

Chapter 25

The Birds of Rutland Water

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Why does Rutland Water Attract Birds?

The outcry, in the early 1970s, against the development of Empingham Reservoir, as Rutland Water was first called, and enshrined in the slogan 'Don't Dam Rutland', was not shared by the bird watchers of the area. With their experience of Eyebrook Reservoir, then 35 years old, to draw on they knew that they were in for a real treat as the new reservoir would attract a large number of birds of many species. They were not to be disappointed as this review will show, but why does Rutland Water feature so prominently as a bird watching site which attracts ever-increasing numbers of bird watchers?

The answer lies in its large size and unique position. With a surface area, when full, of 3,000 acres and a shoreline of around 26 miles it would be bound to attract birds almost anywhere. Add to this its location within 33 miles of the coast of the Wash and its situation just north of the Welland valley and the planners unwittingly created an ornithological magnet.

Wildfowl arriving on the east coast of England regularly use the north Norfolk coast as a landmark and are thus funnelled into the Wash from where, in good weather, they can probably see Rutland Water glinting invitingly in the distance, drawing them further west. The Welland valley was discovered in 1948 by Eric Simms to be part of an important overland migration route connecting the east and west coasts via the Welland and Avon valleys, the latter leading down to the Bristol Channel and onwards to Ireland. Many small birds – Swallows, Pipits, Wagtails and Finches – use this fly-way, especially in autumn, and reservoirs such as Rutland Water are ideal places for them to rest and feed on their migration.



Yellow Wagtails are regularly seen at the dam on migration (John Wright)



Small numbers of Bramblings arrive in October (John Wright)



Several thousand Wigeon winter at Rutland Water, grazing around the reservoir margins
(John Wright)

plexes which are now such a feature of our region – Eyebrook, Pitsford (Northamptonshire), Grafham (Cambridgeshire), and Draycote (Warwickshire) reservoirs and the Titchmarsh and Paxton (Northamptonshire) gravel pits. When flooding forces species such as Wigeon to leave the Ouse Washes many probably relocate at Rutland Water.

Birds before the Reservoir was Created

The ornithological importance of Rutland Water began long before the first drop of water was pumped in during the drought year of 1976. As part of the preparation of the reservoir site the hedgerows and trees which were to be below the top water line were cleared and felled. The valleys which would soon be flooded echoed to the sound of bulldozers and chainsaws and there were huge bonfires of accumulated vegetation.

The resulting landscape resembled a battlefield but was quickly taken over by open-country species such as Sky Larks whilst Turtle Doves, then a common Rutland bird, appreciated the weed seeds now available on the vacated farmland. A run of mild winters in the early 1970s attracted Stonechats in numbers and four or five might be seen on a morning's walk, perched prominently on an exposed tree root or fence post.

As the first water began to accumulate in the borrow pits near the dam, waders appeared on their autumn migration – Ringed Plovers, Ruff, Dunlin and Greenshank. The reservoir attracted its first rarity when a Pectoral Sandpiper from North America was found in September 1973. The rough grassland which developed on the cleared reservoir site was much appreciated by the voles and mice, whose

Another intriguing route by which birds may reach Rutland Water could be along the Humber and the Trent valley, with birds continuing south from the Newark area across the East Midlands. This idea was first suggested by Albert Jolley in 1945. Having arrived at Rutland Water, wildfowl and waders are able to commute between the many reservoirs and gravel pit complexes

Ruff appear on autumn migration from July onwards and small numbers now winter at Rutland Water
(John Wright)



numbers proliferated, but their day ended when regular pumping began. The slow but relentless advance of the water forced them to move on, often into grass tussocks where they were easy prey for Kestrels and Short-eared Owls. The temporary abundance of small mammals attracted a female Hen Harrier during the winter of 1976-77. It was regularly seen hunting over the area near Lax Hill and is commemorated in Harrier Hide, which now overlooks the very different scene of Lagoon One on the Egleton reserve.

Open Water Birds

A casual glance across the reservoir can, at first sight, appear rather uninteresting but perseverance will be rewarded at any season. Viewing from the dam in winter, the observer may expect to see good numbers of Tufted Ducks and Goldeneye, along with attractive drake Smew and Goosander. A careful search through the Tufted Ducks usually reveals one or two Scaup, close relatives which are normally encountered in coastal waters. Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes are regular visitors and may be seen along either arm of the reservoir, sheltering in the bays. Perhaps the most exciting winter visitors are the divers, which, as their name suggests, spend much time below the surface and can be difficult to find. Strangely, the rarest of the three species which visit Rutland Water is the one which is most common off the Norfolk coast, the Red-throated Diver. The Black-throated Diver and the Great Northern Diver are much more regular and in January 1978 up to three of the latter species could be seen off Sykes Lane.

