

After doing the last 2 Bird Races on my own I was toying with the idea of mixing it up a bit this year. Instead of just trying to see as many birds as possible I was considering trying to photograph as many birds as possible instead. That sounded more achievable for me on my own until Wendy announced that her back felt good enough to do it this year and she was in. Having 2 people on a bird race makes life so much easier especially as I have to do the driving as well, so I went back to plan A. The New Year's Day Bird Race was going ahead. We were a bit worried that we were going to get rained off and that we'd have to delay it until 2nd January but luckily the forecast was looking good, so it was all systems go. New Year's Eve was a quiet evening where we had Andy round for a Chinese and then went to bed well before seeing in the New Year. Hardcore! :P

Sunday 1st January

Wendy was woken up at 6.30am by her alarm whereas I'd given myself an extra ½ hour and set mine for 7am :). Lyca, who'd fallen into the lazy trap over Christmas didn't want to get up at all, which wasn't a very enthusiastic start to the day! It was still pitch black outside but it was a clear and dry start to the day. We didn't have to rush as Wendy had already made the sarnies the night before and packed the lunch bag, so that was another job that didn't need doing. She was as usual planning to be at her sisters for around 5pm, so she had to put a bit of makeup on and shoved some jeans into a bag so she could change out of her base layers and ski pants when she got there. After we'd had breakfast and got dressed Wendy pointed out that it'd got light much quicker than we'd expected it to. We'd intended to get out for 1st light, so we'd already missed out before we'd even left the house.....Oooops! I was just going to take out the P900 bridge camera for bird photos and use my Samsung S6 phone for landscape photos and leave all my proper gear at home, as travelling light really helped me not get as tired so quickly last year.

Our 1st plan of the day was to go to Kionslieu for Goosander and then come back home to hopefully see the Redpoll that visited our feeders daily as well as up to 18 species that had been visiting regularly over winter. We'd struggle for Redpoll elsewhere and there was also a very remote chance that the Brambling that had been coming to the garden before Christmas would turn up, but we hadn't seen it for the past week, so we were very doubtful.

At 8.15am we bundled a reluctant Lyca into the car seeing **Herring Gull** flying over and **House Sparrow** in the hedge. When we got to the Quarterbridge we saw **Jackdaws** and **Rooks** flying around the trees in the pub car park. Up at the Anagh Coar traffic lights a **Woodpigeon** flew over the road, further along we heard the alarm call of a **Blackbird** and a **Hooded Crow** flew over at the roundabout at The Cooil. When we arrived at Kionslieu at 8.30am it looked pretty dead and from the layby all we could see was **Coot**, **Mallard** and **Mute Swan**. This wasn't what we'd gone there for at all, so I drove up the road with the intention of walking down the footpath, so we could get a better view. The last time we'd been up there was on bird race a couple of years ago and it'd been a bit of an assault course. It was really muddy and there'd been some bad flooding and a tree down across the boardwalk, so we didn't know what to expect. Annoyingly, when we got there we noticed that it was closed, so they've obviously not done any maintenance since. Unbelievable!



No go zone

With that we crossed the possibility of seeing Goosander off our list as we hadn't seen any at our only other known site at Tromode either. We could always try there at the end of the day if we were desperate though but we did think it'd be a waste of time. I drove back down to the layby to view the water again and we added **Goldeneye** x3, **Tufted Duck**, heard a **Dunnock** singing and saw a **Magpie**. After our bad start we headed back to check Eairy Dam just in case the Goosanders were there. Typically they weren't but we added **Teal**, **Blue Tit**, **Collared Dove**, **Robin** and a flock of **Starlings** before we left at 8.43am.

Driving back towards Douglas we were lucky enough to see a **Sparrowhawk** zooming over the trees at Archallaghan.....Phew! Raptors are always hit and miss on a bird race. I thought it'd be worth stopping off at my work to see if the Song Thrush was hanging around. As I drove into the car park I spotted the **Song Thrush** sitting outside the main entrance, so that was another tricky bird ticked off. It was so obliging that I wound my window down and grabbed a quick pic with the P900 while I had the chance.



Next up we decided to do the Douglas spots before going back home so we went to Marine Drive first. I approached from the Port Soderick end and drove along the road until we reached a cove where we knew our birds would be and got out of the car for a scan at 9am.



