

Winter is the perfect time to visit one of the country's top ten most important wetlands.

FLOCKING TO THE MERSEY



Words Tim Melling

Photographs Steve Young

Remember the TV show Family Fortunes, where contestants had to guess the most popular public answers to simple questions? I wonder what answers you'd get if you asked what people associated most with the River Mersey. The Beatles, the ferries, the Liver building, Albert Dock or the Cathedrals? I suspect that not many would conjure up an image of one of Britain's richest bird sites. But the Mersey Estuary is currently in ninth place in the league of the top UK wetland sites, regularly supporting more than 100,000 ducks and wading birds.

The Mersey rather hides its light under a bushel compared with say, Morecambe Bay, where thousands of people can easily enjoy the waterfowl spectacular from countless viewpoints. On the Mersey, it's difficult to access the inner estuary, the area where most of the wildlife-rich salt marsh and mudflats are to be found. The Manchester Ship Canal is a barrier to access on the south side, and there aren't too many access points on the north side either.

When visiting the Mersey Estuary, timing is everything; time of year and time of day. During the summer, most of the Mersey's birds will have flown to the Arctic or Scandinavia to breed. They return during September and October and will remain until March or April, when they fly back north. So autumn and winter are the best times to visit the Mersey.

The state of the tide is also important, as it governs the birds' activity. At high tide, birds head for an undisturbed roosting place. When the falling tide exposes the food-rich mudflats and

salt marshes, they leave their roosts for breakfast. So the best time to visit the Mersey is about an hour after high tide when the birds should be feeding close to the upper shore. As the tide recedes, the birds will disperse further and further across the vast expanses of intertidal flats.

The Dunlin is the commonest wading bird, comprising almost a half of the Mersey's 100,000

numbers of locally bred Ringed Plovers that spend the whole winter on the Mersey.

The Shelduck is unique among British ducks in that both the male and female have showy plumage; bright red beaks, green heads, black and white bodies with a chestnut breast band. They nest underground in rabbit burrows so the incubating females do not need the camouflaged plumage shown by other types

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH:
FLOCK OF GOLDEN PLOVERS
BELOW: TURNSTONE

“One cubic metre of Mersey Estuary mud contains enough worms and shellfish to equal the number of calories in sixteen Mars bars.”

birds. The Mersey is the top UK site for this species, supporting more than any other site. They are rather small, brown and nondescript in winter, but their beauty comes from the spectacular choreographed flock movements. They feed in large flocks on the mudflats but will readily take to the air. When airborne, they have a coordinated movement that seems to flow through the flock in waves. The effect is mesmerising as the flock changes from dark to white in waves as each bird twists in turn to reveal either the dark back or the white belly.

Some birds don't spend the whole winter on the Mersey, but use it as a sort of motorway service station where they refuel as they migrate vast distances. Arctic breeding Ringed Plovers spend the summer in the Arctic and the winter in West Africa. These tiny cousins of the Lapwing call into the estuary for a few days in spring and autumn to replenish the reserves they have used up on the first leg of the exhausting journey between the two. The envy of human dieters, migratory birds like the Ringed Plover can rapidly use up their fat reserves. Less desirable is their ability to put on fat with equal speed. These migratory birds play leapfrog with smaller

of duck. Thirty years ago the entire British population of Shelducks used to migrate to the Heligoland Bight after breeding, a remote area off the coast of north west Germany.

Like all ducks, Shelducks moult all their flight feathers simultaneously, rendering them completely flightless for a time. Coupled with their showy plumage, this makes them extremely vulnerable to predation, which is why they flew to this remote sandbank. However, Shelducks have been moving to the Mersey to moult in increasing numbers. More than 15,000 Shelducks (about 20% of the UK population) have stayed to moult on the Mersey in recent years, and

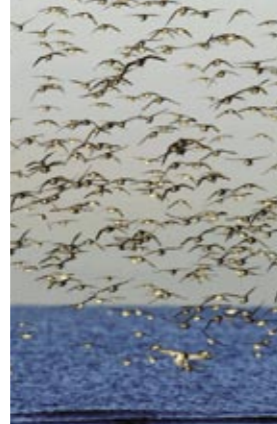
it is now the single most important site in the whole of the UK for this species.



LEFT: CURLEW
BELOW LEFT: WADER FLOCK
BELOW RIGHT: REDSHANK



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Turnstone is a species that was long overlooked on the Mersey – they were missed during the regular high tide counts at Seaforth and the North Wirral Foreshore because they don't roost with the other waders. They were discovered roosting on Liverpool's dock walls at the mouth of the Mersey, which are not easily visible. About a thousand Turnstones normally feed on the barnacle beds on the Egremont foreshore and on the groynes in that area.

Ringing studies on Turnstones have shown that they are both long-lived and extremely site faithful. One Turnstone has returned to the same barnacle bed at Egremont for nearly twenty years, yet it flies thousands of miles each year to breed in Greenland. It seems strange that it travels the globe, yet its knowledge of the world comprises just a few hectares of tundra in Greenland, and a small area of foreshore in England.

The Mersey in winter supports more than 7 per cent of the entire Icelandic breeding population of Black-tailed Godwits. These birds have extremely long legs and bills enabling them to probe deep in the Mersey mud for food. In flight, they have strikingly black and white plumage, including a black tip to a white tail, which gives them their name. In the same manner that our swallows



fly south for the winter, so do Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits. The estuaries of the Northwest are particularly important wintering sites.

