

Newsletter Summer 2002

Reserve Security

Once again there have been several occasions when padlocks have gone missing from the two barriers along the Ship Canal track. There is a real possibility that the Ship Canal Company could change the padlocks if this continues, thus denying vehicular access to the Reserve. We are in no way suggesting that permit holders are responsible for this : we know, for example, that contractors are notorious for leaving padlocks on top of the barriers or not snapped shut when they pass through. This is just a reminder that all padlocks must be closed at all times. Of equal concern are the two recent incidents when people without permits or keys were discovered on No. 3 bed. In both cases the individuals concerned said that they had been let on to the bed by permit holders who had subsequently left. In the past we know that egg collectors have been interested in raiding the Black-necked Grebe colony and a notorious egg collector was found on No. 3 bed a couple of years ago; he later served a period of imprisonment. In addition, we received information earlier in the year from the Merseyside Police that a group of known egg thieves was planning to target a Black-necked Grebe colony this summer. These people can be extremely plausible. There is no evidence that those found on No. 3 bed were anything other than bona fide birdwatchers but this might not have been the case. Permit holders are reminded that they should not allow anyone without a permit on to No. 3 bed. People should be referred to Brian Ankers so that they can apply for a permit in the usual way. We expect all permit holders to follow this procedure.

Fencing on No. 2 bed

At the time of writing there is little to add to the information given in the last Newsletter, namely that access is strictly forbidden for vehicles and will in all probability be denied for people on foot when pumping operations begin. It is clear from the extra lengths of fencing, more extensive razor wire and new "Keep Out" signs that access to the east end of the Reserve is likely to become extremely difficult, if not impossible, in the future. We shall, of course, keep you informed of any developments.

Visiting Groups

This year has seen record numbers of groups visiting the Eyes, many, of course, wanting to see the Black-necked Grebes. We welcome this as it increases the profile of the Reserve and introduces many more people to its special qualities. This has, however, led to some logistical problems for the Group and on one occasion two parties arrived at the same time. Given the limited space in the No. 3 bed hides this can lead to disappointment for visitors and place a strain on those Wardens who regularly accompany groups. As a result, new arrangements have been put into place. A booking form has been introduced and will be sent for completion to all groups, whether they require an accompanying Warden or not. A booking will only be confirmed when this has been returned, together with a £10 non-refundable deposit. We will, of course, endeavour to agree a preferred date but given the level of interest this may not always be possible. If you are a member of a group or society which is planning to visit Woolston then the person to contact for a booking form is Rosalind Martin, 45 Albert Road, Grappenhall, Warrington, WA4 2PF. Rosalind has taken over from Tony Broadbent, to whom we extend our thanks for his many years hard work as visiting group co-ordinator.

Channel 5 Film

We hope that many of you were able to see the programme about the Black-necked Grebes, in spite of the last-minute change in the date of transmission after we had sent out the Spring Newsletter. Television schedulers are apparently well known for this sort of thing, and some of you must have been perplexed to tune in and find a programme about IKEA on the date we had given you!

Membership and Requests for Help

The publicity that the Reserve has attracted in the past couple of years has led to a rapid increase in Membership. Although welcome this has placed a considerable strain on those responsible for administration. Much of the load has fallen on Brian Ankers' shoulders, with permit renewals and the constant updating of the Group's database of members taking up much time. With over 600 permit holders, producing regular Newsletters is now a major task. The writing is the easy part, the work starts with folding the Newsletters and putting them into envelopes which then have to be labelled, stuck down and stamped. To date we have posted Newsletters to you, but to make this big task more manageable we would like to know how many of you have access to the internet and would be willing to have the Newsletter sent via email. Potentially, this could reduce our workload considerably, with only those without internet access having Newsletters posted to them. In addition to this many members of the Committee are involved in ongoing management of the Reserve e.g. pathcutting on No. 3 bed, maintenance of the hides, and clearing around the thousand or so trees planted on the new wetland on No. 4 bed. Carrying out these tasks requires much time and commitment from people who are all volunteers. For this reason, we are making a request for help from permit holders, and are looking at ways of spreading the workload.

Included with this Newsletter is a questionnaire which we would like as many of you as possible to complete and return. We are sure that amongst our permit holders there must be many with skills that could be put to good use on the Reserve. Maintenance of hides, for example, needs woodworking skills but most other tasks simply require hard work. Whatever time you could give, however limited, would be most welcome.

Hides on No.2 Bed

Many of you will no doubt have noticed the poor state of the two metal hides on No. 2 bed. This is largely the result of vandalism. We have battled with this for many years, but feel that to continue maintaining these viewing facilities is not a good use of our limited time and resources. We therefore propose to remove these hides in the near future and replace them with viewing screens which should require less maintenance while still providing good views over the bed.

Roughriding Motor Cyclists

Those of you who have visited the Eyes for some years will remember what a problem we once had with motor bikes. During 2001, however, WECG took part in a series of meetings with a local resident's group, the Police and local councillors. This was more than just a 'talking shop' as positive action has resulted. The points of access on to the Eyes were identified and have all been closed off by high metal fencing. This has been expensive, but has led to almost total eradication of the problem. The Eyes is now a quieter- and safer - place both for people and wildlife.

Gift Aid

We should like to thank all who have signed Gift Aid declarations. This has enabled the Group to claim back tax from the Inland Revenue and the money received to date has been a considerable boost to our funds. We would urge any members who have not yet signed a Gift Aid declaration to

do so (you must be a U.K. taxpayer), and return it to Brian Ankers. If you have mislaid the form which would have been sent with your permit Brian will gladly send you a replacement.

Recent Reports

The eagerly awaited return of the Black-necked Grebes took place on 21st March, when three were seen, increasing to an amazing count of 52 in late April. It is believed that this is the highest number ever recorded at one site in the United Kingdom. Subsequently over 20 broods have been seen, but the cold wet weather in June has taken a heavy toll of the young and at the time of writing it seems likely that only relatively few will fledge successfully – a great disappointment after such a marvellous start to the breeding season. Wildfowl have similarly been badly affected, with relatively few duck broods seen. A major factor in this was the incredible storm of 14th June, which produced over an inch of rain in just over an hour. Water levels rose dramatically and many nests must have been washed away. Passerines seem to have been similarly affected, with the ringers reporting far fewer young birds caught than normal. Spring passage produced a least one drake Garganey which stayed for over a week, many Little Gulls and the now annual Mediterranean Gulls. Sadly, they never stay for long. A Marsh Harrier made a brief visit to No. 3 bed on 5th May, when for the second year in succession a Blue Tit was found nesting in an old Giant Hogweed stem!

Other highlights include a Hobby which was ringed on No. 1 bed, with a second bird nearby, a female Redstart with a brood patch trapped also on No. 1 bed, and a very out-of-season Scaup seen by many observers on No. 3 bed during June.

Other wildlife records of interest include over 1000 toads and at least 900 frogs on the pools on No.1 bed, both counts of national importance, and Great Crested Newts were also found. On one of the few warm evenings in spring bats were seen in good numbers along the east bank of No.3 bed, including up to ten Noctules. It has been a very good year for orchids, with a splendid display of Marsh and Spotted on the south side of No. 4 bed and a total of 54 Bee Orchids at four sites on the Reserve. Sadly, butterfly numbers to date have been poor yet again.