

The Helford River birds

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Greenshank

The Helford River Birds

“ Then there is the bird-life of the River which is to the onlooker a light-winged and ever-shifting pattern, outlined on sky, mud or water, of many hundred birds... that fill the channels and shores with unregulated music. ”

Clara Vyvyan: 'The Helford River'

The seemingly lifeless mud and silts of the River bed are home for vast numbers of worms, molluscs and crustaceans. For many birds, this is an opportunity not to be missed: an enormous supermarket filled to the brim with food!

The change of seasons and tides

The bird-life of the Helford, like that of all estuaries, is dominated by two great rhythms of change: the annual change of the seasons and the daily ebb and flow of the tide. During the summer, most waders are breeding on upland moors or on the Arctic Tundra. When the days grow shorter and food

becomes scarcer, they move south. From early autumn onwards, the number of birds visiting the Helford builds up, peaking in mid-winter. Some use the River as a re-fuelling station on their long journeys to African wintering grounds; others settle in for the winter, before the migration urge sets them moving north again. Curlew, redshank, greenshank, turnstone and oystercatcher are the most common visitors and can be seen following the tide in and out from vantage points like Gweek, St. Anthony and the National Trust paths at Frenchman's Creek and Tremayne Quay. Occasional rarities

such as spoonbill and black-winged stilt have been recorded.

Other winter visitors take advantage of the fish living in the deeper, sheltered waters towards the mouth of the River. Here small numbers of great northern and black throated divers congregate annually, together with Slavonian and red-necked grebes and sea duck such as eider and common scoter. Like the waders, these birds breed much further north and use the Helford to escape the rigours of harsh winters. They join the local sea birds



Little Egret

Good fishing

Two of the most visible river birds at all times of year are the grey heron and little egret.

The snow white plumage of the little egret makes it especially easy to spot against the dark mud banks or oak trees. This bird has recently colonised much of Britain from the continent in a stunningly rapid campaign. Until 1989, there had only

been three instances of over-wintering in Cornwall. Through the 1990s numbers built substantially and in 1997 the Helford is believed to have been only the second site in the UK where they bred. They nest amongst the grey herons in a single herony on the north shore. Heron numbers are fairly stable at 11-12 pairs, but the egrets are rapidly catching up, with 6 pairs in 2006. It will be interesting to see whether the more vocal, and seemingly more boisterous egrets unsettle the herons in the future.

like shag, cormorant and herring gull which breed in small colonies on the inaccessible cliffs around the mouth of the River.

As winter eases in to spring, Sandwich terns can often be seen fishing off Helford Point. An osprey is always worth bearing in mind now too! During summer, the birdlife on the river is fairly quiet,

although a few pairs of shelduck and mallard breed in the upper creeks such as around Mawgan. Late summer is the best time to watch for kingfishers as they move down from their freshwater breeding sites. Listening for their shrill whistle is the best way of locating one as it speeds low across the water.



Kingfisher

Food for waders

Wading birds display a wide range of leg length, bill length and bill shape. This allows them to live in the same habitat as fellow wader species and not to compete for the same food. Quite obvious on the Helford are curlews, whose long legs and downcurved bills allow them to enter deeper water and probe in the mud for the deeper-living worms. Greenshanks and redshanks, on the other hand, having shorter bills, are limited to feeding on smaller invertebrates closer to the surface. Along rocky sections of shore, turnstones use their short, stout bill to live up to their name – they literally turn stones over to find their prey. Alongside them, the black and white oystercatcher uses its long, bright orange stabbing beak to break open the tough shells of cockles and mussels.



Eider



Oyster Catcher



Turnstone

Woodland and farmland birds

As you would expect, the extensive mature oakwoods clothing much of the shoreline support a wealth of woodland birds. Jays, tawny owls, green and great spotted woodpecker, a wide range of finches and tits - including marsh tit - nuthatch and treecreeper all occur. Some of these are likely to be at among their highest densities in west Cornwall.

Conservation work by many of the farmers in the Helford catchment is helping various declining farmland

birds so that many local farms support breeding skylark, bullfinch, linnet, song thrush and house sparrow. In winter these are joined by flocks of redwing and fieldfare and smaller numbers of lapwing, snipe and woodcock.

If you would like to know more about bird conservation in Cornwall, and to join local birdwatching walks, look at www.cbwps.org – the website of the Cornwall Birdwatching and Preservation Society. CBWPS has been helping Cornwall's birds since 1931 and would welcome your support.

Sponsors

The Helford Marine Conservation Group is grateful to its co-sponsors the Cornwall Bird-Watching and Preservation Society, to Martin Rule for assistance with the text and for the photographs by David Chapman www.davidchapman.org.uk

Front cover photograph: *Shelduck*

Designed and produced by The Design Team, Cornwall County Council © 2007, tel: 01872 322630.
Jn P21031 May 07. Printed on recycled paper.



Redshank