

New Year bird race 2009

By Pete Hadfield

With good birding in the Isle of Man getting more and more difficult over the years. (I blame Malta!) we haven't managed to gather enough enthusiasm to do a New Years Day bird race since 2006.

In 2006 we smashed the previous record of 87 with an excellent 95. We were so close to the magical 100 but, since then, there haven't been enough wintering scarcities about to allow us to challenge that target.

2009 was going to follow 2007 and 2008 in having no race, until on New Years Eve I worked out there were 94 species definitely in the IOM at the moment and there was another 16 'possibles' that have been seen recently.

That raised my enthusiasm enough but it took the offer of letting Chris enjoy the comfort of a modern car for a day before he finally gave in. :)

The weather forecast was giving sunny and clear all day! I couldn't believe that, we never have any sun when we go birding and sure enough even as I drove up in the pitch black I could see a massive cloud behind the hills!! Grr Stupid forecasters.

We both arrived at Close Sartfield at 7.30am which was 1 hour before sunrise.

The day started well as in the car park I backed into a tree stump I couldn't see in the dark. Luckily enough there was zero damage. Pheww!

I hadn't noticed how cold it was on the drive up 'til I got out the car... Holy cowwww. I had several layers on but my face nearly froze solid the second the air hit it.

Hat and gloves on, we headed off to the hide. As we approached the hide my lens cap fell off, bounced on the walkway, rolled next to a gap in the boards then luckily settled flat.. Double phewwww!

I was being a right clumsy idiot!

In the dark, we were hoping to use this time to hear as many species as possible from the "dawn chorus" as the birds woke up in their safe haven of the extensive willow scrub.

First up was a quacking **Mallard** which actually was a Mallard this year. Chris' flatulence seemed to have stayed at home. This was quickly followed by a **Pheasant** in the distance, several cooing **Collared Doves**, whistling **Teal** from the nearby pool, then I heard a **Common Snipe** but Chris didn't until 10 minutes later (getting slow in his old age). Everything stayed at this level for a few minutes then we got our first stroke of luck as a **Reed Bunting** began calling right next to the hide. This was a bird we didn't get in 2006, as they seem to just disappear in the winter, so this was a good start. We then got scared out of our skin as a **Water Rail** began its ear piercing (pig being murdered style) screeching. This was the only place for Water rail so it was good to get that in the bag. In the next 10 minutes we heard **Moorhen**,

Wren, Robin, Rook, Jackdaw & Blackbird. Then another stroke of luck as I heard a flock of birds flying over. First instincts were **Redpoll** so I said to Chris but with a question mark as I'm not the best call id'er. Chris confirmed it instantly so we ticked off another bird where Close Sartfield is possibly the only place we could get them.

By this time the -1 degrees C temperature was starting to severely affect me as my fingers were close to frostbite (maybe a slight exaggeration). I was just about to suggest moving off to Chris when I spotted a Male **Hen Harrier** float across the back of the clearing. This was what we were waiting for, Chris got on to it so we then left the hide to get back to the heaters in my car!

Nearing the car park we heard a **Goldcrest** in the bushes and saw a few **Herring gulls** flying over and a **Song Thrush** moving through the trees.

It was now 8.30am and the sun was err supposed to be up (but it was stuck behind the humongous cloud that was hanging around).

We moved off up the track by about a mile and Chris said we will try a feeding station he's seen before. As we approached we could see tons of activity.. Excellent! I don't know whose feeding station it was.. but well done! It was massive and was attracting **Dunnoek, Goldfinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, House Sparrow, Chaffinch** and most importantly for our race **Tree Sparrow**. They would have been difficult to find and probably would otherwise have needed a significant detour to find. Overhead a **Magpie** and a flock of **Starling** flew into the trees and a **Pied Wagtail** flew off the road.

Next stop was Ballaugh Cronk which is a shallow shingle/sand beach area, easily viewed from a car park. On the way there we spotted some thrushes fly out of a tree, crossing our fingers we got lucky as they were **Fieldfare** and **Redwing**. In 2006 we nearly missed out on these so it was good to bag them so early. While there we found a **Coal Tit** in the bushes and a **Great Black-backed Gull** flew over.

At the Cronk there was a strangely large amount of **Common Gull** about but there were also **Oystercatcher** and **Curlew** on the beach and several **Shag** on the sea. Also on a telegraph wire was a group of **Hooded Crow**. As we were about to depart, I spotted two waders flying along the tide line. I called **Knot** and Chris scrambled for his bins and got onto them, that was another bird we could have easily missed out on. Driving out of the Cronk we spotted a couple of **Greenfinch** feeding in a field.

