

New Colonists on the Avalon Marshes

THE GREAT WHITE EGRET

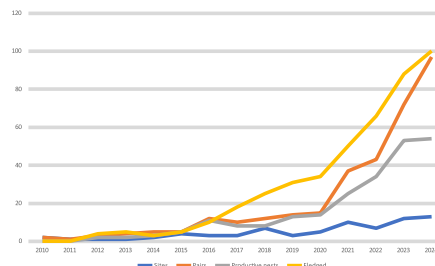
Nesting and Colour Ringing Report 2024

Alison Morgan

SUMMARY

2024 was the first year we have seen productivity reach triple figures. The longstanding pattern of an annual increase in both number of nests and overall productivity was maintained, with 97 pairs attempting nesting in 13 separate locations. 179 chicks hatched on 63 nests, with 100 eventually fledging from 54 of these nests. Given that the Avalon Marshes saw the first successful breeding of this species in the UK only 12 years ago it is a remarkable achievement – not just for these pioneering birds but for all those who have worked so hard to create the habitat which has made it possible.

Great White Egrets on the Avalon Marshes
Sites, pairs, productive nests and fledged juveniles, 2012-24



METHODOLOGY

The nests were monitored by Alan Ashman and Andrew Kirby using a drone, and by field observations from the ground. Most nests were not visible from ground level, so field observations were limited to recording early territorial behaviour and nest building, feeding flights and the presence of recently fledged chicks. Data provided by the drone team were recorded on a spreadsheet which was updated weekly throughout the breeding season. As in previous years, the figures given for 2024 are the most accurate we can achieve, but are based sometimes on assumptions. In particular, it is assumed that birds which have reached fledging age and are absent from the nest have in fact fledged.

RINGING

The ringing programme has continued to provide us with growing understanding of the behaviour and requirements of this pioneering species. In 2024 we were able to visit 15 nests: 6 on Ham Wall, 8 on Shapwick Heath and 1 on Westhay. Metal and colour rings were fitted on 31 birds and a metal ring only on 1 bird. The metal-ringed bird and 22 of the colour-ringed birds fledged successfully, and 14 have so far been resighted elsewhere.

The bulk of the ringing this year was done by Alison Morgan and Bob Medland, with help from Amy King and Alexia Michaelides. A kayak was used to access the nests, with an additional small team of people providing backup support from the bank.

NEST LOCATIONS AND OUTCOMES

The 97 nests were situated in the following 13 locations:

Location of colony	No of nests	Successful nests
Emerys, Ham Wall	7	7
Godwins Island, Ham Wall	5	3
Long Drove, Ham Wall	3	3
Decoy Lake, Shapwick Heath	15	8
Canada Farm Lake, Shapwick Heath	19	10
First Lagoon, Shapwick Heath	16	9
70 Acres, Shapwick Heath	9	3
Estate Ground, Shapwick Heath	6	0
Westhay Tower	3	3
Westhay Viridor	7	6
Westhay Lake Hide	3	1
Turbary Drove, private land	2	1
Rocks Drove, private land	2	1



ADV, ADW, ADX, Shapwick Heath
photo Alison Morgan

The number of colonies across the Avalon Marshes has continued to increase year on year, with the initial two locations in 2012 reaching a new maximum of 13 in 2024. An autumn inspection of used nests in 2023 showed that most nests are not sufficiently durable to last the winter, and this may be one of the factors influencing the annual variation in the location of the nest sites – since 2012 there have been nests or colonies in 22 separate locations. In 2024 colonies were confirmed for the first time on Emerys at Ham Wall and on the Viridor and Tower Hide compartments at Westhay, whereas other previously well-used sites remained empty, most notably Godwins North on Ham Wall – probably due to the persistence of high water levels in this compartment.