Marine Drive

We looked over the wall at the cliff where normally there's loads of Fulmar on the ledges but unbelievably and for the 1st time in months there wasn't a single bird in sight.....Noooooo! Now what? We didn't have time to go looking for them but while we were there we had a quick look out to sea anyway. There were a couple of **Cormorants** bobbing about and then Wendy spotted a **Gannet**, some **Fulmar** finally and very luckily a **Kittiwake** but they were all miles out and with her rubbish directions it took me a while to work out where to look. Fortunately I found them all in the end, so we were free to go. Driving past the house with the duck pond we added **Pheasant** and carried on until I parked up at our next port of call Leigh Terrace.

Although there hadn't been any Goosanders reported from there yet it was a reliable site for Grey Wag and there was always the Kingfisher, which despite trying numerous times, we've yet to see there. I parked up and we ran over the road, which for the 1st time ever was totally carless. As we went through the gap in the wall I noticed that the wooden board that's on the ground was lethally slippery, so I warned Wendy not to stand on it. Regardless of my warning she instantly stood on it, her foot slipped and she so nearly took a decking! Hahaha. I couldn't resist saying, "I told you so!" Looking along the banks of the river there was a **Moorhen** and a **Grey Wagtail** flew in as soon as we arrived, which were more than a bit handy. There was a **Goldcrest** calling from the buddleia next to us and a **Feral Pigeon** flew overhead. As usual there was no sign of any Kingfisher, so we headed back to the car and I drove to the Sea Terminal for a quick scan of Douglas Bay.

It felt decidedly chilly when we got out of the car and peered over the sea wall.



Douglas Bay

Last time we'd done this it'd come up trumps and delivered all sorts of birds including Great Northern Diver. This time however things didn't look so good and there was nothing out in the bay apart from an **Eider**. Looking at the waters edge we found **Black-headed Gull**, **Great Black-backed Gull** and **Oystercatcher** but that was it and nothing we wouldn't get elsewhere, so we hurried back to the car. At the bottom of Broadway we spotted a **Grey Heron** flying along the beach and as we headed home we crossed our fingers for some activity at our feeders.

It was 9.21am when we got back and Wendy made a beeline for the kettle to make a coffee to warm her up with. Looking out of the living room window we added **Goldfinch**, **Greenfinch**, **Siskin**, **Chaffinch**, **Coal Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Mistle Thrush** and the male **Blackcap** that had been visiting us daily even put in an appearance.....Phew! We knew Blackcap would've been impossible (I've never seen one before on a NYD race), if our wintering one hadn't turned up so this was really handy. I took a terrible shot out of the window just for proof :)



Blackcap

The other bird we'd been counting on in the garden was Redpoll but although they were there every day too there was no sign of them today.....Typical! We couldn't afford to sit around waiting for a Redpoll, so we headed out again at 9.51am to go up north.

Up on the mountain road we added **Carrion Crow** and **Raven** but we'd got stuck behind someone driving really slowly at about 30mph.....Urrghhhh! As we crawled towards the Gooseneck I couldn't help but moan because we were losing valuable time until Wendy shrieked, "**Hen Harrier!**" I looked up just in time to see the pale grey wings of the bird disappearing behind the hill, so getting stuck behind the car in front had turned out to be a stroke of good luck after all. Hen Harrier is always a hard one to get on a bird race especially now the roost site at Close Sartfield has been abandoned.

Our 1st port of call was the Ramsey river, so we dodged the dog poo and looked down at the water. Luckily the **Little Grebe** was there and looking down under the bridge we were surprised to see a **Little Egret**. Next up we checked the harbour, as I drove over the swing-bridge and added **Redshank**, **Shag** and **Pied Wagtail**. Unbelievably there wasn't a single Canada Goose there, which was unusual and very odd. Where were they?



Ramsey

Heading further north Wendy wondered if Glascoe Dubh would be worth a check for the winter Thrushes we were missing. There could also be a chance of Shoveler, Snipe and some of the more common birds, so I made a diversion. The sun was right in our faces, so it was hard to see anything but we added **Wigeon** on the dubh. There was nothing else around, so we didn't stick around and carried on up north. Driving up the road past The Phurt we saw **Common Gull** and **Curlew** and as we approached Wright's Pit we could see a flock of finches flying around and crossed our fingers that there were some Twite amongst them. I parked up next to the pit at 10.48am but the finches were twitchy and had cleared off.....Urrghhhh! Luckily they came back and a scan through them all revealed nothing but **Linnets**. This was disappointing but not the end of the world, as we might get lucky at Langness later. We got Lyca out and took her for a walk up the footpath, where there was a **Stonechat** sitting on the fence, so that we could view the gravel pits from the fence.



