

## Birding the Bristol Region

Officially the county of Avon no longer exists. Avon was a short-lived county that was replaced by four unitary authorities in the mid-1990s, including the City of Bristol. In birding circles, as in others, the term remains in use as it describes the area covered by the Bristol Ornithological Club and is reported in the annual 'Avon Bird Report'. The term 'Avon' is used in national recording of birds and there is an Avon Recorder. The county of Avon is centered on Bristol, but includes South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset, and North Somerset which includes Weston-super-Mare. It's a very compact area of only 1342sq km, which can be crossed in an hour by car. There are good motorway connections via the M4 and M5.

Traditionally there were two large urban areas, the cities of Bristol and Bath, but the expansion of Weston-super-Mare has seen it become a town approaching the size of Bath. There is also a spread of small towns, with valleys, farmland which is a mixture of mostly livestock to the south and arable to the north and east, wet moors in the west, woodland and the Mendip Hills to the south to 250m altitude. Two large reservoirs, Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes, are the main inland water bodies. There is a long coastline at the Severn Estuary.

In the south of Avon, Chew Valley Lake is the county's most popular birdwatching site. As well as vantage points from two causeways, there are two picnic areas and a public trail, and, in addition, four hides which are accessible by permit from Bristol Water. Chew attracts large numbers of winter wildfowl - Shoveler, Gadwall, Teal, Pochard, and Goosander are here in nationally important numbers, and the lake is also a stronghold for wintering Wigeon, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Cormorant and Coot. Smew is sometimes present but is just as likely to turn up elsewhere in the county, and Long-tailed Duck has occurred in recent winters. Rare wildfowl are a frequent occurrence with Green-winged Teal (Blue-winged Teal is a very rare vagrant), Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup recently showing. Chew also gets its fair share of wildfowl of unknown origin, including regular Ruddy Shelduck each summer, and occasional Red-crested Pochard.

The lake's most important habitat for breeding birds is its reed bed, which is one of the largest in south-west England. Cetti's and large numbers of Sedge and Reed Warblers as well as Reed Bunting breed here. Cuckoo hang on here with their diminished but densest population in the region. Bittern, traditionally a wintering species at Chew, has been staying later in recent years and so perhaps we can look forward to this species becoming a regular breeder here too. Cattle Egret records have rapidly gained in frequency all over Avon, not least at this site, and Great White Egret has also been showing well in recent years with up to 26 individuals at Chew in the late autumn of 2017. Marsh Harrier is frequent in most months but has not yet bred. Elsewhere around the lake, Garganey occasionally breeds successfully, Great Crested Grebe occurs in nationally important numbers and there is a Grey Heron colony of around 30 nests. There is a large population of Kingfisher year-round, and Water Rail breed and are present in winter. Spotted Crake, after a lean patch in the late 1980s/early 1990s, has been regularly seen again outside of the breeding season in the last few years.

Chew has a huge winter gull roost, peaking at an estimated 10,000+ Black-headed Gulls, 10,000+ Common Gulls, and Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls numbering several hundred each. Of the rarer species, Mediterranean Gull is regular in February; Yellow-legged Gull is present all year in small numbers peaking from July to September at less than 10 individuals, and Ring-billed Gull is almost annual in winter and spring. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls are genuinely rare here though.

Chew Valley Ringing Station operates at the southern end of the lake and has produced records of Marsh and Aquatic Warblers. The lake has also had its share of outstanding rarities over the years

including Greater Sand Plover, Black-winged Pratincole, and over-wintering Gyrfalcon, as well as Britain's first Pied-billed Grebe which it shared with Blagdon Lake.

Blagdon Lake is a smaller and older reservoir, but nevertheless has good populations of most of the species of wildfowl found at Chew. There is a small reed bed and lakeside walks. Rare birds have included Blue-winged Teal, Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-winged Pratincole, Red-necked Phalarope, Blyth's Pipit and Franklin's Gull.

Migration at the reservoirs is good - Common, Arctic and Black Terns are a feature of spring along with Little Gulls. Waders in autumn pick the reservoirs when water levels are lowest and include good numbers of Ringed Plover, Ruff, Dunlin, Common and Green Sandpipers, Greenshank and regular Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. The passage of Swift and *Hirundines* is impressive. Yellow Wagtail pass through in small numbers, sometimes overlapping with Water Pipit, which winters here (usually less than 10) and can stay into April by which time they have acquired summer plumage. Osprey is seen each year and regularly stays for a week or more, and Hobby visits throughout the summer.

