

New year's day 2016

Due to missing out last year's bird race I was adamant that I was going to make the effort and do one this year even if I had to do it alone. With just a few days to go the weather forecast was looking really bad so I started to doubt if it'd even be worth my while. When I did a quick calculation of what was about and realised that there were only 66 defos and 22 possibles I started to give up hope completely. Normally the total available (including possibles) is over 100 making the magic ton a possibility, although still highly unlikely. The fact that 100 wasn't looking remotely possible took the wind out of my sails but on New Year's Eve I finally decided I'd go for it. Wendy was undecided as to whether she'd be coming with me due to her having a few problems, which she was having physio for. She had a horrible feeling that an entire day getting in and out of the car in the freezing cold would only make it all worse. When her friend dropped in on her New Year's Eve rounds I went off to bed early in preparation for my early start. Wendy's friend ended up staying until about 2.30am, so that kind of made the decision for her.

On New Year's Day my alarm went off at 7am only for me to turn it off and fall back to sleep until 7.20am....Whoops! I quickly got my things together and went to look out of the living room window at the garden, which is usually caked in birds. Unfortunately I was a bit early and it was still pitch black, so I took Lyca outside for a wee and had a listen instead. Straight off I heard **Robin, Blackbird and Herring Gull**. It was absolutely blowing a gale outside and that didn't bode well for the day ahead because I knew that everything would be keeping their heads down but at least it wasn't raining for a change. If it'd been raining and windy I think I might've just gone back to bed and pulled the plug on the whole thing. As it gradually got lighter I realised that the birds just weren't coming in, so as the light was just about bird-able I came up with a cunning plan. I could pop out to Tromode and Douglas instead of waiting till 9am like my original plan. Wendy had done a recce of Tromode for me the day before, which had been successful, so it was well worth a shot but certainly not a defo.

I left at 8.10am and nipped to Tromode, which worked an absolute treat as the roosting pair of **Goosanders** were still there! Get in! If I'd left it any later they would've been off down river. Also around the Dam were **Magpie, Coot, Mallard & Wren**. I then thought I could nip into Douglas while I was out. Driving through Douglas I picked up **Rook, Jackdaw and Starling** but down at Leigh Terrace it was very quiet. Up river were 2x **Moorhen** but nothing else so I went across the road to look towards the harbour and luckily got a **Grey Wagtail**. I'd struggle to find one of them elsewhere on my route too so that made it a really good start. Also at the bridge was a **Mute Swan** just sitting there all on its own strangely and on the way back to the house I spotted a **Hoody** and **Blue Tit**.

Back at the garden it was light but there were still no birds.....Arghghgh! I grabbed the Nikon P900 bridge camera, which I was going to try as my one stop shop for the day to see how versatile it could be so I wasn't taking any of my DSLR gear at all! No sooner had a small flock of **Goldfinch, Siskin and Chaffinch** arrived than a female **Sparrowhawk** shot in and scared them all off. The Sparrowhawk was sitting in the apple tree so I grabbed a poor record shot through the window.



Even though I love watching the Sparrowhawk, today I really needed it to go away but it just wouldn't budge. Every time the little birds came in it'd dart out of the tree to try and grab one. That put paid to me getting any of the Tit species or anything else, so after ticking off **Collared Dove**, **Wood Pigeon** and **Feral Pigeon** flying over I thought I'd better get going.

Just before I left I had a quick check of the camera and even though it had a full battery the day before it was now showing only one bar.....Nooooo! That would never last the entire day and I'd really wanted to put the camera to the test but what could I do? I quickly got my thinking cap on and remembered that I had an inverter in the garage so I grabbed that and the camera charger, so I was able to charge the camera in the car.....Result!

I packed everything into the car including my nutritious lunch of Pepsi Max, Crisps and a Mars Bar and got going at 9am. Normally Wendy would've made sarnies but she was still out for the count in bed! I'd originally planned to be leaving at 9am to go to Tromode, so I was pleased to have already saved 30minutes in what looked like was going to be a very tight schedule.

