

Not the New Year's Day Bird Race - 2014

By 31st December it was becoming more and more likely that due to bad weather conditions we'd have to postpone the New Year's Day Bird Race.....Booooooooo :(.

This was a real shame as there was a Black Redstart at Pt St Mary, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers in Derbyhaven Bay and Goosanders at Eairy Dam, which are all good Birds for the 1st day of the year. If the forecast was right then any bird with an ounce of sense would be lying low, so the chances of it being worthwhile were practically zero. It would certainly make a change to what has now become a routine though and also meant that Wendy could do whatever she wanted for New Year's Eve. Typically, it was 1st NYE that none of her friends were doing anything, so after she'd been to her Sister's for a family meal she was home early with nowhere else to go. After changing into her PJ's and settling down to watch some TV she had a last minute offer but decided to stay in.

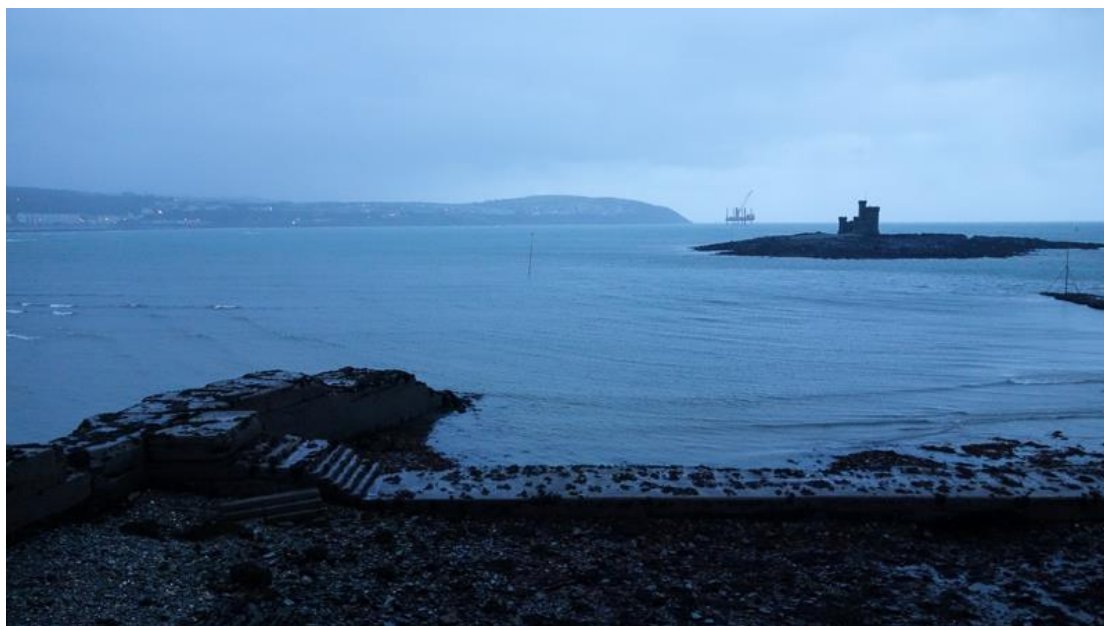
Sure enough New Year's Day was horrible so we stayed in for the 1st time in years! It was windy, raining and dark and there was barely a bird in sight from the kitchen window. It did mean that Wendy got to her Sisters earlier than usual to wish everyone a Happy New Year! By the time it got dark my list was on a staggering 6 and Wendy's was on a whopping 5.....O! Hahahahahaha! We'd definitely made the right decision though and decided that we'd start again from scratch the following Saturday. Unbelievably, on the Friday there were gales and severe coastal flooding all over the Island so the Bird Race was in serious doubt for the following day too. Would the roads be open and would all the birds have scarpered from the storms? Would it be worth getting up early to be out before it was light or should we just stay in bed and postpone it yet again? Decisions, decisions :/.