Point of Ayre Gravel Pits

When we got there it was absolutely freezing and really windy but we viewed the distant pool in the hope of adding something new. The only thing we could pull out at such a distance was some **Pochard**, which we wouldn't find anywhere else, so it hadn't been a total waste of time. Even though Lyca was enjoying stretching her legs and having a good sniff around we were very pleased to get back to the warmth of the car.

It was 11.10am when we arrived at The Point of Ayre and fortunately there were 16x **Golden Plover** asleep on the heath.



Golden Plover

I parked up to view the sea just as some **Ringed Plover** flew in and a **Red-throated Diver** flew past. There was a **Razorbill** out on the water and then we spotted a hefty looking Diver, miles out. We didn't want to jump the gun but after watching it for a while just to make sure we added **Great Northern Diver** to our list. Down on the beach we spotted some **Turnstone** but there wasn't much going on, so we carried on to have a look in the field by the lighthouse.



Point of Ayre

A couple of **Choughs** flew over calling and there were loads of Ringed Plover in the field but nothing else.

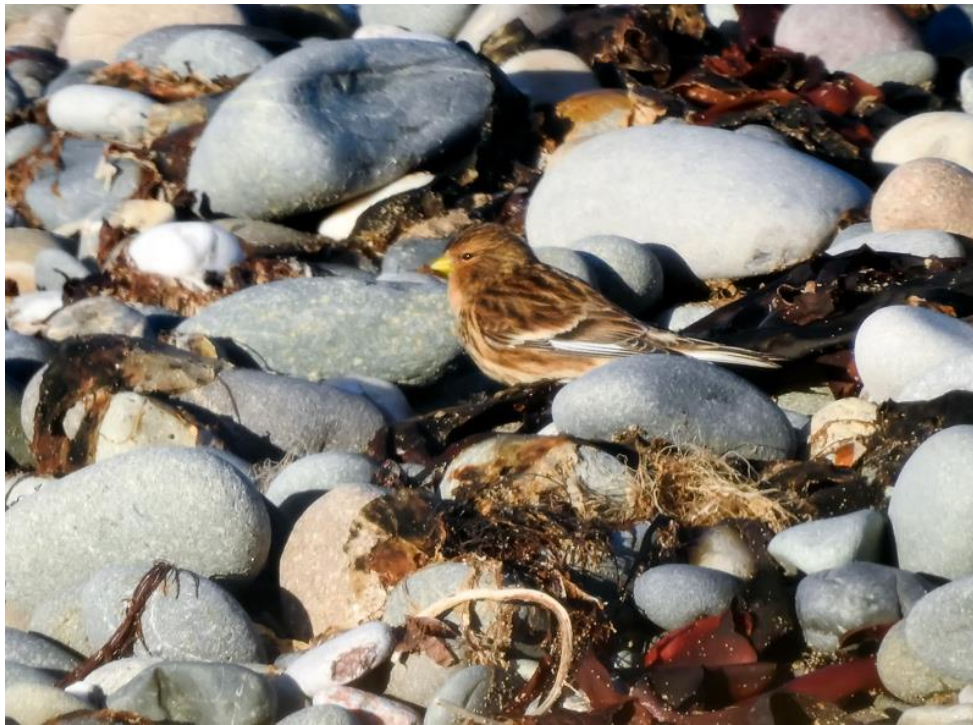


Ringed Plover

If only the Black Redstart that'd been there a couple of weeks ago had stuck around.....Boooooooo! Having failed to see Twite at the pits I reckoned it'd be worth our while driving down the NW coast line to where there'd been a sizable flock of Twite taking advantage of the seed Sean was putting down. Although it wasn't the best thing for my car we didn't have enough time to walk there and it was a great idea for the bird race.....Hahaha!

My poor car! It coped well with the rough track that's really only suitable for a 4x4 and as we approached the seed area a flock of finches lifted and flew off. Now all we needed to do was wait until they came back, so we could check them.

We didn't have to wait long before they all flitted back down to feed on the seed and a quick scan revealed that they were indeed the **Twite** we needed....Yey!



