

NEW YEARS DAY BIRD RACE 2010

By Pete Hadfield

Yet again there was little interest shown in doing a New Year Bird Race (wimps!) but undeterred I decided I would go myself. (Awwwwww).

Since I was the only one going I planned my own, totally "leftfield" approach and chucked the old school route in the bin. Gone was the mental 7am start at the Curraghs (even though that always gets the birds) and in came a much healthier 8am start at Tromode dam. Losing this hour did bunch up a lot of locations and it did look like it was going to be a mad rush but I was confident (ish) this new route would bring the chance of more possibles than we used to be able to get. At the last minute a willing volunteer, in the form of Wendy, stepped up to go through the depression and disappointment that is the NYD bird race with me. GAME ON.

Nowadays the race isn't a race as such. There aren't any other active birders on the island to compete with, or anyone willing to go through the pain, so now it's just a race against previous bests. The 2002 team got 83, in 2003 they got 87, the 2006 team got the record of 96 and in 2009 they got a poor 85. After the first counts of what was available this year things were looking good with 85 defos, 14 possibles and 12 dodgies. A few recce's later and the defo count was decimated to 81 due to the wintering Red-necked grebe, Great Northern Diver, Greenshank and Whimbrel having seemingly decided it had gone too cold and bogged off. Nooooooo!! The NYD Bird Race was already a rollercoaster of emotions and we hadn't even started! One week before the day, depression had truly kicked in so I adjusted the target to now try to beat the 2009 total with the new leftfield route. Beating the island record was now a distant pipe dream.

After a few days of high winds and bad weather I was happy to see the weather much better on NYD although still absolutely freezing at -1 degrees when we left at 7.50a.m. Maybe the bad weather had blown something exciting in? Yeah right.

Starting at Tromode Dam at 8a.m, in the dark, things didn't go well. The pond was completely frozen over and there was no sign of the wintering Goosanders so that was them off the list for the day. A few **Herring Gull** flew over and after a walk into the woods we found a patch of unfrozen water on which there was **Mallard**, **Mute Swan** and a few **Teal**. In the woods itself the only bird moving around was a **Blackbird** but there was nothing else at all... oh pants. After searching high and low and taking far too long we decided we had to cut our losses and move on but as we did birds suddenly starting calling. We could hear **Blue Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Robin**, **Chaffinch** and **Wren** then a flock of **Redwing** started calling high above us and a **Raven** croaked. Handy! The two birds we desperately wanted to hear though, Treecreeper and Long tailed tit, were not playing ball. It would now be very difficult to see these birds somewhere else Arghghh!! This was a terrible start as we had missed the 3 targets for Tromode and spent an extra 30 minutes searching so were already way behind time. We quickly moved off while getting spookily

mocked by the Mallards. I've never heard as many quacking so loudly. I'm sure they were saying "Quack HA HAAA HA quack quack useless fools quack quack quack." On the way out of Tromode we picked up **Magpie**, **Wood Pigeon**, **Rook**, **Jackdaw** and **Hooded Crow**. There was a tiny bird flitting around a bush and we spent 5 minutes trying to confirm Goldcrest but it was still too dark. More wasted time.... Dohhhh! Our next plan was to go to a feeding station in Braddan (and to get a caffeine fix for Wendy) but I thought a check of Port E Chee lake might pay dividends for Goosander. Not only was there no birds but they was zero water. It was iced over as well and it also looked like it had been drained. Weird.

At 8.45 we reached the feeding station. It was eerily quiet there too. Soon though **Pheasants** appeared followed by **Coal Tit** and **Duncock** on the feeders but again there was no sign of the Siskin target we had hoped for. We were getting miles behind time now so had to just go and head west towards Peel. Just as we left we luckily heard the tell tale squeaking of a **Goldcrest**. Phewww that would be handy for the day.

