

THE BIG PICTURE

Great white egrets

In terms of sheer size, nothing is more spectacular than seeing a great white egret take to the skies for the first time. In the 1970s as few as 150 pairs were recorded across the whole of Europe. More than 8,000 sightings later, in 2020 this impressive bird was declared as the most common rare species reported that year, leading to a change in the birds' status.

With conservation partners, we've been monitoring GWE populations since 2012. Warmer winters and the enormous efforts in terms of habitat restoration and creation have meant that numbers on the Somerset Levels have continued to increase year on year. 2024 has been no different – in fact it's been record-breaking! 97 pairs attempted nesting in 13 separate locations, 179 chicks hatched on 63 nests, with 100 eventually fledging from 54 of these nests (the first time in triple figures) and there was nearly 100 new sightings were shared of previously ringed egrets across England, Wales, and (for the first time!) Northern Ireland. In early 2023 Somerset Wildlife Trust facilitated qualified bird ringers to ring the chicks at Westhay Moor so we can follow them as they spread out into the wider landscape. In 2024 we were able to ring 31 chicks.

Head of Nature Recovery, Simon Clarke reflects,

“It's been a pretty incredible year for GWE's again and, for me, it's another reminder that with true collaboration, such that has happened on the Avalon Marshes, we can really have impact in terms of turning the fortunes of certain species around. We must do more of this as our wildlife continues to come under pressure, as well as build relationships with communities across the county who play a critical part in supporting nature's recovery. This year's breeding success is of particular note as, thanks to the amazing efforts of individuals who monitor the birds and an increase in ringing activity, we can now zoom out to see the bigger picture of where our Somerset birds are travelling to, demonstrating the importance of, not just landscape-scale conservation, but of building a stronger, more resilient recovery network across the whole country so birds like these can travel and breed.”



Simon Clarke
Head of
Nature Recovery

400

sightings from all over the country, with 111 reports received in 2024 alone.

Report: New Colonists on the Avalon Marshes THE GREAT WHITE EGRET Nesting and Colour Ringing Report 2024 Dr Alison Morgan. Additional thanks go to Bob Medland, Amy King and Alexia Michaelides for ringing and Alan Ashman and Andrew Kirby for monitoring.





Birds have now
been recorded in

133

discrete locations in

42

counties.



AFN, a female from Ham Wall, is the most widely travelled juvenile this year, having covered at least

837 km

AFN also holds the record for the most sites visited this year – 2 in North Yorkshire, 2 in Lincolnshire, 1 in Northumberland, and 1 in each of South, West and East Yorkshire.

MAP OF RESIGHTING LOCATIONS IN ENGLAND, 2016-24

Bird size proportional to number of sites in each county.



AFL, a female ringed on Westhay on 16 April. She was seen

545 km

away on the Dee Estuary on 16 June.

The most precocious bird was ADM, also female, ringed on Shapwick Heath. She was reported from Abbotsbury Swannery on 7 June, still only

9 weeks old

This is the earliest dispersal record to date.