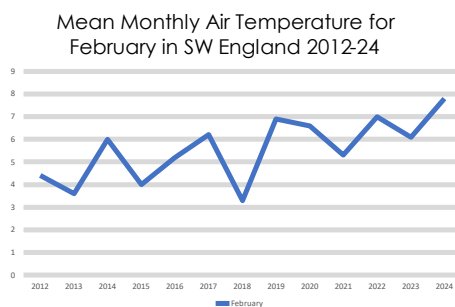


Colony on Shapwick Heath, 18.4.24, photo Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby

PRODUCTIVITY

An early start to the breeding season

The Great White Egret breeding season is long. Nest building has started progressively earlier, and 2024 was no exception: the earliest nests were being built in mid February, with eggs hatching from the last week in March and ringing beginning on 11 April, 12 days earlier than the previous earliest ringing date. The gradual shift towards an earlier start to the breeding season reflects the year by year increase in the mean air temperatures in the region for February, with February 2024 proving to be the warmest on record for England as a whole.¹



Year	Nest building first observed
2024	February 14
2023	February 21
2022	February 28
2021	February 28
2020	February 22
2019	No data
2018	March 14
2017	March 10

The usual pattern of staggered nest building was maintained in 2024, with the last nest not being started until mid May. This meant that while fledging began in the first week in June, the last chick did not leave the nest until the second half of August. The result was that the whole breeding season stretched over 27 weeks.

Weather patterns

2024 brought the now customary disruption to weather patterns, with bands of cold, wet weather and gale force winds sweeping the county in mid and late April, which proved to be the wettest nationally since 2012 and the sixth wettest on record; in the South West it was also the dullest April for 43 years. This was followed by an equally inclement May, with nearly double the amount of rainfall across the South West compared with 2023.²

In previous years the early nests have proved particularly vulnerable to these poor spring weather conditions, as chicks are old enough to be left by both parents but are not feathered enough to keep warm if they become cold and wet, and this was the case again this year, particularly on the early colonies on Shapwick Heath, where 5 nests were abandoned altogether in April, with dead chicks observed in 9 others.

Predation

Egret nests are vulnerable to both mammalian (otter, mink) and avian predation (corvids, herons, harriers), but this does not usually prove to be a major cause of loss. The notable exception this year occurred on Estate Ground, Shapwick Heath, where an entire colony of 6 nests was lost over a period of a few days in mid April. One contained small chicks, four had birds sitting, and one was newly built. Egg fragments were observed in two of these nests; the other nests were found to be intact but empty. Mammalian predation tends to result in empty

nests, whereas the presence of broken eggshells is characteristic of avian predation. However, mammalian predation has been suspected at this colony before.

Predation may also have occurred at two other sites, First Lagoon and Canada Farm Lake, where clusters of nests with birds sitting or eggs confirmed were found empty at various points in April, May and June; one of the nests on First Lagoon contained eggshell fragments. Other nests in both locations were successful.

Predation is thought to have occurred on individual nests in other colonies. The leg bones and wings of two 3-4 week old chicks were observed in the last nest in the Godwins Island colony on 11 July. Grey Herons were present on three previously occupied nests on Shapwick Heath, in one case raising chicks of their own, and a fourth nest immediately adjacent to a heron nest was seen to have dead chicks in the water beneath it. There was one unexplained death of an apparently healthy seven-week old chick on 70 Acres, Shapwick Heath, whose nestmate went on to fledge successfully. All other deaths were attributable to expected brood reduction (see below). There was no evidence of avian influenza in any of the colonies.

It is interesting that the most successful colony this year was on Emerys, Ham Wall, a site where nesting has previously been suspected but not confirmed. Chicks fledged successfully from all seven nests in this colony. This compartment was being closely monitored due to the presence of a Marsh Harrier nest. It had been feared that the egret nests would be an obvious target for predation by the harriers, but in the event the harriers were seen chasing crows away from the area, which may have provided some protection for the egrets.

Productivity compared with previous years

Productivity in this species is known to vary from year to year. In 2024 a new record of 97 nests were built, but losses were greater than in previous years, due both to the exceptionally poor weather in April, and also to the loss of the Estate Ground colony. The overall mortality rate in the nest was 44%, considerably higher than the more typical 30% recorded in previous years. In the end, the 54 productive nests represented an increase of only one over the 53 productive nests of 2023.

The number of eggs laid by each pair on the Avalon Marshes has varied between 1 and 4, the usual number being 2 or 3. In 2024 the mean number of eggs per nest was 2.8, with a single egg on 6 nests and the maximum 4 eggs on 14 nests. Brood reduction is normal in this species, with eggs laid sequentially and food preference given to the larger chicks, with the inevitable result that the smallest chick or chicks reach fledging age only if food is abundant and weather conditions favourable. Brood reduction was the primary cause of death in 2024, with no nests fledging 4 young, 5 nests fledging 3 young, and the rest one or two only. Average productivity was 1.9, precisely in line with the historical average. A summary is given in the table below.

