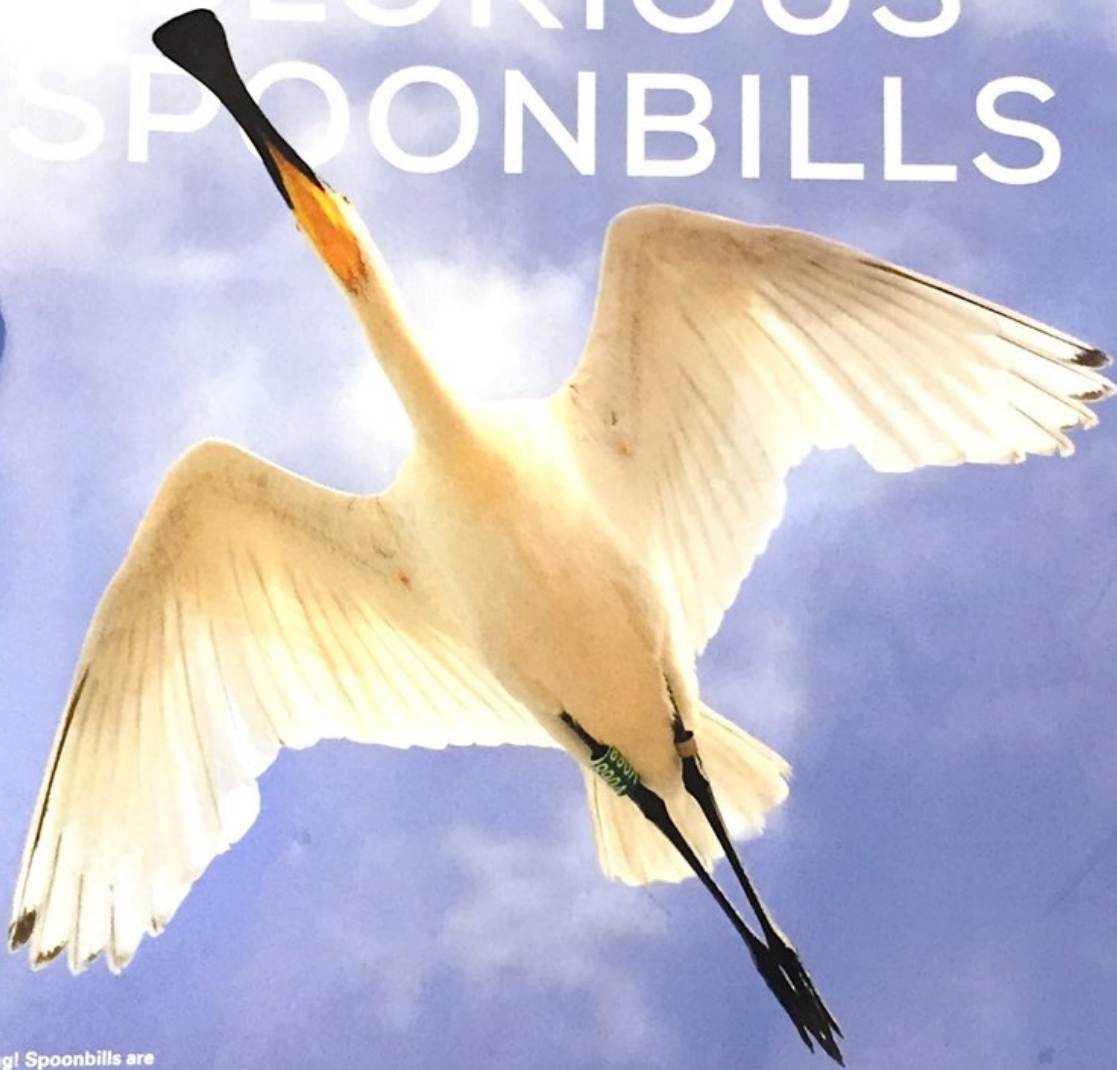


species

After a 300-year absence, spoonbills are returning to our shores. **Dominic Couzens** reveals how your support of conservation work has helped them – and explains the purpose of that cutlery-shaped bill...

# GLORIOUS SPOONBILLS



Coming! Spoonbills are colonising the UK, returning to breed in wetlands after three centuries' absence.

