

## New years day bird race 2019

After missing out on the New Year's Day Bird Race last year due to terrible weather, I was dead set on doing it this year. Wendy was also up for it and booked the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan off work in preparation, so the only thing that would stop us again would be the weather.....or so I thought. Leading up to the 1<sup>st</sup>, I started putting a plan together and looking back at old races from 2010 and 2011 was severely depressing. Birds that used to be nailed on as defos were now either not even possibles but were dodgies or even totally impossible! For example, Yellowhammer was now impossible and Reed Bunting and Tree sparrow now practically impossible. I had a horrible feeling that the results of the 2019 race would only be useful as a grim comparison but still wanted to give it a go anyway

Frustratingly, it would still be dark at high tide because it was ridiculously early, so the best plan I could come up with was to get to Langness for first light, which would be about 15 minutes after high tide. I decided to look at this as a positive thing, as some of the travel time would be done in the dark and would save us time in the long run. The only question was which places that had speciality birds at them would we have time to visit? I decided that Port St Mary and Port Erin were both worth a pop for Purple Sandpiper and Black Redstart respectively. We'd done a recce at Blue Point 3 days before New Year's Day and had Peregrine, Common Scoter and Grey Plover there, which were 3 very handy possibles for the bird race. Two days before New Year's Day that plan was thrown up in the air when a Glaucous Gull was found at Peel by Keith Johnson and a Long-tailed Duck was found at Ballaghennie by Allen Moore. If they stayed, then surely I needed to find a way to incorporate those sites? Worse was yet to come when Wendy came down with a nasty virus, which put paid to all her plans for New Year's Eve but also for doing the bird race! So, it was all down to me again and the last time I'd attempted it on my own I got the worst score ever of 73.....Uh oh! The only saving grace was that I'd be doing this race in my 25 year old Land Rover Defender and sitting so high up would give me a much better chance of seeing things in fields as you can see over hedges. This added some excellent jeopardy into the race too, as I wasn't sure if it was actually capable of surviving the distance without blowing a gasket or setting on fire...../.

Waking up at 7am on the 1<sup>st</sup> January was lovely.....NOT! Even though we'd gone to bed at 11pm we'd been woken up at midnight by the next door neighbour's firework display. The forecast for the day was fine but a bit breezy, so I crawled out of bed and took Lyca out for a wee. Standing out in the freezing cold I could hear a **Robin** singing, so I was up and running. I grabbed myself a drink and breakfast bar and just before leaving at 7.40am I could see **Herring Gulls** flying over in the dark. Wooo! Two down and lots to go.

In previous years I've headed to Tromode first to see if there are any Goosanders but they haven't been seen there for ages, so I didn't want to waste any time. At the traffic lights at the bottom of the road I went into auto pilot and automatically turned down towards Tromode.... Dohhh! I thought I might just be lucky and pick something up on the track down and sure enough the first bird I saw was a **Song Thrush** at the side of the road. I was really worried about Song Thrush (and Mistle Thrush) on the race, as they're exactly the type of bird you can easily miss out on. Not this time though :). At the pond there were no Goosanders as expected but I did get **Blackbird**, **Wood Pigeon** and **Mallard**. I quickly ran back to the Defender and turned it over only to hear a horrible grinding noise coming from the engine!!! Nooooo not already! I opened the bonnet for a look and I could tell it was coming from the right of the engine block but that was about it. I hoped it was just some sand blasting material getting worn away and nothing more serious, so decided to carry on regardless.

Driving off towards the south, I had a brainwave and drove around the office I work at and sure enough I heard a **Goldcrest** in the trees. Boom! That was the first "possible" in the bag. Passing Richmond Hill at 8.10am I had a few **Hooded Crows** fly past followed by soe **Jackdaws** neither of which are difficult to get on any day in the IOM. Before reaching my destination, I scared a **Carrion Crow** off a road kill rabbit as I drove past the Blackboards.

Turning towards Langness at Derbyhaven was a small flock of **Black-headed Gulls** but as I approached Langness at 8.20am I was already 20 mins behind schedule.....flipping heck! Annoyingly the high tide must have been a small one as it was already quite far out.



Dawn at Langness

The first bird I picked up was a gleaming white **Little Egret**, so that was handy then I ticked off all the Langness usuals. **Shelduck, Greater Black-backed Gull, Grey Heron, Wigeon, Teal, Pheasant, Oystercatcher, Chough, Eider** and **Magpie**. I then got very lucky as a **Wren** and **Dunnock** started having a singing competition. I was quite worried about not getting either of them during the day and having missed out on Wren completely on a race in the past this was very jammy. I was now 24 birds in, but weirdly, even though there are normally over a 100 Curlew in a big flock there wasn't a single one to be seen.....Errr?



Landy!

Shooting across to Derbyhaven and in particular Fort Island, I scanned the bay and rocks like a nutter. I quickly spotted **Shag, Cormorant, Brent Goose, Redshank, Turnstone, Rock Pipit** and **Curlew** (Phew!) but try as I might I couldn't pick out what I really needed from the choppy water or the causeway rocks. In a last ditch attempt I scanned out into the mouth of the bay and while I was doing that I luckily spotted a **Stonechat** in the bottom of my bins view.....Haha! As I turned around



to drive off, I spotted a single **Linnet** in the scrub at the top of the shingle. I drove off and round the bay knowing that I could really struggle elsewhere for the Derbyhaven Bay specialities. Red-breasted Merganser would be practically impossible, I doubted that the Grey Plover we'd found at Blue point a few days ago would still be there but I should be OK for Black Guillemot at Peel.....wouldn't I? Checking round at the stream mouth is always a good idea and it turned up **Starling**, **Ringed Plover** and **Dunlin** but not the Bar-tailed Godwit or Knot that I'd hoped for.



Derbyhaven stream outlet

Scanning further back I very luckily picked up the **Little Grebe** that likes to winter in Derbyhaven Bay and a flock of 3x **Golden Plover** flew in. I hadn't originally planned to check as far as the flying club but seeing as I was so near, I decided to go for it. This turned out to be a great move, as not only were there a flock of 19x **Lapwing** (not a guarantee on New Year's Day at all) but also about 6x **Common Snipe**. This was very good as it meant I now didn't need to stop at Bishops Dubh when driving up north. There were also a couple of Chough feeding close by, so I took the opportunity to grab a photo.



Chough



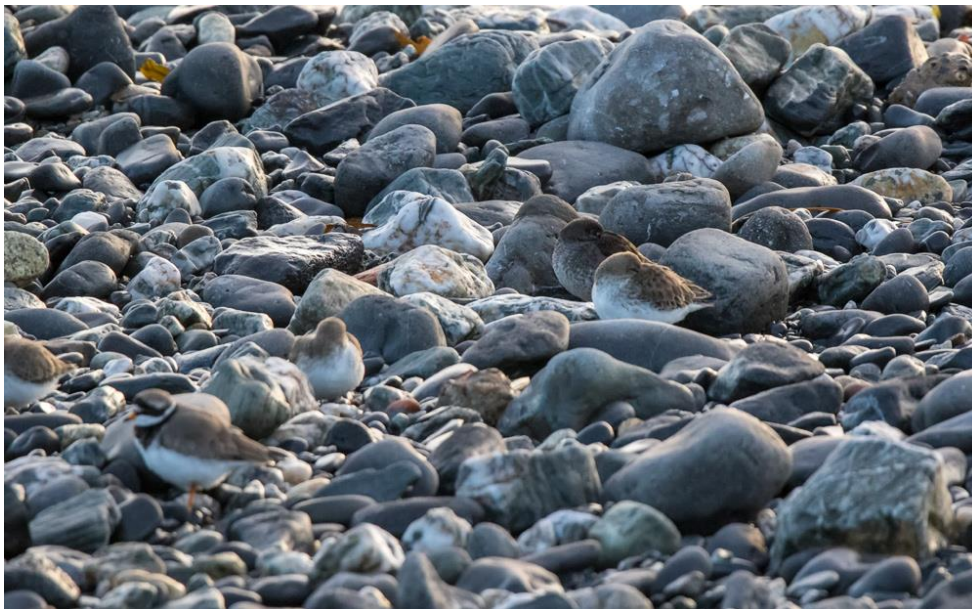
My next stop was Port St Mary but I took a tiny detour round Castletown harbour, which paid dividends and got me **Rook, House Sparrow, Feral Pigeon, Pied Wagtail, Mute Swan** and **Canada Goose**.