Productivity/Year	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Total
Productive nests	2	2	3	5	11	8	8	13	14	25	35	53	54	233
Young fledged	4	5	3	5	10	18	25	31	34	50	67	88	100	440
Productivity	2	2.5	1	1	0.9	2.3	3.1	2.4	2.4	2	1.9	1.7	1.9	1.9

Statistically, it seems that early and late nesting pairs are slightly less productive than those nesting in the middle of the season. The samples are still small, but between 2016 and 2024 61% of chicks (22 out of 36) ringed in April have been subsequently resighted, compared with 71% (24 out of 34) ringed in May. Relatively few birds are ringed in June but only 43% (3 out of 7) have been resighted. This perhaps reflects the risks of adverse weather run by early nesting pairs, and suggests that juveniles which fledge towards the end of the breeding season may have less time to build up the strength needed for long-term survival than those fledged earlier.



Egret AFV, Shapwick Heath
photo Alison Morgan

Sex ratios

Feather samples were again taken from the colour ringed birds under licence, and DNA analysis revealed that 12 were male and 17 female, with 2 tests producing nil results. Of the 14 nests visited, 6 were single sex (4 all female, 2 all male), 3 were mixed sex, 2 produced incomplete test results and 3 contained only one bird – in each case female. Similar proportions were observed in 2023, with 4 single sex nests, 2 mixed sex nests, and 2 nests with incomplete test results. Although with much smaller samples, this was not the case in earlier years, when all nests were either mixed sex or contained singletons.

Sex in birds is known to be determined not by genetics but by environmental and social variables, with parental condition, seasonal variation and food availability assumed to be contributory factors. It is not clear whether an uneven distribution of male to female chicks is influenced by the adult female or occurs purely in response to prevailing conditions, but it is not uncommon.³ The overall proportions of male to female chicks sampled on the Avalon Marshes has varied from year to year, with significant imbalances occurring in 2022 (10 males to 5 females) and 2024 (17 females to 12 males). This imbalance appears to even out over time, with the project period as a whole revealing a parity of 37 males and 37 females.

As in previous years, males tended to be bigger than females at ringing age, the average weight for males in 2024 being 639g compared with 609g for females – heavier than the overall averages of 592g for males and 538g for females. This is most likely due to greater than usual brood reduction, with more of the younger birds not surviving.

Year	Productive Nests	Hatched	Fledged	%
2024	54	179	100	56
2023	53	139	88	63
2022	51	94	67	71
2021	25	71	50	70

DISPERSAL AND RESIGHTING

The high rate of sightings of the colour ringed birds has been maintained this year. Since the ringing project began in 2016 we have received over 400 sightings from all over the country, with 111 reports received in 2024 alone. Birds have now been recorded in 133 discrete locations in 42 counties. The majority of these (121) have been in England, with 9 sightings in Wales, 1 in Scotland, 1 in Northern Ireland and 1 in the Republic of Ireland. With the exception of the birds seen on the island of Ireland, none of the Somerset egrets have been reported from overseas.

The 2024 cohort of colour ringed juveniles has dispersed widely. Often within 10-12 weeks of hatching and in some cases only a few days after fledging, the birds have been reported from Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Dorset, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kent, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Powys, Somerset, Worcestershire and Yorkshire. Sometimes they are seen alone, sometimes with one or more other egrets – but rarely with their ringed nestmates, which tend to fledge on a different date and often head in a different direction altogether.



Birds ringed in 2024 have been reported from the following locations:

- **ADL** – fledged from Ham Wall in late June, reported from the Dee Estuary on 29 August and 5 November

