

Curlews

The sound of the Curlew calling is a familiar one to those of us living in these parishes. Sadly they no longer breed in mainland Pembrokeshire, though a few pairs do still breed on Skomer. We don't often therefore hear their full bubbling breeding song, except in the spring just before they depart.

The Cleddau estuary is an important wintering ground for these birds (about 1300 in total) and of these, a flock of about 130 birds spend the whole winter on the Gann. They roost on the salt marshes at high water and feed in the bay at low water where they can be seen poking and prodding in the mud. They also sometimes roost and feed on the surrounding fields.

They depart to their northern breeding grounds in the spring, at which time their numbers are swollen by more birds passing through from the south. By June most have gone north but by July many birds who have not bred or who have failed to breed are passing back through on their way southwards and numbers can reach 200 or so. By October it is just the wintering flock of birds left behind – last time we counted them there were 135. So there is often no time at all when you can't see at least a few Curlews at the Gann.

The Curlew is quite a large bird. It is 48 to 57 cms long (19 – 23 inches) including the bill which can be as long as 15 cms or as short as 9cms, being shortest on juveniles and longest on adult females. A flock of 135 birds of this size must get through quite a lot of food – which shows how rich the mud in the Gann is as they rarely bother to feed anywhere else.

Being such a large bird Curlews have few predators. Foxes may venture out across the salt marsh and catch a few but I have watched clumsy attempts by a young peregrine to flush a flock of Curlew and all they did was crouch down a bit lower and ignore him! I guess that shortage of food and bad weather are their main enemies.

In spring and sometimes in autumn the Curlews are joined by their smaller relative, the Whimbrel. A few small parties of these birds pass through here and can be seen not only at The Gann but also on the rocks and the cliff top grass at places such as St Brides. It is also thought that single Whimbrels spend the winter on each of Skokholm and Skomer. Whimbrels are smaller than Curlew – only 37 to 45 cms including bill, and their bill is relatively shorter, only 6 to 9 cms. They have noticeable dark and light stripes on the crown which are distinctive given a good view through binoculars. They also have a distinctive flight call – a fast repeated whistling note, leading to one of their nick-names – “Seven Note Whistler”. However a distant Whimbrel with no Curlews near by, is not easy to tell from a young Curlew.

On a different topic, I thought you might like to know what has happened to our visiting Laughing Gulls. They have obviously decided that Milford Haven is an acceptable alternative to the Caribbean as one bird has taken up residence at Pembroke Dock and one has joined the Black Headed Gulls in the centre of Haverfordwest. At the time of writing this (early December) the Haverfordwest bird can be attracted to within a few feet with a few scraps of bread so if you see people laden with binoculars and cameras feeding the gulls on the bridges, you will now know what they are doing!