



AVALON MARSHES

New Colonists Monitoring Group Report 2024

COMPILED BY ALISON MORGAN

The Avalon Marshes is an extensive area of reedbed and other habitats within the Somerset Levels, managed by a group of conservation organisations and supported by a network of staff and volunteers. This report provides a summary of the year's observations for six wetland bird species which are now regularly reported across the Marshes.



John Crispin

OVERVIEW

Great White Egret : Continued expansion, with two new records set: productivity reached triple figures, with 100 young fledging from 54 nests; and we received the first confirmation that a Somerset-reared bird has bred outside the county

Cattle Egret : Just one known colony on the Avalon Marshes, with 20 young fledged; but winter numbers continue to increase, with flocks of over 600 birds feeding and roosting at Westhay and on Shapwick Heath

Glossy Ibis : Both adult and juvenile birds have been seen regularly, with a maximum of 6 in April at Catcott Lows; photo above taken by John Crispin on Ham Wall

Purple Heron : Also now commonly present, with records of adult or immature birds in April, May, June, October & November

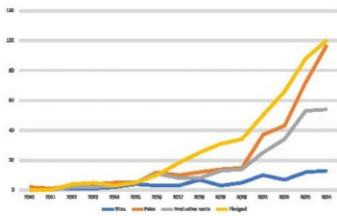
Little Bittern : A single unconfirmed record of a bird heard on Ham Wall in July.

Night Heron : No records this year.



THE GREAT WHITE EGRET

Great White Egrets on the Avalon Marshes
Sites, pairs, productive nests and fledged juveniles, 2012-24



2024 BREEDING SEASON

- Nest building underway by 14 Feb
- 97 nests built in 13 colonies
- 179 chicks hatched on 63 nests
- 100 chicks fledged from 54 nests
- 44% mortality rate in the nest
- Overall productivity 1.9
- First breeding records for Somerset ringed birds outside the county, in Gloucestershire & Nottinghamshire

2012-2024: AN OVERVIEW

- 329 known nests to date
- 233 successful nests
- 440 chicks fledged
- Overall productivity 1.9

THE RINGING PROJECT

- 31 nestlings colour ringed in 2024, of which 21 fledged and 14 were resighted by the end of the year
- 76 nestlings colour ringed to date, of which 63 fledged and 50 resighted
- Over 400 reports from 133 locations

In 2024 the Great White Egret maintained its longstanding pattern of year-on-year growth. Two new milestones were passed: productivity reached triple figures, with 100 young fledged from 54 nests; and for the first time Somerset birds were recorded breeding outside the county. Given that the Avalon Marshes saw the UK's first successful breeding of this species only 12 years ago it is a remarkable outcome.

Nest Records

This year 13 colonies were established across the Avalon Marshes, with 97 initial nests built. Mean temperatures for February were higher than in previous years, which stimulated an early start to the breeding season, with the first nests underway by 14th. However, this was followed by inclement weather in April (the 6th wettest on record) and May (double the amount of rainfall for Somerset compared with the previous year), resulting in the highest rate of nest failure to date.

A record 179 eggs hatched on 63 nests, but entire nests were lost to cold or predation, brood reduction was almost universal, and in the event only 54 of those nests fledged young - nonetheless setting a new annual record of 100 juveniles fledged. Overall productivity from those nests remained stable at 1.9.

One question was answered for the first time this year: would any of the Somerset birds help establish colonies in other parts of the country? In 2024 Egret AAR, ringed on Shapwick Heath in 2021, was among the 12 pairs nesting at Cotswold Lakes in Gloucestershire, and Egret ABT was one of 2 pairs nesting for the first time on Besthorpe NR in Nottinghamshire.

The Ringing Project



Nestling AFT, ringed on Ham Wall in April and reported in August from Oxfordshire.
Photo by Alison Morgan

The colour ringing programme continued in 2024 and thanks to the data provided through the weekly drone monitoring 15 nests were visited and 31 nestlings ringed. DNA testing from feather samples revealed 17 to be female and 12 male, with 2 inconclusive results.

Fledging normally occurs at about 9 weeks, and by the end of the year juveniles had been reported from 14 counties in England & Wales.

Sightings of birds ringed in previous years continued, with over 400 records received to date. Somerset birds have now been reported from 133 discrete locations in 42 counties in England, Wales, Scotland, N Ireland and Ireland.

OTHER NEW COLONISTS

EGRETS, HERONS & IBISES

The Great White Egret was the first of the potential new wetland colonists to breed on the Avalon Marshes. But Cattle Egret, Little Bittern and Night Heron are also confirmed or believed to have bred here, and Purple Heron and Glossy Ibis are regularly present in the breeding season. In 2024 there were no records of Little Bittern or Night Heron, but numbers of Great and Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis and Purple Heron all continued to increase.

Cattle Egret

Cattle Egrets bred on Ham Wall in 2017, and they have bred on a number of occasions since then within the heronry at Swell Wood on the Levels. There have also been small colonies on private land in and around the Avalon Marshes, and that was the case again this year, with 20 juveniles fledging from one site.

For the rest of the year, though, it's a different story. Cattle Egrets have been described by Mark Cocker as 'a candidate for the most successful heron on earth' due to their expansionist habits, and numbers have continued to increase across the Avalon Marshes year on year. In 2024 they were present in every month, with roosts of as many as 600 birds recorded in January, October & November at Westhay and Shapwick. During the daytime smaller flocks were seen feeding on flooded winter fields, particularly in and around Westhay, Catcott and Sharpham. Between April and July small groups were present in many locations, often associated with livestock. From the end of July large numbers reassemble for the winter roosts, with many individuals still in breeding plumage.

