

WHEATEAR *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Very common passage visitor and occasional breeder.

2003 - A very well reported species with records coming from most of the moorlands. The first was at Trough Lane, Denholme on 17th March with further birds here and at Whetstone Gate on 23rd March. The main arrival took place through April and into early May with sightings coming from, for example, Beamsley Moor, Dick Hudson's, Timble Ings, Kex Gill and Thornton Moor Reservoir. Although there were no definite breeding records it is probable that pairs bred at various locations. Return passage is when birds are most evident in the area and small congregations were noted at various sites with August being the peak month. During this month 12 were noted at both Trough Lane and Nab Water Lane with 13 being seen together at Fly Flatts Reservoir. A bird at the latter site was taken by a Sparrowhawk. The last sighting reported this year was of 4 at Soil Hill on 2nd October.

2004 - The 17th March was the earliest date this year, when four were in fields near the Sun Inn at Norwood. Spring passage predictably peaked in late April and early May, and included parties of 10 at Leeshaw Reservoir, and Thornton Moor Reservoir, 18 at Trough Lane and six at Warley Moor Reservoir. Smaller numbers on passage occurred at a number of other widespread sites. Breeding definitely occurred at Warley Moor Reservoir and Cold Edge Dams. Return passage congregations peaked in August, with 18 at Thornton Moor Reservoir, 12 at both Warley Moor Reservoir and Trough Lane, and 11 at Nab Water Lane.

2005 - Whilst a few pairs usually breed, Wheatears are essentially passage migrants through this area, and, it transpires, in considerable numbers. Readers of "Lapwing" will have seen a recent article, in which reference was made to the "Bradford 800". This was, in fact, the estimated number of birds seen on migration in 2004 within an area of about three kilometres square in the south, and recorded, in the main, by three dedicated members (DCB, RHP, BV). Given that this number must represent the highest annual aggregation for such a small area anywhere in Yorkshire, if not the country, their efforts should perhaps be belatedly recognised.

Now to this year. Whilst the same efforts were made by the same people, the totals for 2005 are lower, though they still represent a hefty count. By far the biggest numbers are seen in spring, when there is unlikely to be much double-counting, as birds tend to pass through very quickly. As usual, the biggest counts were made at the traditional staging post of Trough Lane, near Oxenhope, with most of the remaining numbers also being seen in the same general area. Monthly totals for spring migration were:

Trough Lane- March 11 April 141 May 190 Total 342
Other Sites- March 16 April 76 May 147 Total 239

There were many double-figure counts at Trough Lane, with particular highs in May of 21 on 2nd, 22 on 4th, and 27 on 6th. In this same period, there was a Group record total of 44 birds for any one location, at Thornton Moor Reservoir (DCB). The same day, 2nd May, also produced the amazing total of 90 birds counted within the recording area as a whole. Prior to all this excitement, the first birds had sneaked in quietly on 19th March, when singles were seen at Soil Hill, Thornton Moor and Luddenden Dean, and three birds at Roils Head.

Autumn passage was, in comparison, fairly quiet, but around 150 birds were still recorded, mostly from the same areas, from early August for about three months. Daily maxima of 12 birds were seen at Trough Lane on 25th and 27th August, but lingering birds make the possibility of double-counting greater.

To round off the year, there was a remarkable passage at Soil Hill of birds showing the characteristics of the race *O.o.leucorhoa* (Greenland Wheatear). Between 27th September and 2nd November, 10 different birds provided very close telescope views, (KM) and were specifically identified, using the criteria contained in the paper which subsequently appeared in "Lapwing" and is available through the website (M. Cunningham). There were several other reports of large Wheatears, and which were probably this sub-species, but they were not supported by a detailed description. The final bird, seen on 2nd November, is the joint-latest record in the area.

Two fledged young were located in July on Askwith Moor, and a juvenile on Rombald's Moor in September might have been locally raised. The only other record came from Soil Hill, where behaviour was suggestive of a breeding attempt.

2006 - With around 280 records, this is the Group's best-reported passerine, which is remarkable considering that birds were present in only seven months of the year, and that fewer than 25 observers were involved.

Previous Reports have alluded to the considerable numbers seen on migration, and this pattern prevailed again in 2006, assisted by the greater coverage of areas additional to the birds' strongholds in the south, and by the apparent interest of more observers. Compared with the previous year, the spring total was about 25% down, but this was offset by a series of particularly good counts during the autumn passage period.

The first returning bird was found at Whetstone Gate on 23rd March, following which birds were regularly recorded throughout April, and to a lesser extent in May, although this month produced the year's highest count of 26 at Trough Lane, Oxenhope, on the 3rd, following a similar count of 22 there on 18th April. In the same period, there were ten other double-figure site counts, mainly from the same location, of between ten and 18 birds. Providing a reliable estimate of the total numbers seen is, of course, impossible, but is made easier in spring by the tendency of birds to move on fairly quickly, with many being proved to pass through a site within the day. On this basis, it is probable the spring total was around 460 birds.

After the spring surge, only five birds were seen in the whole of June and July, but autumn return passage was clearly underway by the beginning of August, and continued on a large scale until 18th October, when the final bird was seen near Timble Ings. In contrast with the spring movement, there is evidence that some of the birds seen in autumn can stay around the same spot for several days, so arriving at realistic totals is made even more difficult. However, even after taking account of some double-counting, it is likely the autumn movement through the area produced between 350 and 410 birds. Once again, the southern sector had the majority of them, with particularly notable counts of 18 at Trough Lane on 5th September, 19 at Warley Moor Reservoir on 15th August, and with six other site day counts of between 12 and 14.

Two reports of birds showing the characteristics of the race *O.o.leucorhoa* (Greenland Wheatear) were backed up by the required descriptions; unfortunately several others were not. The accepted records were individuals at Trough Lane on the rather early date of 19th April (KM), and at the same location on 30th September (BV).

Given the lack of summer records, the absence of definite breeding data is unsurprising, though the behaviour of a female seen near Lower Barden Reservoir in July caused suspicion of breeding in the area, and one observer considered it possible a pair might have bred on the fringes of Burley Moor.

2007 - As a sparse and sporadic breeder in the area, Wheatear's main claim to attention lies in the considerable numbers which are seen on migration, details of which have been set out in other recent Reports. The numbers in 2007 were such that it is difficult to know where to start. First, a caveat on the numbers submitted. There is a possibility of double-counting in circumstances where migrating birds may stay in the same area for more than a day: this is more likely on autumn passage than in spring. Careful analysis of the records and comparison of consecutive days' tallies, however, makes it possible to formulate a fairly realistic estimate. The numbers which follow are based on this, and have been adjusted where it is thought double-counting might exist.

The first bird back was observed at Trough Lane, near Denholme, on 23rd March, and reasonable numbers were seen there and at a few other sites up to 20th April, when the floodgates started to open to a wealth of birds over the next seven days. On that date 44 birds were at Trough Lane, equalling the existing site day record, but within five days it had been shattered. After a rainy night, an initial count of Soil Hill and the adjoining fields produced a total of at least 81 birds. Following the first observer's enforced departure, another count was made, and this amassed an astonishing 90, which is almost certainly also a record gathering for any inland site in the north of England, and possibly the country. But the counting wasn't over, as 42 birds were discovered at Trough Lane, and another five at Glovershaw, making the day's total count a record one of 137 birds.

Of numerous double-figure counts in the period between 23rd March and 30th May, Trough Lane had seven between 20 and 44, and Soil Hill four between 22 and 90. The likelihood is that, using a conservative estimate, something around 850 birds were seen in this period, largely by a handful of observers, and with all but 150 being seen in a small area centred on Denholme.

There was then a pause to draw breath, as June and early July produced only two reports between them, before autumn returning birds started to appear around the middle of that month. Whilst, from 15th July to 15th October (when the last bird was seen on Soil Hill), 'only' 270 birds were noted, they included several in double figures, and a particularly good seasonal total of 31 at Warley Moor Reservoir on 12th August. They also augmented the spring figures to produce comfortably the area's highest annual aggregate, most of which came from the south. The compiler realises he may have rather laboured all this data, but does so without apology, as numbers of this magnitude are unlikely to be repeated.

2008 - Though the numbers of migrants in both spring and autumn were down on other recent years, there were still some impressive site day totals, notably counts of between 14 and 24 at Trough Lane, 16 at Thornton Moor Reservoir, and 17 on Soil Hill, all during April. In autumn, the best tally was 16 birds at Nab Water Lane, Oxenhope, in late August. The final bird, which showed characteristics of Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*), was on Soil Hill from 7th to 9th November, and became the Group's latest ever.

Potential, but unproven, breeders were seen on Bingley Moor and Burley Moor, and very young juveniles were noted at Nab Water Lane in July.

2009 - The first bird at Nab Water Lane (Oxenhope) on 15th March was the earliest since 1995, and preceded the main spring influx, which, though an impressive 380 birds, was somewhat down on other recent years. However, there were still sizeable day totals of 17 at Trough Lane and 20 at Thornton Moor, plus several other double-figure counts there and at Leeshaw and Glovershaw. There were up to 240 birds in autumn, and the larger counts came from these sites and Warley Moor Reservoir, which had the highest day total of 13. Eleven birds seen at Thornton Moor and Trough Lane in May showed characteristics of Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*). There were

only two summer records, but included two juveniles on Warley Moor in July, perhaps an indication of local breeding.

2010 - Wheatear counts are still being pursued enthusiastically by a number of observers, but the totals are again down on several other recent years, and are, in fact, much in line with those of 2009. The spring passage total was about 420, and the autumn aggregate 250. Many arrivals around 20th April produced several double-figure day totals, the highest of which was 24 at Trough Lane, Denholme, on that date, and there was a similar total of 23 at Thornton Moor in early May. Seventeen birds there in late July was the best of the autumn totals. The presence of downy young around this time (for the third consecutive year) once again suggests possible local breeding.

The year's highlight, however, must be the discovery of a bird on Ovenden Moor on 15th November, which remained until 23rd November, to become the latest ever Yorkshire record.

2011 - Three birds near Silsden on 13th March were the earliest for 18 years, but didn't precede any particularly large totals, as the spring aggregate of 350 was down on 2010, and the autumn figure of some 245 was about the same. There were, however, some good day counts, with 18, 21 and 25 at Trough Lane, and 38 at Warley Moor in April the highest in spring, and 25 at this site in August the best of the autumn totals. Birds showing characteristics of *O.o.leucorhoa* (Greenland Wheatear) were seen in September near Oxenhope, and on Soil Hill. Another was there in October, and two were near Thornton in that month.

The presence of a female with four downy young at Whetstone Gate in late July is a fairly good pointer towards breeding having taken place there.

2012 - In a fairly average year, the spring passage total of around 280 was again well down, though one of the usual main recorders was away for much of this period. Happily, this was offset to some extent by assiduous counts of migrants on Baildon Moor, not much featured previously, and it will be interesting to see what totals are produced from here and the Worth Valley in future years. The autumn total of 208 birds was comparable with last year. Of six double-figure counts the best were 15 and 16 at Glovershaw in spring, and 21 at Oxenhope watchpoint in September. A described bird at Braithwaite Edge on 26th April was accepted as showing characteristics of Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*). Much the year's highlight, however, was the first proved breeding since 2004: three juveniles raised at Low Snowden

2013 - This was another average year with a late spring passage that started on 8th April and continued until 31st May, resulting in a total of 280 birds recorded, exactly the same as 2012. Of seven double-figure day counts during this period, the best were 17 at Leeshaw and 16 at Warley Moor Reservoirs. Return passage commenced at the end of July and 212 birds were counted before a very late, and final bird was seen at Addingham Moorside on 28th October. As has occasionally been seen in the past, this species often travels in the company of Whinchats and this behaviour was witnessed on 24th May near John O'Gaunt's and again on 19th August at Glovershaw. A member also identified a bird which showed the characteristics of a Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*) at Whetstone Quarry on 6th May (AGG), but unfortunately, there was no repeat of the breeding success, reported at Low Snowden in 2012.

