

Newsletter Summer/Autumn 2004

Introduction

The last twelve months have been busy on the Eyes with Roger Benbow and his team carrying out many tasks whilst there have been significant developments regarding the future of the Reserve and the Group's relationship with the landowners. Full details can be found below.

The Woolston Eyes Conservation Group was formally set up in 1979, making 2004 our twenty-fifth anniversary. From relatively modest beginnings the Reserve has grown in status and is now one of the most important SSSIs in the North of England. Along the way there have been setbacks, none more so than the complete draining of No.3 Bed in 1991. Many considered that the Eyes had been irretrievably damaged and the SSSI status hard to sustain given the major habitat loss. However, those of us who have been involved at Woolston since the early days are well aware of the resilience of this large site. Within three years much of the water returned, soon followed by the Black-necked Grebes and wildfowl. Woolston has since become even more important than in pre-drainage days. The commitment of many members of WECG - both past and present - has been crucial in the development of the Reserve, and what has been achieved should one day be celebrated in a written history of the Eyes. I am sure that others could learn from our successes – and mistakes, of which there have been a few! What is clear is that without the loyal support of our permit holders we would have achieved so much less.

Revision of SSSI

Woolston Eyes was designated an SSSI in February 1986. This was for the nationally important wintering numbers of Teal, Shoveler, Pintail and Pochard. Since then, important breeding populations of Black-necked Grebes, Gadwall and Pochard have become established. The site has held up to 40% of the U.K.'s breeding Black-necked Grebes whilst the national populations of Pochard and Gadwall are much rarer than many probably realise, at about 400 and 1000 pairs respectively. The twenty or so pairs of each which breed at Woolston most years therefore represent a significant proportion of the national populations of these ducks. English Nature has recognised this by revising the SSSI designation to include these important breeding assemblages whilst at the same time removing Pintail whose wintering numbers have significantly declined since 1986. As there was no objection to the revision this became law at the end of the statutory consultation period in early September 2004.

This clearly strengthens the level of protection at Woolston and WECG is grateful to English Nature (in particular Mandy North of their Wigan Office) for all the hard work involved in guiding this revision through. It also emphasises the importance of recording, for without the careful monitoring of breeding populations, as well as the continuing monthly wildfowl (WeBS) counts the essential supporting data would simply not exist.

Relations between WECG and the Landowner

The good news continues! After many years of only limited contact with the Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCC) it is pleasing to report that in the past year several very productive meetings have taken place, and it is proposed that at least twice yearly meetings will occur in the future to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern. It is clear that MSCC takes seriously its responsibilities under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and is actively engaged with WECG and English Nature

in the production and implementation of a Management Plan for the Eyes. We are very encouraged by this and will work closely with the Company and its advisers to maximise the wildlife importance of Woolston whilst recognising their need to continue to use the site for dredging deposition.

New Hide on No.3 Bed

Earlier this year, Roger Benbow, Alan Patterson and a number of volunteers constructed a new, raised, hide on the south bank of No.3 Bed. From its elevated position it provides excellent views looking north over the reeds and pools. Given its rather stark outline it is easy to see how one visitor called it the 'gallows' hide, but with plans to add a roof in the near future this is an important addition to the Reserve's viewing facilities.

Open Day

It was clear from the responses to the questionnaire sent to permit holders last year that many were interested in an Open Day and guided walks around the Eyes. We are therefore, planning to organise this next year on 26th June 2005, probably from 10.00 am to 2.00 pm. We hope to have a small marquee where people can meet and see display material, not only about the Eyes but also from other organisations such as English Nature and possibly RSPB and the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society.

This will be followed by guided walks around No.3 Bed and ringing demonstrations. Most Wardens will be present to lead walks and answer your questions. Further details will follow (notably on the WECG website) when the programme has been finalised.

Diverters on Power Lines

Since the construction of the wetland on the loop of No.4 Bed four years ago, there have been many incidents of birds flying into the power lines which cross this water. We know of many ducks and two Mute Swans having been killed and, very seriously also two Black-necked Grebes. These are almost certainly the tip of the iceberg. The Group wrote to MANWEB several years ago alerting them to this problem and a site visit with a MANWEB engineer took place. In spite of promises to fit prominent diverters that the birds could see, nothing was done, though MANWEB did pay for tree coppicing below the lines. Earlier this year, however, major servicing and replacement work took place and the contractors fitted up to 600 diverters following discussions with WECG and English Nature. We hope this will greatly reduce bird casualties in the future.

Number One Bed

Although there is no access for permit holders to this bed some interesting improvements to two pools near the Thelwall Viaduct were carried out earlier this year. The work, funded jointly by the Highways Agency and Peel Holdings, involved the clearance of some trees and vegetation which had completely choked these once productive pools. Common Sandpipers once bred there many years ago. It is hoped that Great Crested Newts, that are known to be present nearby will benefit from the work that has taken place.

Reed Spraying on No.3 Bed

In last year's Newsletter I mentioned that reed spraying was planned on No.3 Bed this autumn. The aim of this is to reverse encroachment of reeds into open water areas while at the same time creating a more broken, sinuous edge to the reeds. This can help to increase the breeding numbers of waterfowl and invertebrate populations. The herbicide used (glyphosate) is only effective when applied in dry weather. Given the high rainfall in recent months it is a miracle that any spraying was

possible, but in a brief dry spell in early September two areas were sprayed in No.3 Bed. We will have to wait until next spring to see how effective this has been. Spraying on the islands on the loop of No.4 Bed has been postponed until next spring.

