

Newsletter 2003 November

Introduction

It has been over a year since the last Newsletter and we apologise for such a long delay. The untimely death in October 2002 of Frank Linley, who so ably produced the Newsletters, and a major change in the circumstances of Brian Martin, who writes them, have been the principal reasons for this lack of communication with our permit holders in recent times. It will, however, be difficult, given the commitments of WECG officers, to produce the quarterly Newsletters, which we had succeeded in doing up to this year. It is now our aim to produce one large, bumper edition each summer, after completion of the Annual Report. Should any important matters relevant to permit holders arise at other times then information will be posted on our web site [www.woolstoneyes.co.uk](<http://www.woolstoneyes.co.uk/>) or on the notice boards in the No.3 bed hides. By these means we hope that communication with you will be as effective as possible.

Questionnaire

Last year over 400 questionnaires were sent to Woolston permit holders asking for email addresses and whether people were available to help with various tasks on the Eyes or would be interested (particularly relevant to those new to the Reserve) in guided walks, an Open Day or indoor meetings with the Committee of WECG. We received 152 replies (38%), of which 129 provided email addresses and we are extremely grateful for this.

Surveys: Thirty-three people expressed an interest in helping with either the monthly wildfowl counts and/or the annual warbler survey. All were quickly followed up with either emails or letters, and 21 responded positively. Many have since helped with these surveys. Some, because of present commitments, are not able to offer immediate help but hope to be able to do so in the future. Unfortunately, a few email addresses taken from the questionnaires were not recognised, so if you are one of those expecting to be contacted in this way but were not, then please write to Brian Martin at the address on your permit or email him at: brianmartin1940@hotmail.com.

Other offers of help: Six people offered administrative assistance and their offers of help will be taken up as soon as suitable tasks have been identified. Twenty people were willing to help with maintenance on the Reserve and already a number have been involved in a positive way with tasks such as coppicing trees on No.3 bed, dismantling the hides on No.2 bed which had been vandalised, and constructing a viewing screen to replace one of these hides. We are extremely grateful for this. Work parties will continue to be organised over the coming winter and anyone interested in helping should contact Roger Benbow, telephone number 01925 601247, or by email to Rogerbenbow@btopenworld.com.

Guided Walks/Open Day: From the responses (94 out of 152) it is clear that many permit holders would like WECG to arrange these activities in the future. With 55 people interested in an Open Day and 78 in Guided Walks around the Reserve the Committee will look seriously at arranging events next summer. Only 17 people were interested in attending indoor meetings with the Committee and so this is not an option which will be pursued at this time.

Other suggestions/concerns: Seventeen permit holders made other suggestions, ranging from a need for more information boards on the Reserve to a wish for more collaboration with other Reserves in the area. Some of the suggestions were unrealistic but others were helpful and have been discussed by the Committee. Some have already been acted upon; for example, contact has been made with the Moore Reserve and this will be developed further.

A few people requested a ringing demonstration but as the ringing teams are present on bed nos.1 and 3 most Saturday mornings throughout the year anyone who is interested should just turn up and make themselves known to the ringers. You will be made welcome.

Infilling of the river around No.3 bed

Earlier this year the Environment Agency (EA) granted the Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCC) a licence to dump dredgings into the river between Woolston Weir and the south side of No.3 bed, and those of you who regularly visit the Eyes will be aware that dredging deposition has already begun. Sad though it is to see the loss of this fine stretch of the river EA granted the licence subject to strict conditions, which include important environmental considerations. This, together with the requirements of the 2001 Countryside and Rights of Way Act, places an obligation on the landowner (MSCC) not only to maintain the present state of the SSSI, but also to enhance it. MSCC, aware of their obligations, have already produced a Management Plan for the SSSI and the practicalities of this will be developed in future discussions between MSCC and English Nature. We are hopeful that this represents a really positive development for the future of the Reserve and heralds a new era of co-operation between MSCC and the nature conservation organisations responsible for Woolston Eyes.

Access to No.2 Bed

The Environment Agency has made it clear that there should be no access through the gate above the weir or the large gate on the Ship Canal track. The Environment Agency is insisting that this be enforced by the Ship Canal Company which is facing the threat of prosecution if people ignore the "No Access" signs. No permit holders must therefore attempt to gain access to No. 2 Bed for any reason. We regret this but the matter is beyond our control

Amphibian Survey on No.1 Bed

It has been known for some time that No.1 bed supports large numbers of Frogs, Toads and Great Crested Newts. Earlier this year English Nature commissioned a consultant Ecologist to carry out a thorough survey of the bed for amphibians. The subsequent results were outstanding. Nearly 1500 female Frogs were present (from spawn counts) and about 650 Toads. The latter is almost certainly an underestimate for over 1100 Toads were found in a survey in 2002. This year, however, was a difficult one for surveying Toads, with very cold nights often restricting their movements to the breeding waters. Approximately 30 Great Crested Newts were found together with eggs in one of the pools.

