

Ringling at Woolston – Winter 2012/2013

(Michael Miles on behalf of the Woolston ringing team)

This note covers the winter period from October 2012 through March 2013 (“this winter”). In this time 1,019 new birds were ringed at Woolston which compares to 1,104 new birds ringed in the 2011/2012 winter period (“last winter”). Although this decline of 85 birds (or 7.7%) appears modest, if we divide each winter into “residents” and “visitors” a stark picture emerges. If we define “residents” as Wrens, Dunnocks, Robins, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Greenfinches and Bullfinches, whilst recognising that some of these species make short distance movements, then this winter we ringed 406 new birds compared to 589 last winter, a reduction of 31%. Part of this decline is a result of adverse weather reducing ringing opportunities but there appear to be fewer birds of these species around the beds at Woolston this winter. Reed Bunting has been excluded from this group because a roost formed in the *phragmites* on No.3 bed in late 2011 whereas the work undertaken on the bed during this winter means we have not had the chance to seek and target a similar roost. In contrast, if we define “visitors” as Redwings, Goldcrests and Bramblings we ringed 217 birds this winter as compared with 57 ringed last winter.

In summary then, it has been a tough winter for the resident birds at Woolston but we have had impressive influxes of several winter immigrants. The “tough winter” will have had several facets, notably periods of harsh weather and a poor food supply going into the winter period following the seeding failures of last autumn.

The most severe decline has been suffered in the case of Bullfinches. Although we believe they had a reasonable breeding season in 2012, this winter we ringed just eight new birds compared with 54 ringed last winter. This is difficult to understand. We know from observation that Bullfinches are a major beneficiary of the continuous supplementary feeding provided by the Woolston Eyes Conservation Group. This effect is not restricted to the seed eaters. If we take the case of a resident insectivore, catches of new Dunnocks year on year are down from 16 to two.

Turning to some individual species, this winter has seen the deployment of the new duck trap, somewhat optimistically called “The Portable Duck Trap” and so named by someone who had the entire Turkish Olympic Weightlifting Team at his disposal. Watching Kieran and Jason moving unsteadily through the reed bed with “The Portable Duck Trap” brings back fond memories of the classic silent short film, “The Plank” starring Eric Sykes and Tommy Cooper. Featherweight it may not be but it has upped the effectiveness of our trapping efforts and this winter saw 12 Mallards ringed of which three were soon shot at local sites. Also, after a blank last winter, two Water Rails and a single Coot were ringed. Kieran’s pre-dawn forays were rewarded with three Common Snipe.

In some years Redwings appear for a few weeks in late autumn and then move on. Such was the case last winter when we ringed nine. This winter they have stayed around the reserve and we ringed 29. The autumn Goldcrest influx was the largest since 2008 and 83 were ringed this winter compared to 48 last winter. As everyone will be aware this was a Brambling winter and we ringed 105. Last winter was blank. It is already clear that 2013 will be Woolston’s record calendar year for Bramblings ringed. A total of 242 Greenfinches was ringed, down from 311 ringed last winter. This reduction is entirely limited to No.3 bed with catches on No.1 bed only nine birds lower than last winter. This species is usually caught at feeders and good numbers of Greenfinches can usually be seen around the feeders by the Morgan Hide.

It seems likely that Greenfinches prefer the more open aspect of those feeders and that may account for the reduced catch on No.3 bed.

The winter immigrants usually bring a smattering of controls and this winter is no exception. We have two British Bramblings, and one each of British Chiffchaff, Greenfinch, Lesser Redpoll, Reed Bunting and , unusually, Bullfinch. Probably the best of the bunch is a Blackcap caught on No.3 bed on 13th October 2012 wearing a German ring At the time of writing we have no original ringing data for any of these birds .

I finish with a recovery which is nothing to do with this winter. On 24th June 2011 Dave Riley ringed a juvenile Kingfisher on No.1 bed and on 12th May 2012 it was retrapped by a ringer in Holland. This is only the second BTO Kingfisher to be recovered in Holland and it is more fortunate than the first one which was picked up freshly dead having flown into a window.