Annual Report

We hope that those of you who ordered a copy of the Report enjoyed it. Sadly the pictures in it were printed badly and we apologise for this. That the originals were of a high standard can be seen by going to the WECG website (www.woolstoneyes.co.uk). We hope that the problem will not occur again in the future.

Surveys at Woolston

The monthly wildfowl (WeBS) counts and the annual warbler census continue to monitor the populations of a number of bird species, whilst a high level of bird ringing occurs throughout the year. It is our aim to gain as much knowledge as possible of other wildlife at Woolston with surveys of amphibians, fungi and moths having been carried out, while a number of wardens monitor butterflies and plants each year. We know next to nothing however, of many other taxa. It was pleasing, therefore, to be approached by Carl Clee and Tony Parker of Liverpool Museum who plan to visit the Eyes next year. Carl is an expert on bees and hopes to use the Eyes as a site to train others in bee identification. We are hoping too, to have a survey of spiders which have never been studied at Woolston.

Highlights of 2004 - Birds and Other Flora and Fauna

Birds: In February, David Bell, Warrington Council's ecologist flushed a Bittern from Paddington Meadows, just to the west of No.4 Bed and watched it fly on to the loop. Sadly, it was not seen again, but this was an excellent record of this rare visitor to the Eyes. In the same month 663 Pochard were present (most on No.3 Bed), the highest count for four years. Over 2000 Teal were noted at the same time. Two Firecrests wintered on No.3 Bed and their tendency to fly into ringers nets made for some excellent close up views of these fine birds. In early March a Great Grey Shrike was a good find on No.1 Bed. It proved somewhat elusive but was seen by a few lucky wardens on several dates up to the end of that month.

A major surprise in the Spring was a heavy passage of Bramblings with flocks of up to 40 seen. Many were mist netted on No.3 Bed.

The first Black-necked Grebes returned on 16th March and subsequently at least 24 adults summered. It is believed that ten pairs bred on No.3 Bed with another pair hatching young on No.2 Bed. In all, a total of 14 young fledged making 2004 the third best year ever and a welcome improvement upon the two previous poor years. Five of the pairs on No.3 Bed double brooded, but sadly all of the young disappeared within a week of hatching as the weather in July became cold and wet. Two of the young were still present on No.3 Bed in mid-November 2004.

Two Mediterranean Gulls were present in Spring (both second summers) with an adult also seen. As always they soon moved on.

The May Warbler census found a total of 549 singing males across the Reserve. Highlights included record numbers of Reed Warblers (93) and Chiffchaffs (58) with the 136 Whitethroats the best showing for many years. The 90 Willow Warblers was a pleasing improvement after many years of decline. Sedge Warblers (113) are now about half the peak population of the late 1990's.

One of the major surprises of the year was the discovery of four breeding pairs of Kestrels on the Thelwall Viaduct - two pairs to the South of the Canal and two to the North. The motorway contractors initially thought that a pair of Peregrines was breeding but a visit by two members of WECG confirmed two pairs of Kestrels. The contractors later discovered two other Kestrel nests with young. Some of you may have seen the story of the Kestrels on the Viaduct in the Manchester Evening News.

Mammals

The record of a Roe Deer reported in the last Newsletter was followed by evidence of their presence on No.3 Bed and an amazing sighting of one with its head caught in the fencing across the bund below the south bank of No.3 Bed. More sightings of Badgers have been made.

Butterflies

2004 was not the best of years for butterflies with heavy spells of rain from mid-June onwards. Even so, there were good sightings. Excellent numbers of Common Blues were noted on the hot June 7th with 79 counted along the Ship Canal track and at least 12 Painted Ladies on No.4 Bed at the same time. More Small Coppers were seen than for many years and Gatekeeper numbers were as high as ever in July. In Spring Brimstones appeared in good numbers but soon passed through, no doubt searching for their food plant, Alder Buckthorn.

Flora

Orchids once again put on a fine display with Bee Orchids appearing in their usual strongholds on Nos.2 and 3 Beds. A new population, however, was discovered by No.4 Bed with up to 18 flower spikes seen. Undoubtedly, the real find though, was the 28 flower spikes of Broad-leaved Helleborine in the centre of No.3 Bed. How long they have been in the shady area where they were growing is anyone's guess as the flowers are very inconspicuous and may well have been overlooked.

A census of the two main Marsh Orchid strongholds found a total of 2366 flower spikes, with at least 2000 of them by No.4 Bed.

Amphibians

Much less frogspawn than usual was found in the main breeding pool on No.1 Bed, probably the result of much lower water levels there. Toad numbers, in contrast, were high across the Reserve with thousands of young Toads seen in summer on No.3 Bed alone.

Web Site

The WECG web site address was incorrect in last years Newsletter. It is, in fact, www.woolstoneyes.co.uk. The site is regularly updated and we are grateful to Norton Williams for this.

It is hoped that changes to the web site will result in more up to date information, photographs and interest for permit holders.

Brian Martin
November 2004