

NEWSLETTER December 2006

Introduction

The Committee of WECG has again faced a busy year, with a number of significant developments which will impact on the Eyes. The Group was successful in obtaining a large grant from Biffaward through the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and a major proportion of this money will be spent on habitat improvement on No.3 and the Loop of No. 4 bed. Full details of our plans will be outlined below. The other major event was the work on No.1 bed for which Peel Holdings, the landowner, received planning permission. Those of you who receive a copy of our Annual Report will have read details of this in Brian Ankers' Chairman's Report, but a more expanded version of this appears later in this Newsletter, including up-to-date developments.

Reserve Management

During 2006 our Contractor has worked hard carrying out agreed action in the Reserve Management Plan. Further reed spraying on No.3 bed aims to produce a more broken reed edge, while a number of bays have been created to provide loafing areas for the wildfowl. Visitors will have enjoyed the improved viewing that reed clearance has created in front of the centre hide on No.3 bed, and this has been extended to the Sybil Hogg hide on the south bank of that bed. This is a long-term task and it will be several years before we see the full benefits of it. Already, however, some spraying and subsequent clearance of the dead reeds has created an excellent shallow feeding area at the north-west pool of No.3 bed, which wildfowl have found attractive. Waders, too, have been seen in larger numbers than for some years in the cleared areas. A sluice has been fitted to one of the water towers and this should allow for much greater control of water levels, a crucial matter on wetland reserves. Spraying has also continued on the Loop of No.4 bed, not only of reeds but also of Giant Hogweed, which had invaded one of the islands. This, too, is an on-going task. In the coming months our Contractor will be fitting depth markers on No.3 bed and the Loop, so that regular monitoring of water levels can be achieved. That the spraying of the islands on the Loop was successful was evidenced by the successful breeding by a pair of Lapwings and the presence of a pair of Little Ringed Plovers during the breeding season. As always Roger Benbow continues with his management working parties, for which volunteers are always welcome. Some Willows were coppiced recently near the ringers net rides and several permit holders spent an enjoyable – and not over-demanding - morning helping with the work. Further work parties are planned for hide maintenance and in particular replacing the screen at the north-west pool, which is beginning to show its age. If you have some time to spare (you do not need to be an expert!) and would like to help please ring Roger on 01925 601247 or e-mail him at Rogerbenbow@btopenworld.com.

Grant Application

As mentioned above WECG was successful in obtaining a grant from Biffaward of over £40,000, which will enable the Group to carry out major habitat improvements on the Reserve. This will ensure the services of our Contractor until at least the end of 2008. In addition to habitat improvements the money will also be used to purchase a secure storage unit for our equipment. This should ensure that incidents of vandalism, as outlined in the January 2006 Newsletter, are much less likely. Another purpose of the grant is to encourage more visitors to the Eyes to enjoy its very special wildlife. This is the largest grant that WECG has ever obtained and David Bowman in

particular deserves special thanks for his hard work in guiding the application to a successful conclusion.

Developments on No.1 Bed

Over the past two years WECG and English Nature (now Natural England) have been in discussion with Peel Holdings, who own No.1 bed, about their plans to construct a small recycling plant for non-toxic materials (mainly bricks) on the north side of the bed. This will involve some inert waste being left on site and landscaped, with Peel and their contractors creating new habitats, including wetlands, to a design approved by Natural England and WECG. Hides will also be constructed across the newly created areas. The whole project, which has now received planning permission, will take over ten years to complete, but new habitats will be created and released as the work progresses. It has been known for some time that No.1 bed held important numbers of amphibians with, for example, over a thousand toads found there in March 2006 and over a thousand clumps of frogspawn. Clearly mitigation was needed for populations of that size. During the autumn of 2006 the developers set up a programme of trapping amphibians by means of pitfall traps. As expected large numbers of frogs and toads were caught, but the greatest surprise was the amazing numbers of Great Crested Newts. By the time catching ceased several thousand Great Crested Newts had been caught and released in parts of No.1 bed outside the proposed development area. It is clear that this is a population of major national importance and further discussions are taking place between Natural England and the developers to ensure that the needs of this population are met. This includes habitat enhancement and the release of more good quality land for feeding and hibernation. This situation will be monitored closely.

The discovery of this large population of Great Crested Newts only occurred after the applicants had received planning permission. Previous surveys by consultants, and those carried out separately by WECG, had only found very small numbers of Great Cresteds and a population of this size was therefore totally unexpected. What is clear is that No.1 bed must now be managed principally for the benefit of amphibians.