This year Cattle Egret bred for the first time in both Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. While Somerset undoubtedly offers ideal wintering habitat, it seems likely that we will see more of this species breeding here in coming years.

Photos: Alison Morgan, Robin Morrison.



Purple Heron

Purple Heron has been recorded on the Avalon Marshes annually in recent years, and this pattern was maintained in 2024, with individuals seen in April, May, June, October and November at Ham Wall, Shapwick and Westhay. A first summer bird was seen at Shapwick in May, and a juvenile at Westhay and Sharpham in October and November; the other sightings were thought to be of an adult bird. Photo at Ham Wall by John Crispin.



Glossy Ibis

Individuals and small groups of Glossy Ibis were seen again on the Avalon Marshes in 2024, with a group of 4 regularly present at Westhay, Shapwick and Ham Wall from January to March. The highest count came in April, when 6 were seen at Catcott Lows. Whilst both adults and sub-adult birds have been seen on the Avalon Marshes, none are present here during the breeding season - there were no sightings between 13th May and 21st September. There were no records in October, but single birds (both adult and sub-adult) were seen in November and December at Westhay, Ham Wall and Shapwick.

In both 2022 and 2024 a pair was seen displaying and mating at Ham Wall, leading to hopes that as with the Great White and Cattle Egrets the Avalon Marshes would host the first UK breeding record for this species. Alas, it was not to be - the first confirmed breeding was recorded this year in Cambridgeshire. Photo by Penny Broomhall, Ham Wall.



ABOVE AND BEYOND

For most of the birds featured in this report the Avalon Marshes is a seasonal habitat. Great White Egret numbers are highest in the breeding season, Cattle Egret during the winter months. Purple Heron and Glossy Ibis must still be regarded as occasional visitors. Despite their escalating numbers we still know very little about the movements of the Cattle Egrets. But for the Great White Egret it's a different story. The colour ringing project has been running since 2016, and thanks to the many sightings of the ringed birds we are able to build up an increasingly detailed picture of where they go outside the breeding season. The map on the right shows resighting locations in England - the bigger the egret, the more sites in that county have been visited by Somerset birds. Ringed individuals have now been reported from 133 distinct locations in 42 UK counties, including Wales, Scotland and, in 2024 for the first time, Northern Ireland.

As in previous years, the 2024 cohort of colour-ringed juveniles dispersed widely. Often within 10-12 weeks of hatching and in some cases only a few days after fledging, the birds were reported from Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Dorset, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kent, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Powys, Somerset, Worcestershire & Yorkshire. Sometimes they are seen alone, sometimes with one or more other egrets – but rarely with their ringed nestmates, which tend to fledge on a different date and often head in a different direction. Rivers seem to provide navigational guidance, with birds heading up the Severn, crossing into the Thames Valley, switching to the Trent and the Ouse, or turning west into Powys. Some opt for the south coast, but the majority head north, with Yorkshire topping the record table.

The movements of birds fledged in previous years are equally interesting. Those ringed in 2016 remained on the Avalon Marshes, with both AAC & AAF breeding here in subsequent years. Subsequent cohorts have been more mobile, but in 2024 ABF, ABN & ABU, all ringed in 2022, were seen back in Somerset after leaving the county as juveniles. ABU is thought to have bred on Shapwick Heath, ABN was seen both at Slimbridge and on the Isle of Wight before returning to Chew Valley Lake in August, and ABF was reported from both Slimbridge and Blagdon & Chew Valley Lakes.

Most of the fledged juveniles, though, do not return to Somerset. Up to 70% of this species do not survive their first winter. Whereas some breed at 2 years, many still seem to be mobile at this age. The exceptions in 2024 were ABT, ringed in 2022 and confirmed breeding at Besthorpe Lakes in Nottinghamshire, and AAR, ringed in 2021 and present in the breeding colony at Cotswold Lakes in Gloucestershire - in both cases providing the first records of Somerset birds breeding outside the county, and the first breeding record for this species in Nottinghamshire.

These are just a few of the things we have learned this year. If you would like to find out more, the full Nesting & Colour Ringing Report for 2024 can be downloaded [here](#).



2024 juveniles AFN (at Far Ings, Lincs, by Paul Phillips), AFU (at Tatton Pk, Cheshire, by Stuart Benson) & AJA (at Silverdale Moss, Lancs, by Jarrod Sneyd)

The Avalon Marshes

The Avalon Marshes reserves lie at the heart of the wider area known as the Avalon Marshes. They are managed by a group of conservation organisations: RSPB at Ham Wall, Natural England at Shapwick Heath, and the Somerset Wildlife Trust at Westhay Moor and Catcott.

Data included in this report have been provided by members of the Avalon Marshes New Colonists Monitoring Group, the Somerset Ornithological Society and the Somerset County Bird Recorder Brian Gibbs. The drone data for the Great White Egret colonies was provided by Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby, and the ringing carried out under licence by Alison Morgan, Bob Medland, Alexia Michaelides and Amy King. The Avalon Marshes New Colonists Coordinator is Alison Morgan, working with RSPB Ham Wall Warden Ali Blaney.



The Avalon Marshes