AVALON MARSHES

New Colonists Monitoring Group Report 2025

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.

Robin Morrison, Ham Wall April 2025

OVERVIEW

Great White Egret : 73 young fledged from 38 nests, fewer than the last couple of years due to a particularly cold, wet start to the breeding season but with good productivity per nest. This year also brought a new UK longevity record, and a Somerset bird & partner became the first of this species ever to breed in Wales.

Cattle Egret : Continued high numbers present in autumn and winter, with over 300 present in February & November; one known colony..

Glossy Ibis : 2 regularly present from January to March, 1 in April & May, 1 or 2 from September to December.

Purple Heron : 1 or 2 regularly present between March & August, with a lone juvenile present in November.

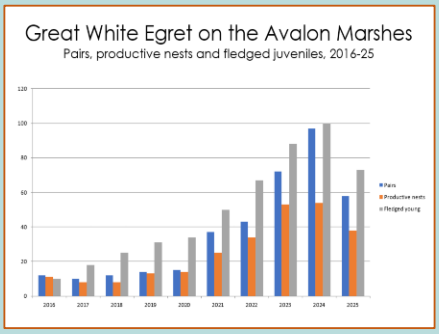
Night Heron : 2 single birds and a pair seen in flight in May.

Little Bittern : No records this year.

New for 2025 - White stork : 2 seen in May & June.

A colony on Westhay
Photo Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby

THE GREAT WHITE EGRET



2025 BREEDING SEASON

- Nest building underway by 19 Feb
- 58 nests built in 10 colonies
- 98 chicks hatched on 39 nests
- 73 young fledged from 38 nests
- 25% mortality rate in the nest
- Overall productivity 1.9
- ABM & partner set the first breeding record in Wales
- AAF sets a new UK longevity record of 9 years

2012-2025: AN OVERVIEW

- 387 known nests to date
- 271 successful nests
- 513 chicks fledged
- Overall productivity 1.9

THE RINGING PROJECT

- 14 nestlings colour ringed in 2025, of which all fledged and 12 were resighted by the end of the year
- 90 nestlings colour ringed to date, of which 78 fledged and 63 resighted
- Over 500 reports from 161 locations

Just when you are wondering whether exponential growth can continue for ever, it stops. 10 days of low temperatures in the second half of February, followed by further days of strong winds and heavy rain, meant that fewer nests were built than in 2023 or 2024. But all was not lost: April & May offered double the amount of sunshine and less than a third of the rainfall compared with 2024 - with the result that although fewer chicks hatched, 75% of them survived as against 56% in 2024. By mid-July a respectable 73 juveniles had fledged.

Breeding Records

2025 was the 14th consecutive breeding year for the Great White Egret on the Avalon Marshes, and marked a 10 year milestone for the ringing programme. Every year is different, and this year was no exception. In addition to the difficult start to the season, an entire sitting colony was lost to predation on Shapwick Heath. On the other hand, a new breeding site was established on Ham Wall and a record 8 nests were built on Westhay. Overall, 2025 was another successful year.

As the years go by and ever more juveniles leave Somerset, our birds are now beginning to establish new breeding colonies in other parts of the country. 2024 found Egret AAR nesting in Gloucestershire and Egret ABT in Nottinghamshire. In 2025 another new record was set, as Egret ABM & partner became one of 2 pairs nesting on Anglesey - a new breeding record for this species in Wales.

We have continued to rely on our team of ringers, drone operators, helpers and surveyors, and on the support and encouragement provided by the reserve managers and staff.

The Ringing Project

Nestling AJX, Shapwick Heath
Photo by Alison Morgan

The colour ringing programme continued in 2025 and thanks to the data provided through the weekly drone monitoring we were able to visit 7 nests and ring 14 young, of which 2 have been resighted in Somerset and 10 in 14 other counties.

There were further sightings of birds ringed in previous years, with over 500 records received to date. Somerset birds have now been reported from 161 discrete locations in 50 counties in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern 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 2025 there were no records of Little Bittern and only a single sighting of Night Heron; but Great White Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis and Purple Heron were all well represented.

The Year of the Ibis!

Glossy Ibis have been regularly present across the Avalon Marshes for a number of years now, and this continued to be the case in 2025. Two birds were present at Ham Wall in January & February and almost daily in March. One bird remained through April, and a group of 7 was seen at Blagdon Lake in August. We had hoped to see this species nesting here, but this has not yet happened. The first UK breeding record was established in Cambridgeshire in 2022.

However, 2025 nonetheless proved to be an exceptional year for Glossy Ibis in Somerset, with hundreds of birds arriving in the south west in the first week of September, many of which continued to move northwards across the country in subsequent days. 24 were present at Blagdon Lake on 11 September, with over 90 seen at Chew Valley Lake towards the end of that day. Populations have been increasing rapidly in recent years in Spain and France, and it seems very possible that this species will follow the same pattern as the Great White Egret, moving north after breeding and gradually settling here. A sky full of ibises may become slightly less surreal in future years!

On the Avalon Marshes 1 or 2 birds continued to be seen in September, November and December.

Photos: John Crispin, Robin Morrison.

Cattle Egret

The Cattle Egret remains something of a conundrum. During the winter months the birds seem to be everywhere, most particularly in the fields around Westhay where 200-300 birds were counted in January, February, March & November, usually in smaller groups, with post-breeding roosts of up to 240 on Shapwick Heath. During the breeding season numbers are much lower, but a colony was established among herons at a confidential location.. Birds were also present in breeding plumage during the summer at West Sedgemoor, but the colony location is not known.