- **ADM** – fledged from Shapwick Heath at the end of May, reported from Abbotsbury Swannery (7 June) and RSPB Lodmoor (6 August & 29 September), both in Dorset
- **ADV** – fledged from Shapwick Heath in first half of June, reported from Berry Fen, Ouse Washes on 25 August
- **ADW** – nestmate to ADV, fledged from Shapwick Heath in first half of June, reported from Clifton Pits, Worcs, on 24/25 August
- **AFC** – fledged from Shapwick Heath in first half of June, reported from Oldbury on Severn, Gloucs, on 18 July
- **AFL** – fledged from Westhay in mid June, reported from the Dee Estuary on 16 & 19 June and Warrington on 16 August
- **AFM** – fledged from Ham Wall in early June, reported from Langford Lowfields, Notts, on 29 June, from Gypsy Lane pits, Bedfordshire on 19 October and Dungeness on 31 October.
- **AFN** – nestmate to AFM, fledged from Ham Wall in mid June, reported from Blacktoft Sands, E Yorks on 16 July, Nosterfield, N Yorks from 20-24 July, East Chevington, Northumberland on 27 July, Nosterfield on 28 July, Alkborough Flats, Lincs on 4 August, Far Ings, Lincs on 29 August, Adwick Washlands, S Yorks on 30 Aug, St Aidan's, W Yorks on 31 August and Far Ings on 7 October.
- **AFT** – fledged from Ham Wall in mid June, reported from Cassington Lakes, Oxon on 4 August
- **AFU** – nestmate to AFT, fledged from Ham Wall in mid June, reported from Tatton Park, Cheshire from 8-12 August and Budworth Mere, Cheshire on 6 November
- **AFW** – fledged from Shapwick Heath in mid June, seen at Catcott, Somerset on 31 July
- **AJA** – fledged from Shapwick Heath in mid June, reported from Talybont Reservoir, Powys from 5-19 August and on 11 September
- **AFX** – nestmate to AJA, fledged from Shapwick Heath in mid June, reported from the Dee Estuary on 13 December
- **AJH** – fledged from Ham Wall in early July, reported from Durleigh Reservoir, Somerset on 29 August.

Some of these journeys stand out: ⁴

- **AFN**, a female from Ham Wall, is the most widely travelled juvenile this year. Heading north, south, west and east, by mid October this bird had covered at least 837 km. AFN also holds the record for the most sites visited this year – 8 in all: 2 in North Yorkshire, 2 in Lincolnshire, 1 in Northumberland, and 1 in each of South, West and East Yorkshire.
- The next most travelled bird is **AFL**, a female ringed on Westhay on 16 April. The smallest of a brood of 3 and presumed to be the bird still on the nest on 10 June, it was seen 545 km away on the Dee Estuary on 16 June, less than a week later.
- The most precocious bird was **ADM**, also female, ringed on Shapwick Heath on 16 April. ADM fledged some time between late May and 4 June, and was reported from Abbotsbury Swannery on 7 June, still only 9 weeks old. This is the earliest dispersal record to date.
- The most inconsistent bird was **AFM**, another female, ringed on Ham Wall on 17 April. Having headed north to RSPB Langford Lowfields in Nottinghamshire (29 June), AFM then went south to Gypsy Lane gravel pits in Bedfordshire (29 October), before appearing at RSPB Dungeness two days later.



ADM in dispute at RSPB Lodmoor, photo Mark Wright

In 2024 we received the following reports for birds colour ringed in previous years:

- **AAR** (2021) – sightings from 5 sites in Wilts/Gloucs including probable breeding at Cotswold Lakes (see below)
- **ABF** (2022) – sightings from Blagdon Lake (March), Slimbridge (June) & Chew Valley Lake (August)
- **ABN** (2022) – Brading Marshes & St Helen's Bridge IOW (July), Chew Valley Lake (August-December)
- **ABP** (2022) – Bolton on Swale (March), Minsmere (September)
- **ABU** (2022) – Shapwick Heath (March) Newington Flash & Pateley Bridge, Yorks (June); thought to have bred or attempted breeding at First Lagoon on Shapwick Heath (see note 7)
- **ACA** (2022) – Burton Mill Pond, W Sussex (Jan), Waltham Brooks, W Sussex (June)
- **ACM** (2023) – Ynys-Hir (May)
- **ACU** (2023) – Ham Wall (Sept) (uncertain ID)
- **ACV** (2023) – Portmore Lough, N Ireland (Jan), Bubwith Ings & North Duffield Carrs, N Yorks (May), Chew Valley Lake (June)
- **ADC** (2023) – Tring, Herts (Feb), Milton Keynes, Bucks (March), Otmoor (August)
- **ADH** (2023) – Abberton Reservoir, Essex (uncertain ID)

Dispersal maps for a selection of birds fledged in the years 2021 – 2024 are included at the end of this report.