Nearer Bristol, Barrow Gurney Reservoir tanks are three large concrete bowls which hold waterfowl in winter and get the occasional interesting passage migrant but their man-made structure and scant vegetation limit their overall species count.

A feature of the reservoirs of Chew, Blagdon and Barrow Gurney is that during strong winds, seabirds turn up, having been blown up the estuary. Grey Phalarope and Sabine's Gull are semi-regular, and most of the other British seabirds have put in an appearance at one time or another (except the auks). At least one representative from either the divers or the rarer grebes is to be expected each winter.

The Mendip fringe, which leads up to the upland heath of Blackdown in neighbouring Somerset, is worth exploring. It is Avon's highest ground where Grasshopper Warbler, Whinchat, Stonechat and Tree Pipit can be found, and if we're lucky, a Nightjar or Dartford Warbler may cross the boundary from Somerset to breed around Burrington.

From the south-west corner of the county at the Axe Estuary and Uphill, Avon's *coast* is on the eastern shore of one of Britain's largest and most important estuaries, the Severn. It has internationally important numbers of waders and shorebirds. It has the highest levels of environmental protection in Europe with all of Avon's coast being a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and much of it designated a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Ramsar site. The coastal strip extends all along Avon's western boundary. This estuary has the world's second highest tidal range so vast mud flats are exposed and covered twice daily. Many bird species thrive upon them, particularly on migration and in winter. The Severn Estuary has huge numbers of waders, and Avon gets its share of these, with sites such as the Axe Estuary, Sand Bay, Clevedon Bay, Portbury Wharf, Severnside and Oldbury Power Station attracting good numbers of species such as Oystercatcher, Grey and Ringed Plover, Curlew, Turnstone, Dunlin and Redshank. Species associated with sandier shores, such as Bar-tailed Godwit and Sanderling occur mainly on migration. Sand Point and Wain's Hill attract land migrants and, with Ladye Bay, can be good sea-watching points in autumn, while the stretch with the outflows of the Rivers Yeo and Kenn are good for passage and winter waders. Battery Point in Portishead is the only reliable local site for wintering Purple Sandpiper.

Just inland are the wet lowlands of Bleadon Levels, Congresbury Moor, Kenn Moor and the Gordano Valley which have great biodiversity of which the wetland and farmland birds are an important part. The area is largely damp moorland habitat of low-lying flat fields with drainage ditches between them - like a smaller version of the Somerset Levels. These moors hold birds such as Lapwing, Snipe,

Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting which are numerous in this area. In common with much of Avon, the Gordano Valley sees Red Kite frequently passing overhead.

The coast north of the mouth of the River Avon is dominated by two Severn road crossings and the narrowing of the estuary. Known as Severnside, ducks, waders and storm-driven seabirds occur here. The key spots on Severnside include Chittening Wharf, Severn Beach, New Passage with its newly created Pilning Wetlands, and Northwick & Aust Wharfs. Pilning Wetlands attracts passage migrants such as Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and Greenshank. During severe south-westerly gales seabirds can get funneled up the estuary and, if you're lucky, close views of petrels and skuas can be had, but anything may turn up – including a *Fregetta* petrel in 2009. Wildfowl such as Shelduck, Wigeon, Mallard and Teal are common as are Black-tailed Godwit. Black Redstart can be found among the built-up coast and flocks of common passerines such as Skylark, Rock Pipit and Linnet use the salt-marsh and rocky shores and may include Water Pipit. Among the waders, rare species have been found including Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover and White-rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers. Short-eared Owl, Merlin and Peregrine are all found in winter, although not in large numbers. The estuary sees a regular spring passage of Common and Arctic Terns, with Whimbrel and Bar-tailed Godwit also moving through in good numbers. Seabird movements in the estuary can be good in most seasons, given the right weather conditions. Pomarine Skua and Leach's Petrel are the Severn Beach specialities, and more common species such as Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Gannet, Kittiwake, Great and Arctic Skuas and auks are annual. North of the original Severn Bridge, Oldbury Power Station (decommissioned) has industrial, semi-natural and managed habitats that attract important passage and wintering birds.

In the north of the county the hedgerow-bounded grazing meadows give way in the north-east to the complex of mixed and coppiced woodlands at Lower Woods. There are good numbers of winter Woodcock and year-round woodland birds, while Spotted Flycatcher is present throughout the passage and summer periods. The woodland adjoins an area of extensive common land stretching southwards to Chipping Sodbury Common which bears a good range of migrant chats and other passerines. Red-backed and Woodchat Shrike have both stopped in this area (in spring and autumn respectively).

