

## **NEWSLETTER November 2007**

### **Introduction**

2007 has been a year with much activity on the Eyes. The two major developments which will have been apparent to permit holders are the planting of the north meadow area on No.3 bed with a winter seed crop and the construction of a new tower hide in the north-east corner of the same bed. We have continued to monitor the progress of work on No.1 bed and further implement the Management Plan with our Contractor. Many visiting groups came to the Reserve during the year and television coverage (notably Chris Packham's 'Nature's Calendar') resulted in much interest in the Eyes and a significant increase in the number of permit holders.

### **Management Plan**

During the year our Contractor, Phil Pearce and his team, has continued to work hard on a programme which currently runs until the end of 2008. The spraying of bays on No.3 bed has already had positive results, with three pairs of Lapwing breeding successfully on the areas of bare earth created near the water's edge, the first breeding Lapwing on the bed in living memory. Similar work on the Loop of No.4 bed also attracted breeding Lapwing. Not surprisingly, passage waders have also been seen on the bays in increased numbers, notably Dunlin, Snipe, Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Greenshank. Wildfowl have also benefitted from this work, which has provided loafing areas: particularly important when the birds are moulting.

The depth markers, mentioned in the last Newsletter, were installed on No.3 bed and the Loop of No.4 bed and have proved very helpful in monitoring the water levels. This was very important during deluges in June and July and led to the rapid opening of the sluices to maintain as stable a water level as possible. The Ship Canal Company generously funded a programme of spraying Giant Hogweed on No.3 bed and it is our aim to eradicate this on that bed at least. On the other beds, however, this pernicious weed is virtually out of control, apart from the Loop of No. 4 bed where again WECG is working hard to remove it.

During the year we constructed a large storage unit on No.3 bed where all our equipment, including a new grass cutter/tractor and attachments, (purchased from the Biffaward Grant which we received) is housed. The new cutter has proved invaluable, making so much of the necessary hard physical work much easier for the ageing Wardens!

We were helped considerably during the summer months by Amanda Jeffers, a student from John Moores University, and her partner Phil Jones, who volunteered to carry out a number of important management tasks, including treating the hides with preservative. Phil also constructed the small decking step to enable youngsters and smaller permit holders to see through the slits in the hide on the south bank of No.3 bed. We welcome such help and if you have some time, however limited, to carry out similar management tasks please contact Brian Ankers.

During 2008 our Contractor will be introducing various aquatic plants on the Loop of No.4 bed with the aim of providing additional sources of food for wildfowl. Spraying of reeds and coppicing of woodland will also continue in line with the Management Plan.

3. Hides

In October a new tower hide was constructed in the north-east corner of No.3 bed. This will allow viewing of pools which cannot be seen from any of the other hides. We know that Black-necked Grebes almost certainly breed there and also take their broods into this sheltered area from other parts of the bed. Until now we have had little knowledge of what was happening there, but the new hide will hopefully change all that. Unfortunately, because the area is sensitive to disturbance and access to the hide can only be made through a gate on the bund by Woolston Weir with a padlock which the Ship Canal Company has only given a few WECG Wardens permission to use, permit holders will not, at this stage, be allowed to use this hide. This situation will, however, be kept under review.

On a more positive note, the old tower hide in the centre of No.3 bed (the one with a 'No Access' sign near it), will shortly have a staircase fitted to it – similar to the one on the Frank Linley hide – replacing the vertical ladder. This will then be fully open and available for permit holders to use; it should also be a lot safer. We have obtained quotes from a Contractor to replace the centre, camouflaged hide with a large, two-tier construction. This will cost a great deal of money, for which we will need to seek grant aid. We will keep you informed of our progress.

### **Filming by the BBC**

Many of you will have seen 'Nature's Calendar' which was screened in February. Chris Packham's enthusiasm for the Eyes came through on the programme and I know that he has plans to visit the site again in a private capacity, if time allows. As mentioned earlier, the response from the general public was amazing, with Brian Ankers inundated with requests for permits from as far away as Scotland and East Sussex.

Sadly, the BBC recently informed us that the extensive footage of the Black-necked Grebes taken for the series, 'Nature in Britain', which is currently being shown, will not be used. It seems that this was an editorial decision based on the large amount of quality material that had been filmed across the country. The BBC Natural History Unit has, however, kindly sent us a tape of what was filmed for the WECG archive.