Over 1,000 Great Crested Grebes winter at Rutland Water (John Wright)



Any lingering Slavonian or Red-necked Grebes in March are moulting into their stunning breeding plumages. They are joined over the reservoir by the first Sand Martins and Swallows whilst in April flocks of Arctic Terns pass through on their journey north. Local breeding Common Terns mingle with them and pose interesting identification problems. April often sees flocks of Common Scoter calling in as they migrate across the country en route for Scandinavia. These black sea ducks rarely stay long but may occur in sizeable flocks, with 31 off Hambleton in April 2003.



Top Right: The open landscape of the reservoir site provides ideal hunting opportunities for Kestrels (John Wright)

Above: Tufted Ducks are one of the most common wildfowl at Rutland Water; with autumn numbers often exceeding five thousand (John Wright)

Nowadays all eyes hope for sightings of fishing Ospreys, usually noted from late March. The north arm at Barnsdale is a likely site to see one of these magnificent birds diving into the water, as is the south arm near Manton (*see* Chapter 26 – A New Home for the Osprey).

An Arctic Tern resting on its northward spring migration
(John Wright)



Above: The introduction of Ospreys to Rutland Water has been a major conservation success
(John Wright)

journey to Africa. This is also the time when European Black Terns appear, lazily hawking insects from the air or water surface. They are sometimes joined by the rarer White-winged Black Tern, usually as single birds but three were present in September 2005. Rarer autumn visitors have included Great and Arctic Skuas and Little Auk, mostly in October.

Ospreys may be more obvious in the summer months, especially as in 2005 up to thirteen birds frequented the reservoir area. Common Terns, now feeding young on the Egleton reserve, call raucously as they fish for fry in the more sheltered areas. Thousands of Swifts feed over the reservoir, flying low over the water in overcast conditions. They, and the Swallows and Martins, may fall prey to Hobbies which by now have young to feed in their crow nests on nearby farmland.

House Martins and Sand Martins assemble in their hundreds over sheltered stretches of water in September where, again, they are a target for the Hobbies which will soon be joining them on the

House Martins collecting mud for nest building
(John Wright)



Wildfowl and Waders

Rutland Water's exalted status as a bird reserve is based on the variety and numbers of the wildfowl which it attracts. Careful management has created the shallow lagoons required by the dabbling ducks – Mallard, Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler – and the deeper



A handsome drake Gadwall. Rutland Water supports internationally important numbers of this dabbling duck (John Wright)

water where thousands of Tufted Ducks and Pochard can moult safely in August and September. Large counts of Mallard and Teal were typical when the reservoir first flooded as the rising water released countless seeds from the weedy grassland and the fertiliser-rich water encouraged an explosion of aquatic plant and animal life. In December 1976, 2,961 Mallard were counted with 2,038 Teal in the following month. These high totals were not sustained once the initial fertility of the water was lost. Comparable figures for December 2005 and January 2006 recorded 1,123 Mallard and 938 Teal.

One species which can fairly claim a close affinity with Rutland Water is the Gadwall. When the reservoir was filling it was an uncommon autumn and winter visitor in the area with up to 25 birds appearing at Eyebrook Reservoir. A remarkable expansion across eastern England saw increasing numbers visiting Rutland Water in autumn. Gadwall have an interesting feeding relationship with Coot, several thousands of which winter at Rutland Water. Coot dive to reach water plants and bring them to the surface to eat. As they surface they are surrounded by an eager scrum of Gadwall which take fragments of water plants and larger pieces if they can do so. Rutland Water is now the most important site for Gadwall in Britain and has recorded counts exceeding 1,500 birds.

Another species for which Rutland Water is particularly important is the Shoveler, a specialist feeder of shallow water where it uses its large bill to filter seeds and invertebrates. Autumn counts regularly reach 600 and over 1,100 have occurred (in September 1999). Numbers decline thereafter, especially if the lagoons freeze, but there is often a return spring passage of up to 200 birds, and one or two pairs may remain to breed.

