

Sandbach Flashes (from "Where to Watch Birds : North West England & the Isele of Man" A. Conlin et al

Habitat

Sandbach Flashes is the name given to a series of 15 or so shallow pools formed during the last century as a result of salt mining. The flashes lie in a triangle between Sandbach, Middlewich and Crewe. The main flashes are in an area designated as an SSSI. The more than 230 species of birds recorded in the area make it one of Cheshire's premier birding areas. The larger flashes Watch Lane, Pump House, Elton Hall and the old lime settling beds, commonly known as the "salt pan", have muddy margins that are attractive to wading birds. Elton Hall Flashes are a diurnal roost for wildfowl. Watch Lane and several of the smaller flashes have marginal stands of reed mace (*Typha*) or reed-grass. *Phragmites* is spreading at Watch Lane. The most important *Typha* bed is at Fodens Flash, a small pool backed by a carr of alder and willow — the only woodland of consequence in the area. Across the road from Fodens Flash a partly derelict market garden is a useful cover of willow and hawthorn scrub. This site, and industrial wasteland in the area, furnishes a good supply of weed seed for winter finches and other birds. Sunken rushy areas in pastures and tall thorn hedges form further valuable habitats.

Despite rapid siltation of the Elton Hall flashes, intensification of agriculture in the surrounding fields and the drainage of Railway Farm Flash (done in spite of its SSSI status) the area remains one of the best in Cheshire for birdwatching.

Species

With over 230 species recorded to date, the flashes form one of the best-known birdwatching sites in Cheshire. Passage waders are perhaps fewer than formerly, but a good variety of winter wildfowl remain.

Spring passage begins in March. Little Ringed Plover is one of the first arrivals. Northern Wheatear passage traditionally starts around mid March, and birds linger long enough around rabbit burrows to give rise to suspicions of breeding. In late March and April, south-westerly winds and showers may bring large movements of Meadow Pipit. Feeding flocks spread out across the short turf bordering Watch Lane and other flashes in company with Reed Buntings, Pied, White and, later, Yellow Wagtails and, rarely, Water Pipits. Common Sandpipers, en route to their Pennine nesting streams, also mingle with these flocks, snapping at Yellow Dung Flies on cow pats. If the wind blows from the east in mid April, there is just a chance of a migrant Osprey.

Wader passage picks up gradually during April and May when more than a dozen species can be present. Most of the typical autumn species occur in small numbers. Arctic Ringed Plovers in May or early June may be accompanied by Sanderlings. Whimbrel, Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Ruff pass through each spring. Recent rarities have included Temminck's Stint and Spotted Sandpiper. Approximately 30 species of wader have been recorded at Elton Hall Flash alone. Terns are also seen occasionally at this time.

Fodens Flash comes into its own during the summer months with Reed Buntings and Sedge and Reed Warblers nesting in the marsh; Great Crested Grebe, perhaps Ruddy Duck and Little Grebe breed on the flash; and Willow Tit, Treecreeper, Spotted Flycatcher, sometimes Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and possibly Water Rail frequent the carr. The adjacent market gardens are alive with Common Whitethroats in the nettle beds and Willow Warblers in the scrub. Bullfinch is common here, their presence betrayed by a thin whistle or a white rump glimpsed as a bird flies into a thorn bush.

The area of the flashes as a whole supports important breeding populations of several wetland species. Little Grebe is present on several of the smaller pools. Throughout the spring Great Crested Grebe can be seen displaying from the end of Watch Lane, at times very close to the car park. A pair of grebes will face each other so that they are almost touching, and shake their heads vigorously from side to side. In more advanced versions of this display the

birds may rear up out of the water and shake limp waterweeds or algae in their bill. One other aquatic species nesting on all pools is the Coot. Throughout the breeding season territorial Coots may be seen rearing up out of the water and thrashing away with their legs and beak at any intruding rival, while non-breeders of the same species swim meekly in a sociable flock.

Shelduck nests annually. Birds return from the moult from December onwards and by spring they too are displaying aggressively. By the time the ducks are sitting on eggs, the drakes will be busy driving ducks of all species, and even Grey Herons, off their adopted flash. Few waders now breed, although Little Ringed Plover still nests in the area. Ringed Plover has also attempted to nest. Redshanks may be seen displaying from December onwards, but rarely settle at Sandbach.

