

NEWSLETTER November 2008

Introduction

This has been another successful year for the Eyes, with an increase in the number of visiting groups and a significant rise in the number of permit holders to over 900. Meeting the needs of so many people is a major challenge for WECG. You will see below how the Group is rising to the challenge by providing improved viewing facilities and, of course, sourcing funding to pay for this. This requires many hours of work by the Committee, and although much of the heavy physical work is now carried out by Contractors there are times when materials need to be taken on to No.3 bed – notably for the construction of hides – and we are always on the look-out for volunteers to help with tasks on the Reserve throughout the year. If you have even just a few hours to spare then please contact Brian Ankers (his telephone number is on your permit).

As you know, the long-term ringing of birds on the Eyes provides much information on their status, particularly of passerines. The ringing programme began in August 1980, and in early October 2008 a notable milestone was reached when the 100,000th bird – a Moorhen - was ringed. This is a major achievement and is testament to the dedication and hard work of all those who have been involved with ringing at Woolston over the past 28 years.

Management

This has continued throughout the year, as always mainly on No.3 bed and the Loop of No.4 bed. Our contractor and his team do the bulk of the work, the most obvious being the opening up of a number of bays which have provided habitats to attract waders and (notably in front of the Frank Linley hide) Water Rails. Less obvious work is the continuing spraying of reeds on both Nos.3 and 4 beds to maintain the balance between reeds and open water, while the spraying out of Giant Hogweed on both No.3 bed and the Loop of No. 4 bed is an annual task.

A major piece of work was the planting of many aquatic plants on the Loop, with the aim of providing important food sources for wildfowl. It may take a few years before we see the full benefit of this but we are hopeful that wildfowl numbers will increase once the plants are established.

During the spring Mark Champion, the Warden of the Wigan Flashes Reserve, shared with us his considerable knowledge of the habitat requirements of Willow Tits. Woolston still holds good numbers of this scarce bird and as a result of Mark's advice our Management Plan has been amended to ensure that the habitat that they prefer is maintained on the Reserve.

Hides

In the last Newsletter I reported that a new scaffold hide had been erected in the north-east corner of No.3 bed, specifically to monitor Black-necked Grebe broods. In the spring and early summer it proved invaluable, with several broods located in areas previously not visible from any of the existing hides. Sadly, in late June this hide was vandalised and although repairs were carried out the vandals returned a week or so later and completely wrecked the tower, throwing parts of it down the bank of the bed and scaffolding poles and steps down a sixty-foot deep water tower. The Police visited the site on a number of occasions, but as far as is known no arrests were made. This seems to

have been part of a spate of vandalism in the area as Woolston Weir was also badly damaged at about the same time. It was soon discovered where those responsible had gained access and work was carried out to make it much more difficult to get on to No.3 bed at that point.

No final decision has been made as to whether the hide will be rebuilt, although the Environment Agency has kindly indicated that it has allocated funds to WECG for a new hide to replace the old one and the Group is currently considering the logistics of this.

Those visiting No.3 bed will have seen the extension to the old scaffold hide and the replacement of the vertical ladder by a much safer staircase. The contractors did an excellent job and this hide is already proving extremely popular. In last year's Newsletter I mentioned that the Group had applied for funding to replace the camouflaged centre hide. We have just heard that our application has been successful and with any luck the construction of a new two-tier hide may well begin before too long.

Visting Groups and Film Crews

During the spring and summer eleven groups visited the Eyes, totalling nearly 400 people. In addition, many of you will have seen the 'Countryfile' programme which featured the Ship Canal. The presenter John Craven and his team spent several hours filming on No.3 bed and obtained some fine footage of the Black-necked Grebes, including display. John was very complimentary about the Reserve and after seeing so many Black-necked Grebes remarked "I thought you said these birds are rare. Here they seem to be as common as muck"!

