Little Grebe* (where we often heard its ‘trilling’ call), *Wigeon, Gadwall, Little Egret a Sparrowhawk and Kestrel* and one unidentified raptor. The Kingfisher also put on a show for us as it did several low-level flypasts over the Pans and Avon Water. Leaving behind the Observatory and its many hundreds of water-birds we started our return journey, but this time along Saltgrass Lane.

We heard a large number of *Starlings* in a ‘chattering-reedbed’. Keith suggested that if members had not yet had the opportunity to visit the Hams on the Somerset Levels during the winter they would enjoy a memorable spectacle of starlings doing their murrurations. The power of the combined wings of hundreds of thousands of starling wings flying a few feet above your head and the ‘whoosh’ they made as they flew down to roost in the adjacent reedbeds is something to behold. Do make try to visit.

The Walk Highlight: The highlight of the walk mentioned earlier was seen right back where we started at Cut Bridge with a beautiful *Red Knot* sitting conveniently on a rock just a few yards from the roadside. It appeared exhausted as they are habitually seen way out on the far edges of the marshes and mudflats. This bird did actually have two normal legs and feet although the rocks and shadow in this photo make it look like he/she is standing on one stump!



Other species recorded on the walk: *Mute Swan, (Keith pointed out that the Mute Swan is the only one of our three swans that makes a noise when flying – Whooper and Berwick’s not making a similar wing-beat noise) Cormorant, Grey Heron, Canada Goose, Mallard, Teal, Pintail, Moorhen, Coot, Rock Pipit, Grey Plover, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Woodpigeon, House Martin, Swallow, Sand Martin, Pied Wagtail, Chiffchaff, Robin, Goldfinch, Linnet, House Sparrow, Carrion Crow and probable Goldcrest*