Southwards from the Cotswold Edge along the Wiltshire border is a mixed agricultural area of higher ground straddling the M4 motorway surrounding the villages of Marshfield and Tormarton. This is a stronghold for farmland species in decline elsewhere in the country. Corn Bunting can occur in three-figure flocks in winter, as can Yellowhammer, with Red-legged Partridge being common. This is the county's best location for Quail in summer, while Golden Plover is found on the high grounds in winter.

On the north-east outskirts of Bath, Batheaston Meadows Nature Reserve is made up of eight hectares of damp meadows, an artificially created oxbow lake with small reed beds, hedgerows and a scattering of mature trees. Bird species of damp and open water are attracted, typically involving Little Grebe, Water Rail and Snipe in winter with common warblers and finches staying on to breed. The city of Bath has a long-standing breeding pair of Peregrines in St. John's church right in the city centre. On the west side of Bath lies the village of Newton St. Loe and its surroundings of wooded farmland and a nature reserve with a lake at Newton Park which has a heronry. Many common and transient species occur here in pleasant surroundings including Tawny and Little Owl, Kingfisher,

Grey Wagtail and Yellowhammer, with wintering Wigeon and Goosander, and Spotted Flycatcher in summer.

The city of Bristol has plenty to offer with waterways, mature parks and gardens providing plenty of linked habitat; specific sites include the River Frome valley from Frenchay's Snuff Mill to Eastville Park: this is productive for woodland and freshwater birds with Kingfisher, Dipper and Grey Wagtail all breeding. Very similar are the Kingsweston and Blaise Estates on the River Trym in the west of the city. Ashton Court in the south-west of Bristol is a mature parkland with specimen trees and open grassland that supports many more common species. Brandon Hill, home of the Avon Wildlife Trust's HQ, is right in the city centre and has an AWT nature reserve with a meadow. This bushy tump attracts common passerines along with Firecrest and winter thrushes. The jewel in Bristol's crown is the Peregrine breeding site at the Avon Gorge. Though other pairs breed in the city it is this high profile must-visit location that makes the connection between the general public and the natural world. Avon Gorge Peregrines can be seen at eye level as they swoop and glide in the gorge while onlookers view from 75m above the River Avon. Peregrines can also be seen around the city centre and docks, while Buzzard and Raven are also city breeders and now quite a common sight in all areas of Avon.

Ornithology in Avon is well-served by Bristol Ornithological Club, the county's main bird study group. The Club covers the former County of Avon, centered on Bristol, but including South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset and North Somerset, including Weston-super-Mare. We are lucky too to have the Forest of Dean, Slimbridge WWT and the Somerset Levels within easy reach. The Club issued its first monthly bulletin in January 1967 and celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017. Since then it has evolved its methods and it now benefits from its own website ([bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk](http://bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk)) and Daily Blog, Avon Birds ([bocbirds@gmail.com](mailto:bocbirds@gmail.com)). The Club can be found on Facebook and Twitter. Club membership is currently around 580 with many members participating in BTO surveys (BBS, CES, WeBS, Atlases) as well as locally-organised census work, such as long-running surveys on heronries and Rooks. Significant studies have also been undertaken by individual members, for example Buzzard (Robin Prytherch), urban Gulls (Peter Rock), Reed Warblers (David Warden) and House Sparrows (John Tully and Richard Bland). There is also an active team of BTO surveyors, managed by Gordon Youdale and Dave Stoddard who also runs the Breeding Bird (BBS) for the BTO. The annual Avon Bird Report is produced jointly by Bristol Ornithological Club and Bristol Naturalists' Society, under the name of Avon Ornithological Group. For further information contact the report's editor, Harvey Rose.