I reached Port St Mary breakwater at 9:30am and although the tide was a bit further out than I'd have liked I started scanning anyway.



Back of Port St Mary breakwater

I could see lots of small waders about but couldn't find my target....Noooo! This was not what I'd wanted as Port St Mary is a pretty big detour and out of the way on a bird race but I tried to stay calm and finally found 1x **Purple Sandpiper**.....Phew!



Purple Sandpiper (just about)

Due to the Glaucous Gull still being reported at Peel I switched to plan B to incorporate it and ditched off Port Erin. It was probably the longest drive without stopping but it would take me over the southern hills where there could well be raptors around, which I hadn't even had a sniff of yet. As I was on the way I suddenly realised I was going to be driving past Ballachurry wetlands. Even though I reckoned I was behind time I decided to run in and quickly check near the pond, as Sheila Norris had had a Reed Bunting there recently, which would be a great bird for a New Year's race.





Ballachurry Wetlands

I didn't manage to get lucky with the resident Water Rail nor did I find the Reed Bunting, but I did see **Great Tit**, **Blue Tit**, **Long-tailed Tit** and **Chaffinch**, which brought me up to 50 birds and it was only 9.50am. Not bad!

Carrying up the west coast road I annoyingly didn't see any raptors but going through the Round Table there were a pair of **Ravens**. As I drove through Glen Maye, I had a sudden stroke of luck when a **Grey Wagtail** flew alongside me as if it was showing itself to me before it turned away and was gone.....Mental! I only had one location down to try for Grey Wagtail, so to get one like that was brilliant.

I reached Peel breakwater at 10.20am and I couldn't see any Black Guillemots in the harbour or marina, which was a right pain as Peel was realistically my last place to find one. I met Gerry Jones who was looking straight at the **Glaucous Gull** which was sitting nicely in the water by the trawlers.....Handy!



Peel Bay

Checking the end of the breakwater there wasn't any Kittiwakes either, but Allen Moore was there with some info. He said there were some **Common Gulls** about, which I quickly spotted and that 5x Black Guillemot had flown out of the bay about 10 mins ago.....Arrgghhh! I did a quick check off the

back of the breakwater and picked up **Fulmar** but nothing else....Boooo. I then realised that getting Fulmar there meant I could now knock Marine Drive on the head. Aha! This would save me some time, which was really good. Before leaving I grabbed a shot of the obliging Glaucous Gull.



Glaucous Gull

On the way out of Peel I had another look in the harbour for Black Guillemot but they were still hiding, so I gave up on them.

The first time the Defender came in useful was when I was able to see a **Mistle Thrush** on the Peel Football Club pitch. I hadn't seen a Mistle Thrush for quite a while and was a bit worried about them, so this was great.