Saturday 4th Jan

At 5.30am we were woken not to the sound of the alarm, which was set for 6.30am, but to a very loud and prolonged rumble of thunder. WTF! The thunder and lightning continued for about 30mins and was accompanied by an outburst of hailstones, some of which sounded like golf balls. Wendy looked outside to see my car lights flashing away merrily in the car park, so my 1st job was to get up and turn my alarm off. Luckily Lyca was still lying down and was handling the storm well apart from a couple of tired and grumpy, "Wuffs." Wendy, who'd hardly slept the night before either because of the gales, wasn't impressed. She was totally knackered and her enthusiasm levels were non-existent, but even though it was raining it was the 1st day in over a month when we could go out birding without strong winds hampering our efforts. After listening to Wendy moaning, "I wanna go back to bed, there's no point, I'm knackered, it's raining, there's no birds about, this is gonna be a waste of time!" I decided to be harsh and ignore her, I was optimistic that the lighter winds meant the NYD race was doable. I just hoped that she wasn't right or I'd never hear the end of it! All we could do was cross our fingers that the rain would stop at lunchtime, as forecast, or we'd be in for a soggy day not to mention dog! I also hoped that I'd be able to get a few bird pics for the article this year, as last year I don't think I had time to get any. After what seemed like forever it eventually started to get light, so after loading up the car we bundled Lyca into her harness in the back seat and the Bird Race kicked off with **Herring Gull, House Sparrow, Blackbird** and **Rook**. Normally there'd be loads of Goldfinches on our feeders and we'd have at least heard a Siskin flying over but it was unusually quiet outside.....Typical! We left at 8.30am for our 1st port of call and just down the road we had **Hooded Crow**

and **Robin**. It was 6c but it felt colder, so hopefully we'd put on enough layers to keep us warm and had a bag of hand and foot warmers in the boot just in case we needed them later in the day. As we approached The Quarterbridge a **Cormorant** flew over the road and at the Brown Bobby we heard a **Wren** singing it's heart out, although this year I'd made sure I had a full tank of petrol the night before and didn't need to stop there!

At 8.35am we arrived at The Sea Terminal to check the bay, as this had been a good move last year. As we opened the doors to jump out I realized that I'd parked in a massive, deep puddle.....Doh! Wading our way through and trying not to get our boots soaked at such an early stage in the day we reached the railings and had a scan through the darkness.



Douglas

We looked out to sea and along the beach picking up **Black-headed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Eider, Shag, Black Guillemot**. We were also pleasantly surprised to find 2x **Great Northern Divers**, which seemed to be prevalent in many of the Islands bays recently, presumably due to the stormy weather. Normally we'd have been high fiving a GND on a NYD race but they were a near banker at Derbyhaven at the time. Down on the rocks we only found **Curlew, Grey Heron, Oystercatcher** and **Redshank**, so we thought we'd better get going.

Our next plan was to go to Marine Drive to try for Fulmar, which was a bit out of the way for just 1 bird but was where we stood our best chance. We'd failed to see them there last year so it was a long shot. On the way up to Douglas Head we saw a **Carrion Crow** and Lyca had started to whinge in the back to get out, but she'd have to wait until we parked up for that. There was still some evidence of the flooding on the road and as I approached one of the massive puddles I couldn't help but worry that it was too deep for my car to get through. Luckily it wasn't as bad as I'd thought and I drove straight through without a problem. At 8.51am we parked up at the gate and got Lyca on her lead and she happily jumped out for a sniff around.



Marine Drive

Thinking she might've been desperate for a wee she very annoyingly didn't do one, so all the fuss had been about nothing. We planned to walk over to the 1st cove for our bird but when I looked down the cliffs right next to the car a bird appeared and I shouted to Wendy, "**Fulmar!**" She came running over and watched it whizz past, followed by another.....brilliant! Now we didn't need to waste time walking over to the cove whilst dodging dog poo :). There were a lot of Crows flying around over the hills and we found 2x **Ravens** amongst them but there was no point sticking around so Wendy jumped back in the car to write some notes while I tried to calm a hyper Lyca down. The next thing I knew was that Wendy was banging on the window and shouting from inside the car, frantically pointing up to the sky. I had no idea what was going on or what she was on about so she opened her door and shouted, "Above you, above you.....**Chough!**" I looked up and saw the 2 birds just before they disappeared down the cliff, which was our cue to leave.

At 9.03am I parked up on Leigh Terrace and we ran over the road for a scan of the river. The water was so high that the concrete under the bridge was totally under water so our only hope of seeing Grey Wagtail went straight out the window.



Leigh terrace

The only birds we saw were **Jackdaw**, **Moorhen** and **Mallard** and when I saw a Pied Wagtail it disappeared before Wendy got onto it. That of course meant that it didn't count, so we ran back to the car and I drove off. Just as we approached Kewaigue a **Blue Tit** flew over the road and we kept our eyes peeled for Long-tailed Tit, as they're always dodgy birds to get on a Bird Race. Needless to say, there were none, but we did see a **Magpie** and very jammily got another dodgy bird as I drove through Braaid. A flock of Crows lifted from a field, so I turned my head to look and couldn't believe my eyes! I shrieked, "**Peregrine!**" and Wendy couldn't fail to see the bird as it zoomed straight past the car, really close to us.....Cool! We hadn't seen one in quite a while, so this was a good bird to get!