Overall during the project period more males (26) have been resighted than females (20), perhaps reflecting the fact that males are on average bigger than females at 17-18 days, the preferred age for ringing (see above). The birds which have travelled most widely are also more likely to be male: AAU (male 2021: 2284 km), ACV (male 2022: 1636 km), ABP (male 2022: 1345 km), AFN (female 2024: 837 km), ACA (female 2022: 617 km).

Destination type

Whilst the birds' breeding sites are all located in reedbeds, most of the resightings come from other habitat types. During the project period the highest number have been reported from nature reserves (where of course there may be an element of observer bias). This is followed by birds seen on water bodies (lakes, reservoirs, gravel pits), beside rivers (particularly the Severn, the Trent, the Thames and the Ouse), at miscellaneous sites (parks, garden ponds), on or near the coast, and in country parks. There is inevitably some overlap between these sites – for example nature reserves may contain reedbeds, or may be close to the coast. Only one bird, Egret ACA, has been seen fishing in salt water.

Location type	No of sites
Nature reserves	65
Water bodies	29
Rivers	18
Miscellaneous sites	12
Coastal	5
Country Parks	4

Patterns of movement

As the available data grows it becomes possible to look for patterns in the movement of the dispersed birds. Initial destinations show a wide variation, with recently fledged birds heading in all directions. Most go north, often following the River Severn; some of these birds spend time in Gloucestershire, whilst others travel west into Wales or continue northeast into Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. A few days of strong westerly winds carried Egrets AAH & AAJ (2017) east to Dungeness and Sandwich Bay. One bird, Egret ACA (2022) headed west, spending its first winter in Devon and Cornwall before travelling east into Hampshire and West Sussex the following year. A few birds stay for months in one location – Egret ABC (2022) has only ever been reported from Sandbach Flashes in Cheshire where it was present in both 2022 and 2023, and Egret AAT (2021) was reported from RSPB Saltholme in the Tees Valley over a continuous period of 15 months in 2022 and 2023.



AFU, Tatton Park, Cheshire
8.10.24, photo Stuart Benson

Most birds, though, continue to move freely about the country, as the sample dispersal maps at the end of this report show. The most travelled bird remains Egret AAU (2021), which has been reported from 16 locations in 9 counties over a period of 2½ years.

Some evidence is now emerging to suggest that as they grow older, birds may begin to establish a more regular summer/winter pattern. Egret ABN (2022) spent its first summer after fledging on the Isle of Wight and its second summer in 2023 at Slimbridge. Summer 2024 saw it back on the Isle of Wight, where it may have attempted breeding. In August it headed north again, and it is now wintering on Chew Valley Lake. It will be interesting to see if it returns to the Isle of Wight in 2025.

DISCUSSION

Pioneers or home birds?

At least one of the Great White Egrets which first settled in Somerset had been ringed in 2009 at the nest in Northern France. This pioneering bird had travelled widely within England before breeding on the Avalon Marshes.⁵ Would the juveniles raised here follow this pioneering pattern of dispersing far from their natal colonies, and if so would they return to breed here once they reached breeding age (2 years), or would they too establish colonies in new, perhaps similarly northerly, locations? This has been one of the questions the ringing project hopes to answer.

Initial data suggested that the birds were remaining and breeding in their natal region. The first three nestlings were ringed in 2016. All were resighted, but never outside the county. Two of them, Egret AAC and Egret AAF, returned to breed on Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall as soon as they were old enough: Egret AAC fledged 3 young in 2018, was seen nest building in 2019, and was present in breeding colours in 2021, while Egret AAF was present within the colonies every year from 2018 to 2023, and has been seen with nesting material throughout that period. In 2023 AAF reached the age of 7; it is the longest-lived of the colour-ringed birds, but has not been seen in 2024.

From 2017 onwards, the pattern has been different. Once they have left the Avalon Marshes, all the sightings of first-year colour-ringed birds have come from other parts of the country, with the exception of two of the 2024 birds which so far have each been resighted once within Somerset. Would these birds also return to breed here, or would they establish new colonies in other parts of the country?