My next stop was Eairy Dam where I got my target species of **Tufted Duck** straight off. I was going to drive straight off but then thought there might be some Tits about and sure enough after a minute or two a **Great Tit** started calling. While I'd been waiting I'd attempted a Tufty shot with the camera, which came out OK, especially considering how poor the light was.



I scanned the edges of the Dam in the vague hope of a Snipe but there was nothing about so I quickly moved on.

Normally on a New Year's bird race we omit Peel but since I was doing a crazy off the wall route I decided it was doable.



Down at the breakwater I finally got a **House Sparrow** along with the 3x **Great Northern Divers** that had appeared during the storms the day before. There was also all the usual winter birds you'd expect to find at Peel and I ticked off **Shag, Black Guillemot, Great Black-backed Gull, Pied Wagtail, Black-headed Gull, Eider & Rock Pipit**. Unfortunately the 2 birds I really needed here, Fulmar and Kittiwake, were nowhere to be seen.....Typical! I went down the breakwater steps to see if the camera could do anything with the Great Northern Divers but they were too far away even for 83x zoom! Just before I was going to give up a Black Guillemot popped up about 15 feet away from me

and the camera managed an OK shot of that too, which was nice. I did wish I had the DSLR for that shot though!



Out of desperation I went round to the rocks at the back of the breakwater in a last ditch attempt for Purple Sandpiper. They obviously weren't there at low tide but a quick scan of the sea revealed a **Razorbill**. Not always a given on New Year's Day. That seemed to wrap all the Peel birds up nicely, so I headed off up the west coast, which meant I could also do a quick stop at Bishop's Dubh.

When I arrived there at 10.06am I had to get out of the car to have a good look, which I never like doing. It's a really fast section of road but there'd been a Pintail there recently as well as my target bird, so it was worth the risk.



As I got out a **Song Thrush** flew out from below me, which was very handy, as I knew I'd really struggle for one of them. They seem to be getting harder and harder to see every year. I had a scan around the edges of the pond and that got me what I was hoping for, a **Common Snipe**. Good stuff :).

Next up was a drive through Ballaugh Curraghs via the best bird feeding station on the island. Going through the Curraghs I came across a big flock of **Redwing**, which was really handy seeing as the winter Thrushes can sometimes be a nightmare to find. As I drove on I could hear a very strange high-pitched squeal and was wondering what on earth it was. I rounded a corner and coming the opposite way was a bloke on a pushbike with a Shetland Sheep dog in the front basket squealing its head off! Hahaha it looked really funny but I couldn't work out if it was squealing with excitement or fear though.

At the feeding station there were birds everywhere but unfortunately the owners of the house were out working in the garden which meant the birds were flying around constantly.....Arghgh! I set about scanning them all but could only add **Mistle Thrush** and **Coal Tit**. There wasn't any sign of a single Tree Sparrow, which is depressing considering it used to be THE spot in the island for them. Nearby I saw a **Raven** flying over and a field with **Greylag Goose** and **Pheasant** in it.

I knew that Whooper Swans had been getting seen again, so I'd checked which field they were in this winter the day before and found out it was on Summerhill Road again. I fired that in my Sat nav as I can never remember which one of the millions of tiny roads it was up there. I think I found the exact field they were meant to be but typically there were no Swans there. There were some **Fieldfare** though, which was OK (a tick is a tick) but it would've been the only place on the island to see Whooper swans and I'd probably see Fieldfare somewhere else. To take the sting out of it one Fieldfare came relatively close to the car, which gave me a chance to play with the camera a bit more.



I've still got a lot to learn with the P900 and I think I could've got a better shot in that situation but it's just working out which mode is the correct one to use, doing what is basically digiscoping in a tiny package.

Heading northwards I stopped off at Andreas to try and dig out some Red-legs or even an Owl.... Yeah right! I had a good snoop about but could only pull out a **Kestrel**, which wasn't to be sniffed at knowing that I'd struggle to see any of the Birds of Prey in such bad weather.