Next on the agenda was Eairy Dam and as soon as I parked up at 9.16am we saw the 3x **Goosanders**.....Woo Hoo! We'd have struggled for them elsewhere so we were more than a bit relieved that they were still there. There was also **Coot**, **Teal**, **Tufted Duck**, **Collared Dove** and a **Great Tit** but not much else. We'd been hoping to hear Siskin flying over but there wasn't so much as a squeak. Having exhausted Eairy we carried on to Kionslieu, where we were going to walk Lyca down to the water to hopefully find the Gadwall.....Hahahaha! When I pulled up in the layby to view the water we could see how flooded the path was, it was like a river, and had to resign ourselves to the fact that Lyca was going to get incredibly wet and muddy. There was a **Pheasant** in the field where the all the pine trees used to be and unbelievably and very luckily a **Hen Harrier** drifted across the field, which really took us by surprise. We've never seen one there before and we weren't even hopeful of seeing one at all on the race never mind there! We needed to get out of the car to view the water properly, so I drove a bit further down the road to park up before our walk and in the garden of the house opposite there was a **Song Thrush**. We squelched our way down the soggy path in the rain and had to go off track into the reeds when it got too bad. Lyca of course, though it was great fun and trotted her way through every muddy puddle available.



Waterlogged path!

Further along the boardwalk there was a tree down so we had to duck underneath it to get through, which was easier said than done, although Lyca had no problems!



Wendy heard Long-tailed Tits and tried to get me onto them but I heard nothing, so they didn't count either, which was a shame as they're dodgy birds to find on a race too. We did hear **Goldcrest** and there were **Mute Swans** and **Wigeon** on the water but although we looked through everything there was no sign of the Gadwall.



Pretty dead Kionslieu

That was that crossed off our list for the day then :(We turned back and made our way back to the car as quickly as possible and after drying Lyca off the best I could we carried on to our next stop at 9.47am with my boots already soaked through to my feet. Driving through Foxdale the rain thankfully stopped and we picked up **Mistle Thrush**, **Chaffinch** then **Woodpigeon**.

On the way down south we pulled up at South Barrule Plantation for a quick listen, so we wound the windows down. A **Dunnoek** appeared and shot into a bush opposite us but apart from that it was all very quiet.....typical! I was just about to drive off when Wendy shrieked, "What's that, what's that?" There were a few small birds darting about in the pines and when we got our bins on them we both shouted, "**Coal Tits!**" We really did have to go and I drove away at 9.56am, exactly 1 minute after we'd arrived. I took the South Barrule route

although we didn't even try for Red Grouse, as we knew it'd be like looking for a needle in a haystack, but we did pick up **Stonechat** on the way. The sky was blue and there was a weird fog covering the Sloc, but looking down south it was clear. Wendy had started to have one of her Tripolar attacks, which was way too early in the game!

Sure enough it was bright and calm at Port St Mary and we had our 1st **Starlings** of the day flying around the houses. First off we stopped to view the flat rocks at Kallow Point at 10.12am and we ran down the grassy bank dodging tons of dog poo as we went.



Kallow Point

We had a scan but the Purps were nowhere to be seen.....Grrrrrrrr! We're always taking a chance by going to Pt St Mary, as it's a bit out of the way if we don't get to see what we were looking for. There was a solitary nutter out in the sea on a surfboard and the only new birds we could find were a couple of **Rock Pipits** flying about and feeding on the rocks. Our only other hope was the breakwater but we weren't hopeful, as it wasn't high tide and we never seem to have any luck finding the wintering Purps on a Bird Race. I put my foot down and raced over, screeching to a halt at 10.20am in the car park. We leapt out of the car and peered over the breakwater and down onto the rocks. Wendy very quickly yelled, "**Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Dunlin!**" and got me onto them. This looked good, so I carried on looking and was totally gob smacked when I spotted what we'd gone all that way for.....**Purple Sandpiper**. YES!



Purple Sandpiper

After I'd taken a record shot and Wendy had seen them we had a quick check out in the bay, finding yet another Great Northern Diver, before running back to the car. Our 2nd stop was the footpath round at the harbour to chance our luck for the Black Redstart we'd seen on Boxing day but after the terrible storm and flooding we seriously doubted it would still be there. I tried to get the car nearer to where we wanted to be, to save us some precious time, but it soon became apparent that it'd be impossible. The road along the row of houses was totally covered in rocks and boulders and was impassable.



What a mess!