We now had to work our way north to the Point of Ayre, visiting all the access points to the North Western beaches. This section of the coast was the only good place to pick up Divers, Scoters etc.

Moving through Jurby, as I was doing my drive-spot tactics I suddenly noticed I was veering off to a concrete raised path. I instinctively turned right hard but Chris wasn't aware I was doing any of this so it jerked his head to the left. Cue several expletives and severe exaggerations that I had broken his neck! Lucky we aren't

American or he would be suing my ass off.

First location was Ballagaraghyn, it was FREEZZING here, it was like a mini wind tunnel, luckily enough there was absolutely nothing here so we were quickly back in the warm car.

The next left turn off the road was down to the Lhen. This used to be my favourite spot for divers you could not fail to see them here..... we failed...there was nothing. But our disappointment was (marginally) lifted by at least a bird lifting off from the dunes..It was a crow so I (more in hope than skilfully) said **Carrion crow**. Amazingly it was. Yet another bird that could be easily missed out on.

Next stop was the scene of what completely made our brilliant record of 95 in 2006, Blue Point.

At every other accessible location on the NW coast, you are at sea level but at Blue point the sea is not that far from a sediment cliff of about 80-100 ft high, so you view from there. Having the height gives you the angle to scan the sea much better. This is the place for Scoters if you don't get them here, forget it..... there were no Scoters, and very little else. I had to crack out the scope to eventually find a **Red Throated Diver** and a nice **Male Red-Breasted Merganser**.

Going to Blue point we were neck and neck with the 2006 total of 40. Leaving Blue point we were 8 behind!! It had been that much of a disaster.

Undeterred we continued on. Back down to sea level, next along was Smeale beach. In a field on the way I was doing my usually drive-spot everywhere else when I spotted a thrush in a field. The lack of 4x4 height was affecting us a bit and it was a struggle to get a view over the hedge but when we did we were pleased to see it was a **Mistle Thrush**. This completed the "Thrush set".

It was now 10.00am, the tide was quite low so the beach was pretty barren. We spotted a few **Black-headed Gulls** flying up the shore and Chris clocked a **Great Northern Diver** flying north. With nothing else about we went back for the car. As we did another Crow appeared out of the Dunes, this time it was a **Raven**.

We were already starting to feel it wasn't going to be our day. We needed some luck and fast.

At the next stop, Ballaghennie we got a some luck alright.... but not the good kind ! First up on the visitors centre roof was a **Stonechat** and on the beach were a handful of **Golden Plover** but then I spotted a Red throated Diver closer in than I have ever seen one. Chris tried to warn me off as we didn't have time but I had to attempt a photo as all my RTD photos are rubbish, so every time it dived I went sprinting off (in my several layers and carrying about 8kg of gear!!). Each time it surfaced I collapsed in an "out of breath sweaty heap" so it hopefully wouldn't see me. Doing this I managed to get right to the tide edge without spooking it. But it kept resurfacing further away than I anticipated. At least I got lined up as it surfaced

but it was a bit further out than previously but I managed an OK shot especially considering the light.



I then stood up to go back and was in shock to see Chris as a tiny spec in the distance.. I had sprinted a total of about half a mile!! No wonder I felt like I was going to collapse. I then started trudging back when I saw Chris waving his arms about. I thought oh no... he's found the Snow Bunting that was seen here recently. I tried to pick up the pace to get back quicker but I felt like I was going to keel over in a pool of vomit from being so knackered so had to just continue staggering on. 5 minutes later I got back and Chris hit me with it..... Gannet flying north.. A very common bird in summer but in this time of winter it's extremely rare, there was no way I would be seeing another Gannet today. Chris was angry we had missed a "possible", I was annoyed and feeling sick. It was all going super...not.

We reached the Point of Ayre at 11.00am - exactly the same time as in 2006. Spooky. First thing to do was to view the corner of the private gravel pits that is viewable from outside the fence.

Hopefully the next time we do a bird race these pits will be finally opened to the public and have some warm hides to sit in!! (hahaha ..sorry, I think I'm hallucinating from sleep deprivation)

Luckily enough a lot of ducks were in our view and we picked up **Cormorant**, **Wigeon**,

Pochard, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Coot and Scaup. We could also hear the resident **Greylag Goose** flock honking in the distance.