On the way we stopped at Braaid which was where we had recently found Grey Partridge but carrying on the mornings theme of missing everything we didn't see them either but added **House Sparrow** and **Starling**...(woooooo). The roads were extremely icy so any chance of clawing back time went completely out the window as I was just managing to crawl along at snails pace and keep the car on the road. I managed to negotiate the Eairy bend without skidding into the reservoir, saw **Coot** and **Song Thrush** there and got to Kionslieu in one piece at 9.40. Kionslieu is a small reservoir and is home to possibly the only Gadwall on the island which has been there permanently for about a year but guess what? Yup. We scanned desperately but there was absolutely no sign of it....I couldn't believe it. Fair enough the birds we'd missed earlier were all down as possible but this bird was a 'nailed on' definite. Whilst persistently searching we did get **Wigeon** and it was nice to see 4 **Whooper Swans** standing on the ice. We hadn't expected them here but it still didn't cheer us up. Missing Gadwall was a terrible sign for the day ahead.

On the way to Peel we picked up **Pied Wagtail** and then Wendy screamed "THERE THERE THERE!" That was the only info I was given and I hadn't a clue what she was on about hahaha. I was also on a fast bend and couldn't stop but managed to pull in further up the road in a safer place. She had just seen a Hen Harrier and my confident famous last words were "bah that's alright we will get tons of them at Close Sartfield at the end". As we looked out over the fields we started to see they were alive. First up was more Redwing but then there were tons of **Fieldfare** and a handful of **Mistle Thrush**. Excellent. Wendy wandered off to look in the adjacent field and located a massive flock of finches feeding on some sort of crop. We scanned the flock and it was mainly **Goldfinch** and **Linnet** (a bird we missed out

on last year!) but then we both spotted a couple of **Redpoll!** Brilliant... that's more like it. Our optimism got a tiny boost from this as we moved off into Peel proper.

The day before on a recce we had managed to relocate a Black Redstart at Peel so this was our main target here as the Ramsey bird is now super elusive. My plan was to pull up at the Castle and jump over the wall and start searching but as I stopped I yelped at Wendy "Holy pants batman" (or something similar) the **Black Redstart** is right there! And there it was sitting on the steps no more than 2 yards from the end of my car. It still took Wendy 30 seconds to find the bird like! Hahaha (maybe not helped by my Wendy style directions .. "err its right there... like RIGHT THERE")

I jumped out of the car with my camera and it posed for me beautifully in the sun.



We then continued round to the breakwater and managed to see **Kittiwake, Black headed Gull, Great black-backed Gull, Shag and Eider.** Nothing mind blowing and no sign of the recent Red-throated diver or Long-tailed Duck... bah! On the way out we had a quick check at Fenella Beach to try for Purple Sandpiper but could only locate **Turnstone** and **Oystercatcher.**

Next stop was the South, which is the best area in the island for birds by an absolute mile and a half, so this was where I pinned my hopes on. Our original plan was to nip into Glen Maye on the way down, to try and get Dipper, but we were so far behind time I had to scrub that so next on the chopping block was Port St Mary. The day before we had recce'd the breakwater hoping for Purple Sandpiper, which are getting harder and harder to see over here. I hadn't seen any since about October and we hadn't seen any the previous day so I was going to pull the plug on the idea but at the last second we decided to go for it. It was 10.25 and we were on 44 birds, in 2009 at this point we were at 38, so even though it felt like a shockingly bad start we were actually doing well. On the way down we realised we still hadn't seen Moorhen so we stopped at the Gansey stream expecting to peer over the wall and go there's one.....so we peered over the wall and went... "Errrrr....where the flip are the moorhens? This is getting stupid." We didn't give up though, we jogged up the stream and eventually found just one **Moorhen** but that was enough.