## **Top Sites**

### **Chew Valley Lake**

[Webpage](#)

[Satellite View](#)

This nationally well-known reservoir is roughly 4km long and 2.4km wide. Apart from a few short stretches including the dam at the northern end most of the perimeter is naturally vegetated with large reed beds at the southern end. This is by far the area's most important reservoir for birds and holds internationally important numbers of Shoveler and Gadwall as well as around 400 Great

Crested Grebe in autumn. It is recommended to obtain a permit to enter the reservoir enclosures and four hides, though good viewing at Chew is possible from the road at Heron's Green and Herriott's Bridge as well as from the hide accessed along the trail from the eastern shore's southern picnic site. [Permits can be obtained from Bristol Water, Woodford Lodge, Chew Stoke, BS18 8SH. The permit covers Chew, Blagdon and Barrow Gurney reservoirs. As of January 2018 permits cost £30 per year or £5 for the day]

## **Blagdon Lake**

[Information](#)

[Satellite View](#)

Blagdon Lake is also well-known nationally. This reservoir has a mile of public footpath along the southeast side from the east tip near the village of Ubley. Permit holders have access to private paths and two hides. [Permits can be obtained from Bristol Water, Woodford Lodge, Chew Stoke, BS18 8SH. The permit covers Blagdon, Chew and Barrow Gurney reservoirs. As of January 2018 permits cost £30 per year or £5 for the day]

## **Uphill and Bleadon Levels LNR**

Information:

[www.wessexwater.co.uk/Bleadon-Levels-nature-reserve/](http://www.wessexwater.co.uk/Bleadon-Levels-nature-reserve/)

Uphill, at the southern tip of the Avon coast, looks across the River Axe to Brean Down in Somerset. On high tides the waders tend to roost on the Somerset side but cross over to Avon as the tide drops exposing the long muddy beaches of Weston-super-Mare. Dunlin and Redshank numbers are significant in winter with a good variety of other waders occurring regularly. Shelduck and Wigeon counts reach three figures during the winter when Short-eared Owls can sometimes be found, and Little Egrets are always around. There is a walk southwards along the beach or inland on the cycle path to Bleadon Levels past a high cliff that attracts Black Redstart, to a viewpoint on the hill overlooking the levels and the river down to Weston Sewage Treatment Works (STW) a mile away. There are several pleasant paths through the levels where the bushes attract warblers and thrushes, and the estuary brings in passing migrants such as terns, *Hirundines* and Wheatear. Merlin, Peregrine and Raven occur on both sides of the river.

## **Sand Point**

The Weston site extends from Sand Point, southwards through Sand Bay and Weston-super-Mare seafront to the river Axe estuary near Brean Down, a distance of about 12km. The main vantage points are located at Sand Point headland, including the nearby Middle Hope nature reserve, Weston sewage treatment works and the nearby river Axe estuary. Sand Point is a rocky limestone headland which juts out into the Bristol Channel and is one of our best sites for seeing spring and autumn migrants. During strong south-westerly winds, it is also one of our best sea-watching sites too.

To find out more about birds and other wildlife visit [Weston Birds & Moths](#)

## **Clevedon Coast**

[www.bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk/birding/where-to-watch/](http://www.bristolornithologicalclub.co.uk/birding/where-to-watch/)

The Clevedon and Portishead site extends from Portbury Wharf at the mouth of the river Avon at Royal Portbury Dock, southwards through Portishead and Clevedon town seafronts and ends at the Yeo Estuary, north of St Thomas' Head and Sand Point. The total distance is some 20kms though only about 8kms of these are likely to be of interest to the birder. The main vantage points are located at Portbury Wharf, Portishead seafront, Wain's Hill at Clevedon and Channel View farm at Kingston Seymour, although access here is restricted to permit holders for the Avon Wildlife Trust Reserve of Blake's Pools. The shoreline regularly attracts many species of waders and ducks though most of these are concentrated and best seen along the stretch from Wain's Hill southwards to the Yeo Estuary. This stretch also incorporates the small outfalls at the Blind Yeo and Kenn rivers. The coastal fields and scrub also hold many migrant birds on passage through the area. The Wain's Hill headland at the south end of Clevedon town is particularly good for seeing migrant passerines, especially at migration times and also during periods of bad weather when many birds become grounded. Sea-watching is best undertaken from Ladye Bay at the northern end of Clevedon town but the estuary is fairly wide here and a telescope is essential.

## **Gordano Valley National Nature Reserve & Weston Moor**

[www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/weston-moor](http://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/weston-moor)

[Information](#)

[Satellite View](#)

Fen meadows, reed-fringed pools and ditches are the richest habitats on this reserve. Lapwing and Snipe are attracted to breed while Skylark, Sedge and Reed Warblers and Reed Bunting are dependent upon the scrubby reed areas as nesting sites. A wet woodland has breeding Tawny Owl. Buzzard is numerous and Little Owl occur all year with finch flocks benefiting from the valuable winter food sources. There are rare aquatic plants such as greater bladderwort and an impressive number of insects including the hairy dragonfly. The meadows have many scarce plants such as lesser butterfly orchid along with masses of meadowsweet.