I reversed back and parked up in our usual spot, which would give Lyca a longer walk but would take up more of our time. We hadn't thought for a second that it'd take so long but we finally saw our 1st **Feral Pigeons** of the day. As we wandered down the road we couldn't believe the mess and felt very sorry for the homeowners down there, especially the people who'd just bought the one with the 'Sold' sign on it! There was a section of wall and part of the road, which had

collapsed, and a guy was out with a shovel trying to clear the debris away from outside his house.



Destruction!

I spotted a **Pied Wagtail** down on the beach so I got Wendy onto it and we headed round to the rocks where we'd last seen the Black Redstart. Even part of the concrete coastal path had buckled with the force of the waves and although there was a sign up saying it was closed everyone was still using it. The tide was pretty high but there was no sign of the Black Redstart so, feeling very disappointed, we turned round and headed back. We were back at the car at 10.50am and I began to worry that after this unproductive stop off we were running seriously behind time. Driving out of Pt St Mary we could hear the barking and yelping of dogs, which sounded in distress. All was revealed when we saw that outside the Co-op, in the middle of the road, 3 people were bending down around 2 Dogs, which had locked on to each other in some sort of fight! :O. Neither of us had ever seen anything like it before and I had to swerve the car around them to get past.

When we arrived at Derbyhaven at 11.02am we decided to check the left side first, so I parked up on the grass by the boats and we jumped out for a look. A quick scan of the beach in front of us produced a very surprising bird indeed and I called it out to Wendy, "**Knot!**" We certainly weren't expecting that, so I grabbed a quick record shot! I was starting to think we were being very lucky on this race and was getting more and more optimistic about our possible total.



Knot

The 2x **Barnacle Geese** were down at the shoreline as were the **Brent Geese** but there was nothing else new. Typically, the Black Guillemots were in really close and with the nice light on them it made for the perfect conditions I'd been waiting weeks for, but I had no time for photography and had to walk away :(. We took a spin over to the Flying Club specifically for Snipe and although there were none we did find a **Meadow Pipit**. Again a bird not guaranteed on the NYD race. The beach line was a total mess of seaweed and looked very different to the last time we'd been there.



Flying club

There was no point sticking around, so we went over to Fort Island with our fingers crossed for something decent in the bay. On the way we handily spotted **Razorbill** and the **Little Grebe** miles out in the sea, neither of which were guaranteed birds, especially after the storms. Approaching the causeway there was a lot of water and seaweed washed up and part of the wall had been destroyed there too.



Causeway Wall damage

We looked to the right, to check the wader roost rocks and I just dismissed the birds as the usual Redshank etc. but Wendy yelled out, "**Grey Plover!**" Sure enough one of the 'Redshanks' I was looking at was plain as day a Grey Plover.....Doh! We hadn't found any of the normal wintering Grey Plover for weeks so yet again our luck was in. As I pulled up in the car park at 11.21am there was a small flock of about 5x **Linnets** feeding on the ground, which flew off as I parked up. This was very handy, as we'd also been struggling to spot any Linnets during the past few weeks. There were at least 3x Divers in the bay and between dives we counted 3x Great Northern but there was another one further out by the causeway, which we reckoned could've been the Black-throat.



Scanning the bay

There didn't seem to be much else about apart from Black Guillemots until I spotted the **Red-breasted Merganser** pop up from a dive....Phew! Another great bird for the NYD race and highly likely to be the only RBM around the Island at the time. We were starting to think we should be making a move when Wendy announced that there was a **Kittiwake** flying in, which was a huge surprise for the bay and a great bird for the race too. While we were watching another one and wondering what they were doing at Derbyhaven something caught my eye as it landed just in front of me. I looked down onto the rocks only

to see a lovely **Sparrowhawk** sitting there, which was another very flukey bird for us. I grabbed Wendy's camera from the back of the car for a quick record shot but I just wished that my camera hadn't been in the boot.....Grrrrrrr!