Twite

My car creaked and groaned as it bounced its way back down the track but successfully got us to the road without any incidents.....Phew!

We had to make our way south to Peel next but had a few places to hit on the way and our 1st target was on the Jurby road. Driving along the straight we spotted something big at the back of one of the fields. A couple of weeks ago we'd seen 3x Pinkfeet at Blue Point, so we stopped to check it out just in case. Unfortunately it was just a **Greylag** but we also spotted 2x rowdy **Fieldfare** and a Brown Hare and carried on. Further down the road we saw what we were after behind a hedge, so I stopped the car and reversed back up the road. The **Whooper Swans** were right up against the hedge and quite hard to see but luckily we spotted them before driving straight past!

While we were there I stopped off at the Curraghs for a quick scan of the great feeders and trees. It was 12.20pm by then and we weren't remotely confident that we'd find any Tree Sparrows there but it was the last place we'd seen them in the past, which unfortunately was a few years ago now. We wandered down the road and I was sure I heard a squeakier Sparrow like call, which would suggest Tree Sparrow but I couldn't dig any out of the ivy covered trees.....Urgghh. At the feeders it was disappointing due to the fact that the owner of the house had planted bushes so they weren't visible from the road anymore. It goes to show how long it'd been since we'd been there last! We heard some **Redwing** flying over, which completed the Thrush set nicely but we quickly gave up and went back to the car as I felt we were pushed for time. We spotted a **Kestrel** as we went through Ballaugh and when we got to Bishop's Dubh I pulled over at the side of the road. It's always a dodgy place to stop because the road is so busy and we just hoped it wouldn't take us too long to spot what we wanted. I scanned around the edge of the dubh but had no luck so I looked down at the side nearest to the road. Luckily I spotted a well-camouflaged **Common Snipe** feeding away frantically but Wendy couldn't see it. It was too close in to be view from the passenger side, so she had to hop out and look down from the pavement. We dread to think what all the people whizzing

past us were thinking but we were on a bird race, so it was tough luck :P. With Snipe ticked off she jumped back into the car and I headed towards Peel realizing that we were now 50 minutes behind schedule.....Uh oh! With this in mind I really didn't want to hear Wendy saying that it was also lunchtime. We didn't have time when we were that far behind but she reckoned we should park up at Fenella beach and look for the Black Redstart that had been seen over by the Castle recently while we ate our sarnies. I thought we should wait until we got to Derbyhaven, as we'd be scanning the Bay from Fort Island anyway but she was having none of it!

It was 12.46pm when we arrived in Peel and I parked up in the car park at Fenella beach. Wendy had already unpacked our lunch, so that we could at least quickly eat our sarnie and the rest could be eaten on the move. We scanned the rocks over by the Castle but there was no sign of the Black Redstart but on such a windy day it could be anywhere taking shelter in the Castle grounds. We added **Rock Pipit** and headed off to the breakwater munching on our crisps as we went. We hadn't got far when we spotted Wendy's Mum Pam on her way over to the breakwater after walking up Peel Hill with her Cockerpoo Trixie, so we waved as we passed her. I found a park on the breakwater and quickly finished my crisps before preparing to go out into the freezing cold and wind. Our plan was to check round the back of the Castle for Purps with the very slight chance of seeing the Kingfisher too, although we weren't hopeful of either with it being so windy. Wendy spotted her Mum heading our way, so I said I'd run round to check the breakwater and back of the Castle while she spoke to her.

Pam had been up to Corrin's Folly where she'd been sitting talking to some very friendly people who'd kindly shared some of their Irish coffee with her. She said she'd had a lovely walk, so I left them to it and off I went.



Peel breakwater

It was horrendous round the back of the castle and there was no sign of anything, so Wendy had been lucky having stayed in the car.

When I got back I was just getting into my car when I heard a massive splosh then a SHRIEK!! I turned round to see Wendy's Mum standing by my open back passenger side door looking like a drowned Rat and poor Trixie soaked as well. Even the bobble on her hat was no longer round and under the sheer weight of

all the water it had become flat! I looked in the back and could see that Lyca was also soaked as well as the interior of the car.