Photo: Nick Upton (raspb-images.com)

## species

**A**ugust 1521, and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, being at the very height of his powers as Henry VIII's right-hand man, attended a banquet in King's Lynn, Norfolk. Among the recorded delicacies brought to his table were 10 cygnets, three bitterns, 13 plovers – and two tender spoonbills.

Back then, in the 16th century, spoonbills were a familiar sight in parts of the UK, having been present since at least Anglo-Saxon times. There was even a colony at Fulham, in Middlesex, just down the Thames from Wolsey's Hampton Court Palace. The following century, however, brought widespread drainage of the bird's habitat, including the Fens, as well as continued hunting for the pot. The population crashed – and the last recorded nesting was at Trimley in Suffolk in 1668. For more than 300 years, not a single spoonbill chick was raised in Britain.

Then, in the 1980s, something extraordinary began, the effects of which we still see today. Birds with long legs, and

usually with white plumage, suddenly started to march into the UK from the near continent. They liked it here and stayed. Little egrets were the trailblazers, first nesting successfully in 1996, rapidly expanding and now with a population of about 1,000 pairs. More recently cattle egrets have colonised (first breeding in 2008 and expanding) and so have great white egrets (2008). There are inklings that purple herons and little bitterns may follow. With some help, cranes are also thriving, and introduced white storks may follow in those tall, elegant footsteps.

### RETURN OF THE SPOONIES


"But what people don't realise," says Graham White, the RSPB's Head of Ecology, "is that spoonbills almost beat little egrets to it. They attempted to breed in eastern England way back in 1997, and there have been sporadic attempts in several places since." In 2010, a regular colony was firmly established at Holkham National Nature Reserve in Norfolk.

"As egrets have gained the headlines, spoonbills have also been quietly attempting to recolonise," says Graham.

2020 might have held little cheer for humankind, but it was a breakout year for breeding spoonbills in the UK. Not only has the Holkham population thrived, with 28 pairs producing 56 young, but they have also bred successfully on two RSPB reserves. Six pairs produced three young at Fairburn Ings in North Yorkshire, and three pairs produced four young at Havergate Island in Suffolk. The Havergate birds are perhaps especially poignant, located just a few miles – if 350 years – away from the lost Trimley colony.

It seems that the march of the long-legged birds gathers pace every year. It is great news for birdwatchers and birds alike. But what is behind this Glorious Revolution, this expansion of so many species on to our islands?

"Many people immediately latch on to climate change as the explanation," says Jo Gilbert, RSPB's Deputy Director of Conservation Programmes. "But it is more



"Spoonbills feed by sweeping their bill – which is kept slightly open – from side to side in the shallows."

complicated than that. Milder winters undoubtedly help large wading birds to survive here into the spring, but there are other factors at play.”

One of these is that, as far as spoonbills are concerned, the increase in the UK is directly related to the bird's fortunes on the continent, where populations in northern Europe, especially the Netherlands, have significantly increased. Many, if not most, of our colonising birds are thought to originate from here. Another bloodless revolution has therefore reached our shores from Holland (in the original Glorious Revolution, William of Orange was invited to be king in 1688).

“But we shouldn't overlook the fact that much of the spoonbill's recent success is down to conservation work,” comments Jo Gilbert. “Spoonbills have particular ecological requirements, it has taken some time to get this just right.”

#### BEAK TECHNIQUE

Anybody who has watched spoonbills in the wild will see that they are unusual.

Spring is a great time to watch spoonbills sparring for mates and territory.





## SEEING SPOONBILLS

You can see spoonbills at a number of RSPB reserves, even in winter.

**1 ARNE, DORSET**  
There are up to 70 non-breeding spoonbills here in the autumn, with about 30-40 remaining for the winter.

**2 MEDMERRY, WEST SUSSEX**  
This new reserve, created by inundation of the sea, provides increasingly good feeding for spoonbills.

**3 ISLEY MARSH, DEVON**  
A small reserve near Barnstaple which often has spoonbills in the winter.

**4 FRAMPTON MARSH, LINCOLNSHIRE**  
Spoonbills can visit almost any time of year, with late summer especially good.



**5 CLIFFE POOLS, KENT**  
Small numbers can be seen here at any time of year. This is another site where they are likely to become more frequent.