I now had to head directly east back to Douglas where, since it was now light, I could check the garden for its usuals. This route could easily take in the two small reservoirs near Foxdale as well. The only decision I had to make was did I just have a quick check of Kionslieu by the side of the road or quickly run down the boardwalk to get a better view? Again, I decided to put a bit of effort in and went for a run in. As I ran down the path I heard a call that I thought was a **Coal Tit** and sure enough quite a few flew across the path into the willows.....Sweet :). Down at the water it was a different story and there was only **Tufted Duck** and **Coot**. No Goosander.... Noooooo! Interesting though the water level was fantastic being really shallow in places with muddy islands in the middle. I've never seen Kionslieu like that but I really hope they leave it so we can see what happens in spring and autumn with migrating waders. We haven't got any viewable shallow freshwater areas so it could be great.





Kionslieu

I then shot off to the neighbouring Eairy Dam and the only thing to add there was **Moorhen**. With no Goosanders there either it meant that I'd have to forget about them for the rest of the race....Boooooo :(.



Eairy Dam

My next stop was home, for the garden birds but also to pick up Wendy as, even though she felt as though she'd been used as Frank Bruno's punch bag, she really wanted to join me for the second half. My original plan was to do the garden first then go to Marine drive and Leigh Terrace but due to not needing to go to Marine Drive anymore I decided to just nip to Leigh Terrace before going home. This made more sense as after the garden we would be heading north but unfortunately it produced nothing. There was no sign of the wintering Kingfisher which I only had a slim chance of seeing anyway, but strangely not even a Grey Wagtail. This made it even more lucky getting the bird flying past me at Glen Maye. I had a tiny urge to just shoot up to Marine Drive to have a scan for Peregrine but I realised that I didn't have time as I was still sure I was at least 20 minutes down from my schedule.

I got back home at 11.20am and Wendy had made sarnies for our lunch and along with Lyca was all ready to go. I went to check the feeders that Wendy had been watching intently all morning and

added **Greenfinch** and **Goldfinch** but she said she hadn't seen our wintering Blackcap at all.....Dammit! To be fair though a Blackcap in winter is a near impossibility normally so I couldn't complain too much. More pressing was that even though Wendy had already seen them there wasn't any Siskin about! Whilst scanning the bushes and feeders trying to pick one out Wendy shouted, "**BLACKCAP!**" and sure enough, there was our male Blackcap on the sunflower hearts. Excellent! I was starting to think we'd have to get a move on and ditch off **Siskin** when one finally appeared on the Niger seed.....Phew! It was now 11.30am, so we quickly got everything packed into the Landy and shot off north, albeit rather slowly.

As we headed towards Snaefell I realised I didn't have any Raptors at all and started to worry that skipping Marine Drive had been a bad move. Turning off the Mountain road and down the Tholt-Y-Will road I glanced right and saw a Ringtail **Hen Harrier** hunting over the moorland.....Wahey :). At least that was 1 raptor! Heading down into the valley 2x **Redwing** flew into a roadside bush, which was very handy. As we didn't need to stop at Bishops Dubh it saved us some time, so our first stop on the Northern plain was at Ballaugh Cronk at 12.08pm. Being in the Landy made it very easy to spot our regular wintering **Whooper Swan** flock in the field.



Whooper Swans

Deciding on the next move was a tricky one. The more common-sense route would be to head up the NW coast, round the POA then down to Ramsey. I thought that it might be a bit risky getting to Ramsey so late in the afternoon, so I decided to head straight east to Ramsey and finish off up at Blue point on the NW coast instead. On the way we went down the Bayr Ny Hayrey road and picked up **Greylag Goose**.

At Ramsey we skipped the usual stop and quick walk at Pooyl Dooey as I'd already seen Little Grebe, so we went straight to the boat park. I parked up at 12.33pm and decided to take Lyca out for a wee and have a check round the rocks from the other side. The current building works are a bit worrying as it looks like they are going to Tarmac the area, which could mean the end of the wintering Black Redstarts that have been coming here since at least the 1940s!





Ramsey boat park (but for how much longer?)

As I got the furthest away from the Landy I could possibly be my phone rang. I knew what this meant and answered it to hear Wendy saying, "It's here!" I quickly scanned the rocks over by the Landy and could see the **Black Redstart** standing on top of one.....Get in!