More than 10,000 Teal regularly spend the winter on the Mersey Estuary, making it the second most important UK site, after the Somerset Levels. These tiny ducks are only about half the size of a Mallard, and instead of quacking they make a high pitched, bell-like whistle. They breed in marshes in Scandinavia and Russia, but flee before the onset of the freezing winter. This is the time of year when most Liverpoolians are dreaming of vacating Merseyside for a holiday in the warmth. But for the Teal, the Mersey Estuary in a mild winter haven.

Meanwhile, Peregrine Falcons have cottoned on to the fact that there are many birds around for them to feed on. In recent years, they have moved into Merseyside and now nest on buildings on both sides of the river. This is quite a dramatic step for a bird that is more at home on remote moorland crags and sea cliffs. They can regularly be seen perched on Hamilton Square Chimney in Birkenhead, or on tall buildings in Liverpool itself.

But the bird that has really put the Mersey on the

birdwatchers' map is the rare and elusive Leach's Petrel, a small dark seabird with a white rump and a forked tail that ranks among the most difficult to see of all British birds. The name petrel is thought to derive from St Peter who walked on water as these birds patter over the surface in a similar manner. It only nests on remote, uninhabited Scottish islands such as North Rona and Sula Sgeir. Furthermore, it only ever returns to these nesting islands at night, spending the daylight hours many miles out to sea. It also winters at sea off the coast of western Africa.

So why is the Mersey so famous for them? During September, Petrels migrate south at night from Scotland towards Africa, flying above the Irish Sea. When strong northwesterly winds blow at this time of year, disoriented birds get blown across Liverpool Bay and into the Mersey. Keen birdwatchers eagerly watch the weather forecasts during September and after a strong blow, you will usually see large crowds of birdwatchers sheltering against Perch Rock in the hope of catching a glimpse of one of these special birds. New Brighton is generally reckoned the most reliable place in Britain to catch sight of a Leach's Petrel.

So what does all this tell us about the quality of the

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ABOVE: PEREGRINE

BELOW:


LEACH'S PETREL

FACING PAGE FROM TOP:

WADER FLOCK,

BLACK TAILED GODWIT,

BATHING MALE TEAL, DUNLIN

Mersey Estuary? As the water quality has improved in recent years, a greater range of invertebrates (worms, shellfish etc) has developed, which in turn supports a greater range of birds. So next time you look across the sandflats and mudflats of the Mersey Estuary and you think it is a barren waste, remember that there are over 100,000 birds out there who disagree with you. 



60-second expert

- Most people are surprised to learn that the Mersey Estuary is in the top ten most important wetland bird sites in Britain.
- It regularly hosts more than 100,000 birds and is considered internationally important for three types of duck and four types of wading bird.
- Winter is the best time to see birds on the estuary. Each autumn birds arrive on the Mersey all the way from the Arctic. They choose the Mersey partly because they consider it a warm and sheltered site to spend the winter and partly because of the superabundance of food.
- It has been calculated that the worms and shellfish in one cubic metre of Mersey mud have the same number of calories as sixteen Mars bars.
- Parts of the estuary are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or as Ramsar sites, which covers wetlands of international importance.

Accessing the Mersey Estuary

On the north side of the estuary

Park in the Hale Head Car park (map reference SJ473814) and walk south to the lighthouse where you can walk east or west along the Mersey shore. Dunlin, Redshank and Teal can be seen here, amongst lots of other species. Park at Oglet Bay car park (SJ449820) and again walk east or west along the Mersey shore. This area is also good for Dunlin, Redshank, Teal and Shelduck.

On the south side of the estuary

Park at Eastham Ferry (SJ362819) at the country park and enjoy views across the Mersey. At low tide Dunlin, Redshank and Teal can be seen on the exposed mudflats. Very few birds to be seen at high tide.

On-street parking at New Ferry (SJ342855) can give access to New Ferry Bay, a favoured site for Black-tailed Godwits and Pintail when the mudflats are exposed.

On-street parking at Egremont (SJ319920) will give views of the coastal defence groynes. These groynes are used by roosting waders use at high tide. This area is also the best feeding site for Turnstones when the falling tide exposes the barnacle beds.

On-street parking near Perch Rock at New Brighton (SJ310942) gives access to the North Wirral Foreshore; a favourite feeding and roosting area for wading birds. This site is also a favourite spot to look for rare Leach's Petrels and other seabirds such as gulls, terns and skuas.

Important Bird Populations on the Mersey Estuary

A site is considered to be of international importance for any species of bird if it supports more than 1 per cent of the European population. The Mersey Estuary is internationally important for three species of duck and four species of wading bird and so qualifies as a Special Protection Area, a status reserved for only the most important bird sites in Europe. It also qualifies as a Ramsar site; a wetland of international importance. This recognises wetlands as vital links in a chain where migratory birds can stop and refuel en route between their breeding and wintering grounds. To be considered nationally important, a site must regularly support more than 1 per cent of the UK population of any species.

Internationally Important Populations

Species	5 year mean peak count*	% UK population	Ranking in UK
Shelduck	11,459	19%	1st
Teal	11,211	7%	2nd
Pintail	838	4%	10th
Dunlin	49,067	12%	1st
Black-tailed Godwit	1,543	7%	8th
Redshank	5,559	6%	3rd
Turnstone	1,067	8%	2nd

Nationally Important Populations

Wigeon	10,335	3%	10th
Golden Plover	2,671	2%	25th
Grey Plover	1,382	3%	17th
Lapwing	10,814	3%	13th
Curlew	1,682	2%	12th

*These figures are based on the latest published counts of birds during the winters 1996-97 to 2000-01. (The Wetland Bird Survey 2000-01 Wildfowl and Wader Counts. BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC)