

## BIRDS OF THE FLEET AND CHESIL BEACH

This information has been abstracted by J FitzPatrick from the detailed account with species distribution maps provided by J Fair of the Abbotsbury Swannery and D Moxom, Tern Warden of the Chesil Beach.

The Chesil Beach, the shoreline of the Fleet and the waters of the Fleet itself are very important to large numbers of bird species. The area is used mainly by wintering flocks of waterfowl and waders and species on migratory passage. The ringing programme of waterfowl at the Abbotsbury decoy - one of the oldest in Britain built in 1655 - shows that some of the birds come from Arctic Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The area is also important to a lesser extent for breeding species. The most important breeding species is the Little Tern. D. Moxom emphasises that the Chesil's present day population of Little Tern and to some extent Common Tern (except Scilly) and Ringed Plover (except pockets in N. and S. Devon) are the only representatives of their species in the S.W. Peninsula. A reported reduction of the Little Tern numbers of Chesil Beach is said to be related to disturbance associated with a long established mackerel fishery, the training area of the Royal Engineers Bridging Camp and presence of the Royal Navy helicopter training establishment whose machines fly low over the beach. Increased tourism and natural predation also occur (see Tern Warden's Reports 1974-80). This international site has been wardened since 1974, organised by Strangway's Estate and D.N.T.

The whole area offers a gradient of conditions, bays and inlets which are sheltered, mud flats which are tidal and less disturbed areas of shingle. J. Fair has stressed that for successful breeding, a good wintering area with abundant food, readily available without too much disturbance is essential. Six to seven months of the annual cycle may be involved.

Food supplies in the Fleet include Algae, especially Ulva, Zostera and Ruppia, Crustacea, molluscs, polychaetes, and small fish (in the Fleet and in the Channel beyond). D. Moxom has given a list of food items taken by the Terns and Waders and J. Fair has included feeding information on many of the waterfowl. Clearly,

the abundant food supply is important to the continued survival of the bird species of the area.

The table in the appendix (1) has been constructed from the information given in J. Fair's maps, which show the distribution of 49 species of birds on the Fleet. For simplicity, the area has been arbitrarily divided into West, Mid and East Fleet.

1. West Fleet - Swannery to Rodden Hive - where no boats are allowed.
2. Mid Fleet - Rodden Hive to Lynch Cove - where shooting is allowed.
3. East Fleet - Lynch Cove to Ferry Bridge and Portland Harbour.

Table 1. The number of bird species using the 3 areas of the Fleet

Group of Bird	Nos. of species using areas of Fleet			Total nos. of species
	West	Mid	East	
Divers	1	1	1	3
Grebes	5	1	2	5
Ducks	19	12	8	22
Geese	2	1		3
Swans	3	3	1	3
Waders	13	17	7	25
Coot	1	1		1
Totals	44	36	20	62

Apart from these groups, 12 species of Gulls and Terns, 12 Birds of Prey and 3 other species use the area. The 59 species that occur in the Swannery at Abbotsbury and around the shore line of the Fleet are listed in the appendix 3.

In all, about 150 species of birds have been recorded for the area in recent years.

Table 1 gives some idea of the importance of the Western areas of the Fleet

to a large number of species and individual birds. Some species, however, tend to occur at the eastern end of the Fleet and Portland Harbour, e.g. Eider, Slavonian Grebe, Great Northern Diver.

In the 1980 Spring issue of the R.S.P.B. Magazine, a table of the numbers of wintering waterfowl was given for 13 of the Society's reserves. The numbers given were the highest counts of each species 1974-79. J. Fair provided the highest count 1974-81 for the Fleet as a comparison. This table (in appendix 2) shows that the Fleet compares very favourably with these other important ornithological sites.

#### Mute Swans of the Abbotsbury Swannery

This ancient colony has been owned by the Fox Strangways since 14th Century and is unique for several reasons. It is the only such colony in the U.K. It is relatively isolated and there is little mixing with other swan populations. Compared to the Mute Swans of other habitats such as riversides and lakesides, the Abbotsbury birds are not tempted to fly in search of their food which is artificially supplemented. The cygnets are artificially reared in special pens and as a result, they have a higher survival rate and the Mute Swans on the Fleet therefore are not declining. Elsewhere in Britain a decline has been reported.

The numbers of the Abbotsbury Swans fluctuate around 900. Dr C. Perrins of the Edward Grey Institute, Oxford and Dr M. Ogilvie of the Wildfowl Trust are carrying out studies on the breeding success of the swans at Abbotsbury as part of their research on the species. They have also found that there are physiological differences in the Fleet Swan population when compared with those birds examined in the Thames and Midlands.

## Appendix 1

BIRDS USING THE FLEET and CHESIL BEACH

(from data supplied from J. Fair and D. Moxom)

	Status	Species	Max. Nos. (1974-81)	FLEET AREAS		
				West	Mid	East
DIVERS and GREBES	W	Great Northern Diver	(singles)			X
	W	White-billed Diver	1(1975)			X
	W	Red-throated Diver		X	X	
	W & R	Great crested Grebe	6	X		
	W	Red-necked Grebe		X		
	W	Slavonian Grebe		X		X
	W	Black-necked Grebe		X		
	W	Little Grebe	24	X	X	X
		Cormorant	40			
		Heron	30			
DUCKS	W & R	Mallard	400-	X	X	
	W	Teal	400+	X	X	
	W	Garganey	2	X		
	W	Gadwall	143	X	X	
	W	Wigeon	5000+	X	X	
	W	Pintail	260	X	X	
	W	Shoveler	250	X	X	
	W	Red-crested Pochard	7	X		
	W	Scaup	40+	X	X	
	W	Tufted Duck	400-	X	X	
	W	Pochard	600+	X	X	
	W	Ferruginous Duck		X		
	W	Goldeneye	160+	X	X	X
	W	Long-tailed Duck (rarest duck making flat its regular winter quarters)	5	X		X
	W	Velvet Scoter (1 pair once)				X
	W	Common Scoter		X		X
	W	Eider (occasional)				X
	W	Red-breasted Merganser	100+	X	X	X
	W	Goosander	3			
	W	Smew (sporadic)		X		X
W & R	Shelduck	100+	X	X	X	
W	Ruddy Duck		X			

## Appendix 1 (Cont)

	Status	Species	Max. Nos. (1974-81)	FLEET AREAS		
				West	Mid	East
GEESE and SWANS	W	White fronted Goose	100-	X		
	W	Pink footed Goose	1			
	W	Brent (dark bellied)	300-	X	X	
	R	Mute Swan	1238	X	X	X
	W	Whooper Swan	6	X	X	
	W	Bewick Swan	6	X	X	
	W	Coot	3500	X	X	
WADERS	R & P	<u>Oyster Catcher</u>	22	X	X	X
	R	<u>Lapwing</u>	1500+	X	X	
	R & P	<u>Ringed Plover</u>	60+	X	X	X
	W	Grey Plover	94	X	X	X
	W	Golden Plover	200+	X		
	R & P	Turnstone	39			
	F	Snipe	200+	X		
	W	Jack Snipe				
	P	Curlew	2			
	P	Whimbrel	15	X	X	
	P	Black-tailed Godwit	4		X	
	P	Bar-tailed Godwit	32	X	X	
	P	Common Sandpiper				
	R	<u>Redshank</u>	46	X	X	X
	P	Spotted Redshank		X	X	
	P	Greenshank		X	X	X
	P	Long-billed Dowitcher			X	
	P	Knot	3		X	
	P	Purple Sandpiper			X	X
	P	Little Stint		X	X	
	W & P	Dunlin	1000+		X	X
	P	Curlew Sandpiper			X	
	P	Ruff	4			
P	Avocet	3		X		
P	Grey Phalarope		X			
Totals				44	35	20

W = Wintering

P = Passage

R = Resident

Appendix 1 (Cont)

		<u>Other species -</u>		
GULLS and TERNs	Great black-backed Gull		also Great Skua	
	Lesser "	"	Fulmar	
	Herring Gull			
	Common Gull			
	Black headed Gull			
	<u>Common Tern</u>	35 pairs 1980 (1st count 1917 = 1000 pairs)		
	Artic Tern			
	Roseate Tern			
	<u>Little Tern</u>	65 pairs 1980 (1st count 60 pairs 1918) 1967 National Survey = 205 pairs.		
	Sandwich Tern			
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	Little Auk	(2 strandings in Swannery in last 6 years)		
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BIRDS of PREY	Buzzard			
	Sparrow Hawk			
	Marsh Harrier			
	Hen Harrier			
	Osprey			
	Hobby			
	Kestrel			
	Merlin			
	Barn Owl			
	Little Owl			
	Tawny Owl			
	Short-eared Owl			
	 <u>Breeding species on Chesil Beach</u>			
	A. <u>Regulars</u>	Little Tern		Oyster Catcher
Common Tern			Skylark	
Ringed Plover			Linnet	
Redshank			Reed Bunting	
Lapwing			Meadow Pipet	
B. <u>Irregular/or not at present</u>	Sandwich Tern		Blackheaded Gull	
	Roseate Tern		Wheat ear	
	Arctic Tern		Pied Wagtail	
	Great Black Backed Gull			

## COMPARISON OF THE FLEET WITH THE PRINCIPAL RSPB RESERVES FOR WINTERING WATERFOWL

This table demonstrates the relative importance of the principal wetland reserves for various wintering waterfowl, bearing in mind their habitats and geographical location.

## Notes:

1. Data are the *highest* count of each species for the winter months, October-March during the years 1976-79. Some figures are estimates.
2. The highest count may be exceptional in some cases, eg during severe conditions. A few counts are of flocks migrating over but not alighting on a reserve.

3. In some cases higher counts of a few species are recorded during April-September.
4. Figures in italics exceed one per cent of the north-west European wintering population of that species and are therefore of acknowledged international importance.
5. The new Gayton Sands (Dee Estuary) reserve qualifies but comparable data are not yet available. Titchwell, Insh Marshes and Blacktoft Sands also qualify, but have had to be omitted owing to lack of space.