Lesser Whitethroat nests in overgrown hedges at Watch Lane, Elton Hall and elsewhere, but is more often heard than seen. Little Owl breeds in hedgerow trees throughout the area. Its yelping calls are often heard by day, especially in showery weather. Corn Bunting and Yellow Wagtail are present around arable fields, but have become rather scarce recently. The local population of Yellow Wagtail is of particular interest since aberrant birds resembling Sykes' and Blue-headed Wagtails occur from time to time, and have been seen feeding young on several occasions. Summer can be quiet but June or July has produced rarities including Stilt Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, White-winged Black Tern and Night Heron.

Return wader passage may begin by the end of June with the first Green Sandpiper, or perhaps a Greenshank or black-plumaged Spotted Redshank. Common Sandpiper passage peaks in July when a Turnstone or Sanderling may also occur and Green Sandpiper increases, its liquid calls carrying on the twilight air. Green Sandpipers have become a feature of autumn passage. Ruff, Greenshank and Spotted Redshank, and possibly a Wood Sandpiper may appear in August. Little Stints or Curlew Sandpipers may latch on to parties of Dunlin, and a godwit or Grey Plover may turn up, even quite late in the autumn. The flashes have provided several records of rare waders during the autumn including Pectoral Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Upland Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs.

Autumn migrant passerines include Whinchat perched on fence posts around Watch Lane (although numbers have decreased) and Common Redstart flickering along the hedgerows. The line of crack willows at Elton Hall provides rich pickings for passing warblers. A small but regular passage of Water and Rock Pipits is most obvious during the first few days of October when birds comb the edge of Watch Lane Flash, picking freshwater shrimps from among the debris. In some years Garganey is present among the Common Teal, but may often escape detection through its habit of sleeping for much of the day.

In winter Elton Hall Flashes is an excellent locality in which to see all the common dabbling duck species, with over 1,000 birds present at one time including Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Pintail, Shoveler and Gadwall. Of particular interest is the flock of Pintail, which has visited the site annually since the 1960s. Numbers vary between 25 and 60 from year to year. Common Teal is the most numerous duck, with several hundred present at times. Eurasian Wigeon numbers up to 400 or more and is occasionally joined by an American Wigeon. Many Coots graze the pastures around the flash. In severe weather less usual fowl appear, perhaps a family party of Bewick's or Whooper Swans or a small flock of White-fronted Geese.

So long as the weather remains mild large numbers of Northern Lapwing (up to 3,000 or more) feed on surrounding pastures and roost on the sludge bed at

Elton Hall. Snipe conceal themselves in the marshes and Jack Snipe occurs. Dunlin may be present through the winter, and a few Redshanks, Ruff, Curlews and European Golden Plovers wander down from their haunts around Northwich and Middlewich. The sloping field to the north of Pumphouse Flash regularly supports several dozen Moorhens. A flock of Skylark winters on the stubble fields between Elton Hall and Railway Flash - this species is remarkably local hereabouts at this season. Fieldfare and Redwing strip berries from the hedges and may fall prey to a Peregrine Falcon sallying out from a perch on a nearby electricity pylon. Great Grey Shrike has occurred in the past.

At Elton Hall as elsewhere, the behaviour of the large flocks of birds often gives warning of the presence of predators. A hovering Kestrel may elicit only local consternation among the smaller waders and Starlings. A passing Merlin or soaring Sparrowhawk will cause the Northern Lapwing flocks to scramble. The impending arrival of a Peregrine Falcon or migrant harrier (rare here) causes panic among the ducks as well.

Rare species that have occurred at Elton Hall Flash in past winters include Common Crane, Great White Egret and Lesser Scaup.

Watch Lane holds a few diving ducks in winter, but it freezes over rapidly. Ducks and Great Crested Grebes are then displaced to the coast. A few Jack Snipe winter in the *Typha* beds along with Water Rail. A Green Sandpiper may feed in the north-eastern corner of the flash. The pool below the canal sometimes attracts a Kingfisher. Stonechat is a regular winter resident in the area when its population is at a high level, and can be seen perched on thistle stems and fence posts.

