

Milford Conservation Volunteers



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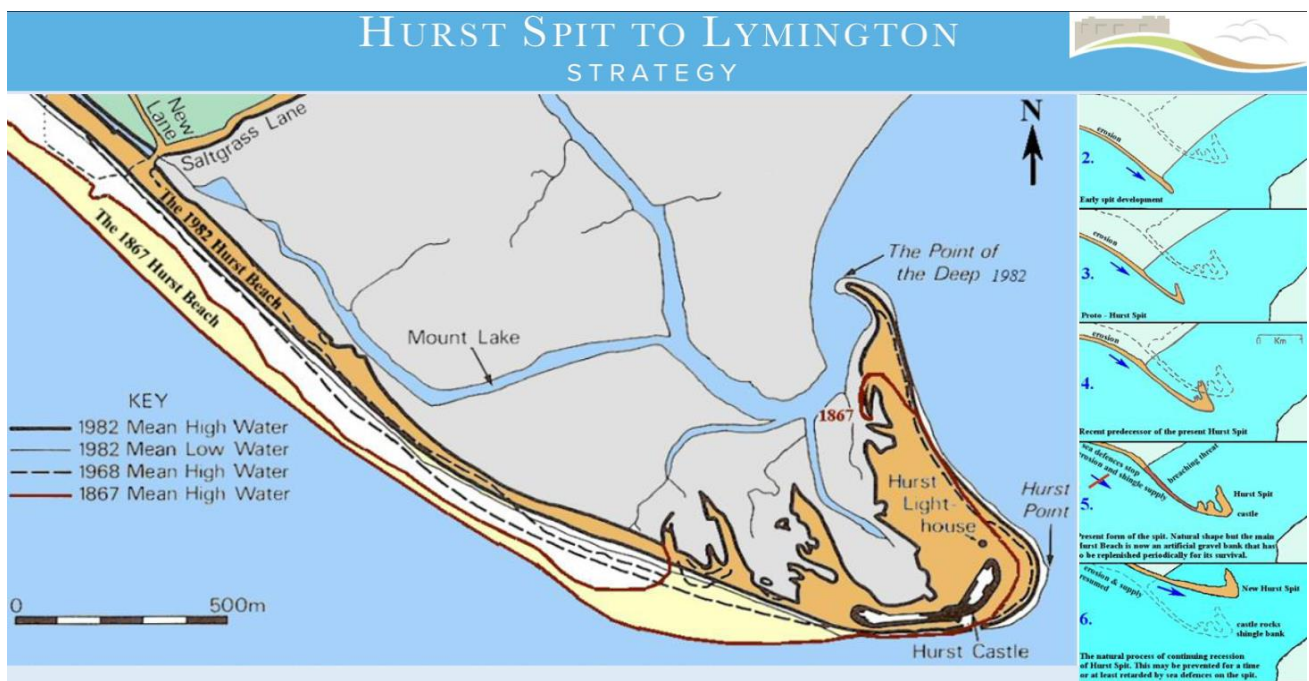
Date: 2nd December 2024

MCV WALK REPORT

Sturt Pond Bird Hide to Keyhaven Bird Observatory - 28th November 2024

On a glorious bright and sunny morning, four members joined up for the leisurely walk led by Keith Metcalf between Sturt Pond and the Pans Observatory. The first 10 minutes were spent in the Bird Hide waiting to see if any others turned up for the walk. We saw four *little grebe* (the highest count there for some years.) Three *cormorant*, a few *mallard*, fifty *black-headed gulls* and a couple of *meadow pipit* were heard and then seen sitting on the meadow fence posts.

We started our walk going up to the top of the Spit, where we were able to look out across the Solent and back down onto Sturt Pond. Keith spoke about the Environment Agency (EA) - Hurst Spit to Lymington Strategy - *preferred pathway* for the future management of *Hurst Spit* which is to *'maintain and hold the form for the next 10 to 20 years, followed by allowing the Spit to a rollback with minimal intervention'*. This is deemed the most natural way of managing the Spit over the next 100 years. Hurst Spit formed about 7,000 years ago and has always rolled back as nature pushes the Spit in that direction as sea-levels also continue to rise.