Breeding on the Avalon Marshes

It is more difficult to read rings on the legs of breeding birds as they come and go from the reedbeds in which they nest than when they are standing on riverbanks or in sparse vegetation during the winter. But as more birds reach breeding age a picture is beginning to emerge. Egrets **AAM** (2018) and **ABU** (2022), were both seen back on the Avalon Marshes at the age of two years; both had previously been reported outside Somerset, and ABU was seen in breeding colours at the First Lagoon colony on Shapwick Heath in 2024. Colour-ringed individuals were seen on Ham Wall in June, July and September 2024, the rings could not be read. These birds were not in breeding plumage.

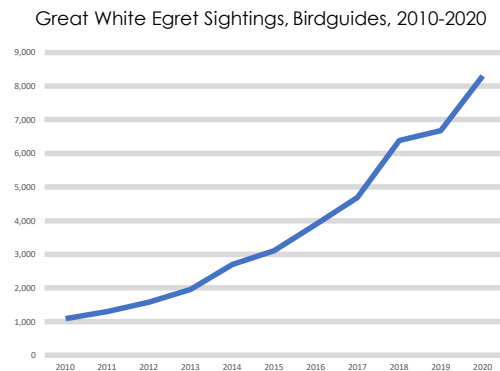
Egret **ACV** (2023), previously resighted in Dorset, was reported from Portmore Lough in Northern Ireland in January 2024, and was seen at Chew Valley Lake in breeding colours in April and June, but is not old enough to breed and spent the intervening month of May in Yorkshire. Egret **AAU** (2021) returned to Ham Wall from its peregrinations in Yorkshire in April 2022, but was seen in the Tees Valley a few days later. It was present at Fairburn Ings from June 2022 through to January 2024, but has not been reported since.



ACV with others at Portmore Lough, N Ireland, 25.1.24, photo Ian Dickey

Establishing new colonies

Since Great White Egrets began to breed on the Avalon Marshes in 2012, birds have been increasingly reported in other parts of the UK, with burgeoning winter sightings leading to a steady if more modest growth in numbers observed during the breeding season.⁶ Successful breeding has been recorded in Norfolk (from 2017), on the Dee Estuary (from 2019), in Gloucestershire (from 2020), on the Ouse Washes (from 2021) and at Loch of Strathbeg, Scotland (2024).



We already knew that Somerset ringed birds had been seen at three of the six locations outside Somerset where breeding has so far been confirmed (Dee Estuary, Gloucestershire/Wiltshire border, & Nottinghamshire), and we also know that Somerset birds have been seen during the breeding season at two further locations (Isle of Wight & Otmoor) where breeding has been suspected or attempted. In June 2024 Somerset birds in breeding colours were also seen in Sussex (Egret **ACA**, 2022) and at Slimbridge (Egret **ABF**, 2022). In November 2023 Egret **AAW** (2021) was seen at Holkham, but none of the ringed Somerset birds has been observed among the nesting pairs there.

A new milestone was however passed in 2024: colour-ringed individuals from the Avalon Marshes have for the first time been seen breeding or attempting breeding elsewhere in the country.

- Egret **AAR** (2021) was among 12 pairs nesting at Cotswold Lakes in Gloucestershire & Wiltshire; Egret **ACL** (2023) was reported from this location in November 2023.
- Breeding has been recorded for the first time this year Besthorpe NR in Nottinghamshire, with Egret **ABT** (2022) confirmed as one of the two nesting pairs. Both **ABU** (2022) and **AFM** (2024) were reported from the same area in June. **ABU** (not originally from the same colony as **ABT**) is thought to have bred or attempted breeding on Shapwick Heath this year, and **AFM** is a juvenile bird.⁷

There are two other sites where breeding was attempted or suspected in 2024, in both cases for the first time: on the Isle of Wight, where Egret **ABN** was one of three birds present in July 2022 and again in July 2024, and at RSPB Otmoor, where Egret **ADC** (2023) was reported in August 2024. **ADC** is not old enough to breed successfully, but Otmoor is an obvious future breeding location.

Meanwhile breeding has continued on the Dee Estuary, where Egret **ABM** (2022) and this year's juveniles **AFL** & **AFX** have all been seen. Juvenile Egret **ADV** was reported from the Ouse Washes, where pairs have been present since 2014 and successful breeding was first confirmed in 2021.

So far, therefore, it seems that some of the birds raised on the Avalon Marshes stay here to nest, that others disperse to locations across the country but may return to Somerset to breed, and yet others will help to establish new breeding colonies elsewhere.