This was the spot for Twite as well but they just were not showing. This was another blow to the race.

When we parked up at the actual Point we both dived into our lunches to recharge as well as scanning the sea for anything about. We did quite well here and picked up **Guillemot** and **Razorbill** flying past and a distant **Kittiwake**. Handy! I then saw a diver flying south, It was definitely a Black-throated Diver with the tell tale all white flanks, we severely needed this but between lowering my bins, pointing Chris in the direction and then bringing my bins back up I lost it. We assumed it had landed but we just couldn't relocate it arghghghh. Then, suddenly, as I had my mouth full of Pringles I spotted a large white bird flying over the sea from the south. I nearly punched Chris as I tried to point out of the window, then spat out GGGgRUNNET as Pringles went all over the place. There it was (possibly the same bird) a **Gannet**! There were woops of delight and air fives all round! I doubt anyone's had that reaction before when seeing a Gannet.

It was now 12.00 still bang on the 2006 time schedule but we were only on 60 birds which was 10 behind the 2006 count at this point... errkkk.

It was looking more and more unlikely we would challenge the record but would we even beat Chris' team's 2003 total of 87? We pinned all our hopes that Langness/Derbyhaven would get us out of this trouble later in the day.

After the Point we moved down the East side of the island towards Ramsey, on the way we stopped off at Glascoe Dubh which is a small flooded shallow pool which holds good numbers of wintering ducks. At least 2 Shovelers winter here every year..... We pulled up..... zero Shovelers.. Absolutely unbelievable. We had to be seeing the birds that were definitely there in order for us to have a chance.

Into Ramsey we checked the harbour mouth area for the wintering Black Redstart, but as Chris hadn't seen the bird for a couple of weeks this didn't look good. Sure enough we saw nothing apart from some **Ringed Plover** on the edge of the tide. A check along Mooragh park lake and Ramsey harbour for the Kingfishers also resulted in nothing. But we did pick up **Feral Pigeon**..... woوو well done us.... not. Moving round to the Poyll Dooley section of the Sulby River, behind Ramsey bakery, we saw **Canada Goose** on the way and a **Redshank** on the river. But extremely worrying the Little Grebes were not showing and there were no Grey Wagtails at all! We had to get out and run up the path to the corner of the river, dodging what seemed like a carpet of dog crap.

Poyll Dooley? Poyll Pooey more like.

Chris exclaimed no Little Grebes and frantically stormed off further down the path.. I looked up the river and was a bit confused as sitting in the middle of the river was 1 **Little Grebe**. Chris came back and claimed oh yeah, ummm it must have dived or something..... Yeahhh or his eyes are going.. but there was no time for mickey-taking, we turned round and got quickly back to the car.

On the way through Ramsey we checked the "Waxwing" trees by Shoprite but they were completely empty. A Waxwing on a NYD bird race would have been a fantastic addition. In Ramsey we went up to Chris' feeding station, we stopped briefly, Chris said two **Siskin** on the feeder and we drove off. Quality bird-racing skills there. Moving out of Ramsey, Chris was adamant there must be some Waxwing about as people keep seeing flocks of 20-30 in Ramsey so he directed us into an estate he had seen them in about 5 years ago. Not only did we not see any Waxwings we also did see any Berry trees!! .

Not Chris' best idea of the day. He soon followed it with another...

But first one of his better plans. We went to a place called Bayr-ny-Hayrey which I had never even heard of. It was some weird slightly flooded stubble field, but here was the only place we should be able to see **Whooper Swans** as they aren't in their usual Jurby field anymore. Sure enough the second we pulled up there were several white blobs in the field and not a false alarm with Sheep this time... By this time we also were seriously worrying about Woodpigeon!! We hadn't seen any at all all day but here the sky was full of them! No wonder we hadn't seen any, the entire **Manx Wood Pigeon** population was hanging out in this field!. But also Chris had had something else with these swans the day before. We scanned the birds but nothing. We edged forward and luckily spotted it peaking its head out from the stubble. 1 **Pink footed Goose**. Phewwww, there was no chance of seeing a pink foot after this location.

Next stop was after a bit of a discussion, Chris wanted to drive through Sulby Curraghs but I wanted to nip into the Garey where we had a good chance of a roving tit flock. I won and we drove in, the second we crossed the ford we could hear several birds calling in the trees. We got out and got the bird we came for **Long-tailed Tit**. We couldn't pick out a Treecreeper though which was a bit of a pig as that would be it for Treecreeper and another bird lost over 2006. Dohhh!