Mink

The trapping programme has continued on the river and is proving very successful. In total 26 Mink have been caught since March 2007 and hopefully this will have had some impact on predation levels of the wetland birds, and also of the Water Voles that used to be common on the river. Only time will tell, but we may gain some information about Water Vole numbers next spring when Richard Gardner, who is the Cheshire Wildlife Trust's Water Vole Project Officer, is planning to look for signs of the presence of voles, particularly on No.3 bed.

Gift Aid

We are extremely grateful that so many of you Gift Aid your annual subscription, as this has considerable financial benefit for WECG. If you are a tax payer and have not yet completed a Gift Aid form then please contact Brian Ankers, who will be glad to send one to you. Although the Chancellor announced a reduction of the basic rate of income tax from 22 to 20 per cent we understand that for the next two years charities will benefit at a rate of 25p in the pound before it falls to 20p. Any help from you will be much appreciated.

New Patron

We are very pleased to announce that the well-known wildlife presenter Chris Packham has kindly agreed to become the Patron of WECG. Chris, as many of you will know, has visited the Eyes, and regards it as one of his favourite places.

Open Day

Those of you who attended our last Open Day in 2006 will know what a success it was. We are planning a repeat event on 28th June 2009, and we hope to meet many of you on that day. There will be guided tours of the Reserve and demonstrations will include bird ringing and moth trapping. We hope that our new Patron, Chris Packham, will be present, as well as the well-known wildlife artist Colin Woolf. A number of other groups should have stands in the marquees and gazebos on the site by the Ship Canal, and we are hoping for a repeat of the glorious weather which helped to make the event so successful in 2006.

Found

A long cylindrical eye piece cover (probably from a telescope) was found on No.3 bed several months ago. Despite notices on the web site and in the hides no one, as yet, has claimed it. If it is yours please contact Brian Martin (telephone number on your permit).

Wildlife highlights in 2008

Birds. A Red Kite was seen over No.3 bed on 1st April, when 4 Whimbrel flew along the Ship Canal. At this time up to 60 Chiffchaffs were singing across the Reserve, and the first Willow Warbler was heard on 3rd April. Highlights of the Warbler Census in May were the first increase in Sedge Warbler numbers for many years (55 singing males), although this was still well down on the numbers of only a few years ago. Up to 150 Reed Warblers were present, 131 Whitethroats, 64 Blackcaps and 71 Willow Warblers.

Apart from the Red Kite there was the usual passage of Marsh Harriers in the spring, and regular sightings of Hobbies.

Several Mediterranean Gulls were present in the spring, but as usual there was no proof of breeding. Five Black Terns on No.3 bed on 8th May were the first for several years, and a Sandwich Tern was a rare visitor in early May.

For the second successive year bad weather affected the breeding success of several wildfowl species, but the Black-necked Grebes did well, with at least 14 pairs fledging over 20 young. A pair of Greylag Geese bred on No.3 bed, the first proved breeding, and a Quail was calling on No.1 bed on 9th/10th May.

Pride of place for sightings, however, must go to the lucky observer who, on the same late August morning saw an Osprey attempting to fish a pool on No.1 bed, followed by a Hobby feeding a juvenile and a pair of Peregrines, one of which took a Moorhen off a pond!

Butterflies. Despite the poor summer it was generally a good year for butterflies at the Eyes, with peak counts of 60 Common Blues and 100 Speckled Woods. Good numbers of Gatekeepers and Meadow Browns were also seen in July, although fewer than in the record year of 2006. Sightings of Holly Blue butterflies continue to increase and there was a good showing of Small Coppers. On the debit side it has been a disastrous year for Small Tortoiseshells, and below-average numbers of Peacocks have been seen.

Odonata. Sightings were limited during the wet summer, but improved during August and September, with one newly-created pool on No.1 bed holding nine species of dragonfly and damselfly. Brown Hawkers were almost always present on No.3 bed to greet visitors as they walked along the path on the south bank, where a few Migrant Hawkers were also seen.

Brian Martin