Two other ducks deserve a special mention, the Garganey and the Pintail. The former is a Teal-sized summer visitor from Africa, the drake sporting a distinctive white line above the eye and greyish flanks. It is a rare breeder in Britain – less than 50 pairs annually – but it usually appears as singles or pairs in April and May and again in

Oystercatchers have nested at Egleton since 1977. The breeding birds usually arrive in March (John Wright)





A party of elegant Black-tailed Godwits feed on a lagoon as they pause on spring passage (John Wright)

Thirty-seven species have been recorded on migration and over twenty species may be present on a good day in September. The Eggleton reserve has attracted a variety of breeding species to its gravel-covered islands and wet meadows, including Little Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Snipe and Redshank. The creation of these special habitats has been an important factor in persuading passage birds to stay and breed. Curlew are becoming more regular visitors for longer periods and may soon be added to the list of breeding species.

Passage waders, those which stop to rest and feed on their migrations between northern Europe and Africa, account for much of the interest which the reservoir holds for bird watchers. One literally does not know what may appear during the spring migration in April and May or the more protracted return passage between July and October.

Spring migration brings adults in breeding plumage – Dunlin, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Wood and Common Sandpipers and tortoise-shell chequered Turnstones, perhaps en route for Greenland or the Russian tundra. Scarcer visitors include Sanderling, Knot, Temminck's Stint and Curlew Sandpiper. Rarely do these birds linger long as they must press on to establish their arctic breeding territories.

Parties of Ruff herald the return migration in late June, some of the males still in their gaudy breeding plumage. They are joined by noisy Greenshanks, Wood, Common and Green Sandpipers and the first flocks of Dunlin, always worth checking for Little Stints or Curlew Sandpipers. Autumn waders are often a challenge with birds in breeding, non-breeding and juvenile plumage often present in the

August and September. The drake Pintail is surely our most elegant duck with its long brown and white neck and striking plumage offset by a long tail. Uncommon or absent in summer, numbers increase from August, reaching over 200 by November, when the males have acquired their breeding plumage.

Rutland Water's extensive shoreline and the lagoons have proved to be a magnet for waders, making it the most important inland site for this group of birds in the country.

A migrant Turnstone finds suitable habitat on the Rutland Water shoreline (John Wright)



A juvenile Curlew Sandpiper on its first southerly migration from its arctic birthplace
(John Wright)



same flock. Occasionally some real rarities appear. These have included Long-billed Dowitcher (2005), White-rumped Sandpiper (1994, 1995 and 1998) and American Golden Plover (November 1996). These New World waders always attract many visitors. Another species, the Pectoral Sandpiper, has occurred seventeen times.

Middle Right: Many Lapwings from Europe winter at Rutland Water. Increasing numbers breed by the Eglington lagoons
(John Wright)