Sparrowhawk

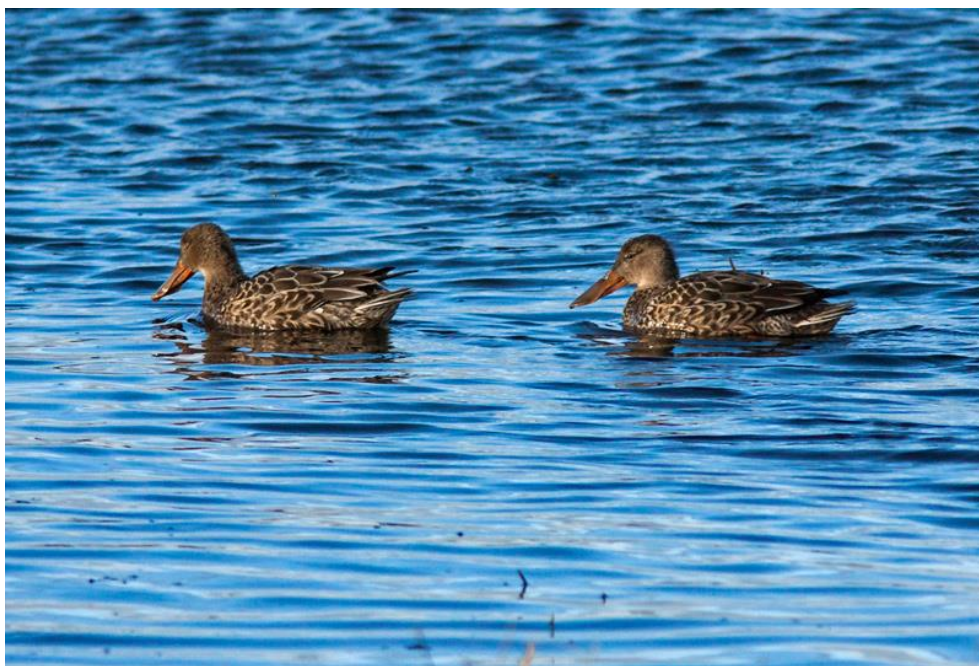
We'd practically given up on everything else when the **Black-throated Diver** appeared just in front of us. Woo Hoo.....we were on a roll! After that we definitely had to get going, so I pulled off at 11.34am and drove back over the dodgy causeway, with our next stop being Langness.

The south had been very kind to us up till then but we knew that our luck would run out sooner rather than later, so we weren't expecting much at Langness. Having said that, we had to laugh while I was driving through the golf course, as the **Little Egret** flew straight over from Derbyhaven. We had no idea where it'd been while we'd been there but neither of us had seen it. The next bird for our list was **Shelduck** and there were a good number of them about too. We noticed that the Dubh was full of Ducks, which made a nice change from being totally empty, so we headed over hoping that the Pintails were still around.....in our dreams!



Stinky Dubh

Obviously we weren't seriously expecting that they would be but we'd already seen all the common birds we'd usually find there, so it was worth a shot. I pulled over and started going through them and my jaw nearly hit the ground when I noticed a female **Shoveler**! That wasn't what we'd expected at all and it turned out that there were 2 birds....Cool!



Shoveler

After getting a record shot and checking everywhere, including Maddocs, thoroughly for Reed Bunting and failing miserably I thought I'd risk driving down the track to Sandwick in the hope of finding the Barwits. We hadn't found them either, despite trawling through the hundreds of roosting Curlews at Langness, but we knew that they must've been around somewhere. On the way we saw 2 more Little Egrets flying over the pool followed by the other one, so that made 3 birds in total, instead of just the resident one. The track down to Sandwick was worse than ever due to the recent floods and within a few seconds there was a large CRUNCH noise. It sounded nasty at the front of my car so I got out to check the damage. Somehow my car had become a plough and the problem was a 3 foot high bank of seaweed jammed at the front of the car! Uh oh.

There was only one thing for it, whilst Wendy relaxed in the nice warm car I manically kicked and shoved enough away to get the car unstuck and we were able to get down to the parking area :) pheww! The tide was pretty high so there were tons of Gulls, including **Common Gull** but no sign of the Barwits, so that was them AND Reed Bunting scrubbed off the list for the day :(Another bird, which we'd also just about given up on, suddenly appeared and luckily I heard them before I saw them. A flock of **Greenfinches** flew in and started feeding on the seed heads of some dried up plants....Yes!



There used to be a track here!

As it was a bit chilly we didn't bother walking down the track (well what was left of it) to look for the Bar wits but I hoped that wouldn't come back to haunt us. (Sure enough the next day I was down there with Andy and we found two Skylarks in the grass!! Nooooo.)

We called it day at 12.06pm and realizing that we'd also brilliantly failed to see a single Goldfinch I took a detour to my Mum and Dad's house to look at their feeders, which are always caked in them. At 12.09pm I jumped out of the car and stuck my head over the fence only to remember that they'd had to take the feeders down due to the risk of the pole snapping in the gales.....Doh!

By then we were already starting to feel hungry, so we ate the last of the Celebrations, which I'd smuggled out with me in my pocket. The problem was that we couldn't afford to stop for lunch until we hit the Point of Ayre, as it would take up too much time. We just hoped that it wouldn't take us too long to get there but of course, we ended up getting stuck behind a tow truck in Foxdale and all the way through Glen Helen.....Urrghhhhh! As we continued up to the North section of the island I pulled up briefly in the car park at The Glen Helen Inn at 12.33pm to listen out for Treecreeper but it was totally silent. Shortly after I caught up with the truck and had to follow it all the way through Kirk Michael, which was very slow going and frustrating to say the least.

