

NEWSLETTER Autumn 2009

Introduction

This year has been busier than ever at the Eyes, with two new hides erected and much on-going habitat management by our Contractor and the Wardens. Although for the first time in many years no visits have been paid to the Reserve by the media many RSPB and other wildlife groups came to Woolston from as far away as southern Scotland and the south Midlands. Their visits were concentrated in the spring months - no doubt the Black-necked Grebes being a significant attraction – but some did visit at other times of the years. One group from Leicestershire even came to support our Open Day in June. We are already fully booked for April 2010.

New Hides on No.3 bed

Thanks to a very generous donation from Warrington Rotary Club the Group was able to erect a new scaffold hide in February. This overlooks the north-west pool and has proved very popular, particularly with photographers. It replaces the wooden platform which had given sterling service for over 20 years, but was beginning to show its age. The new hide is one of the best places for seeing Water Rails, with many sightings of adults and young in the spring and early summer. The building of this hide was followed in August by WECG's most ambitious project to date – the construction of a wooden elevated hide to replace the old metal John Morgan Hide. Funding for this was obtained from Biffaward through the Landfill Community Fund scheme, and it was built by the well-known hide constructors Gilliard Brothers, who coped well with the logistical problems of getting huge amounts of material from the Ship Canal track to the centre of No.3 bed. This hide, too, has been very well received and provides superb views across the wetland. Many thanks are due to Eyes Wardens David Bowman and Roy Taylor for their hard work in completing demanding application forms and supervising the project through to completion.

The five hides and one platform now provide excellent viewing on No.3 bed and it is the intention of the Group to concentrate on habitat management during the next twelve months.

Management

WECG's work on the Eyes is based on an active Management Plan, with work concentrated mainly on No.3 bed and the Loop of No.4 bed. The Plan is reviewed annually with our Contractor. Permit holders who visit regularly will be aware of the two meadow areas for wildflowers and the winter seed crops that have been planted to provide food for Species of Conservation Concern such as Reed Bunting and Linnet. For some time we have been concerned about the state of the extensive phragmites reed beds on No.3 bed, on which only limited management work has been carried out. In September our contractor, Phil Pearce, attended a course on reed bed management run by the RSPB at Leighton Moss, as a result of which a programme of cutting and removing blocks of old phragmites has been built into future management. This should counter the inevitable build-up of reed detritus and encourage new healthy reed growth. Sinuous channels will also be cut through the phragmites to provide a greater variety of wetland habitat. Recent visitors will have seen the start of this in front of the newly renovated scaffold hide. Work has also been carried out this year to remove Himalayan Balsam, Giant Hogweed and the very extensive Goose Grass, which smothers most other vegetation. Regular mowing seems to be effective in controlling the Goose Grass, and in the next few years we hope to reduce it greatly in the centre of No.3 bed. Coppicing is an annual task which encourages new leaf growth, although care is taken to maintain habitat for Woolston's

important Willow Tit population, which prefers old decaying timber in which to excavate nest holes. During the year many boardwalks have been constructed by Wardens and placed in wet approaches to hides and, in recent weeks, along a part of the south bank track which has become very muddy in the November downpours.

Enviroloo

The lack of a toilet at Woolston has been commented upon for several years and we have now addressed this by installing an Enviroloo which requires only minimal maintenance. This was purchased with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, to whom WECG is extremely grateful.

Bird feeders

The feeders near the Frank Linley Hide are once again fully operational and attracting a wide variety of species. It is planned to provide additional feeders adjacent to the new hide, and hopefully these will be in place by the New Year.

Open Day

This took place on 28th June 2009 in very warm weather, and attracted over 500 visitors. Many new permit holders were recruited, and everyone enjoyed the numerous exhibitors as well as guided walks, the chance to see birds in the hand courtesy of the ringing team and a fascinating selection of moths caught by Graham Cooke and a colleague. We are grateful to all who contributed to making the day such a success, and in particular to David Hackett and Les Jones for their usual meticulous planning.

Nuisance motorcyclists

During the year Warrington Police have been very active in responding to incidents and on two occasions launched special operations as a result of which a number of off-road bikes were seized and crushed. This has greatly reduced the problem and the proposed erection by the Ship Canal Company of specially designed kissing gates, which are Disabled Act compliant, at the first barrier on Thelwall Lane and at Woolston Weir should reduce the problem even further.