In winter Fodens Flash is a good place to see Water Rail. This shy bird performs particularly well in frosty weather, when they feed by open puddles or ditches in the willow carr. Willow Tit is resident, providing as good a place as any to get to know this species because Marsh Tit is almost unknown here. A long-established roost of Magpies in scrub behind the flash has held over 470 birds. Long-eared Owl has been recorded in at least three winters roosting in scrub.

Timing

In spring, showery weather from a southerly quarter or misty days are more likely to bring down migrants, as is wet or stormy weather in the autumn. Winter duck numbers tend to increase during the day as feeding birds are flushed off field ponds and minor flashes back to the roosts. Prolonged frosts concentrate waterfowl at Elton Hall where the River Wheelock provides some open water.

Access

Turn south off the A533 Middlewich to Sandbach road by The Fox public house just north of Sandbach station. Continue around the perimeter of the lorry works until you reach a narrow humpback bridge over the canal (SJ733611). For Fodens Flash turn right immediately at this bridge and park at the roadside by the flash shortly after the first corner. A bridle path runs westward through the carr just beyond the flash. For Watch Lane Flash return to the canal bridge and take the other fork. Turn left by the telephone box into Red Lane and continue round until Watch Lane appears as a minor road joining from the right. Car parking at the end of Watch Lane (SJ727606) allows good views of the flash. To reach Elton Hall take roads around the eastern side of the flash, viewing at intervals over the hedges. Turn right at the main road past the chemical works, then left after two-thirds of a mile (1 km) at the first crossroads. This road runs between Elton Hall Flash to the east (SJ725595) and Pumphouse Flash. Visitors should not wander off the roads at Elton Hall or Watch Lane.

CALENDAR

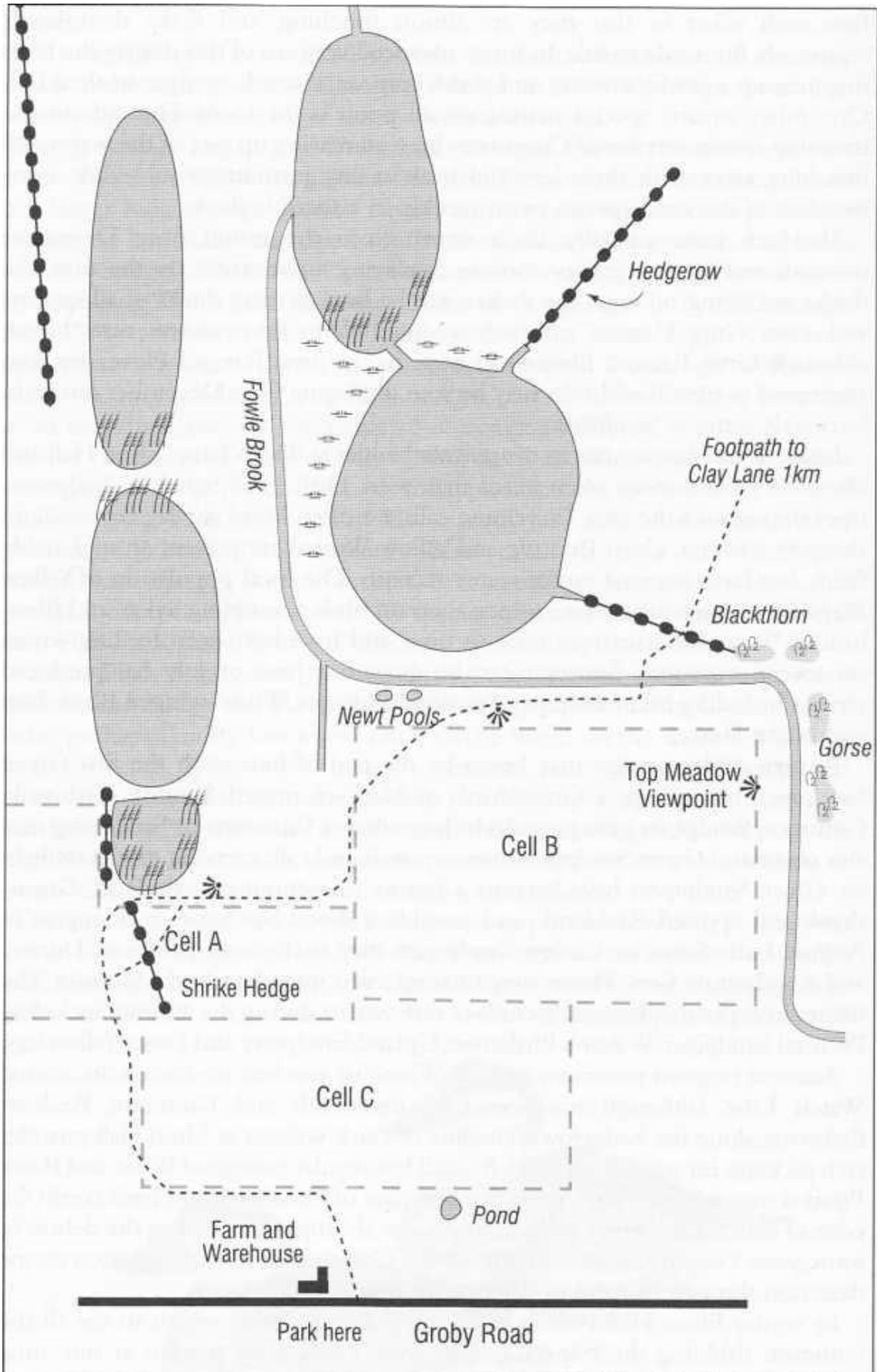
All year: Great Crested and Little Grebes, Mute Swan, Shelduck, Northern Lapwing, Dunlin (not breeding); Little Owl along hedgerows; Willow Tit and Bullfinch are common at Fodens Flash.