Our next plan was to stop at Bishop's Dubh for our last and best chance of seeing Snipe and at 12.42pm I pulled in on the curb. The Dubh was really full and most of the exposed weeds that we'd normally check were under water.....Uh Oh! As luck would have it we quickly found one right at the back and added **Snipe** to our list :). Two minutes later I drove away and we breathed a sigh of relief to have

seen another risky bird for the Race. As I drove through Ballaugh we noticed a small flock of Thrushes flying over. I quickly stopped to check them and we confirmed **Fieldfare** and **Redwing**, which was very very lucky, as they seem to have been incredibly thin on ground recently. It actually turned out that they'd been flushed by our 2nd Peregrine of the day, which is a bird we'd usually struggle for on a race! After we'd found some brilliant garden feeders last year we wanted to incorporate them into the route again, as we were unbelievably struggling for Goldfinch and Siskin! When we got there we found that they'd all been taken down and instead of the masses of Tits and Finches, we'd had before, the whole area was lifeless. This meant that our only hope of Siskin, not to mention Redpoll, was to hear a random bird calling from somewhere overhead.

By then we were absolutely starving and dying for our lunch but we had a few stop offs planned before we finally got to the Point of Ayre. Firstly I drove through Jurby at 12.59pm to check the fields and we added **Whooper Swan** to our list and then drove out to the East coast through Ramsey, seeing **Canada Geese** in the harbour. We then headed to the North end of Ramsey bay to look at one of the remaining sewage outlets left on the island. Our 1st scan produced nothing and it looked as though our birds weren't there, which would have been a nightmare, but luckily Wendy finally found the **Goldeneye** absolutely miles out. We'd hoped that the tide would be in when we hit Ramsey, as we'd found loads of Sanderling feeding on the shoreline the weekend before, but the tide was too far out. This meant that we could near enough scrub Sanderling off, as the Point of Ayre had been very hit and miss for them recently.

Driving towards the recently dry flood field at Glascoe Wendy commented that it must've been be flooded with all the heavy rain we'd had. This was a good point, so I pulled up at 1.19pm and we crossed over the road for a look. It was indeed full of water but there were no birds on it to speak of. Just as we were about to leave I spotted a single **Lapwing** lying very low in the grass right at the back at the edge of the pool. This was very good, as it was highly unlikely that the flock of 30, we'd seen coming in at The Phurt the week before, would still be around. I'd hazard a guess at this was the only Lapwing on the Island at the moment! Crazy when I think back to when I used to do the WeBS surveys and would count flocks of 100 or so down south. Next off we wanted to stop at Ballacorey Equestrian Centre, to check for Red-legs, as it was our best chance of finding any. At 1.24pm I parked up and we scanned the field from the gate but there was no sign. To add insult to injury there were shooters out in the field so surely the birds were either hiding somewhere or blown to bits. Wendy had already written them off and had started to walk back to the car but I stayed put a few seconds longer. This was just enough time for me to see a few **Red-legged Partridge** being flushed from the ground by a gun shot and flying over the hunter's heads. I shouted Wendy to come back but she was a bit reluctant given the circumstances. After she'd seen one, which happily also got away, we raced back to a very bored looking Lyca. She'd been so good all day but by then she must've been raring for another walk. Luckily she wouldn't have too much longer to wait, as that was our plan at our next stop, after we'd had lunch of course.

It was 1.39pm when I parked up next to Wright's Pit and although Wendy was quietly confident of finding our bird I wasn't so sure. I thought that with the bad weather Sean wouldn't have been out ringing, so there'd be no seed down for them to eat. Sure enough there was nothing at his ringing site. We didn't give up though and I drove a bit further on to look into the pit. We scanned the weeds

but there was nothing, so I turned the engine on to drive off just as a small flock of Finches fly in. We got our bins on them and luckily it was the **Twite**.....Phew! :). This was brilliant but we couldn't believe that we'd seen Twite before Goldfinch or Siskin.....Crazy! Normally we'd see Goldfinch there but for whatever reason there was none. We desperately needed some food by then and Wendy was on her 2nd Tripolar attack of the day, so I drove over and parked up at the Point of Ayre at 1.44pm. Not as late as I worried we would be.



Point of Ayre

It was Wendy's Mum's Birthday and her Sister was cooking tea for everyone later but Wendy still hadn't heard anything from her Mum. She was starting to get worried by then and was also anxious that she'd make it in time for tea at 5.30pm.