As we went to drive off I suddenly noticed my lack of petrol. Not to worry I thought I'll get some when back down south before coming back up. But Chris said err no all Petrol stations are shut today.....!! Cue quick calculations . It said I had 95 miles left (at 27mpg, which is a great mpg in my car). I had about 30miles to get down south and around 50 to get back up north and home again..... it should be ok.. .. errkk. This added extra pressure as I was now thinking about removing places to go to to save fuel.

Chris obviously wasn't worried as he then insisted we drive through Sulby Curraghs in 1st gear doing about 12mpg..... So we trundled through and saw exactly nothing. Chris had hoped for Red legged Partridge, a bird we missed in 2006. But true to form we missed it in 2009 as well. Dohhh!

We were behind schedule now but I couldn't make the time up as I was trying to "hypermile" on the drive down south to save fuel so was doing 4x4 slow ass speeds. On the way down Chris spotted a **Kestrel** flying over the road.. I then had to try lean forward and look up without crashing into oncoming traffic..... it was a narrow one but I managed it phewww...

Half way down the island Chris suddenly comes out with.. "Glen Helen!!"... I went "eh,

you wot..".

He had had (another) brainwave and decided a virtually un-birded area was where we should stop. Glen Helen is a very large area of plantation in a steep sided valley, it's usually very poor for birds. If it was anything other than right on the road we were on I was going to tell him to shove it but I pulled in off the road and parked up. As we got out Chris headed straight for the busy restaurant! I was getting more confused.. Some people leaving the Restaurant must have thought what on earth was going on as two blokes with binoculars round their necks and dressed like they were about to scale Ben Nevis were walking towards them. Suddenly Chris shrieked TREECREEPER and started clicking his fingers like a mentalist. I scurried up as the Treecreeper ran behind the tree. Chris began a tirade of expletives at the little blighter but fortunately it flew off that tree to the one behind.

Kerrrrchingggggggggggggg. **Treecreeper** in the bag and one we thought had gone for the day. It had taken a total of 2 minutes to get it , it actually took me longer to put my hat and gloves on than find it. I then had to sit through 10 minutes of a gloating Chris.....arghghgh!

Just before we got down south we took a quick detour to the dams at Foxdale. This failed to produce the ducks we wanted in 2006.. and, shock horror, it failed in 2009. We had to try though as we desperately needed some good luck now.

As we entered Castletown it hit 14.00. We had gained a 20 minute advantage from 2006 by completely avoiding Peel on the west coast which had been a disaster 3 years ago.

We were now 12 behind the 2006 count at this same stage. The next hour would make or break the race.

Just before a junction I spotted a flock of small birds flitting about over a field. I instantly stopped in the middle of the road hoping it was Linnet (we hadn't seen Linnet yet!!! unbelievable). We listened out for the call and confirmed it was a tick but not Linnet...It was a flock of **Meadow Pipit**. Bit bizarre, but we would take it. Just past this stop I saw a petrol station, crossing my fingers and toes it looked open! Yesss. The car was showing as only 50miles left!. We could expand the route back to what was planned.. phewww. I decided to go after we had been to Langness though, so we could hit there bang on high tide.

We needed Langness and Derbyhaven to produce everything that was there the day before.... at the beach section called Sandwick we had a **Skylark** fly over, good start, that's one we missed in 2006. On or around the beach were **Shelduck**, **Rock Pipit**, **Chough** and after a bit of searching a shy **Turnstone**. Off the shore was a pair of **Eider** too. I was glad to pick these up as I haven't seen that many about recently. Looking towards Langness itself were some of the Derbyhaven **Brent geese**. We scoured the area for the Little Egret that has been getting reported nearly every day from there but we couldn't see it. I haven't managed to see it at all yet. I was