December-February: Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal and Pintail at Elton Hall; Water Rail at Fodens; Northern Lapwing and Common Snipe widespread; a few Ruff and perhaps a Jack Snipe or Green Sandpiper; Sparrowhawk and sometimes Peregrine Falcon hunt the area; a few Stonechats in mild winters. Magpies form a huge roost at Fodens Flash.

March-May: Breeding waders appear in March and April, followed by passage birds in April and May - Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper and other species. White and Yellow Wagtails may join flocks of Meadow Pipit and Reed Bunting. Northern Wheatear from late March. Wildfowl depart and summer visitors arrive.

June-July: Breeding species include Little and Great Crested Grebes and Ruddy Duck, Little Ringed Plover by flashes and on waste ground, Reed and Sedge Warblers, Common Whitethroat and Spotted Flycatcher at Fodens Flash; Lesser Whitethroat and Reed Bunting widespread. Wader passage resumes in July.

August-November: Autumn duck flocks may include one or two Garganey sleeping among the Common Teal; a sprinkling of passage waders; in October, winter visitors arrive including Water Rail; duck flocks build up in late autumn.



Sandbach Flashes

Sandbach Flashes -

(Some access or viewing from footpaths and roads)

An all embracing term used to describe the various flashes in the area to the west and south of Sandbach, and north of Crewe. These started forming in the 1930's after land subsidence following brine extraction. All flashes are now privately owned and there is no public access. However, most are watchable from public roads and tracks. Most of the flashes' area is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). There are currently around fourteen flashes, but the most important are:

Elton Hall Flash - SJ727596

In two parts, with the River Wheelock flowing through the well-vegetated part, and very little vegetation on the salt pan.

Maw Green Tip - SJ717577

Not strictly in the flashes' area but inextricably linked for gulls and corvids. It is being greatly expanded and now butts right up to Railway Flash and Groby Flash. Just north of Crewe.

Pump House Flash - SJ723595

The site of the old brine pumping mechanism. Now silting up rapidly.

Railway Flash - SJ718585

Currently two separate flashes with a marshy area between.

The Moat - SJ730613 (previously known as Foden's Flash)

Includes a large bed of bulrushes and the wood around and behind the flash.

Warmingham Flash - SJ719619

Heavily disturbed by fishermen.

Watch Lane Flash - SJ727606

Heavily disturbed by fishermen but with two small reed beds.

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