While we ate our food we kept an eye out to sea and also a look out for Golden Plover, which we still needed, having failed at Langness. Wendy played it safe this year and had made a sarnie for herself as well. It certainly looked a lot easier to eat than her usual poncey Cous Cous and Edamame Bean Salad concoction, which usually ends up all over her instead of in her mouth :P. We all enjoyed our lunch, even Lyca, who polished off the remainder of her breakfast from earlier. Wendy spotted a Diver out at sea and thankfully it was a **Red-throated Diver**, our 1st of the day, and not another Great Northern, not that we could sniff at so many GNDs! I then spotted some waders asleep on the shingle and optimistically thought they could be Golden Plover. We both had a look and were chuffed to find, not Golden Plover, but some **Sanderling** in with the Ringed Plover.....Wahey! Unfortunately there were no Golden Plover to be seen, so we scrubbed them off the list, unless a flock flew over us at some point. Wendy then found an Auk, which was a **Guillemot** and amazingly this is a bird we hardly ever see on a New Year Bird Race. Razorbills aren't that hard to find but Guillemots are really tricky for some reason. There was another close in Black Guillemot and seeing as I'd had to miss an ideal opportunity at Derbyhaven I ran down to the shoreline to try for a shot while Wendy and Lyca finished off their food. I wasn't very happy with the shot, as the bird ended up further away that it had been, so I couldn't help but feel depressed at not having had the time earlier.



Black Guillemot

The clock was still ticking and it was beginning to look as though it was going to rain again, so we made our way back over to Wright's Pit.

We got out of the car at 2.19pm and after I'd put Lyca on her lead we went for a walk around the fence to view the Pits from the only place possible, which is miles away from the birds. We weren't expecting to be able to pick out anything other than Pochard but with very few birds left to add by then, anything would do. It started to rain but Lyca went for a run and had a good sniff around while we tried to pull out a Pochard from the tiny black silhouettes on the Pits. Wendy was the 1st to say she had one and after she'd got me onto it we turned round and hotfooted it back with **Pochard** on our list. We were back at the car by 2.33pm and I reckoned, since we had time, that the Ballaghennie viewing platform was worth a try to see if the Golden Plover were on the beach somewhere. I pictured seeing the birds in my head and thought it was a great last minute idea.

I pulled in to The Ballaghennie Pines car park in the hope of hearing Redpoll or seeing Goldfinch, which had turned into our most impossible bird of the day, but there wasn't a bird to be seen or heard. Not only that but the car park itself was flooded, so I made a quick exit. When I drove down the road towards the platform we soon realized that it might be a no go zone. The road and the heath were properly flooded and it looked like a completely different place.....Uh Oh!



Ballaghennie floods

I drove through the first puddle but the second one was massive and looked pretty deep. I got out and had a paddle to see if it came over my shoes. Within about 2 yards it was over my shoes and about 10 yards in you couldn't see the road. I decided that this one wasn't worth the risk especially as Wendy was still worried about getting stuck and not making it to her Sisters. In the end I reversed back up the road and made a hasty retreat back to the main road. I was really gutted about that, as I'd done a rough count and knew that we only needed a handful more birds to beat our best ever score. Every new bird was vital by then.

It was still too light to go to Ballaugh, so I reckoned we should check Blue Point out just in case the, up till now absent, flock of Common Scoters had miraculously decided to return. This proved a great plan, as on the way there we spotted a bird sitting on some power lines and stopped to confirm our suspicions. It was a **Kestrel** making it our 4th Raptor of the race, which was brilliant, as we'd normally be desperate for most of them by the end of the day. When we hit another huge flood in the road I was worried we'd have to turn around and lose bags of time going back on ourselves but luckily a 4x4 came up behind us, so I let it go past. This meant that I could gauge how deep it was and if my car could handle it or not. It didn't look too bad, so I slammed the car into gear and went for it, ploughing my way through without a hitch.....Skillzzz :P. Further down the road we hit yet another and without the 4x4 in front of us I just had to hope that it'd be OK. Everything had gone well so far, so I took the chance that it'd be alright again :). Luckily it was fine and I parked up to view the sea at Blue Point at 2.58pm.

Although we gave it our best shot we couldn't find anything new, nor were the Common Scoters there, so we left. With so much flooding on the roads I'd started to think that we wouldn't make it to Close Sartfield, as surely the tracks around that part of the Island would be especially bad? As a last ditch attempt at Common Scoter we paid Ballagarragyn a visit and although there was no sign of them it made for a lovely view with the sun just starting to set.



