

Away with the birds

Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind. *Genesis 1:20b*

Christmas is one of my favourite times of year; but it's always busy, with lots going on. So a good way to enter into the spirit of joy and peace can be to take a break from all the activity, wrap up warm, and spend some time outdoors, enjoying God's creation and one of its star attractions – the birds.

There are birds everywhere in Springfield – in our gardens (encouraged by bird feeders?), our churchyard, our open spaces, and along the Chelmer Valley. And for a treat, we can head to places in our part of Essex where hundreds of birds will gather, especially during the winter.

I was interested to discover that as many as 40% of birds migrate to warmer countries in winter, before returning in spring for breeding. The numbers of birds like swallows and swifts, leaving England for Africa, are more than compensated by the birds arriving from northern Europe and the Arctic, either over-wintering here or stopping off on their southward journeys.

Essex's coastline (second longest after Cornwall) is like a magnet for birds in winter because of the size and variety of its habitats which include mud-flats, salt marsh, grazing marsh, sand and shingle

spits, shell banks, offshore islands, and reedbeds. These provide ideal feeding and roosting opportunities for the many waterbirds that use the Essex coast.

The Blackwater and Colne estuaries are particularly good for seeing birds, and the Essex Wildlife Trust has several coastal nature reserves including Bradwell Shell Bank, Tollesbury Wick, Abbots Hall Farm, and Fingringhoe Wick. The Trust's reserves at Hanningfield and Abberton reservoirs are good for winter birdwatching too.

Featured on the next two pages are six bird species which descend on Essex in large numbers at this time of year. I hope you enjoy reading about them, and seeing them!

All Saints' Eco Church Group wishes everyone a joyful and peaceful Christmas.

Roger McFarland

For more information about birds in Essex please see these websites, which were the sources for most of this article:

Essex Wildlife Trust – essexwt.org.uk

RSPB – rspb.org.uk

Bird Aware Essex Coast –

birdaware.org/essex

Essex Birdwatching Society – ebws.org.uk

British Trust for Ornithology – bto.org



Smaller than other geese, **dark-bellied brent geese** have a distinctive dark grey-brown plumage, but with a mostly white tail. Every winter they fly over 3,000 miles from Arctic Siberia to reach the Essex coast. Typically they can be seen on estuaries, salt marshes and coastal fields.



Dunlin are the commonest small wader found along the coast. They have a slightly down-curved bill, and are grey above and white underneath in winter. Although they can be seen in summer too, in winter thousands flock to the coast, roosting on nearby fields, salt marshes and the shore.



The once-common **pochard** is now under threat because its populations are declining rapidly. Most of them come here for the winter from northern and eastern Europe. Males have a bright reddish-brown head and a very pale grey body, females are brown with a greyish body. They are often found on reservoirs, lakes and estuaries.

This month's eco suggestions

- Plan meals ahead** so that all the food we buy will be used
- What other ways can we enjoy a '**green**' **Christmas** this year?



Over 20,000 **goldeneye** come to the UK, mostly from Scandinavia, to overwinter on reservoirs and large lakes here. Males are black and white with a 'golden eye', females have a chestnut-coloured head and a grey body. Unlike other ducks, they are most likely to be spotted as individuals or pairs, rather than in large groups.



The **knot** is a short, stocky sandpiper that migrates to the UK in large numbers during winter from its breeding grounds in Arctic Iceland, Greenland and Canada. In winter they are silvery-grey on top and white underneath. They form huge flocks along muddy estuaries, flashing their pale underwings as they twist and turn in flight.



The **bar-tailed godwit** is a long-billed, long-legged wading bird with a grey-brown winter plumage. They breed in Arctic Scandinavia and Siberia, and hundreds of thousands of them pass through the UK, on their way further south, or stop off here for the winter. Although they can be seen all year round, in winter much larger numbers feed and roost along estuaries and the coast.

To find out more or to share your ideas on Eco Church please go to the website allsaintsspringfield.org.uk/church-life/eco-church or speak to one of the Eco Church Group – Roger McFarland, Nicky Morecroft, Chris McFarland, Ian Poston, Dave Gauld, Beth Cornish, Ann Salmon.