On the way out of Ramsey, Wendy reminded me to check the Grand Island area which I'd forgotten all about. Since the IRIS system is now working in Ramsey, I'd assumed the wintering Goldeneye flock wouldn't be there anymore as they always seemed to hang around the old sewage outlet, but it was worth a check anyway. Within seconds of parking up Wendy had found the **Goldeneye** flock followed by 2x **Gannets** not that far out. Thank god Wendy had remembered!

Heading up the east coast we stopped to see the 4x **Barnacle Geese** at Glascoe Dubh over the roadside hedge, which were another really good bird for the race.



Barnacle Geese

I was starting to feel optimistic that this year's total might actually be pretty decent, as apart from Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Grey Plover and Kingfisher we'd seen all the other scarce birds that were currently on the Island.

When we reached the Point of Ayre at 1.00pm I worked out that we were now well ahead of time. I wasn't sure how that'd happened because we're usually desperately trying to beat the clock but due to this I could add in more places on the NW coast, so that was great news.

To see anything at the Point of Ayre requires having to sit for much longer than is ideal in any bird race but being ahead of ourselves gave us the perfect opportunity to do just that while we ate our lunch.



Point of Ayre

We quickly found a few **Red-throated Divers** on the sea then a **Great-Northern Diver** flying north. Out at the same distance were a few **Kittiwake** going past and further out we could see flocks of Auks flying east, but annoyingly they were too distant to positively ID. Luckily though just after we'd finished our lunch a **Razorbill** popped up pretty close in. Good stuff. On the way out from the Point we stopped at the capped tip and walked round to view the distant flooded gravel pits from the fence line, where we could make out **Pochard** but that was all. We'd half hoped there'd be a gleaming male Goosander viewable but that was being a bit greedy.

At Bride we stopped for a toilet break and while we were there, we checked the trees as we still didn't have Collared Dove! In those few minutes we had yet another stroke of luck as a **Sparrowhawk** zoomed over the car park. Due to the time available I decided to have a look at Ballaghennie in case the recently found Long-tailed Duck was there but unfortunately due to the choppy seas it wasn't spotted by us or anyone else that day. Typically, it was easily viewable on the flat calm sea the next day though, which was just our luck. Driving on to the next beach along the coast we spotted a field full of Wood Pigeons. I stopped and got out as you just never know when one of these flocks has a Stock Dove in with them, especially up north. It wasn't to be for us this time but, worth just the same, a **Collared Dove** flew into the trees at the back of the field. It was crazy that it'd taken that long to finally see one. Since we still had time, we went to Smeale beach in the hope of Sanderling. On the track down, we spotted an LBJ on the road, which turned out to be a **Meadow Pipit**! We hadn't really expected to see one of them on a New Year's bird race so adding Smeale had already proved worth it. The beach didn't produce anything though so I was just about to head to our final stop of the day when I realised that as we still had bags of time we could walk to it from Smeale. This would give Lyca a nice walk after being stuck in the Landy all afternoon.





Finally a walk!

Walking along the beach we very quickly and very luckily came across the 3x **Grey Plover** we'd found a few days earlier.



Grey Plover

I really didn't expect them to still be there, but they were literally still standing in the very same spot! This was excellent as it recovered us from missing out on the Grey Plover at Derbyhaven. Very soon after a relatively large flock of approximately 40x **Sanderling** flew along the beach. We rarely get Sanderling on a bird race as it's hard to work out which Northern beach they are at when you don't normally have time to visit all the beaches. The number of them was also impressive, it's been a while since we'd seen a flock of that size. At Blue point we turned back as the light was getting a bit difficult.



Dusk looking towards Blue Point

As we did I glanced over at the raised beach cliffs, half hoping to snatch a Kestrel at the death. Over the cliffs I could see a bird hovering but before I could say Kestrel I realised it was much bigger and that there's only one other raptor that hovers.....**Common Buzzard!** Haha good stuff :). A bird we would've never seen on a race 5 years ago is becoming more likely to see in the future than any of our other raptors I think. It was good to get one so late in the day too.