Volunteers

Although many hours of work are put in on the Eyes by Wardens and our Contractor and his team there is still a need for extra help from permit holders who can spare some time. We appreciate that most of you have busy lives with many commitments both to work and family, but it would be most helpful if we could call on people to help with various tasks that arise from time to time: for example topping up feeders or carrying materials on to No.3 bed. Earlier in the year we had a delivery of a large amount of recycled plastic planks to make boardwalks. Getting it on to No.3 bed took a long time, but would have been much quicker with several extra pairs of hands. If you feel you can spare some time to help then please speak to Brian Ankers, whose contact details are on your permit.

Wildlife highlights of the year

Birds One of the most unexpected records for a long time was the young female Serin found in a ringer's net on No.3 bed in late January. Although an unusual time of year the bird was considered to be a wild individual. A first record for Woolston and only the ninth or tenth Cheshire record. It is understood that it was only the 26th Serin to be ringed in Britain since the ringing scheme began 100 years ago! Black-necked Grebes had a disappointing year. A maximum of 26 was present in the spring but only six pairs bred, less than half the usual total. It seems, however, that they failed to

breed at other sites, so perhaps it was just a strange year. In contrast, Great Crested Grebes did well, with seven pairs raising young on No.3 bed alone. Up to three Little Egrets favoured the Loop of No.4 bed in the early autumn. Wildfowl had a mixed year, with near record numbers of Gadwall (450) in September, and up to 250 Shoveler on autumn passage. Gadwall also bred well, but later breeders such as Pochard and Tufted Duck were affected by the third successive wet summer, and brood numbers were well below average. Water Rails are present in good numbers on No.3 bed, with at least four broods seen. A variety of waders was reported, including Dunlin, Jack Snipe, Green Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit and two sightings of Wood Sandpiper. There were at least two reports of Barn Owl and a Long-eared Owl was seen on No.1 bed. On the debit side Cuckoos were extremely scarce, with only about half-a-dozen reports in the spring – a reflection of their rapid decline in recent years. A spectacular passage of Swifts in late July and early August involved many hundreds of birds. Woolston has always been one of the best sites for hearing Grasshopper Warblers and in late April at least seven were reeling on No.4 bed alone. Ringing proved how important the Eyes is for warblers – by October over 400 Reed Warblers had been caught, in excess of 300 Blackcaps as well as over 100 Bullfinches. Three juvenile Cetti's Warblers caught in successive weekends in the autumn were part of an influx into the north-west of England at that time, and three very young Siskins ringed on No.1 bed in July was a surprise. The Spotted Flycatcher, also trapped on No.1 bed, was the first ringed at Woolston for eight years.

Butterflies

Despite the poor summer weather some spectacular numbers were recorded during warm spells, with peak counts of 1350 Gatekeepers, 335 Meadow Browns, over 500 Peacocks, 137 Common Blues, 100 Speckled Woods and many hundreds of Whites. The influx of Painted Ladies, which was widely reported across the country, brought a maximum of 46 to Woolston. Up to ten Small Coppers were seen, but sadly no Holly Blues, and Small Tortoiseshells remain very scarce. It is understood that some of the large totals above were the highest recorded at any one site in Cheshire.

SPECIAL EVENT! SPECIAL EVENT! SPECIAL EVENT! SPECIAL EVENT!

As we reported last year, Chris Packham of 'Springwatch' and 'Autumnwatch' fame, is WECG's Patron. Chris has kindly offered to give an illustrated talk at the Parr Hall, Warrington, on Thursday, 25th February 2010, commencing at 8 p.m. The title of the talk is "Postcards from Paradise". Given Chris' popularity there is likely to be a demand for tickets and WECG is offering priority booking to permit holders until the end of December. After this the event will be opened up to members of other wildlife groups and members of the public. Tickets, which cost £10, can be obtained from our Treasurer, Douglas Buchanan, 10 Rosemoor Gardens, Appleton, Warrington, WA4 5RG, from Wardens or from the Parr Hall Box Office, Palmyra Square South, Warrington, WA1 1BL. Cheques to Douglas should be made payable to 'WECG'. Parking is available in either local streets or the Golden Square Car Park, Legh Street, where it is important to park in the Red Zone only. The Car Park closes at 11.30p.m.

Please support this important event!

Brian Martin
November 2009