Finally I got to the Point of Ayre at 11.10am and in my original plan I wasn't to leave the Point any later than 2pm! I started to get really worried that I'd goofed up somewhere, as I was miles and

miles ahead of schedule and a quick check of my total so far confirmed I had, as I was well down on numbers :{.

Firstly I had a look at Sean's ringing area in the hope that some Twite would be about but even though there were loads of **Linnets** there wasn't any Twite to be seen.....Booo :(I then walked up the path around Wright's Pit to view the Gravel pits from the fence.



This is where the Scope replacement ability of the P900 came in useful, as you can see by the photo that the water is absolutely miles off. Using the camera on full 83x zoom I was able to ID **Wigeon**, **Teal** and **Pochard** even in the strong winds! Very handy! Annoyingly though I then spotted a couple coming out of the pits with two dogs off the lead!! The place is fenced off and quite obviously private and it's been over 10 years since it was supposed to have been opened as a nature reserve. A lot of birds nest and roost in there and getting disturbed by people is bad enough since there aren't any banks or screens up but to have dogs off the lead is so selfish it's untrue. The people looked a bit scummy as well so I didn't fancy taking them on single-handed. Annoyed with this I walked back seeing a small flock of **Choughs** flying over.

I then went to the tip itself to have a look at the sea and as it was quite windy I got lucky with several **Kittiwake** flying past, which made up for me missing them at Peel. I found a **Red-throated Diver** sitting on the water then a few **Common Gulls** flew along the beach. Not much else was going on so I decided that seeing as I had time I'd drive down Point West to see if I could find any Twite amongst the dunes. Before I got there a flock of **Turnstone** flew up the beach and a pair of **Shelduck** flew in off the sea! Wahey, I was racking up the birds now. I couldn't find anything amongst the dunes except for a **Carrion Crow**, which was better than nothing I suppose. With the Point of Ayre exhausted I set off down the east coast to my next planned stop at Ramsey.

There are a few areas to check at Ramsey and I had tons of time to play with so I could start to relax a bit (time wise that is!). I arrived at 12.12pm and checked the Grand Island beach first. Sure enough the wintering **Goldeneye** flock were there.



Next off was the Boat Park just in case a Black Redstart had dropped in but there was nothing. While I was there I drove to the quay and had a look back towards the harbour but there was nothing there either. I found out a day later that a poor lad had fallen into the harbour right where I was looking about 10 hours earlier and had tragically disappeared. I'm glad I hadn't spotted something totally unexpected while I was there! I then had to drive around the quay to find where the flock of stupid **Canada Geese** were. Eventually I found them hiding near the shipyard and since I had time I thought I might as well check the Sulby River bend.



Fortunately I was spared from having to walk up the dog poo path when I looked down to find a **Little Grebe** directly below me. Phewww! With nothing else to find in Ramsey I set off and headed south at 12.26pm. This was going to be a long drive (by Isle of Man standards) from Ramsey to the south with no planned stops, which again made me think that I'd messed up the route quite badly somewhere along the line. My original plan was to leave Ramsey and head to my final stop of Derbyhaven/Langness but I was still 2 hours ahead of schedule.....Whoops! With this in mind I decided that I had time to add Port St Mary into the route and on the way down going through the southern hills I finally got a **Stonechat**!

I got to Port St Mary at 1.25pm and went straight out to the breakwater.



The tide wasn't in as far as I would've liked but looking over the back I happily added **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Oystercatcher** and **Cormorant**. A bit of a longer search finally revealed what I'd gone there for when I spotted the **Purple Sandpipers**. They're so well camouflaged when they want to be!



Happy with that I went to get back in the car but spotted a group of Eiders displaying, so I thought I'd see what the P900 could do and was quite impressed by the shot it got. In bad light digiscoping used to be practically impossible, so using the same theory the P900 should've been really struggling but it was coping surprisingly well. Obviously it's not a patch on my DSLR and L lens but considering it was a tenth of the price, I can't complain.



I couldn't think of anywhere else to go, although a few days later I found out that the Fulmars were back on the cliffs in nearby Port Erin (Doh) so I headed to Derbyhaven.