Filming by the BBC

Two separate film crews from the BBC visited Woolston in the spring, and spent many days filming on No.3 bed. We believe that some excellent footage of the Black-necked Grebes has been obtained, including adults feeding young. One of the programmes is part of the series called 'Nature's Calendar', introduced by Chris Packham, who spent a hot April day on No.3 bed with a visiting group from the West Midland Bird Club and a number of WECG Wardens. A new series of 'Nature's Calendar' is currently being screened, but the series including Woolston is to be shown from 19th February 2007. For two weeks from that date half-hour programmes will be on BBC 2 from 6pm to 6.30pm. It is not known at this stage on which evening the Woolston visit will be shown. The March 2007 issue of the BBC 'Homes and Antiques' magazine (out in February 2007) is scheduled to include an article on the series with information and photographs of Woolston. The second programme, which we believe is to be fronted by Alan Titchmarsh, is part of a large-scale series call 'Nature in Britain'. All that we know at this stage is that this is not due to be shown until the autumn of 2007, but as with the Chris Packham film we will give more details on our web site as and when we know them.

Website

During the year Chris Wooff, a permit holder and Deputy Director of Computer Studies at Liverpool University, took over responsibility for our web site, which had become embarrassingly out of date. Chris has already brought about significant improvements to the site, in particular endeavouring to ensure that information is as up-to-date as possible. Clearly, it will take time for him to completely revamp the site and if you have any suggestions for further improvements please contact Chris at c.wooff@liverpool.ac.uk. You can view the Woolston site at www.woolstoneyes.co.uk. Chris has also set up a link to Amazon from our web site. If you purchase books via this link WECG receives a small donation from Amazon on each sale, so please don't forget this when you are buying books!

Plastic Boardwalks and Seats

Those of you who visit Woolston regularly will have seen the sections of plastic boardwalk placed near the approach to the Frank Linley hide and the north-west screen. It was felt necessary to provide safe access for our visitors as those areas become particularly muddy during the winter, and as money allows these will be extended. Two seats, also made from recycled plastic, have been placed along the footpath in the centre of No.3 bed, one on the way to the centre hide, the other by the north meadow. These should be long-lasting and will hopefully provide comfortable resting places.

Wildlife Highlights in 2006

Birds: It is pleasing to report that the Whiskered Terns, Crane and Chimney Swift have all been accepted by the Rarities Committee. Other highlights in 2006 were a Great White Egret, Little Egret and Red Kite. A male Cetti's Warbler was ringed on No.1 bed in August and was still present as recently as a week or two ago. In November a second Cetti's Warbler, this time a female, was netted on No.3 bed. If they both stay what are the possibilities of them finding one another in the spring? Another fascinating record was a group of at least four Bearded Tits found in front of the Frank Linley hide on 9th October by permit holder John Williams. They were still present on 14th October when the ringers caught one, an adult male. This was photographed and its picture is on our web site. These birds appear to have been part of an influx into the country at that time and at least one remained until 19th October.

A Merlin, which flew into net on No.1 bed in the autumn was the first ever ringed at Woolston. The Black-necked Grebes had probably the second-best breeding season ever, with a total of 16 broods, all on No.3 bed. Many young fledged. Wildfowl had a quiet year with wintering numbers well below average, as was the case at many other sites. It is believed that mild weather in eastern Europe kept most of the duck there.

A few Marsh Harriers appeared as usual in the spring, and several Hobbies were also seen. Sightings of 18 Black-tailed Godwits and 10 Greenshanks were also good. In the last two weeks of April two adult Little Gulls became resident on No.3 bed, but just as hopes began to rise that they might stay they departed. A few days later two Sandwich Terns made a brief visit, the first record for almost exactly twenty years.

The annual Warbler Census in May produced record numbers of singing male Reed Warblers (150), Whitethroats (185) and Blackcaps (97), but Sedge Warblers continue to decline at an alarming rate –

just 77 singing males, 48 of which were on the favoured No.4 bed. Willow Warblers showed a pleasing increase to 93 compared with 81 in 2005.

Butterflies: 2006 was an excellent year for many species, and I am indebted to Dave Hackett for providing the information for this summary. No doubt the hot and dry weather in June and July provided ideal conditions, but at times the numbers observed were staggering. Record counts of Gatekeeper (1600), Peacock (200), Painted Lady (22), and Comma (over 60) were the highlights, with other large counts of Small White (150), and Meadow Brown (238). The single most exciting event, however, was the return of the Clouded Yellow after an absence of ten years, with four seen on 22nd August and sightings continuing until 1st November when two were found mating on No.1 bed! There were also good numbers of Red Admirals, and Holly Blues were recorded on at least five occasions. The year also saw the establishment of a Butterfly Transect in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation. This is a set route which is walked on a weekly basis from April to September, and the data used to establish trends over a number of years.

Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies). This was an excellent year, with Trish Tompson and Les Jones continuing their studies on the Eyes. In late July two new species for Woolston were discovered on No.1 bed, a Yellow-winged Darter and a Black-tailed Skimmer. The former is a first-class rarity and was part of a small influx into the country at the time. Emperor Dragonflies are now well established, while Common Darters were present in large numbers, with two pairs seen mating and ovipositing as late as 29th October.

Some of you will have observed a notice that has been placed in the hides advising of dates for the Webs count. This is a wetland bird survey, which means that on the listed dates we count ducks and other wildfowl. Anybody is welcome to help or learn, please contact Brian Martin if you would like to take part. Each session will last no more than three hours

Brian Martin
December 2006