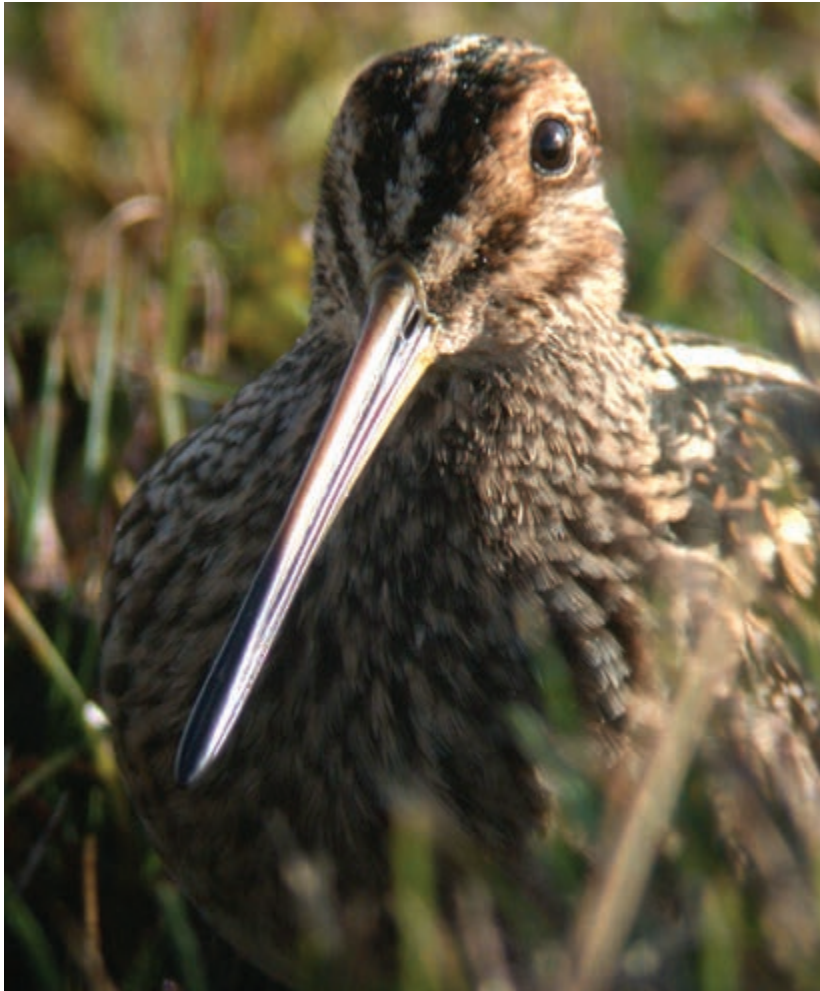


By November most waders have passed through, to be replaced by large wintering flocks of Golden Plovers and Lapwings. These may number over 4,000 and make a fine sight over the Eglington lagoons as they are harassed by a Peregrine, now a regular winter visitor. Up to 200 Dunlin may remain with perhaps a Little Stint, as in winter 2005-06. One or two Green Sandpipers also frequent the lagoons along with varying numbers of Snipe and Jack Snipe.

Below Right: The Green Sandpiper is a common autumn migrant and a scarce winter visitor
(John Wright)



Rarely seen in spring or summer, Snipe are regular winter visitors (John Wright)



Woodland Birds

The loss of so much woodland to Rutland Water was a major heartache to naturalists, whatever their interest. The old deciduous woodlands at Barnsdale, Burley and Hambleton, together with Armley Wood, held a marvellous array of wildlife – flowers, insects and mammals as well as birds. Fortunately time has been kind to the woodland which remains, and despite increased levels of disturbance from cyclists, walkers and dogs, much can still be found. Among the birds, many species have maintained their numbers, some have declined or been lost and some have re-colonised the area.

These fine oak woodlands, with their hazel shrub layer and thickets of blackthorn with bramble, support a varied bird community. Nuthatches and Great Spotted Woodpeckers are common and possibly increasing. Treecreepers nest in crevices in the bark of old trees and Tits breed in suitable holes. The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker still occurs but has declined, and favours stands of old timber where the softer wood is easier for the excavation of nest cavities. Woodcock still occur in winter, mainly as continental

migrants, but the slow roding flight of the males as they patrol their territories on summer evenings has not been seen for several years – part of a national decline of the species. Another charismatic species which has declined is the Nightingale. From a reservoir woodland population of eight singing males in 1977 only five were found in 2005, all in Hambleton Wood and Gibbet Gorse. Rutland birds seem to favour dense blackthorn scrub from which to sing. Hopefully, recent coppicing in Hambleton Wood will recreate the right habitat and enable their numbers to recover.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – most obvious when calling or drumming in March and April
(John Wright)

The Redstart used to be a regular summer migrant to Burley Wood, where a population of up to six males remained throughout the 1980s. Then a decline set in and the last confirmed breeding record was in 1995. This colourful and lively bird used nest boxes for several years and a number of broods were ringed. One bird ringed in 1989 was caught by a cat at Redhill in Surrey in August 1990 but was released unharmed and hopefully completed its migration to Africa.

The recovery of birds of prey has been an encouraging feature of the bird watching scene over the last 30 years. Before the reservoir site was flooded Sparrowhawks were virtually unknown in the area, scarce winter and passage visitors. In February 1979 one soaring over Half Moon Spinney proved to be the advance guard of a re-colonisation which has seen all woodlands now occupied and local villages receiving visits from hunting birds. The display flights of breeding pairs can be seen from February to May, especially where there are tall conifers which provide secure nest sites.

Nightingales have declined in recent years but may still be found in Hambleton Wood
(John Wright)

The arrival of the Buzzard as a resident has been a more recent event, dating from 1998. Pairs or larger groups soaring over Barnsdale or Burley hark back to the nineteenth century before persecution eliminated this fine raptor. Also returning is the Red Kite, colonising from the population established by releases and breeding in Rockingham Forest. As the Rutland Water woodlands regain their full quota of lost species we may hope for the return of the Raven, which last bred in Rutland in 1840 but has been present in Leicestershire since 2000.