2014 - Two males, seen at Trough Lane on 15th March, heralded the start of the influx that continued until the middle of May. During this spring period 495 birds were counted, 150 of these at Glovershaw and 83 at Trough Lane. At Warley Moor Reservoir the single day-count was 38 on 5th May, and this included two birds showing the characteristics of the Greenland race (*O.o.leucorhoa*). There were sightings of single birds in June at Bradup and Scargill Pasture, and a

juvenile was seen at Warley Moor Reservoir on 1st July. On the following day, three fledglings and an adult female were seen on Bingley Moor (MB, RB). A week later on 11th July, a very young bird was watched near a rabbit burrow on the 12th green of Baildon Golf Course. This juvenile (see photo), occasionally seen with an adult, was present in the same area until the end of August (PK, PM).

The number of birds recorded during return migration, which commenced at the end of July, was just over 500, with 60% of the total seen at Warley Moor Reservoir. This location provided nine double-figure records and seasonal day- counts of 31 on 3rd August, and again three weeks later. The final report of this remarkable year was a bird at Addingham Low Moor on 27th November, the Group's latest ever (WNS).

2015 - Two very early males at Leeshaw Reservoir on 14th March set the scene for an influx that continued throughout the next two months. In that period reports indicated that 365 were seen, with the biggest concentration from 15th April to 8th May, when two-thirds of the birds passed through. A female on Pennythorn Hill (Baildon) on 4th June and two males and a female at Ogden Reservoir a week later, may have suggested local breeding. A much stronger case was in the form of 11 adults and juveniles at Warley Moor Reservoir on 12th July.

The return migration figures showed that 345 birds were reported from a wide area of moorland. Double-figure counts were seen at Hazlewood Moor and Warley Moor Reservoir, where 100 were recorded during a 10 day period in August, 30 of them on the 20th. The final record was a bird on Keighley Moor on 19th October.

2016 - There were interesting and pleasing statistics on this passage visitor with 536 birds reported moving through our area in the spring and 248 birds reported on the return journey in the autumn. The first spring arrival was seen at Glovershaw on 25th March closely followed by birds at Slippery Foord, Leeshaw Reservoir and Lower Laithe Reservoir. The final record was a single on Soil Hill on 16th October preceded by two on the 14th at Warley Moor Reservoir one of which was said to show the characteristics of Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*). The spring total included double-figure counts at Glovershaw, Whetstone Gate and Warley Moor which location also had an excellent 19 birds in the autumn.

Over the years Wheatear has essentially been a passage migrant and there have been very few breeding records. It is therefore pleasing that eight pairs raised young in the Barden area part of some 26 birds which apparently summered.

2017 - Spring arrivals of Wheatear are enthusiastically sought, and this year's first, near Draughton on 9th March, was the earliest on record (WNS). At 418 birds, the spring total was rather down on 2016, but was offset by an increase in autumn passage, which produced some 300 birds. These included day-counts of about 25 at Warley Moor and Trough Lane (Denholme) in April, and 23 at Leeshaw in September. Birds showing characteristics of Greenland Wheatear (*O.o.leucorhoa*) were seen in May at Alcomden Stones (10th), Thornton Moor Reservoir (11th, and two on 14th), Trough Lane (14th) (KM), and one was near Warley Moor Reservoir on 8th August (BS). Birds apparently bred again on Barden Moor, raising three young.

2018 - A dramatic fall in the numbers seen on migration saw only 207 birds in spring and 151 in autumn, and the only double-figure counts were of four between 10 and 14 birds at Warley Moor Reservoir in August and September. Four fledged young seen near Storiths in June may have indicated local breeding.