At Port St Mary it was now 30 minutes before high tide so perfect conditions for the Purps to be behind the breakwater. Not only was there no Purps there were no birds at all, not even an Oyc (there was a **Black Guillemot** in the harbour though.. not to be sniffed at). I think at this point we should have got the message that was being punched in our faces and packed up and gone home but we had the good old Manx "never give up never surrender" spirit (or is it *Traa dy Liooar?*) and I had a brainwave to check these weird flat rocks further up the coast that I could see. I've never looked at these rocks before but the second we got to them I shouted **PURPLE SANDPIPER!** Wendy as usual didn't believe me and went "Yeah right where?" I gave directions and she had to eat her words as there were 4 Purps... YES!!!

The sun was in a bad direction but I had to get a record shot so quickly got one.



There were also some **Dunlin** & **Redshank** here too. Finally, a chancy location had paid off... about flipping time!

Next off was the best areas of Langness and Derbyhaven, a quick detour to Strandhall on the way produced **Shelduck**, **Stonechat** and **Cormorant**. We arrived in Langness at 11.45. 45 minutes after I had planned. That really wasn't good. High tide was at 11.30a.m so we were still ok on that front but we needed to do speed birding now big time! At the Sandwick end we saw the usual **Chough** flocks and also **Curlew** and found a few **Common Gull** out of the hundreds of feeding gulls.

Moving on to the wader roost we saw the **Brent Geese**, **Golden plover** (of which there was about 400!), **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Lapwing**. It was a ticking frenzy but the wintering Little Egret was nowhere to be seen nor were any Grey Herons...crazy! We moved on to the Dubh and looked in vain for the recent Greenshank... that bird has definitely gone but suddenly Wendy shouted, "**Little Egret** just flown in" Waheyyy. I then spotted a **Grey Heron** hiding behind the wall and a **Common Snipe** flew in and disappeared into the saltmarsh. Now this was more like it... good old South :)

We couldn't find the Shoveler we'd found a few days earlier though and there were no Falcons around either so we moved round to Derbyhaven. It was now 12.00 and we were on 62 birds now, still ahead of the 2009 count by this point (but only by 2) and in 2009 we still had the south to do... ut oh! As we were driving round to Fort Island I said "Oh noooooo, we haven't had Greenfinch yet.....OOOO YES **Greenfinch!**" there were 3 birds sitting in a roadside bush... hahaha. Neither of us have ever exclaimed "Yes Greenfinch" before and I doubt we ever will again! At Fort Island we got the first target straight away, **Grey Plover**. We had missed them last year so that was a good start. With them were a few **Ringed Plover** too. Next up was to check the bay. We really needed the recent quality birds... but depressingly it looks like the Red-necked Grebe has definitely gone and the Great Northern Diver is ranging further out so it's not guaranteed anymore. We had our lunch there though to just give it some time but even after 30 minutes there was no sign. We then moved round to the Flying Club to check for the recent Whimbrel that seemed to be wintering but, as per our recent visits, again there was no sign... We now had to make our way north but Wendy suggested checking Castletown bay for the GND. There was no harm in this, as you can scan from the road, so we did. As soon as we stopped we found a **Great Northern Diver**. We were getting some luck but not a lot and were now leaving the best area on the island with just 66 birds.

On the plan there was only another 14 defos remaining. We could do with some major luck kicking in soon or we would have had it. I started turning my thoughts to the lowest ever score of 83 rather than attempting to beat last years total. Gulppp. This was the time for the North to shine and show us all the great birds Chris claims are up there..... yeah right. Even though we were still 45 minutes behind time we chanced a quick drive into Port Grenough. This was our last chance for a Treecreeper but no joy. We did find a **Grey Wagtail** in the stream so it wasn't a complete waste and we'd missed out on Grey Wag last year so that was quite good. I then forgot to take the turning to get back on the main Douglas road so we ended up going through Kewaique. Whoops not good for the timing but as we went up the hill Wendy nearly blew my ear drums out as she Shrieked "**LONG-TAILED TIT!**" Brilliant!! Now that was jammy....

Further north near Dhoon we had a **Kestrel** hovering by the side of the road....
Kerching kerching kerchingg keep em coming.

We were now running very late so had to completely remove the entire Maughold section from the plan, this saved us 20 minutes, getting us to Ramsey at 14.00. We went straight to Chris' front garden and just as in 2009 we pulled up, went "**Siskin**" thanks very much and turned round and drove off.

Next stop was the river. There was no sign of the local Kingfisher (no shock there, I've only seen it once in 3 years) but there was also no sign of the Little Grebe either this meant a walk up 'dog poo alley'. I put 50p on 11 dog poos on the 100 metres of path and Wendy went for a more optimistic 7. Within 20m we had ticked 5 dog poos and had skilfully avoided them all. I thought I was going to win the bet but by the end of the track there had only been another 2.. damitt 50p to Wendy. Ramsey Commissioners could make about a billion pounds standing on that path giving out spot fines. Pooyl Pooey path has got to be the worst place on the island for dog mess. I must be on a 90% "muck on shoe" rate for that place. It was worth the risk though as Wendy spotted a **Little Grebe** at the end of the path.. smashing. The journey back was muck free which was handy as wasting ages wiping smeared poo off our shoes would have severely wound us up.

Next I meant to drive down to the quay, to continue our journey, but again took the wrong turn and ended up driving to the prom via the football pitch road. At the Mooragh park section I said, "Let's just stop and have a look .. maybe the Kingfisher is around here hahaaha." What an unusual spurt of optimism to break the depression of the day. Wendy went to look at Mooragh lake while I looked into the muddy tidal area on the other side of the road. Next second I saw a blue flash from no more than 30 m away. I was in a bit of a shock and got my bins on it and there it was flying away. I shouted at the top of my voice **KINGFISHER** but I don't think Wendy heard me as she slowly sauntered across the road. As I watched it land on a yacht I screamed it again and this time Wendy got the message and sprinted to where I was. I got her on the bird and then ran back for my camera dying for a record shot (last time I got a shot of this bird was in 2003) but it had flown further up the harbour before I got back to the wall. We were both very happy though. Wendy hadn't seen this bird at all previously so in the middle of Ramsey did a Star jump and whooped in celebration. I sidled off at that point mumbling, "Err I'm not with that person." As this bird was so special we went round to the shipyard place to see if we could relocate it but there was no sign... ah well. That bird totally made our day. All the tiredness, cold and depression had now been worth it, whatever score we ended on.

After that we moved round to the swing bridge as Wendy had just reminded me that we hadn't seen Canada goose again after I had missed them at Castletown.

Imagine my surprise at the lack of Canada geese in the harbour... flipping heck! I then had to drive all the way round the quay just to get them. This we did, wasting another 5 minutes we didn't have, and got the stupid **Canada Geese**.

We quickly shot over to the Grand Island to get the wintering ducks. Normally it takes 10 seconds to locate them out on the sea but for some reason this time it took 5 minutes. Eventually Wendy found the **Goldeneye** in the middle of the massive gull flock feeding on the raw sewage outlet... mmmm nice.

I was still worried about the time and due to the clouds that had materialised the light was fading fast. We wondered whether we should we do Glascoe or not but had a go anyway. First off we checked the flooded field for the Pink foot flock that was there recently but no they had gone too. Grrrr! On the duck pond the usual things were there and again no sign of Shoveler that used to winter on it. I was just about to bang my head against the wheel for my decision to come here when Wendy went "eh up **Carrion crow** over there". I had a gander and saw the chap... that will do. This bird was never a 'nailed on' anywhere.

Moving further north towards the Point of Ayre we stopped at the Phurt duck pond where Chris had found a Pochard earlier in the day which he said was "showing well". We pulled up and the only thing showing well was water. Eventually though we found the **Pochard** asleep under the overhanging trees.