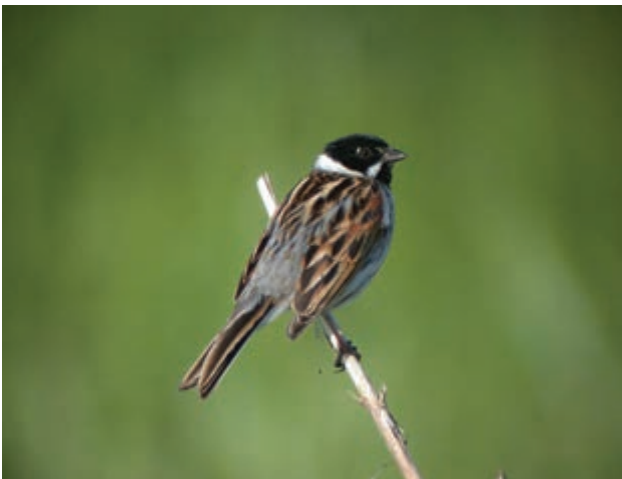
Reedbed Birds

When Burley fishponds were flooded the Phragmites reedbeds vanished and an important habitat for Reed Warblers was lost (RO)



Concerns over the fate of birds which rely on reedbeds were expressed as the Rutland Water project evolved as there were important stands of *Phragmites* around Burley Fishponds. They supported the largest population of Reed Warblers in Rutland, some twenty-five pairs, and occasionally attracted small numbers of Bearded Tits in winter and a passing Marsh Harrier in spring. Establishing new reedbeds on the nature reserve was a priority and these now occupy the northern edge of Lagoon Three. They have proved to be a great success, attracting ringed Reed Warblers from the now vanished Fishponds reedbeds along with Cetti's Warblers in winter (1995-96, 1997-98 and 2001-02) and the rare Savi's Warbler. Marsh Harriers are now annual visitors in April and May and could breed – if a male and a female were to arrive at the same time! These new reedbeds have played a major role

A Reed Bunting at the new reedbeds on the nature reserve (John Wright)



in attracting Bitterns to the reserve, although they are rarely easy to see. Bitterns have become regular winter visitors since 2001; there had been about five or six previous records, dating back to 1979, including a juvenile which had been fitted with a radio transmitter at the RSPB Minsmere reserve earlier in the summer. The reedbeds support a good winter population of Water Rails, which have bred in recent years.

Migrants

A reservoir as large and popular as Rutland Water was bound to attract rare birds among the large numbers of migrants which pass through in spring and autumn and this has certainly been the case. Early examples, a Collared Pratincole (July 1977) and an Alpine Swift (August 1978) were seen mainly by reserve staff but others have attracted large numbers of admirers; a Red-throated Pipit came in May 1981 and a Bridled Tern in June 1984. A juvenile Night Heron wintered in 1984-85 but unfortunately died, whilst a Cattle Egret stayed for twelve days in April 1993. Little Egrets were first recorded at Rutland Water in 1989 and they are now regular visitors in late summer and autumn. Six were present in 2004. Their larger relative, the Great White Egret, has visited the reservoir on three occasions. Ringing provided the county's first Bluethroat, a female, in April 1996.



Wildfowl have naturally provided a number of rarities including American Wigeon, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup, but the rarest of all was a drake Redhead found among a flock of Pochard in February 1997. It was only the second record of this species in the Western Palearctic. Most of the rare waders have already been mentioned but several Purple Sandpipers have occurred and a North American Lesser Yellowlegs was present at Egleton for a week in September 2004. Avocets appear in most years and looked set to breed in 1996 until their nest was predated by a Coot.

A Bearded Tit at Burley Fishponds from Haines' Notes on the Birds of Rutland, published in 1907



One or two Yellow-legged Gulls may be found in the early winter gull roost (John Wright)

Conclusion

This review highlights the changes which have occurred to the bird life as a result of the development of Rutland Water, as habitats have changed or matured or have been deliberately created to attract key species. It has not been possible to mention all of the 256 species which have been recorded at the reservoir but the reader will have gained a good impression of what can be seen, when and where, throughout the year. In a changing world it is difficult to predict what is to come but at Rutland Water the proposed devel-

An Osprey with its recently caught evening meal – a Pike (John Wright)



opment of lagoons at the western end of the reservoir should mitigate any problems which may arise from increased draw-down, which would affect the feeding opportunities for dabbling ducks and waders. The Osprey introduction project could see a self-sustaining population of these marvellous fish-eating raptors becoming established and further habitat manage-

ment on the nature reserve may add Curlew or Black-tailed Godwit to the breeding birds. Many would welcome an increase in Nightingales to pre-reservoir days.

Ask any bird watchers what they love about Rutland Water and you will get a range of answers: seeing the first Wheatear of the year flitting across the stonework of the dam on a cold March morning; hearing the Nightingale in a still dawn at Hambleton; or seeing unending streams of gulls coming in to roost on a January afternoon. For most the sight of an Osprey labouring over the water carrying a freshly caught Pike or Rainbow Trout and the huge flocks of winter wildfowl on the lagoons will ensure many more visits to this magical reservoir.



A Mute Swan and cygnets at the Rutland Water Nature Reserve (John Wright)