## The Fleet. Maximum recorded

1974-1981

	Arne	Dungeness	Elmley Marshes	Fairburn Ings	Homsea Mere	Leighton Moss and Morecambe Bay	Ouse Washes	Ynys-hir	Havergate Island	Loch of Strathbeg	Lochwinnoch	Snettisham	Minsmere	The Fleet
Great crested grebe	30	24	17	29	18	60	19	1	2	2	18	21	8	6
Cormorant	30	35	60	4	66	12	75	55	15	80	17	28	49	40
Mute swan	6	27	30	89	78	16	331	5	10	426	28	15	26	1,238
Jewick's swan	35	60	7	22	11	120	2,303	46	150	—	—	92	58	6
Whooper swan	—	—	—	60	7	20	92	9	—	502	42	19	2	6
Pink-footed goose	—	—	—	107	90	240	39	270	—	8,500	46	4,540	38	1
Greylag goose (wild)	—	—	—	—	—	405	—	3	—	7,500	800	—	—	1
Brent goose	300	31	700	—	16	3	7	1	500	—	—	1,415	2,047	300-
Shelduck	347	19	3,000	14	18	1,200	74	72	280	95	2	3,075	230	100+
Wigeon	400	520	10,000	82	770	1,360	26,532	3,200	3,560	2,300	320	2,590	1,500	5,000+
Gadwall	9	33	56	53	110	40	391	2	80	3	2	48	200	143
Teal	185	708	4,000	600	370	970	2,755	420	794	750	146	248	802	400+
Mallard	70	1,510	2,905	1,455	2,400	526	5,406	1,070	965	2,500	476	2,015	480	400-
Pintail	75	50	18	8	125	285	1,237	25	139	3	5	434	40	260
Shoveler	10	150	650	268	180	220	513	26	150	19	80	32	201	250
Pochard	70	400	95	407	350	40	3,055	92	30	2,050	1,114	130	45	600+
Tufted duck	200	200	30	552	670	46	1,165	5	35	1,900	812	157	27	400-
Goldeneye	30	30	7	69	220	24	15	37	9	450	67	71	20	160+
Red-breasted merganser	120	33	22	2	2	80	2	21	2	4	—	58	10	100+
Goosander	3	24	—	42	20	18	11	2	1	109	16	5	7	3
Coot	—	390	125	1,100	2,000	220	2,300	13	33	2,000	800	498	243	3,500
Oystercatcher	500	400	249	2	1	11,240	12	450	35	60	7	12,900	8	22
Ringed plover	4	14	400	4	5	130	24	5	170	26	—	76	30	60+
Grey plover	50	61	3,300	9	4	32	—	30	30	19	—	634	15	94
Golden plover	1	820	1,200	29	145	1,500	2,126	7	110	300	35	600	50	200+
Lapwing	666	215	7,000	3,000	1,000	2,740	5,835	720	300	1,500	400	1,200	1,200	1,500+
Knot	6	70	7,000	4	—	24,000	1	25	35	150	3	32,000	49	3
Dunlin	1,550	300	10,000	38	25	23,400	593	1,200	1,000	300	6	13,000	900	1,000+
Ruff	—	113	38	15	1	—	250	6	8	3	1	1	55	4
Snipe	20	50	100	300	75	350	3,000	16	15	60	200	18	330	200+
Black-tailed godwit	150	4	450	7	1	3	196	3	100	—	—	5	170	4
Bar-tailed godwit	41	12	80	1	1	2,000	1	57	29	4	—	3,880	106	32
Curlew	240	200	2,000	18	5	160	6	680	150	1,400	90	1,292	12	2
Redshank	400	50	1,700	25	9	1,687	156	220	250	250	4	3,006	120	46
Turnstone	5	16	48	—	—	450	2	4	7	20	—	760	15	39

## Habitat

Saltmarsh and muddy creeks	
Coastal freshwater pits	
Flooded pasture and saltmarsh	
Freshwater pits and marsh	
Shallow coastal lake	
Fen mere, saltmarsh and mudflats	
Inland flood meadows	
Saltings and freshwater pools	
Shallow lagoons and saltmarsh	
Coastal lake	
Shallow lake and marsh	
Flooded pits, saltmarsh and mudflats	
Brackish lagoons and coastal meres	
Brackish lagoon	

Appendix 3.

List of the birds of the Swannery and the Fleet  
supplied by J. Fair (incomplete)

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* Water rail	* Reed Warbler
* Moorhen	* Marsh Warbler
Woodcock	* Sedge Warbler
* Collared Dove	* Blackcap
* Cuckoo	* Garden Warbler
* Swift	* Whitethroat
* Kingfisher	* Willow Warbler
* Green Woodpecker	* Chiff chaff
* Great spotted Woodpecker	* Wood Warbler
Skylark	* Goldcrest
* Swallow	* Firecrest
* House Martin	* Spotted Flycatcher
* Sand Martin	* Pied Flycatcher
* Jackdaw	* Dunnock
* Great Tit	* Pied Wagtail
* Blue Tit	* Grey Wagtail
* Marsh Tit	* Yellow Wagtail
* Willow Tit	* Starling
Long tailed Tit	* Greenfinch
* Bearded Tit	* Goldfinch
* Tree Creeper	Linnet
* Wren	* Bullfinch
Dipper	* Chaffinch
* Mistle Thrush	Yellowhammer
* Fieldfare	* Reed Bunting
Redwing	* House Sparrow
* Blackbird	* Tawny Owl
Stonechat	* Heron
Whinchat	* Coot
* Redstart	* Short eared Owl
* Robin	* Snipe
* Cetti's Warbler	* Jack Snipe
* Grasshopper Warbler	Wheatear

\* = Swannery Birds