### **Wild Bird Seed Crops**

One of the major problems facing species of conservation concern such as Linnets and Reed Buntings is a lack of food during the crucial winter months. To try and help at the Eyes an area adjacent to the north meadow on No.3 bed was prepared and sown with seed in late spring. This consisted mainly of Sunflower, Linseed and Quinoa. As many of you will have seen the area was soon covered by a yellow mass of sunflower heads and other, less obvious, plants. These have now set seed and as we hoped the birds have moved in. As I write this in early November already flock of up to 100 Greenfinches, 20 Reed Buntings and 40 Chaffinches have been attracted to the seed, which is very encouraging. A few Bramblings have also been seen. A second area has been prepared nearby and this will be rotavated and seeded next year. Clearly another area of interest on your visit to No.3 bed.

### **Predator Control**

Mink have been present on the Eyes for many years and although we have no hard evidence to indicate that they predate significant numbers of waterfowl there have been regular observations of

them taking both young and adult Black-headed Gulls and wildfowl, particularly in the breeding season. A major concern is the possible impact on the Black-necked Grebe colony. As a result of increased sightings of Mink on the river and on No.3 bed the Group decided to introduce a programme of trapping and this commenced in March 2007. Since then 15 Mink have been caught, all on the river below No. 3 bed. This is an excellent total given the low level of trapping that has taken place. Clearly, as Mink move along river systems for territories and mates it is unrealistic to believe that they can be completely eradicated at the Eyes. Hopefully, however, numbers can be reduced, and the trapping programme is planned to continue in 2008.

### **Motor Bike Nuisance**

In recent years rough-riding motor bikers have become a major problem, particularly on Nos. 1 and 2 beds. It was discovered that they were gaining access through the Biffa Waste site just to the east of the Eyes. To do this major vandalism was occurring, including smashing down fences and using angle grinders to remove gates! Many thousands of pounds worth of damage was done and despite quick repairs and re-instatement of gates etc. it was not long before the damage was repeated. Powerful bikes were involved and once on the Reserve there was a lot of destruction of sensitive habitats. This could not be allowed to continue and a joint approach was made to Cheshire Police by Biffa, WECG and the Manchester Ship Canal Company. Regular meetings have taken place, resulting in the Police implementing a robust Action Plan. Aerial surveillance and regular patrols at known peak times of activity have resulted in many motor cyclists being apprehended and served with what is called a Section 59 Notice. This is an official warning that if the rider is found on the land again the bike will be confiscated and crushed. So far the desired effect seems to have been achieved with no damage or incursions being reported in the past two months. We are grateful to the Police team based at Risley for their commitment and hard work.

We know that some low-level motor-bike activity also occurs at the Latchford end of the Reserve – mainly at weekends. If you do see any motor-bikes on the Ship Canal track or No. 4 bed we should appreciate it if you would make a note of the number (if there is a number plate!) and pass it on, with the time and date, to either Brian Ankers, Brian Martin or any of the Wardens.

### **8. Annual Report**

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The Group has produced an Annual Report since 1980. This is a quality document detailing the wildlife sightings throughout the year, a comprehensive Ringing Report and many other articles relevant to the Eyes. Increasingly we have included photographs, the standard of which improves from year to year. We are proud of the Report, which is up to 80 pages long most years. Less than a quarter of permit holders order copies of the Annual Report and we wonder whether they are put off by the title 'Annual Report', which conjures up an image of boring balance sheets, election of officers and so on.

If you have never seen a copy then why not write to Brian Ankers – who still has some of the 2006 edition left for sale at a price of £6 each. I am sure you will not be disappointed.

### **9. Web Site**

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A reminder that the WECG's web site can be accessed at [www.woolstoneyes.co.uk](http://www.woolstoneyes.co.uk). We endeavour to keep it as up-to-date as possible but this is dependent on regular information being submitted to Chris Wooff, who manages the site. Please note that in the New Year details will be posted of the dates in April, May and June when visiting groups will be on the Reserve. Some will have upwards of 40 people so clearly this could create difficulties for permit holders, who may wish to avoid those busy days.