Soaked Doggie

What had happened was that Wendy's Mum was standing talking to Wendy with my back door open whilst Trixie was saying hello to Lyca in the back seat. A huge wave had crashed over the breakwater wall and totally engulfed Wendy's Mum, the 2 dogs and the inside of my car!! I suppose that's an alternative way of doing the New Year's Dip! :). Everyone, dogs included, had a look of shock and confusion on their faces but luckily Wendy's Mum could see the funny side of it. It was a good job she'd drunk that Irish coffee earlier to lessen the blow of the freezing cold seawater that was now dripping off her. The fact that the top of her rucksack was open suggested that the entire contents would also be soaked, so she had a major clean up operation on her hands when she got home. Wendy wanted to nip to the WC's before we left and on the way another wave caught her out but fortunately it was more of a light sprinkle compared to the Tsunami that her poor Mum had endured! We offered her a lift back to her car at Fenella Beach, so she didn't freeze to death, which she gladly accepted. We dread to think how cold she'd have been if she'd had to walk back! As I started to drive away it soon became evident that the seawater had made a right old mess of my windows. It was drying into a splodgy salty coating, which was going to make seeing birds out of them more difficult not to mention driving! Heading out of Peel we got stuck behind another slow coach all the way to Cronk ny Arrey Laa, which held us up again just when we didn't need it!

Our next stop was Port St Mary breakwater and I parked up at 1.44pm. Somehow I had managed to fit Peel and PSM into our days plans which I had never managed before so I kept scratching my head to think what I'd missed out. It was blowing a gale at PSM so it was pretty difficult keeping our bins steady to look down onto the stones below us.



Port St Mary

The weather hadn't put another couple with bins off though and they were looking down at the rocks too. There was loads of roosting **Dunlin** and if we didn't find what we'd gone for there then we'd have to scrub them off the list, as there was nowhere else left to look. Luckily we finally spotted some **Purple Sandpipers** amongst them perfectly camouflaged against the rocks.....Phew! We didn't have anymore time to waste though so jumped straight back into the car and I made a quick detour to the WC's for myself. While I washed my hands I had a brainwave and soaked some hand towels with water and took them outside to clean the salt off the windows of the car. I gave all the windows a good wipe down and things were looking better. Until they started to dry and the smeary mess I'd just created, which had only resulted into making matters worse, became apparent.....Doh!

Approaching Castletown we knew that the 1st thing we needed to do was check the river for a certain underwhelming bird that had bizarrely given us the slip in Ramsey. I slowed down as I drove over the bridge looking left while Wendy looked right. I drew a blank but luckily Wendy squealed, "**Canada Goose!**" but I had to see it or else it wouldn't count. I spun my head round and got a brief glimpse before I drove straight past.....Phew! I can't remember ever being so excited to see a Canada Goose!

When we arrived at Langness it was 2.03pm and driving along the road looking out over the saltmarsh it looked quite quiet.



Langness

We'd only added **Shelduck** before I parked up at Madoc's so it was a good job we weren't counting on it to boost our numbers too much! We got out of the car and took a wander so that we could have a better look realizing that we still needed to see a Wren! We usually saw or at least heard one at Langness, so we were quietly confident, not that it was too tall an order. We had a good look around but strangely there wasn't a single Wren to be seen or heard. Maybe they'd all gone into hiding due to the tradition of Hunt the Wren? :P. Having drawn a blank and not wanting to waste too much time we walked back to the car. On the way up the hill Wendy stopped and said, "Did you hear that?" I hadn't heard anything, so when she said that although it was distant it was a Wren my heart sank. We stood around waiting to see if it'd sing again but it had fallen silent and we had no choice but to head off to Derbyhaven. Langness had been a real disappointment but we'd arrived when the tide wasn't all the way in so that's never a good time to visit there. We knew there'd be more birds we needed there and I was pretty sure we were really low on the total, hopefully we'd finally come across an unusually elusive Wren.

We kept our eyes peeled when we drove along the road towards the Golf Links, as the area is normally good for our now frustrating quarry. Needless to say there was no sign but hopefully we'd have more luck at the car park at Fort Island. There had to be one there, surely? By then it was 2.30am and we had a quick of the bay seeing the 3x **Red-breasted Mergansers** that'd been hanging around for the past couple of weeks. Wendy scanned the beach as I drove past but there was no sign of another bird we were counting on. It wasn't until I'd reached the causeway that we spotted a single **Grey Plover** sitting on the rocks....Phew! Last time we'd seen Grey Plover there'd been 7 of them, so if the others were elsewhere we'd been lucky to see this one. I stopped the car and rattled a few shots off before carrying on to Fort Island.



