

NEWSLETTER January 2006

Introduction

The past year at the Eyes has been one of further progress in many areas, not least in our relationship with the Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCC), the landowners of Beds two, three and four, and Peel Holdings who own No.1 Bed to the east of the Thelwall Viaduct. Regular meetings have taken place between WECG and representatives of both companies, with Mandy North of English Nature also much involved. The Group is confident that the future of wildlife on the Eyes is now a significant priority for both companies. In 2005, for example, MSCC signed up to a Management Plan for Beds 2, 3 and 4 and we await confirmation that the Company will fund part, if not all, of the annual costs of the Plan. This is extremely encouraging and a far cry from the lack of contact and, at times, uneasy relationship which existed between WECG and the landowners a few years ago. This gives WECG encouragement to pursue its plans for future improvements on the Reserve, some of which will be outlined below.

Open Day

In response to many permit holders' requests this took place on 25th June 2005 and proved to be a great success. The weather could not have been better - if anything it was too hot! – and to our amazement over 400 people turned up, many of whom signed up as new permit holders. There were many good birds to be seen on the guided walks including, of course, the Black-necked Grebes, and the ringing demonstration organised by Keiron Foster and the moth trapping of Graham Cooke proved to be particularly popular. The participation of a number of exhibitors in the mini-marquees by the Ship Canal track was an added bonus and we are grateful to all those who helped to make the day such a success. The event required a great deal of planning and organisation by WECG Wardens Les Jones and David Hackett. That the day went so well is the result of their professionalism and attention to detail.

Given the huge amount of planning of the Open Day the Committee of WECG has decided that this will not be an annual event, but we intend to make it a regular one. If any of you have comments (either good or bad) about the Open Day then please let us know by contacting either Brian Ankers or myself. Our addresses are on your permit.

Visiting Groups

The Eyes Reserve is proving a very popular venue for many bird groups and natural history societies and during 2005 eight booked visits, including a 48-seater coach from the West Midlands Bird Club. The Black-necked Grebes are a major attraction and most visitors are astonished by the large numbers present. One group was amazed to see over 20 adults together on the north-west pool of No.3 bed. Just as exciting is the opportunity to hear Grasshopper Warblers singing (and occasionally seen) as this is now a rare bird in many parts of the country.

These visits clearly have an educational function as well as providing WECG with a small amount of extra income. Feedback from most groups has been very positive about the Reserve and the work that we do to improve the habitat and viewing facilities. However, WECG is aware from the comments of some permit holders that to arrive at the Eyes and find a large group of visitors filling

most of the hides can spoil their day, particularly if they have travelled a long distance. For this reason we plan to provide the dates of group visits on our website (see below) so that permit holders can plan their visits accordingly. Most groups visit to co-incide with the return of the Black-necked Grebes i.e. mid-April to mid-June and nearly always come at weekends. We will do our best to ensure that visiting groups cause as little disruption as possible for our long-standing permit holders and, of course, the wildlife on the Reserve. The majority of groups (except those made up of existing permit holders) are accompanied by WECG Wardens.

At the moment we have visiting groups arranged for the following dates: 18th February, 9th April, 23rd April, 6th May, 7th May, 14th May, 21st May and 18th June.

Reserve Management

Much ongoing work has been carried out by Roger Benbow and his team during the year, including the promised roofing of the new south hide, strengthening the north-west hide and reflooring the Frank Linley hide. Access to the latter two hides can be hampered by mud on the paths during the winter and so boardwalks will be installed in the near future, using recycled plastic material, to overcome the problem.

Work on the Management Plan continues with the reed spraying on No.3 bed reported in the last Newsletter proving successful. Further spraying, using a safe herbicide, was carried out in the early autumn of 2005 on No.3 and it is hoped that this will improve the habitat for the wildfowl and increase invertebrate populations. Our contractor has also worked on the Loop of No.4 bed where the islands had become choked with vegetation. The spraying there should restore the islands to their original state and hopefully attract breeding waders such as Lapwing and Little Ringed Plover.

Roger Benbow organises working parties during the year and these are generally not too physically demanding. Sadly, despite requests for, and offers of, help few permit holders turn up, so it is the same dedicated people who carry out the small-scale management tasks. If you can spare even a few hours a year much more work could be done. Roger can be contacted on 01925 601247 or by e.mail at Rogerbenbow@btopenworld.com.

Filming by the BBC

During the spring of 2006 the BBC is to start work on a new major wildlife series and the producers recently visited the Eyes to discuss filming the Black-necked Grebes. Unlike previous programmes that have included footage of the Black-necks at Woolston the aim is to have a cameraman present on No.3 Bed for several weeks filming the grebes during display and, hopefully, with young. WECG has made it clear that the grebes must not be disturbed at any time and that filming (which will be supervised by WECG) will take place from the hides. We have been assured that the footage of the Black-necks should be the best yet. The programmes will apparently be screened some-time next year. Further details will be provided when available.