### **Wildlife Highlights in 2007**

**Birds:** The Cetti's Warbler present on No.1 bed in late 2006 remained well into 2007 and it was thought that a second male could also have been present. Another male was heard calling on No.3 bed on many dates in October and was subsequently ringed. Bearded Tits have been heard intermittently and with several present in early spring special nest boxes were donated to WECG by Leighton Moss RSPB Reserve. These were duly put in position in phragmites beds on No.3 bed and with at least one bird calling nearby as a box was installed hopes were high. Unfortunately, no further reports were received during the breeding season, but at least six were heard calling on one date in October. These are encouraging signs that maybe breeding may take place in the near future. A Yellow-browed Warbler flew into a ringer's net on No.1 bed, also in October.

The appalling weather in June and July led to one of the worst breeding seasons in many years for wildfowl, with only Mallard doing reasonably well before the summer deluges. The Black-necked Grebes, however, bred surprisingly well given the conditions, although three broods were lost on the very wet 25th June. In all, about 14 or 15 pairs bred and many young were fledged. In contrast, the Great Crested Grebes reared no young on No.3 bed, and Little Grebes fared little better.

Birds of prey did not disappoint, with Buzzard proved breeding for the first time, though the nest failed. At least four, possibly five, pairs of Sparrowhawks successfully raised young, while Peregrines continue to be seen regularly on - or near - the Thelwall Viaduct, raising hopes of possible future breeding. Marsh Harriers were seen as usual on passage, and there were regular reports of Hobbies, notably in the autumn when they are attracted to the Swallow roosts on Nos.1 and 3 beds. On one occasion two flew into a ringer's net only to bounce straight back out! Excitingly, Barn Owls were reported on No.1 bed, probably from a farm not too far away where successful breeding is known to have taken place.

Two adult Mediterranean Gulls were seen intermittently amongst the breeding Black-headed Gulls, but they failed to stay and there was a good passage of Little Gulls in the spring.

The annual Warbler Census was carried out in indifferent weather and with fewer field workers than necessary to cover this large site. As a result the numbers of singing males recorded could well have been an underestimate. The most numerous species was Reed Warbler (126), followed closely by Whitethroat (117) and Willow Warbler (77). Sedge Warblers continue their alarming decline at the Eyes, with only 49 singing males found compared to 77 in 2006 and the peak of 256 in 1999. The importance of the Eyes for passage warblers (particularly in the autumn) is as great as ever and on one morning recently over 90 Blackcaps were caught by the ringers in the middle of No.3 bed, including 60 that were 'new,' i.e. had not previously been ringed.

**Butterflies:** With such a poor midsummer it is not surprising that the numbers of Gatekeepers and Meadow Browns were well below average, but in the fine warm April excellent numbers of Peacocks

(up to 80) and Orange Tips were recorded. Other highlights included the earliest ever Common Blue on 29th April, a day maximum of 14 Small Coppers and up to 60 Speckled Woods, while reports of Holly Blue continue to increase. As the weather began to improve up to 125 Peacocks were found on one day in late July across the Reserve.

The unusually balmy weather in early November produced late records of Peacock, Small Copper and Red Admiral, (seen on No.3 bed on the 6th).

**Dragonflies and Damselflies:** Despite the poor weather reasonable numbers of dragonflies were seen on the Reserve, though many fewer than in the excellent year of 2006. Highlights included good numbers of Brown Hawkers when the sun finally began to shine and the discovery of a good population of Banded Demoiselle damselflies on the Mersey by Woolston Weir.

**Bats:** The Eyes has always attracted good numbers of bats and on the warm evening of 11th April at least 20 Noctules were feeding low over the centre of No.3 bed near the John Morgan Hide.

On 22nd June the Lancashire Bat Group carried out a survey on No.3 bed. Unfortunately conditions were far from ideal, but Noctules, Soprano Pipistrelles, Common Pipistrelles and Daubenten's were recorded, although none in high numbers. Hopefully the survey will be repeated in better weather conditions so that more knowledge can be gained of these little-studied mammals at Woolston.

11. E-mail addresses

A significant number of Newsletters are e-mailed to permit holders. It is important therefore that you advise us of any change in your e-mail address so that our records can be kept up to date.

**Brian Martin**

**November 2007**