Back at the Landy it was 3.50pm and time to head home because Wendy needed to get back to be at her sisters for tea. On the way I thought we may as well drive through the Curraghs and past Penny Holdings Lane in the hope of hearing the squealing of a Water Rail. As we headed that way I noticed the sign for Rhenny Road, which is always worth a look for Red-legged Partridge. Seeing as we still needed Red-legs I drove down it slowly and in a field on the left we spotted a large flock of Thrushes and to our delight the majority were **Fieldfare**. I'd really thought we wouldn't get them, as we hadn't seen any for months. What a jammy bird to get but more was to come! Nearing the end of the road Wendy spotted a small falcon silhouetted in a bush near the road edge. She suggested Kestrel which would have done nicely but as it flew off and we got it in our bins it was a cracking **Merlin**. We rarely get Merlin on a bird race and it was our 4<sup>th</sup> raptor of the day, which wasn't bad at all considering I hadn't had any by the half way stage.

Driving through the Curraghs got us nothing apart from getting our bones shaken to death by what must be the most potholed road in the British Isles. I reckon that if I reported those potholes using the DOI app I'd take down the entire Government computer system there are so many!

The Merlin turned out to be the last bird recorded for the race, as we added no more by the time I'd dropped Wendy off and got back home at 5.15pm. A quick count showed 87, which was only two off our best record of 89! Unfortunately, this count proved wrong though and the corrected count was only 86. Still, it was so much better than I'd feared at the start of the day. The scarce wintering birds that we managed to get definitely made the difference but thinking we were only 4 off the magical 90 was nagging. All we needed was Red-legged Partridge, Kestrel, Peregrine and **BLACK GUILLEMOT** (40 of which were seen in Peel harbour on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.....) so definitely not out of the question. So near and yet so far.

The Landy had survived 143 miles and just under 10 hours of more or less constant driving on the day. Although it was coughing and wheezing by the end of it the experiment of using a slower but higher vehicle worked, so if it lives till the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2020 it will be wheeled out again :).



## Bird list

European Robin	Common Eider	Mute Swan	Hen Harrier
Herring Gull	Magpie	Greater Canada Goose	Redwing
Blackbird	European Shag	<b>Purple Sandpiper</b>	Whooper Swan
Mallard	Eurasian Curlew	Great Tit	Greylag Goose
Song Thrush	Atlantic Great Cormorant	Chaffinch	<b>Black Redstart</b>
Woodpigeon	Common Redshank	Blue Tit	Common Goldeneye
Goldcrest	Brent Goose	Long-tailed Tit	Gannet
Jackdaw	Linnet	Grey Wagtail	<b>Barnacle Goose</b>
Carrion Crow	Stonechat	Common Raven	Great Northern Diver
Hooded Crow	Rock Pipit	<b>Glaucous Gull</b>	Black-legged Kittiwake
Black-headed Gull	Starling	Northern Fulmar	Red-throated Diver
Common Shelduck	Dunlin	Common Gull	Razorbill
Great Black-backed Gull	Northern Lapwing	Mistle Thrush	Common Pochard
Grey Heron	<b>Little Grebe</b>	Coot	Sparrowhawk
Eurasian Wigeon	European Golden Plover	Tufted Duck	Collared Dove
Common Teal	Ringed Plover	Coal Tit	Meadow Pipit
Little Egret	Turnstone	Moorhen	<b>Grey Plover</b>
Common Pheasant	Common Snipe	Greenfinch	Sanderling
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Rook	Goldfinch	<b>Common Buzzard</b>
Wren	House Sparrow	<b>Blackcap</b>	Fieldfare
Chough	Feral Pigeon	Eurasian Siskin	<b>Merlin</b>
Duncock	Pied Wagtail		

## Map