It was now 15.00 and the light was getting worse even though the sun wasn't due to go down till 16.00. We got to the Point of Ayre and went onto the public heath to look into the private Gravel pits. If anyone has read the 2009 NYD Bird Race article you will have seen that I was hopeful that this would now be open as a reserve which has been planned since before 2003. Unfortunately it looks like the area is being worked again, from what we could see, so the dream of having one proper bird reserve over here seems in tatters now. Having zero bird reserves on the island in the 21st century is a disgrace if you ask me. Grrrrrrrrrrrr!

We were now on 76 birds, with 1 hour of light left and we were 5 behind the 2009 count at the same time. We needed the Pits, Point and Curraghs to give us a blinder, we were at last chance saloon, we had had our chips, too many cooks spoil the broth. Oh hold on, that one's not right.

We only got two birds at the pits, **Tufted Duck** and **Greylag Goose**. Greattt... not. The Point was even worse. No Auks flying past, no Divers, no Merlin hunting, there was literally absolutely nothing. I was now doubting whether my leftfield plan was the right move but I was soon cheered up (ish) when I got a text from Chris telling

me there was absolutely nothing at the Point in the morning either so the time of day wasn't the issue... phew!! :)

Last stop was the Curraghs but on the way we stopped at Blue point in desperation for a Red throated diver or anything really. The only birds about were loads of Shags... very poor. Is this the effect of Global warming or something? We used to have tens of Divers wintering off our coast but now there's like 1 on a 10 mile stretch! Maybe the Cypriots have been sticking them in pies or something, if they get past the Maltese, blowing their brains out, of course. Heading into the Curraghs I made sure we stopped off at the uber feeding station. Even though it was quite dark by now as soon as we got out I could hear our target in the bushes which was being, very helpfully, loud. But it wouldn't show itself and Wendy wouldn't accept it until we saw the bird. Finally it flew across the road and we saw it in the top of a tree just as a woman came out of her house probably wondering what two people dressed in dark clothes were doing stalking around her hedgerow... haha.

We reached our final destination at 16.30. We had a few birds nailed on (and glued with no more nails) here. I had no doubt about them as we got to the hide at Close Sartfield. I was a bit shocked to see it packed with people in Red Helly Hansen coats and stuff and I think they may have been scared off by the muddy, balaclava'd pair that approached. Within seconds the top of the hide was abandoned and we got the full view ourselves.... cool!

Unfortunately the "biggest Hen Harrier roost in Europe" now seems to be the smallest as zero Hen Harriers were seen. It was a real shock to the system and I hope it doesn't indicate a drop in breeding birds or anything. We stayed until it was pitch black and got our last bird of the day at 17.00 in the form a pig squealing **Water rail** right by the hide.

There were no Owls at all either. Boo hiss.

The 'amazing' north had completely ruined the days score. I wasn't that shocked though as it has not produced anything noteworthy in the last few months. In all we'd only managed 12 birds in the North compared to 69 in the south. So the total for the day was ... drum roll please.....tchtchtchtchtctchhhh.... 81! Groannn. Worst score ever high five!

Stat warning:

We got 72 defos in the end with 7 possibles and 2 dodgies. We picked up 9 birds that we hadn't seen in 2009 but missed out on 13 birds that we had. We had covered 130 miles and I had driven for just under 6 hours!! I could have got to Norfolk from Heysham in less time... crazy.

I am still trying to decide whether it was my leftfield route that messed up the day or if was just the fact that there are very few birds around at the moment. I'm edging towards the latter (to stop me being depressed mainly :)). Even though the overall score was quite depressing the day was well worth it just by seeing the elusive Kingfisher..... the only one on the island. I did my own celebratory Kingfisher celebratory star jump when I got home whilst Wendy decided to spend the rest of the day 'wetting the Kingfishers head'. (More like drown it! :P)

There is a positive to take from the day though, at least the 2011 NYD Bird Race has a much easier target to aim for :P