Grey Plover

I parked up and we added **Brent Geese** to our list and I spotted another Razorbill but weirdly there was no sign of any Black Guillemots that normally shelter in the bay. I thought I had one right out by the breakwater but the bird dived and then never reappeared again, so I couldn't confirm it. Looking further out into the seaward side of the bay I finally found a **Black Guillemot** out by one of the buoys and as soon as Wendy had seen it we were free to leave.



Derbyhaven

I stopped on the causeway again ever hopeful of something to add but there was nothing. There was another Gannet out in the bay and with all the others we'd had at Marine Drive and Point of Ayre we had a definite record count for a New Year's Bird Race. A small wader flew in and landed down on the beach, so I parked up on the grass near the stream outlet, by the boats. Looking down we were disappointed to see that it was just a Dunlin, which was running around with loads of Ringed Plover and Turnstone :(Why couldn't that have been a

Knot? Carrying on round to the Flying Club we had another 2x Gannets flying over the sea but that was it.



Flying Club

We'd reached the end of the road and the only thing left to do was to get Wendy to her sister's. Driving back towards Derbyhaven Wendy caught a brief glimpse of the shape a large bird flying low over the road, which disappeared onto the beach. All of sudden all the waders flushed, so I stopped the car to check it out. Unbelievably it was another male Hen Harrier, so we'd done well for them having seen 2 over the course of the day without even trying. We'd been very worried that we wouldn't see any, as they're always a dodgy bird on a Bird Race.

Weirdly even though a few hours earlier we were behind our schedule now we had time in hand. I don't know if that was because Langness had been so poor and we didn't take long there or what. Not wanting to give up just yet I parked up at the small car park at Derbyhaven so we could have a quick look at Sandwick before we left. As I started to walk towards the golf course I heard Wendy shouting over to me. She'd looked out over Derbyhaven Bay and found a sizeable flock of **Lapwing** flying over the breakwater. Get in!! Lapwings are never a certainty in the Isle of Man anymore. We carried on over the golf course hoping for a last minute Wren or Meadow Pipit but it seemed like our luck had expired. Down at the beach we did a desperate scan of the waters edge for a Barwit or something but there was nothing new at all, so we gave up and headed back to the car. It was getting near to when Wendy needed to be at her sisters but I reckoned we still had time to check Tromode Dam for Goosander again, she wasn't too happy with this idea but I was sure we could just squeeze it in.

When we got to Eairy Dam it was still quite light but it wouldn't be for much longer and there was still no Goosanders, so I carried on round the back to Kionslieu. It was 3.48pm when we started to scan what little of the water we could see from the road but still couldn't see any, which considering there'd been 5 reported the day before was very depressing.



Getting a bit dark!

I wasn't going to be defeated by our last possible of the day and wanted to end on a high, so I got out of the car for a better look. It was freezing outside but I wandered down the road to enable myself to get angles to see into the nooks and crannies we couldn't see from the car. It was looking hopeless and I was just about to give up when I spotted a white blob in the now fading light. Luckily I'd found a male **Goosander** tucked right into the nearest edge being obscured by all the bushes and trees.....Yes! I ran back to the car to get Wendy who was sitting there grinning and waving her phone at me. Wendy got out and I took her down to where we could see the bird and there were actually 3 of them, all fast asleep. We heard the 3rd Song Thrush of the day, which was another good count for a bird race. We kept our ears pricked up just in case there was a Wren singing and although Wendy had heard one at Langness I hadn't so we couldn't count it. With the now low light the visibility out of the car windows was absolutely terrible urhghg. Rain would have been nice at this point! :) If I had known my efforts at trying to improve matters at Port St Mary would've only made it worse. I would have left well alone.....Doh!

It was 4.15pm when I dropped Wendy off to join the rest of her family to celebrate New Year. She ran straight upstairs to get changed out of her ski wear and into something more 'normal' before finally settling down with an Aperol Spritz. I was home by 4.20pm and after totaling up our days count I texted Wendy to let her know our results. We'd ended our New Years Day Bird Race on 82 birds, which wasn't our best of 88 but was a lot better than I had predicted and battered my terrible score of 73 the year before. There hadn't really been any rarities to go for this year to boost the numbers and add some excitement but we'd got into the 80's so I was happy with that.

Typically normality resumed in the garden the following day and the Redpoll were back in force as well as the Wren..... Aarrghhhh!