

## Purple Heron in South Buckinghamshire – third county record

By Lee G R Evans

I was just finishing off a definitive identification and occurrence article on Marbled and Long-billed Murrelets when I received a call from my old sparring partner Joan Thompson at midday, informing me of a strange bird that one of her contacts had seen. Steve Blake, a local birdwatcher Joan had become acquainted with at Tyttenhanger and elsewhere, had been walking his beloved spaniel and flushed a bittern-like bird from the River Chess. As Joan described the bird over the phone, I had visions of an American Bittern and immediately raced out of the door.

Within three minutes, I had joined Steve, and the bird in question was still in view. To my astonishment, the bird was a juvenile PURPLE HERON, and showing at exceptionally close range – only the third record for the county and the first ever twitchable. In my haste, I had darted out of the door without my mobile phone, so I asked Steve if he would kindly stick with the bird whilst I popped home to retrieve it. The location in which the bird was feeding was a sensitive one, with virtually nowhere to park, so I had a dilemma about what to do with the news. Being less than a mile from my home, I was back at the site within a very short time – during which Joan Thompson had arrived. The heron was still showing incredibly well from the bridge, just outside the village.

I immediately informed *Rare Bird Alert*, explaining to them that the bird was in a sensitive location and all would-be visitors would need to contact me if they wished to see it. I also informed the major cogs of the Bucks Birding Ring. Carmel popped down to witness such a dramatic village visitor and for a while, the four of us basked in its performing glory, literally 25 yards from the bridge.

The bird was a juvenile in very fresh plumage and was almost identical to my only previous November Purple Heron seen in Prees village, Shropshire. Most striking was its long, narrow yellow bill and long yellow legs. The head, neck-sides, back and upperwings were a rich ochre-brown, with the upperparts dominated by black centred feathers fringed ochre/soft chestnut. The entire upperwing-coverts followed this pattern, with the outer primary feathers being all dark. The head and neck were uniform brown, with a paler line of feathers leading back from the bill and eye. The black crown contrasted with the brown of the head. The eye was a bright yellow with a black pupil/iris. The chin and throat were creamy-white and unmarked, this extending down to the heavily striped foreneck – the long striping continuing right the way down the jawline.

Mick Frosdick was the 4th birder to arrive at the scene, closely followed by local photographer Paul Keene. Both took full advantage of the performing bird. As more and more birders came upon the bridge, the bird gradually became more nervous and slowly wandered into denser vegetation. It was feeding knee-deep in reeds, a large amount of which had emerged on the river bed. On several occasions, it waded across the shallow river to feed on the opposite side and for a while, disappeared out of view. Ben Miller was soon on site, along with Darin Stanley, closely followed by Rose Collard and Dave Ferguson, Dave Bilcock, Mike Campbell and Paul Lewis. For a further period of ten minutes, the bird walked back towards the bridge and fed once more in full view. Frosdy fired off over a hundred images and Dave Bilcock several less, whilst Dave Ferguson obtained a mini-video of its antics. This was a Bucks tick

of mass appeal. Then, for no apparent reason, the bird took flight, just as Jim Rose drove up!

It flew away from us and along the Chess River Valley, stalling when it reached the next kink in the flow. It had been perfectly happy where it was, catching at least three small fish in the hour that I had been observing. It was now no longer on view.

With much of the area private, it was decided to try and push it back to the cressbed and with this in mind, several of the group marched out across the field. They took a wide arc but as they approached, the bird suddenly took flight and returned back towards Joan and I on the bridge. In flight, the distinctive angular 'neck-keel' could be observed, as well as the long toes, spread-eagled. The wing-beats were typically jerky and lacking the depth and dominance of the Grey Heron. It came upon the road and continued, eventually settling west of the road some 100 yards away.

Shortly later, a Grey Heron made a loud 'kharkk' and within seconds was chasing the Purple Heron upriver. The two birds flew high in the sky, the size difference and neck-shape difference being only too obvious. Andrew Moon had arrived by this time and he too enjoyed flight views. The Grey Heron kept chase for a few minutes more, the Purple Heron eventually being lost from view over distant trees at 1350 – less than two hours after its initial discovery.

It did not return and a search between Chenies and Chesham failed to reap results. It represented only the third Buckinghamshire record following a first-summer at Newport Pagnell GP on 28th May 1978 and an adult summer at Hyde Lane Gravel Pits on 13th April 1980. It also constitutes the rarest bird to occur in the Little Chalfont parish, perhaps usurping the juvenile dark morph Long-tailed Skua in October 1982 (from 12th-17th) and certainly the wintering flocks of Bohemian Waxwings in 2004.

I am indebted to Steven Blake for his impressive find and to Joan for her exceptional speed in disseminating the news. I am also grateful to Paul Keene, Mick Frostdick, Dave Bilcock and Dave Ferguson for the excellent images that adorn this paper.





***Plates 1-6: Juvenile Purple Heron, Latimer Bridge, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, 13th November 2006 (Mick Frosdick)***



***Plate 7: Juvenile Purple Heron, Latimer Bridge, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, 13th November 2006 (Mick Frosdick)***



***Plates 8-9: Video-grabs of Juvenile Purple Heron, Latimer Bridge, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, 13th November 2006 (Dave Ferguson)  
The third record for Buckinghamshire: witnessed by just 16 observers.***



***Plates 10-11: Juvenile Purple Heron, Latimer Bridge, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, 13th November 2006 (Dave Bilcock)***

Evans, L.G.R, November 2006, Purple Heron in Buckinghamshire. *Rare Birds* \*\*\*\*  
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