## **Portbury Wharf**

[www.friendsofpwnr.com/](http://www.friendsofpwnr.com/)

This area of 46 hectares (113 acres) was originally set up as a nature reserve to offset the building of 2,500 homes around a disused industrial site. It was originally managed by the Avon Wildlife Trust but in 2015 the management was switched at the behest of North Somerset Council, who are now responsible for its upkeep. The damp fields, scrubby margins and reed beds hold species that prefer cover such as Water Rail, breeding Sedge and Reed Warblers, and Reed Bunting. The open pools with low-level islands attract wildfowl, waders and gulls, with Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Oystercatcher and Little Ringed Plover breeding. The scrub and hedgerows have matured to form small fragments of succession woodland and this is good for *Sylvia* warblers and finches. The rough open fields offer

good hunting for Barn Owl, Kestrel, *Hirundines* and Stonechat, with Buzzard common and Little Owl likely. A nature trail with three hides makes the most of what the site has to offer and beyond the sea wall flooded salt grasslands form the coastal habitat. The reserve's location benefits from being at the northern end of the Gordano Valley and adjacent to an SAC and Ramsar section of the coast.

## **Severnside**

To find out more about birds and other wildlife visit [Severnside Birds](#)

Severnside is a general reference to the shoreline extending from Aust Wharf southwards to Chittening Wharf close to Avonmouth, a total distance of about 8km. The main vantage points are located at New Passage (including Northwick Oaze) and Severn Beach (including Chittening Wharf). The recently created Pilning Wetlands at New Passage has increased the species list and made several species, particularly waders, more viewable and longer staying. Severnside is arguably our best coastal site for seeing a wide variety and numbers of birds at any given time of year. The shoreline regularly attracts many species of ducks and waders and the coastal fields and scrub also hold many migrant birds on passage through the area. On its day, sea-watching off Severn Beach during strong south-westerly winds can be truly breath-taking with seabirds milling around low over the water before regaining their bearings and flying back down river. Extremely close views are often possible. Don't overlook Aust Wharf which attracts Short-eared Owl and Merlin in winter.

## **Marshfield to Tormarton, east of the county**

To find out more about birds and other wildlife visit [Birds of South Gloucestershire](#)

Marshfield village is situated approximately 20 km east of Bristol centre within the boundary of South Gloucestershire. The area is the highest point in South Gloucestershire and is mainly upland arable farmland with many crop fields bounded by dry stonewalls and quiet countryside lanes. The limited variety of habitat around the area means that Marshfield does not attract such a wide range of bird species as are found at the coastal sites but it does hold a number of species which are uncommon elsewhere around the wider Bristol area. The Marshfield area is our local stronghold for (summer) Quail, Corn Bunting and Yellowhammer but Grey Partridge are only just hanging on these days. Corn Bunting can flock in numbers of over 100 in winter. Many other species are present including wintering Golden Plover with Red Kite, harriers, Short-eared Owl and Merlin frequent visitors.

## **Avon Gorge**

Information: [www.avongorge.org.uk/documents/the\\_downs\\_bird\\_trail.pdf](http://www.avongorge.org.uk/documents/the_downs_bird_trail.pdf)

The muddy tidal river Avon flows from the city of Bristol through the gorge and into the Severn estuary at Avonmouth, a distance of about 13kms. Though this is not a hotspot for many bird species the Avon Gorge is best known for the Peregrine Falcons which breed on the rocky cliff ledges each year. The Bristol Ornithological Club has run a Peregrine Watch at the edge of the Avon Gorge since

1991. Initially, it ran seven days a week for the security of the birds, but is now focused on one or two weekends as an opportunity to share views of the birds with the wider public. Sessions are timed to coincide with the period of maximum activity near the nest-fledging and nursery flights, and the location means that the birds frequently pass at eye level. The best vantage points to see the Peregrines are along Circular Road (known locally as 'the sea wall') which runs along the top of the gorge from the Clifton Zoo area to Stoke Bishop. The birds, of course, can decide to nest anywhere along this stretch from year to year but our watch records have shown that the gorge viewpoint closest to the zoo is normally the most productive. Earlier in the year Raven also breeds here and with birders' extensive breeding season coverage, many other species have frequently been seen, notably Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Kestrel plus occasional sightings of Red Kite, Osprey and Goshawk. Redshank, Common and Green Sandpipers also occur on the river banks along with various gulls.