Reserve Security

Although incidents of vandalism on the Reserve are relatively few several incursions on to No.3 Bed in the spring of 2005 resulted in minor damage to the south hide, but more serious damage was done to the Group's main grass cutter, which had much of its electrical system ripped out and a fuel

line cut. Further damage occurred in September when the Log Book in the south hide was burnt. The points of access on to No.3 for the vandals were identified and remedial action taken. The Ship Canal Company has been particularly helpful in digging a trench across the north bund by Woolston Weir and allowing it to flood and this has greatly reduced access at this point. If permit holders see anyone acting suspiciously, or who clearly should not be on No.3 Bed please let either Brian Ankers, myself or any other Warden know – the telephone numbers for the two Brians are on your permit.

More worrying were reports that a Sparrowhawk nest on No. 4 Bed had been robbed, possibly for the second year running. Further investigation revealed six inch nails driven into the trunk of the tree where the birds were nesting, to be used as a ladder to reach the young. Discussions have taken place with the Cheshire Police Wildlife Officer, with a view to preventing this happening again in 2006. Not all was gloom and doom, however, for two other pairs of Sparrowhawks on No. 4 Bed both successfully reared young.

Surveys in 2005

In addition to the on-going Wetlands Bird Survey and annual Warbler Census Trish Thompson and Les Jones concentrated on recording Dragonflies and Damselflies (Odonata), whilst Carl Clew and Tony Parker from Liverpool Museum made many visits to the Reserve recording Bees, which have never been studied before at Woolston. The number of species that they found was amazing – and they expect to find more. A full account of all the surveys will be published in the 2005 Annual Report in the late spring, so why not order a copy from Brian Ankers with your permit renewal!

Annual Report

We hope that those of you who bought a Report last year will have been impressed by the greatly improved quality of the photographs which were included. We used a new company for the printing and they produced the Report to a high standard which we hope to maintain in the future.

Web Site

A major disappointment in recent months has been the Group's failure - in spite of promises - to ensure that our website www.woolstoneyes.co.uk was fully operational and updated regularly. There are good reasons for this, in particular a major computer crash for the person now responsible for the site as well as other problems over which we had no control. Please bear with us as we are so close to having a really excellent website packed with up-to-date information. We hope that it will be fully operational soon.

Lost Money

During the late summer of last year an amount of money was found on No.3 Bed. If any permit holder lost this then please contact Brian Martin on 01925 264251. You will obviously be asked for details of the amount and the denomination of the notes.

Highlights of 2005

Birds: Two new species were added to the Reserve's ever-growing list, namely a Crane flying east over No.3 Bed and, remarkably, a Chimney Swift seen briefly over No.1 Bed in early November, part

of a widespread influx into the U.K. at that time. One of our Wardens, Alan Patterson, was privileged to see four Whiskered Terns arrive on No. 3 Bed on 19th May and stay for several hours. Only one other person saw these birds at Woolston before they left and turned up at Ashton's Flash, Northwich, where they were watched by several hundred observers. Whiskered Terns have been recorded once before at Woolston, in 1983, but this was one of the largest flocks of this marsh tern ever seen in this country.

The Black-necked Grebes had a successful breeding season, with a maximum of 34 adults present. At least ten pairs bred on No.3 Bed, and raised water levels on No.2 Bed attracted four or five pairs there. The latter produced at least ten young, including a very early brood on 1st May, but falling water levels in hot weather in June and early July led to all of the water drying up. It is believed that four of the young may have fledged there.

Wildfowl had an average breeding season, but Ruddy Duck broods were few, no doubt the result of the on-going cull. Over 660 Pochard on No.3 Bed in February were a fine sight as was the count of 317 Shoveler in September, the largest gathering for many years.

Birds of prey rarely disappoint at Woolston and this year was no exception. A Rough-legged Buzzard was over No.1 Bed in early March and there was a good passage of Marsh Harriers in the spring. Osprey, Hobby and Peregrine were also reported. Two Barn Owls on No.1 Bed were very pleasing and reflect the up-turn in the fortunes of this fine Owl.

The annual Warbler Census in May produced record numbers of singing Reed Warblers (121) and Blackcap (65), and near record numbers of Whitethroats (157). Sedge Warbler numbers remain low, however, and the 109 found is half the number that used to be at Woolston only a few years ago. Remarkably, 86 of all the Sedge Warblers were found on No.4 Bed, where the habitat has changed least.

Butterflies: 2005 was a mixed year for butterflies at Woolston, with record numbers of Gatekeepers and Speckled Woods, but only one record of a Painted Lady. There was a first sighting of a Holly Blue since 2002, whilst the Reserve had the earliest record in Cheshire for Orange Tip and an exceptionally late Red Admiral near Woolston Weir on 19th December!

Flora: Orchids again provided a fine show, with the Sandpit Pond area of No.4 Bed the best place to see them en masse. In addition to the large display of Marsh Orchids at least 22 spikes of Bee Orchids appeared in the same area in June and in excess of 20 flower spikes of Broad-leaved Helleborine reappeared where they had been discovered in 2004.

Dragonflies: The systematic recording of dragonflies and damselflies by Trish Thompson and Les Jones produced several sightings of Emperor Dragonflies on Nos.1 and 4 Beds, with both Ruddy and Black Darter found on No.1 Bed. Good numbers of the more common dragonflies were seen as well as Banded, Emerald and Large Red Damselflies.

Brian Martin
January 2006