Cattle Egrets first bred in Somerset in 2008 and then at Ham Wall in 2017, and in recent years there has been a colony in with the herons at West Sedgemoor. Breeding records have now been established in 10 other counties across the country.

Photo: Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby

Purple & Night Heron

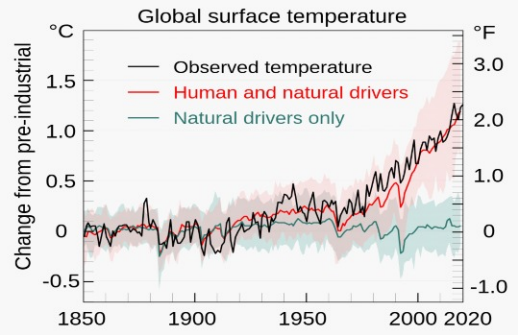
Purple Heron continue to be seen intermittently across the Avalon Marshes. Single adults were present on Ham Wall in March, April & May, an immature bird was present on the Avalon Marsh reserves throughout May, and an adult was seen at Ham Wall in August. The last record was of a juvenile seen on 5 November, also on Ham Wall.

Archive photo: Graham Hall

Night Heron bred at Westhay in 2017, but not as far as we know since then. 2 single birds and a pair were seen in flight over Ham Wall in May.

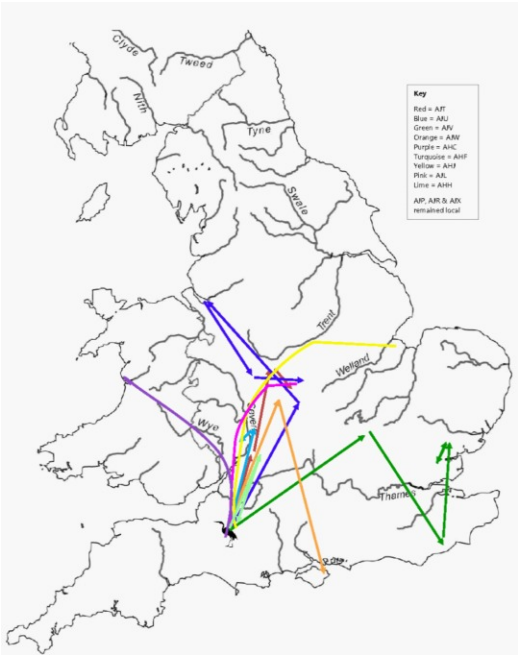
WHAT NEXT?

Whilst the weather in England has long been changeable, changeability is increasingly giving way to unpredictability. The one constant is that year by year the average temperature is rising; and bird populations are responding to the new conditions in new ways. Little Egrets first bred in England in 1975, Little Bittern in 1984, Cattle Egrets in 2008, Purple Heron in 2010, Great White Egrets in 2012, Night Heron in 2017 and Glossy Ibis in 2022. Of these, the Great White Egret and Night Heron records were set here on the carefully restored habitats of the Avalon Marshes, and Little Bittern and Cattle Egret achieved their second confirmed UK breeding records here in 2010 & 2017 respectively.



But changing climatic conditions are creating opportunities for other species too. White Storks are now the subject of a project which aims to reintroduce them across southern England. The first wild breeding took place in 2020 in Sussex, and a further group of birds were released in 2025 in Devon. So it wasn't that surprising to find, for the first time, that storks were visiting Somerset. In May and June 2025 they were seen in ones and twos at Ham Wall, Shapwick Heath and Greylake.

2025 brought other unexpected records too. A Savi's Warbler was heard reeling on West Sedgemoor, and small groups of Penduline Tits were seen at Greylake, Ham Wall and Cheddar in November and December.



Meanwhile our Great White Egrets continue to travel the country. The 2025 cohort has continued the steady pattern of northward dispersal: the map on the right shows the route taken by each of the 12 resighted juveniles, each one traced in a different colour.

Every year we receive reports from more locations, and it is now apparent that Somerset egrets have visited every English county except Cumbria, Durham, Rutland, Berkshire and Greater London. Most have been reported from nature reserves, possibly reflecting the greater observer presence in these locations – our birds have visited 70 of these. The next most popular destination is water bodies – birds have been reported from 40 different reservoirs and lakes. Then rivers, 21 of which have hosted Somerset birds. Other destinations include 6 coastal locations, 6 country parks, and 12 other venues including marshes, garden ponds and a golf course.

The full 2025 Nesting & Colour Ringing Report for the Great White Egret can be downloaded **here**.

AAW at Sculthorpe Moor, Norfolk,
photo by Graham Brownlow

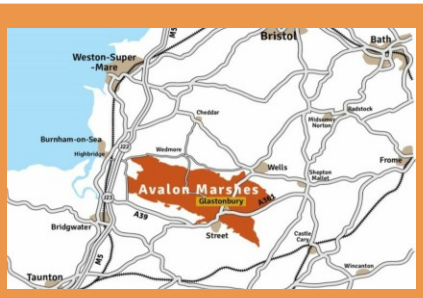
AHJ at Deeping Lakes, Lincs
photo by Mike Weedon

AJW at Daventry Country Park
photo by Gary Pullan

The Avalon Marshes

The Avalon Marshes reserves 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 BirdGuides. 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. For more information visit the Avalon Marshes website at https://avalonmarshes.org/.



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