We walked along the top of the Spit to the ‘crabbing bridge’ and then onwards to ‘Cut Bridge’ (*though people often refer to both as ‘crabbing bridges’*). Crabbing has been carried out for generations by youngsters (*and their parents*). As we crossed the bridge, we could see fifty or more *turnstone* and a single *red knot* (*see photo below*). The knot has spent a couple of weeks resting on the rocks by Cut Bridge, or merrily feeding on small invertebrate amongst the vegetation which is washed up on each high tide.



At the junction of New Lane and Saltgrass Lane the turnstones were seen contently feeding on the oats placed there by our friendly ‘*swan lady*.’ She feeds the swans and turnstones every day throughout the year as she has been doing for many years.

We saw the turnstones running backwards and forwards like little wind-up ‘*clockwork*’ birds trying to dodge the many cars and walkers at the bend in the road into New Lane. There are often as many as 60 to 70 birds either walking or flying backwards and forwards on and off all day long while there is still food available at the curb side. When the food has gone, they revert to type by feeding on the shores around the edges of Hurst Spit, Mount Lake and Sturt Pond by turning over stones and vegetation to find tastier morsels below. Occasionally, the mute swans vacate the water and join the turnstones, sometimes causing havoc for vehicles passing (*see photo over the page*). The swans are often reluctant to move out of the way of vehicles as the photo shows!



We climbed the slope to walk along the top of the embankment above Saltgrass Lane. EA's '*preferred pathway*' for the Keyhaven management unit is for '*managed realignment with saltmarsh creation.*' This EA pathway allows space for intertidal habitats to roll back onto the higher farmland north of the lane to provide the compensatory habitat required for other management units.

We believe that this Keyhaven site is likely to be the first of the nine management units to be tackled, but even so, it may still be 5 to 10 years down the line before the present embankment will be breached to allow the sea onto the farmland. In conversations with others, we would like the embankment to be opened in two or three places so that the remaining parts can be retained to create small protected islands where waders and terns might in the future be encouraged to breed, and who knows, we might even be able to encourage some of Pete Durnell's excess breeding Avocets down to this end of the Nature Reserve..... wouldn't that be great.

We also suspect that new protective raised embankments around the new farmland site could be created using excavated soil materials. A *large shallow lagoon area* north of the present embankment could be created and protected islands located in the new lagoon area for other ground-nesting or high-tide roosting birds. We shall see!

However, all that comes much further down the line at the '*detail stage*' of the project, which is still some years away, and subject of course to funding being secured.

As with all management unit options, there will be some benefits but also some losses. The primary loss here would be that Saltgrass Lane may not be accessible from New Lane at the western end. Residents living in Saltgrass Lane might also gain in that only residents would have access from the Keyhaven end of Saltgrass Lane, considerably reducing the number of cars, vans and motorhomes passing their frontages.

As we walked along the top of the embankment we could see over the farmland to the north. There were a few *oystercatcher* feeding in the field and a small group of 10 *ringed plover* flew overhead south towards the saltmarshes.



Left: *One of four oystercatchers feeding in the soft grassland meadow.*

Below: *Four of the ten ringed plovers flying from the farmland out towards the saltmarshes.*

On the wet boggy grassland meadows of New Lane stubble fields good numbers of this species often feed contentedly, sometimes with dunlin and two to three hundred golden plovers.



As the eastern end of the Saltgrass Lane embankment where the flood-gate is located, we dropped down onto the road and back up the slope onto *Saltgrass Marsh*, which is owned by NFDC and is managed by the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HIWWT). The EA has still not decided the best long-term ‘*pathway*’ for this marsh, although the Wildlife Trust envisage the land, currently behind the sea wall, being managed as grazing marsh. If this project is pursued, the Trust would need to stock-proof fence the site so that cattle, or whatever animal they choose to graze the marsh, would be contained. We wait with interest for both the EA and the Trust to decide the best course of action from this rapidly deteriorating habitat.