Ballagarragyn

The temperature was beginning to plummet when we got back to the car at 3.13pm, so Wendy cracked open some foot and hand warmers. She'd remembered how she'd let herself get too cold before we'd even got to Close Sartfield and how long it'd taken her to warm up, so wasn't prepared to let it happen again. Before we got there we had just 1 more place on our agenda, where we could potentially see Tree Sparrow, Siskin and Goldfinch. If we were successful it would be enough to get us right up there with a chance of our highest score ever and even knocking around the magic 90!

I parked up just down the road from the Curraghs feeders at 3.26pm and we wandered slowly down the road listening out for any of the birds we still needed. Although some of the Sparrows calling sounded just like Tree Sparrows we couldn't find a single one amongst the House Sparrows. The feeders were very busy, presumably with birds feeding up for the night. Luckily for us the majority were **Goldfinches**, as we'd all but given up them and it'd be a pretty poor show if we'd ended the race without such a common bird! I noticed that the pond in the garden with the feeders had been drained and I remembered Sean telling us that Tree Sparrows need water near their strongholds, so I wondered if that might have been the reason for their apparent disappearance? By then it was starting to get dark, so despite a desperate last ditch scan for Tree Sparrow and Siskin we eventually had to give up and went back to the car to head for our last stop of the day. This put the nail in the coffin for us getting a big score, as we'd just failed to see too many of the birds I'd expected at the end of the day. The North had been a bit of a let down in comparison with our good luck down South earlier.

It was 3.46pm when we finally arrived at Close Sartfield and the 1st thing we noticed was a big sign saying, "No Dogs!" That meant that poor Lyca would be left on her own in the car while we were out freezing to death at the Hide. I cracked open my foot and hand warmers in preparation while Wendy went for a look in the fields behind the car. The only thing she found was 3x **Brown Hares**, which were surprisingly tame, and quickly returned.



National Geographic submission – Brown Hares :P

Before we headed out we sat in the car with our eyes and ears fixed on anything that moved or squeaked until it was dark enough to go. We were at the Hide by 4.03pm and were surprised at how deathly quiet it was. Normally there'd be the huge flock of Greylags coming in to roost by then and last year we'd even had a White-fronted Goose in with them. I'd been slightly hopeful that it'd still be around but none of them materialized. We still needed Greylag and when Wendy heard them in the distance we still couldn't count them, as I hadn't. Fortunately in the end I did but we were confused as to why they didn't fly over like normal, noisily calling as they went to roost. As we now fully expect at Close Sartfield we didn't see a single Hen Harrier, so it was lucky that we'd already seen one earlier. It's a shame to see what used to be the biggest Hen Harrier roost in Europe now completely empty.



Curraghs

As we stood there with toasty warm feet, thanks to the heat pads in our boots, a big **Wallaby** hopped out of the bushes and into the back of the field. It's always great to see them and made a nice change to just an eye glare and dark shape in the car headlights, like when we're out Nothing in the summer. Eventually, after waiting for what felt like ages, we heard the squealing of a **Water Rail**, which was our cue to head home.....Phew! Job done.

Back at the car at 4.43pm the temperature was down to 4c and although our feet and hands were warm the same couldn't be said for the rest of us. Lyca was luckily asleep on the back seat and I whacked on the car heaters to thaw us out on the way home. The only race we had now was to get home so that Wendy could get changed and up to her Sister's for her Mum's Birthday. That said, we did keep our eyes peeled for Woodcock and Owls the whole way home but needless to say, our luck had run out and that was that.

After a quick change Wendy was at her Sister's by 5.40pm and I tallied up our total for the day after I'd dropped her off. Wendy was pleasantly surprised to find that we'd ended the race on 87 birds, which didn't beat our record of 89 but was a lot better than our lowest count of 82. I couldn't help but feel like we could've hit the big 90, especially after our amazing luck down south, but somehow we'd just crumbled at the line. I'd have gladly taken 87 in the week leading up to the race when I was estimating around 80 but after the actual event, with only 3 birds short, it left me feeling slightly disappointed. The killers to miss out on were Long-tailed tit, Tree Sparrow, Siskin and Golden Plover. Add in Skylark & Bar-tailed Godwit which were about somewhere and we would have beaten the all-time record, that's how close we were. If only! :)

Although the day had kicked off to an awful start with the thunder, lightning and hail storm and didn't look like it would be worth doing, it'd actually turned into a nice day, weather wise. The rain had mainly held off and sun had even put in an appearance too. I'm glad I hadn't listened to Wendy that morning and that I'd cracked the whip to get her motivated but although it's always a great day it's also a relief to get it over with too! :P.

Bird list (birds in bold are uncommon on our NYD races)

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

Google Map of locations visited