According to the consultant the exceptional numbers of amphibians found make No.1 bed probably the most important site for amphibians in the whole of Cheshire. How many must there be on the site as a whole? The populations are of such importance that English Nature considers that No.1 bed would qualify for SSSI status for its amphibian population alone! In the near future EN will be

discussing the future management of No.1 bed with the landowner and early the findings of this Report will form an important part of the discussions.

Hides

As already mentioned the two badly vandalised hides on No.2 bed were removed earlier this year. With No.2 bed now largely dry and overgrown, except in the south-west corner, we have erected one small viewing screen and plan another where the hide above the Weir used to be. When dredgings are being deposited on to No.2 bed wildfowl and waders quickly return, so it is always worth viewing the bed to see what state it is in.

Earlier this year an extension was built to the Centre Hide on No.3 bed and new wooden shutters fitted in place of the unwieldy and heavy metal one. The original scaffold hide on No.3 bed has been altered so that the horizontal bar at the top of the ladder which restricted access can now be slid to one side, making entering and leaving much easier. In the future we may well look at erecting a staircase similar to the one on the Frank Linley hide, as we are aware that a vertical ladder is not to everyone's taste!

The hide on the south bank of No.3 bed is not in an ideal position for viewing the waters nearby and this autumn a new viewing facility will be provided, about 100 metres to the east. This, together with a spraying programme (see below) should make the water and the wildfowl much easier to see. We have also been considering erecting a new tower hide between the south bank of No.3 bed and the old tower hide, but more information will appear in the next Newsletter.

Reed Spraying

During the past couple of years both Reed Mace and Phragmites have encroached extensively into areas of open water on No.3 bed, and to maintain the balance a major programme of spraying is planned for the autumn of 2004. In addition, the islands on the Loop of No.4 bed have become covered with vegetation, making them unsuitable for nesting waders such as Lapwing. These, too, will be sprayed. The aim of the work on No.3 bed will be not only to improve viewing but increase aquatic invertebrate populations on which, for example, the Black-necked Grebes rely for food. The Group is hopeful that a grant towards the cost of spraying will be obtained from English Nature.

Bird Feeding Station

Bird feeders have been used on No.3 bed for many years and attract hundreds of birds throughout the year. Few, however, have been sited in places where permit holders can see large numbers of different species at relatively close quarters. With this in mind a feeding station is currently being constructed just to the east of the Frank Linley tower hide. There will be up to six feeders and possibly a bird table, providing good views from the top of the hide. We hope that this will produce more variety to the birdwatching on No.3 bed and who knows what might turn up? Our aim is to have this fully operational in November.

Dogs on the Reserve

Although dogs are not encouraged on the Eyes the Group's policy as far as No.3 bed is concerned has been stated before - namely that any dog taken on to the bed should be kept on a lead at all

times. Elsewhere the situation is more difficult, with many members of the public walking their dogs in various parts of the Reserve. Very few adverse incidents have, as far as we know, occurred over the years, but a recent event which resulted in a permit holder complaining that he had been attacked by another permit holder's dog highlights the importance of dogs with uncertain temperaments being kept under strict control (ideally on a lead) when visiting the Eyes.

Bird – and other – highlights of 2003

Birds: To summarise almost a year of sightings is difficult, but as always there has been much of interest. The year began with yet another Reserve record count of Tufted Duck (858) during very cold weather in January. Most resorted to the River Mersey, providing a spectacular sight. Over 600 Pochard concentrated on No.3 bed during February, with in excess of 1300 Teal. Other significant counts were 297 Gadwall in August and 175 Shoveler in October. Most wildfowl species also had successful breeding seasons, notably the nationally scarce Pochard and Gadwall. Little Grebes had a disappointing breeding season and although Great-crested Grebes hatched many young it is likely that few of them fledged. Of particular concern is that for the second successive year Black-necked Grebes fledged few young – just five. Those of you who visited the Eyes in spring after the grebes returned will have been aware how elusive they were at times, with very few seen during April and May on the favoured No.3 bed. It was later discovered that up to 12 were present on No.2 bed, where at least three pairs bred and raised young, while nine were resident on the Loop of No. 4 bed for much of April and May, before moving on to No. 3. Subsequently seven pairs bred on No. 3 bed, making a total of ten pairs, still the largest population in the United Kingdom. In late June many small young were seen being well fed by adults, but within a few days all but two disappeared on No. 3 bed. With the weather fine and warm and food supply good it seems likely that they fell victim to a predator. Mink are likely candidates, but they have been present for many years without any impact on the Black-necked Grebes as far as we are aware. New arrivals are Terrapins, with many sightings of dinner-plate sized individuals. It is reported that they will take the eggs and young of waterfowl, while Pike may also be a likely candidate. Clearly, this is a situation which must be resolved as soon as possible. English Nature is proposing to arrange a meeting of people with a knowledge of Black-necked Grebes before the next breeding season, to discuss the best course of action at Woolston. In the meantime, we would ask that permit holders keep a particular lookout for terrapins and mink, or any instances of predation, not just of Black-necked Grebes but all waterfowl, and record it in the Log Book on No. 3 bed. This could well help us to build up a picture of what is happening on No. 3 bed.