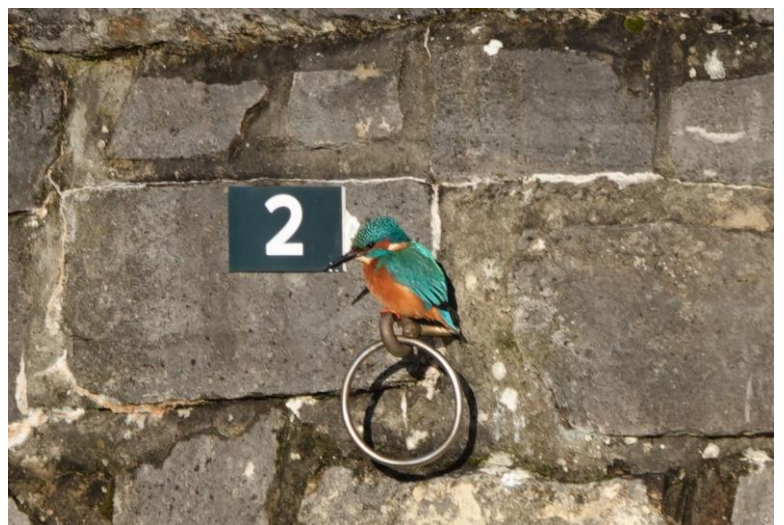
We made our way eastwards along the sea-wall towards Keyhaven River and the harbour and saw the odd *little egret* and heard the bubbling call of one or two *curlew* way out on the marshes.

Walking around the harbour beyond the River Warden’s elevated lookout, we engaged with the second of three *kingfisher* seen on our walk. A female (*identified by it having a red lower mandible*) conveniently perched on a mooring ring (*see below*).



This bird obviously has a *penchant* for sitting on mooring rings as a couple of days before, I saw another (*probably the same bird*) perching on the number (2) mooring ring in the harbour (see photo below).

Kingfishers breed in the riverbanks further to the north in the New Forest and come down in winter to Sturt Pond, the Pans, Avon Water and harbour areas. They do this as inland streams and rivers tend to ice over, whereas coastal waters are mostly ice-free except in the harshest winters. In some years, as many as eight different kingfisher visit our reserves. We know this through local ringing records.



We finished the walk by visiting the bird Observatory in Keyhaven. We were greeted by a *coal tit* and *blue tit*, and were also pleased to see one female *marsh harrier* at the front of the reeds in *Avon Water*, followed quickly by a second (*male*) that briefly landed next to the female before taking off and flying away across the reed tops. A lovely way to finish our walk.



Here is the full list of birds seen during the walk held on the 28th of November 2024 between 10am and Noon.

Species	Number	Species	Number
Little Grebe	4	Pied Wagtail	1
Cormorant	3	Meadow Pipit	8
Mallard	20	Woodpigeon	200
Black-headed Gull	30	Blue Tit	2
Redshank	2	Robin	1
Little Egret	4	Cetti's Warbler (Heard)	1
Turnstone	50	Goldfinch	1
Oystercatcher	7	Great Tit	2
Ringed Plover	10	Marsh Harrier	2
Curlew	1	Jay	1
Grey Plover (Heard only)	2	Kestrel	1
Coot	3	Rock Pipit	1
Teal (Heard only)	A few	Carrion Crow	6
Grey Heron	1	Coal Tit	1
Kingfisher	2	House Sparrow	3
Brent Goose	50	Magpie	1
Lapwing	70	Wren	3
Herring Gull	4	Stonechat	3
Mute Swan	20	Knot	1

Report and photographs by Keith Metcalf