I arrived at Derbyhaven at 1.45pm and stopped off at Fort Island first.



From there I was pleased to find the **Red-breasted Merganser** that'd been over wintering there, albeit miles out as usual though.



There was a **Redshank** on the rocks as well as some **Brent Geese** over towards the Golf Links Hotel. Driving off to Langness I picked up a small flock of **Greenfinch** too and was at my last location of Langness at 2pm.

I was really planning to be there as late in the day as possible hoping that a Short Eared Owl might make an appearance and maybe the wintering Water Rails would call. There was nothing else for it but to park up and sit it out, so I decided to park up at the Dubh as the normal parking spot has been blocked off. There was ample room for cars to pass me but quite quickly I started to notice the dirty looks being thrown at me by the drivers, so I tried ignoring them and set about looking for birds instead. I only managed to add **Curlew** and **Dunnock** before I got so annoyed with some of the drivers I thought I'd better move off to prevent some kind of road rage incident happening at any second! I then parked up on Madoc's and saw 2 more Red-breasted Mergansers and extremely luckily a **Gannet** out to sea! Very jammy :). I knew I was really low on birds by this point and that there was literally zero chance of adding enough birds to make it a respectable total. Birds that should've been nailed on at Langness just weren't there. I can only think that they'd possibly gone to roost or something?

With this depressing thought I threw in the towel at 3pm and was home by 3.30pm having added nothing else on the drive back. It hadn't gone unnoticed by Wendy, who was getting ready to go to a family meal at her sister's, that I hadn't made any lunch for myself. After telling me off she kindly made me a sarnie to tide me over before tea.

I'd driven a total of 126 miles and was pretty shattered by the end of the day. Having to drive and look at the same time was obviously far too difficult for one person to cope with on a bird race. This showed in my terrible total of 73. Without checking I think that is the worst total to date! I missed out on some shockers like Goldcrest, Grey Heron, Little Egret but to be fair my initial calculations showed only 66 deffos available so I was probably flogging a dead horse before even setting off. If I'd also taken into account the poor weather conditions I really should have known better!!! I managed 11 possibles and no scribblers so that was a slight positive. My best sighting of the day would've been the Goosanders at Tromode, it's hard to pin them down there at the best of times so I was very lucky to see them.

The Nikon P900 test worked very well, with all shots (scenery and birds) taken on it. Even in the poor light it managed long distance record shots and some quite alright shots as well, so for the price I'm very impressed.

What I've learnt is that a bird race definitely needs more than one person doing it so I won't be trying that again in a hurry. I still like my crazy idea of having a bird photo race, which is to take as many recognisable photos of birds you can in a day. If Wendy's not up for the New Years bird race again I might just try that next year.....Glutton for punishment or what? :).

Bird List

Mute Swan	Oystercatcher	Stonechat
Canada Goose	Ringed Plover	Blackbird
Greylag Goose	Dunlin	Fieldfare
Brent Goose	Purple Sandpiper	Song Thrush
Shelduck	Curlew	Redwing
Wigeon	Redshank	Mistle Thrush
Teal	Turnstone	Blue Tit
Mallard	Snipe	Great Tit
Tufted Duck	Kittiwake	Coal Tit
Pochard	Black-headed Gull	Magpie
Eider	Common Gull	Chough
Goldeneye	Herring Gull	Jackdaw
Red-breasted Merganser	Great Black-backed Gull	Rook
Goosander	Razorbill	Chough
Pheasant	Black Guillemot	Carrion Crow
Red-throated Diver	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Hooded Crow
Great Northern Diver	Woodpigeon	Raven
Little Grebe	Collared Dove	Starling
Gannet	Rock Pipit	House Sparrow
Cormorant	Grey Wagtail	Chaffinch
Shag	Pied Wagtail	Greenfinch
Sparrowhawk	Wren	Goldfinch
Kestrel	Dunnock	Siskin
Moorhen	Robin	Linnet
Coot		

Location map