During spring passage a Golden Oriole was an amazing find on No.3 bed, but it did not stay around, unlike a fine drake Garganey which moved between the river by the footbridge and No.3 bed for several days. There were several sightings of Osprey during the year, while Buzzard numbers just go on increasing, with up to 14 seen in the air together at the east end of No.1 bed. Other bird of prey highlights were at least three Marsh Harriers in August, including two together quartering No.4 bed. A ring-tailed Hen Harrier, now a rare visitor, briefly appeared over No. 3 bed in October, with sightings of Hobby (chasing Swallows and House Martins) and Merlin.

Of the more scarce birds the red listed Grey Partridge bred on No.1 bed (three pairs), with up to 15 seen later in the year, and there were increasing reports of Yellowhammer in the same part of the Reserve. Great Spotted Woodpecker was proved breeding for the first time, whilst one lucky birdwatcher saw a Water Rail with three tiny young on No.4 bed in June.

The recent drought has exposed large areas of mud on No.3 bed, providing excellent conditions for waders. Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit (up to nine), Green Sandpiper, Snipe (over 60) and several reports of Wood Sandpiper have been received. One flock of five Wood Sandpipers was seen while another flew into a ringer's net on No.1 bed, a first record for the Merseyside Ringing Group.

The annual Warbler Census in May was much better supported this year but unfortunately was carried out in poor weather which may well have led to the under-recording of some species. Even so, it was clear that Sedge Warbler numbers were well down (just 104 singing males compared to up to 200 only two years ago) and this was confirmed by subsequent intensive ringing on Nos.1 and 2 beds. In contrast Reed Warblers continue to increase, taking advantage of the spread of Phragmites. On the east side of No.3 bed, for example, David Norman, in the period 5th July to 6th September, trapped a total of 278 Reed Warblers. Chiffchaff, too, continue to increase (a record 44 found in the Warbler Census) while the Willow Warbler decline sadly continues.

The year round feeding programmes on Nos. 1 and 3 beds have attracted large numbers of birds, notably finches, with an amazing total of over 1000 Greenfinches caught by the ringers.

Orchids: After the splendid numbers of Bee Orchids seen in 2002 this year produced just one small colony on the south bank of No.2 bed. If, however, you want to see a display of orchids that never fails to impress then visit the south side of No.4 bed, near to the Sandpit Pond, in June. There, growing in clinker from the Alcan furnaces are hundreds of Marsh Orchids with smaller numbers of Spotted Orchids. It is a sight not to be missed and as it is outside the planned development between the two barriers at the Latchford entrance to the Eyes should remain safe for some years to come.

Mammals: One of the most unexpected sightings at the Eyes this year was of a Roe Deer on the Ship Canal track at 11.30 pm one late May evening. A badger was seen on No.1 bed, the first record of a live individual; a dead one was seen in the Mersey some years ago.

Butterflies and Moths: Not surprisingly, the long warm summer produced excellent sightings of butterflies, with good early numbers of Orange Tip and Peacocks. It has been the best year for Small Tortoiseshells for many years, with over 100 found on No.4 bed by one observer, and there was a notable passage of Painted Ladies in June - up to 15 on No.4 alone. It was very pleasing to receive many reports of Small Copper, which had almost disappeared from the Eyes, while the usual huge emergence of Gatekeepers in July was again

spectacular. A single Small Heath was found on No.1 bed for the second successive year, suggesting that breeding may well have resumed there. A major surprise, however, was the Camberwell Beauty which appeared near a ringer's net on No.3 bed one June morning. Excitement about this rarity was tempered by the subsequent news that it could well have been an escapee.

Regular moth trapping has been carried out for the past two years by Graham Cooke. In 2002 he caught a micro moth (*Phylantia perlucidaris*) which was new to Lancashire and Cheshire. An individual was trapped again this year, suggesting that breeding may well be occurring at the Eyes.

Brian Martin
November 2003