Growing the UK population

We know that the number of Great White Egrets in the UK has been steadily increasing over the last decade and a half. We know that this species has been breeding further and further north within Europe, and that small numbers of ringed birds from France, Poland, Lithuania and Belarus have been reported in the UK in recent years, mostly during the winter. But we do not know what proportion of the birds now present across the country in both winter and summer are immigrants from the continent and what proportion are home-bred birds. The ringing programme is helping us to shed some light on this question.

Since 2016, an estimated 440 Great White Egrets have fledged from the Avalon Marshes. 63 of these, 14% of the total, have been colour-ringed birds. 50 of these ringed birds, 79%, have so far been reported from other parts of the country. If these 50 ringed birds are representative of the Somerset fledged juveniles as a whole, we may assume that the Avalon Marshes have exported at least 348 young Great White Egrets to other regions of the UK, where in 2024 they have for the first time been active within the small number of breeding colonies.

Whereas this species is now widely present in winter, it remains much less common in the summer months. This suggests that birds seen in the UK in the winter months may (bearing in mind that first winter mortality is high) be returning each spring to their breeding colonies on the continent – whereas resightings of the colour-ringed Somerset birds indicate that native bred birds remain within the UK. It seems reasonable to conclude that the birds raised on the Avalon Marshes now make up a substantial proportion of the resident UK population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Great White Egrets nest on three reserves within the Avalon Marshes: RSPB Ham Wall, Natural England Shapwick Heath and Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay.

The colour ringing project is approved by the European Colour Ringing Birding group and listed on their website at <https://cr-birding.org/node/4022>, and operates under BTO project licence 5590. Bob Medland & Alison Morgan hold



ABN, St Helen's Bridge, IOW
24.7.24, photo Derek Hale



ADL, Connah's Quay, Dee Estuary
29.8.24, photo Mike Pollard

full BTO ringing licences, special methods licences and British Canoeing certificates, Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby are licensed drone pilots, and the ringing and drone teams hold Natural England disturbance licenses.

We would like to thank:

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Ringing Team: Alison Morgan, Bob Medland, Alexia Michaelides, Amy King

Support team: Karen Haddy, Oliver Norris, Mike Pearce, Chris Wool

Observers & photographers: The many people who have submitted sightings and photographs of the ringed birds. All photographs are used by permission.

Rich Hearn: We would like to pay tribute to Rich Hearn, who provided the expertise necessary to establish the programme back in 2016, and ringed alongside Alison Morgan until ill health prevented him from continuing. His death this year has brought great sadness to very many people.



1. Adult sitting, Ham Wall 8.4.24
2. Adult with 15 day old chicks, Westhay 12.4.24
3. Heron neighbours 6 week old chicks, Ham Wall 11.6.24

Photos by Alan Ashman & Andrew Kirby

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January 2025

¹ Annual February [air temperature data](#) and long term average [mean temperature data](#) from UK Met Office.

² Met Office data for [April](#). May 2024 [rainfall](#) across the SW was 92mm, compared with 50mm in 2023.

³ J. Graves, 'How birds become male or female', [Conversation Trust](#) 2017; KJ Navara, 'The Bees Do It, but What About the Birds?', in *Choosing Sexes: Mechanisms and Adaptive Patterns of Sex Allocation in Vertebrates*, Springer 2018 pp71-97.

⁴ A more detailed report on these birds was published on the RSPB Assemble network in November; it can also be viewed [here](#).

⁵ The bird carried ring number C69229, and was reported from Lancashire, Merseyside, Cardiff, Newport and Gloucestershire before settling in Somerset, where it was present between April 2010 and May 2015. For the early breeding see Morgan et al, 'Great White Egrets in England: tipping the balance,' *British Birds* May 2022

⁶ The expansion of the winter population has been logged by [Birdtrack](#), which reported that a peak reporting rate for this species of 3.8% of all lists in September 2019 had been superseded in September 2024, when it appeared on 8.2% of all lists – with a peak count of over 100 birds at Rutland Water that month. The vast majority of sightings have occurred between October and April. The steep rise in annual reporting rates led [Birdguides](#) to delist the Great White Egret as a main species from 2021.

⁷ ABU was present on First Lagoon in breeding colours in March, but was reported from Newington Flash in S Yorks on 7th June. The earliest nest on First Lagoon had fledged its chicks by 4th June, and 6 other nests had already failed by that date.