**DID YOU KNOW**  
Six species of spoonbill are found across the world, on every continent except Antarctica.

A spoonbill fracas breaks out on the Norfolk coast as everyone settles down to roost.





▶ A quick glance at the remarkably shaped bill will allow you to conclude hastily that they are unlikely to visit your bird table.

Spoonbills feed by wading in sheltered shallows. Once immersed they walk slowly forwards, sweeping the bill, which is kept slightly open, from side to side. The surfaces of the bill are highly sensitive to touch, so should a fish, crustacean, mollusc, worm, frog or toad brush against it, an instant reaction snaps the bill shut and the prey is captured and swallowed. If the potential food is especially lively, a spoonbill will also run through the water with its bill open, hoping to touch and snatch.

Both methods are entirely tactile, reducing the need to see and aim at prey. As a result, spoonbills are content to feed at night, and in the morning and evening twilight. Birdwatchers often complain that, although it's always exciting to see a spoonbill, it spends much of the daylight hours asleep, head and neck nestled on its back, a white blob on long legs.

Spoonbills are large and chunky birds, up to 85cm tall, and need a good source of food, especially when breeding. "They need two things to thrive," says Graham White, "a safe place to nest and a reliable food supply. The latter is what limits their numbers."

#### A HELPING HAND

Thanks to the support of its members, the RSPB has been able to give these birds some help. At Havergate Island, the RSPB has been trying to encourage nesting spoonbills for the last 15 years, going as far as manipulating the nearby habitat to accommodate the birds' foraging needs.

"A tidal surge in 2013 engulfed the area," says Graham White. "It just so happened that developing natural flood management by taking flood water into the island also helped with providing one of the spoonbill's favourite foods, a type of small fish called the three-spined stickleback, into Havergate. So, in the end, everybody was happy."

Although their needs are great, spoonbills will commute to find reliable sustenance, and for the Fairburn Ings breeding birds, this involves considerable effort. "In the Aire Valley, our breeding spoonbills fly around 25 miles or so to Blacktoft Sands to feed," says Richard Barnard, RSPB's Area Manager for Yorkshire and Humber.

"It's probably not ideal that there isn't enough food in the immediate vicinity, but the fish nursery on the Humber is a major attraction."

However, the spoonbills' other key requirement is equally precious. ▶

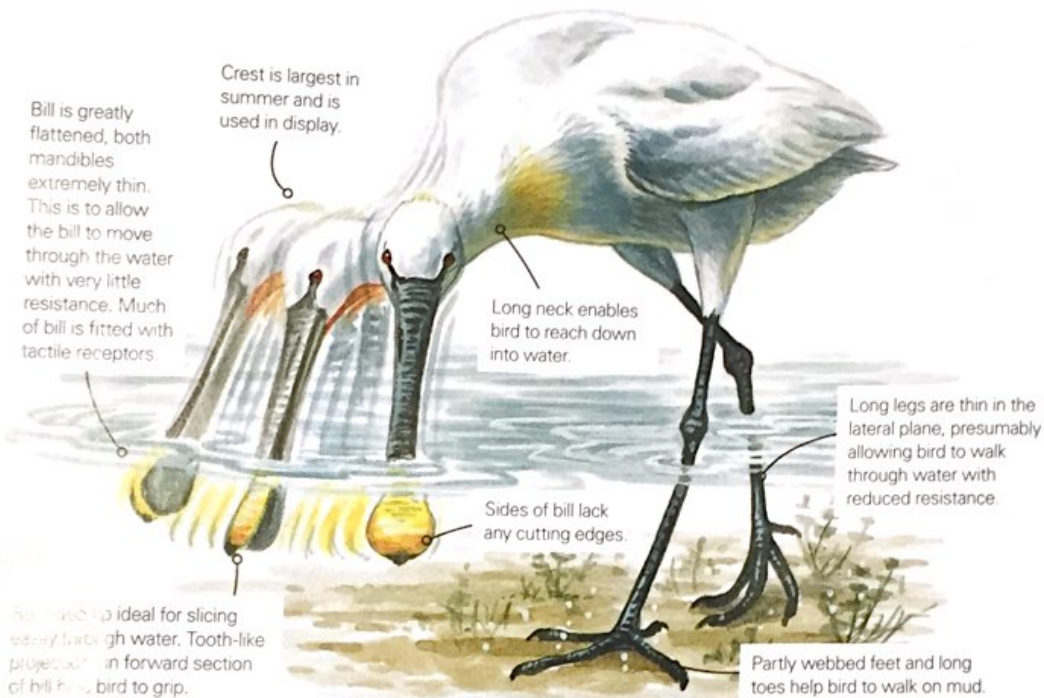
**"After years of management work on site, the spoonbills have finally bred successfully."**

