

Little Egrets along the River Wye

Little Egrets began regularly wintering in the UK in the early 90's and first bred in 1996. Since then the population has grown to nearly 600 pairs. Only relatively recently, over the past four years or so, have we seen significant numbers along the Wye and Back Stream during the winter.

Most are probably roosting on a small island on Wycombe Abbey School lake. The highest winter roost counts were 32 in 2019 and 19 in 2020 and were of birds leaving the roost and moving downstream at dawn, or returning upstream at dusk. They represent the largest recorded single winter roost site in Buckinghamshire. Numbers counted in roosts appear to be consistent with the total numbers of birds downstream to Bourne End during the day, although no precise count has been made.



Photo: Pete Edwards

During the day Little Egrets are normally encountered as individuals because they defend feeding territories along the river (Wye and Backstream) and they occasionally interact with other Egrets making a territorial 'grunt like call' when they get too close.

They are opportunist feeders, preferring small fish but also feeding on crayfish and freshwater shrimps. Bullheads, *Gammarus* and the invasive signal (red clawed) crayfish are all abundant in the river.

The Egrets essentially disappear from the river during the summer and, we assume, are moving closer to breeding colonies elsewhere. Why do they not stay to breed at their roost site in the Abbey? There are colonies in North Buckinghamshire and Berkshire and some summer records from Little Marlow where they have nested.

Little Egrets suffer high mortality in cold winters. Chalk streams are largely fed from underground aquifers where the temperature of the emerging surface water is fairly stable and rarely deviates from 10°C. This relatively warm water during the winter (and cooler during the summer) may partially explain the use of the River Wye during winter. Other winter roosts are close to other chalk streams, e.g. the River Chess, but not exclusively so.