hoping a recently reported Pintail was still about but unfortunately it wasn't. Also quite worryingly there was no sign of any falcons. We only had Kestrel so far which was pitiful. But even more ridiculous was there was not one Grey Heron at Langness. I don't think I've ever not seen a Heron here in the last 5 years of birding. Langness had been a severe let down. Chris had already resigned himself to the 2006 record being unbeatable, I was hanging on... but not for long. We moved round to Fort Island which is a little rocky island sticking out the end of Derbyhaven bay to pick up the very easy wintering Grey Plover.....guess what..... that's right, absolutely no sign of the Grey Plover. This was the final nail in the coffin for me. Our luck was just not with us today. I revised my target to the 2003 total of 87 but as we were only on 81 with an hour left of light, things did not look good at all. Whilst searching for the Grey Plover we did find a **Dunlin** on the causeway though. So at least we got something. Moving right round Derbyhaven bay to the north end we saw nothing new at all. At the Aero club section we hoped for Linnet but it was all quiet on the beach. Then we saw the possible reason for that. A superb male **Peregrine** blasted straight through. We then had to start thinking on our feet for 4 birds. I suggested Strandhall, Port St Mary then back out to Peel. This, in theory would get us Grey Wagtail, Grey Heron, Lapwing, Purple Sandpiper and Black Guillemot. 5 birds that would beat 2003!! ..

On the way to Strandhall I turned into the Petrol Station only for it to be looking very empty ... I was worried but when the pump started pumping fuel I calmed down. As I went to pay I saw a sign on the door.. New years opening times... 10.30am to 3.30pm... It was 3.20pm!!!! Holy \$%#% how close was that? If we had had a better time at Langness we would have been scuppered. Maybe lady luck was giving us a little bit back to help us beat the 2003 count.

Strandhall is a place to view a sheltered shoreline/bay. When I did surveys I would regularly count up to 100 Lapwing at the Pooyl Vaaish end and would see Grey Wagtail every time at Strandhall.

Lady Luck was obviously taking the piss by helping us get fuel, she was just wanting to continue our misery.

We did get one bird though and it (unbelievably) got another cheer from the car.....

Grey Heron.

That was it for Chris, every 5 seconds he was saying I wanna go home... I ignored him and tried to pull out the greatest manoeuvre of bird race history... (on the Isle of Man anyway . I can't speak for UK bird races.)

One Waxwing had been getting seen near the amenity centre in Port Erin which is close to Port St Mary. I didn't know exactly where but I knew the trees are along the road. I turned up the road driving quite slow, we checked all the trees and then, right at the last tree.....we worked out there were no Waxwing here..... crap.

We carried on to Port St Mary breakwater anyway. Looking over the wall, on the

rocks I was expecting to go .. yep there they are and drive off. Unfortunately we looked over and went errr where are they. After looking at a tiny patch of rock for a couple of minutes we finally spotted some Ringed Plover, then Dunlin then Turnstone.... but not our quarry. Totally crazy... but after scanning some more in a bit of a "this is totally stupiddd" strop, there were the little dark blobs. 9 **Purple Sandpiper** in total.... It was 15.45, our plan was now to go to Peel then back to the Curraghs even though the sun would have set.

We went up the west coast and through the hills hoping maybe for a hunting Short eared Owl but that was a bit optimistic. In Peel we parked up on the breakwater scanned the bay and we quickly realised Peel had been yet another failure. No Black Guillemots and no Fulmars either.

We hadn't lost any time though and arrived back in the Curraghs at a good time for Owls. If we could get Barn and Long-eared Owl here like in 2006 then we will have matched the 2003 total.....

We didn't, we lasted 15 minutes to 17.00 then gave up. To top the day off, on the way out I tripped over a bit of wood and nearly dislocated my knee cap... awesome.

We ended the day on 85 and had seen some pretty good birds for the Isle of Man but it still felt like a failure. We had missed out on 11 birds that there was no reason for missing as the birds were there. The worst of the bunch being Linnet, Lapwing and Grey Wagtail. But Sparrowhawk, Black Guillemot, Twite, Grey Plover, Shoveler, Sanderling & Red-legged Partridge were terrible to miss out on. Not forgetting the Black-throated diver incident and not seeing the near resident Little Egret at Langness.

It shows the potential is there to break 100 as you would just need 2 more lucky sightings from a Merlin, Black Redstart, Bar tailed godwit, Common Scoter etc . If I was loaded I would put up a £1000 prize to see if anyone could hit 100. But I'm not, so I will put up £5 quid. So if anyone out there wants to put a team against us next year for the chance to win a whole £5 give us a shout in December :)

As a side note, I went down to Langness/Derbyhaven the day after and saw Linnet, Twite and Grey Plover the instant I parked up. We also were told on New Years Day the Little Egret was seen at Sandwick and there had been a flock of 25 Waxwings over Ramsey!!!

Talk about an extra kick in the Gentleman's area.