

# Bird Man of Peel

Leigh Morris | CEO

If you are out and about in Peel during the day and walk around the harbour, bay or castle, you will undoubtedly come across Keith Johnson quietly and methodically observing and recording all the birds he sees.

Keith's love of birds started at the age of six, and from 1971 he has been meticulously recording birds in the Isle of Man. Over the last eight years Keith has focused almost entirely on Peel and now does observations every day of the year, following his daily walking route, which includes the lower River Neb, harbour, bay, breakwater, before stationing himself at the back of Peel Castle for many hours 'sea watching'. In winter months Keith does two walks/shifts a day, however, in the summer months he does three. Every day. All weather!

Keith keeps detailed records of all his sightings in handwritten notebooks, spending 1-2 hours every evening writing up his notes from the day (a written record that I believe needs to be digitised for the Island) and then he feeds his sightings into the Island's formal bird records, initially to Pat Cullen and now via the annual bird report published in Peregrine. In very recent years, Keith has adopted new ways to inform people about his sightings.



He posts frequently in the Manx Bird Chat WhatsApp group, and since early 2024 all the bird species he sees each month are written on a blackboard which stands outside the Manx Wildlife Trust gift shop in Peel.



Manx Bird WhatsApp Chat.



Keith writing on the bird sighting board outside our Peel gift shop.

I have walked and jogged past Keith many times in Peel since I arrived in the Isle of Man in January 2020, and over the last five years I've been delighted to slowly get to know Keith better. I now enjoy stopping to join him, wherever he is on his route, and I learn something about birds every time we speak.

Keith's bird expertise is exceptional, in terms of his knowledge about the

species, and the sightings he has made over the years. His ability to recall individual sightings and the number of birds he sees annually and in specific months is amazing. Keith has eyes like a hawk and can spot birds out at sea quickly and reliably, before reaching for his camera with a large zoom lens to grab the shot. Keith has been taking photos since 1980, and I've witnessed that he is 'quick on the draw' when any bird of interest appears. Keith enjoys putting a slide show together from his large archive of images for the Manx Ornithological Society Christmas dinner every year.



Surveying Peel Bay.

Keith's response to the question on his most memorable bird sighting was immediate; "a Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) on 16th October 1983. I'd set off on my bicycle and got as far as Jurby when I had to turn around for the strong southwest onshore gale. I returned to Peel and went to the back of the Castle where the place was alive with birds forced in by the weather. Hundreds of Kittiwakes and amongst them, there it was."

Keith still has a few birds he's yet to see but hopes to one day. Top of his wish list are the Black Winged Pratincole (*Glareola nordmanni*), which "got as far as Anglesey a couple of years ago, so might make it here", and the Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*).

In respect to reflecting on his years observing, Keith talks wistfully on how bird numbers and patterns have changed. "I've always counted the Gannets and used to get 300+

on a sea watch regularly, one year recording a total of 4985 one September, but now the numbers are far less and last September the monthly total was (only) 1760". It's similar reflections for Swallows ("I often saw 1000+ in a day, now 300-500 is good") and Scoters ("which I regularly saw in groups of c.50, but now 25 is about the maximum").



Feeding the birds at Peel Castle.

Keith is a humble chap, and he modestly admits "I was going for 20 years before I thought I was any good (at bird observation)". He often presumes people are as knowledgeable as he is, and he's amazed that not everyone can identify a bird from 500 yards in flight over the sea! One of my personal favourite stories on Keith is one afternoon (after I'd started to get to know him) I was buying a sandwich in the Peel Co-Op, Keith walked past the open door, saw me, and simply said "58". I looked up, smiled and he repeated "58 today". Thankfully I interpreted him correctly – Black Guillemots (NB: Keith's record number is 69 in Peel on one day).

Keith has a wonderfully dry sense of humour, and I discovered one day that we both can recite and share a chuckle at the anecdotes of Blaster Bates! One thing is very clear, Keith loves birds and whether he is observing, photographing, feeding or informing others, Keith is in his element. The commitment Keith has shown to bird observation over 50+ years is staggering and his recordings are a fantastic contribution to the biological records of the Isle of Man. A lovely man, who certainly deserves his accolade as the 'Bird Man of Peel'.