Above: Spoonbills take flight at Cley Marshes in Norfolk.

Photos: Roger Tidman, Graham Goodall, Robin Budgen (all rspb-images.com)

## A WETLAND SPECIALIST

Spoonbills' needs are fairly precise; peaceful, shallow, usually coastal lagoons rich in aquatic life.



Bill is greatly flattened, both mandibles extremely thin. This is to allow the bill to move through the water with very little resistance. Much of bill is fitted with tactile receptors.

Crest is largest in summer and is used in display.

Long neck enables bird to reach down into water.

Long legs are thin in the lateral plane, presumably allowing bird to walk through water with reduced resistance.

Sides of bill lack any cutting edges.

Forward section of bill is ideal for slicing easily through water. Tooth-like projection on forward section of bill helps bird to grip.

Partly webbed feet and long toes help bird to walk on mud.

► "The birds are extremely sensitive to disturbance," says Richard. "At Fairburn Ings, they nest along with herons and cormorants on an island in a small lake, which is densely wooded with willow scrub. The bulky platform stick-nests are above head height. We often can't see the nests at all, and that's how the birds like it."

At Havergate Island, the spoonbills use a low island in an isolated part of the reserve, away from hides or visitors. "Fortunately, the nests are in the lee of the sea wall," says Aaron Howe, the Site Manager. "So the spoonbills are shielded from the sight of the continuous river traffic just behind them."

The Havergate site is secluded, but it hasn't always been safe. "In 2019, we had six nests, one of which hatched four healthy chicks," says Aaron. "Unfortunately, they were all predated, probably by a mammal swimming from the mainland." In the end, after the failed breeding season, the RSPB staff waited for neap tides (twice a month, when sun and moon are at right angles to each other) and built 350m of wire fencing around the birds' breeding island.

"If a fox tries to swim across, it won't be able to jump over the additional barrier," says Aaron. "It was hard work, but it seems to have been the final piece of the jigsaw. After years of management work on site, building breeding platforms and even putting up models of the birds, the spoonbills have finally bred successfully."

Last summer's breakthrough raises hope that these successes will be replicated elsewhere. At RSPB Wallasea Island, Essex, for example, the idea that spoonbills should breed some day was incorporated into the original plan for this large, newly created coastal habitat.

"We have been visited by small numbers of spoonbills for a few years now," says Rachel Fancy, the Site Manager. "And we have a small scrubby island ready for them to breed. Every so often we take a boat into the huge lagoon and weed the area on the island where the scrub is growing. We have even carried in freshwater for them to stop the bushes getting desiccated. Meanwhile, fish supplies are increasing, so we are playing a waiting game."

The same game is being played at a few other RSPB sites, such as Burton Mere, on the Dee Estuary, where spoonbills tried and failed to breed in 2019, and at Titchwell, Norfolk, where work on the fresh marsh should create excellent spoonbill habitat.

"It's thrilling to see so much colonisation," says Jo Gilbert. "The creation of extensive habitats in places such as the Somerset Levels shows that conservation efforts can go a long way towards enabling wetland birds to establish in the UK. Now we know how to encourage spoonbills, the future is looking bright for them."

It seems, gloriously, as though the great takeover of long-legged wetland birds in the UK is still far from complete. ■



Dominic Couzens is a well-known writer on birds and wildlife, having written 40 or so books and hundreds of articles over the last 25 years. He is based in Dorset and sees kingfishers at the bottom of the garden, as well as spoonbills nearby at RSPB Arne.

Illustration: Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)