

## **NEWSLETTER: DECEMBER 2010**

### **Introduction**

We indicated in the last Newsletter that the priorities for WECG in 2010 would be habitat enhancement and this has certainly been the case, as you will see below. Our Patron, Chris Packham, attracted over 450 people to his excellent talk in February and once again visiting groups came to the Eyes from many parts of the country, mostly in the spring and early summer. The demand was so high that we were unable to accommodate a couple of societies. The message is to book early if you have a particular date in mind.

The current number of permit holders is over a thousand, but the Eyes remains a largely undisturbed site, with many people visiting only once or twice a year, notably in the spring to see the Black-necked Grebes.

### **Hides**

No new hides have been constructed this year, but the two built in 2009 have been universally well received. The large wooden hide in the centre of No.3 bed has proved extremely popular and provides superb views across the No.3 bed wetland. It also provided a safe roosting site for a Barn Owl during the freezing weather in early January and a bird has again been seen there during the recent severe spell. The Group is planning to rebuild the hide in the north-east corner of No.3 bed that was vandalised a year or two ago, but work has been delayed by vandals continuing to thwart our efforts to keep them off that particular part of the bed. Hopefully, we will have more success with this in 2011.

### **Chris Packham talk**

As mentioned above, this proved to be very successful, and the Parr Hall in Warrington was full to capacity. It was pleasing to see so many of you there and it is clear from your comments that the evening was well received. Chris generously gave of his time, waiving any question of a fee, and we are very grateful to him for this. The Group benefitted financially from the event and much credit is due to our Treasurer, Douglas Buchanan, for all his hard work in organizing it.

### **Habitat Management**

This has been the main focus of WECG's work during 2010. We work within a tight budget and our Contractor and his team have concentrated on what we consider to be our main priorities. The programme of coppicing has continued on No.3 bed, with benefits already becoming apparent from the two large blocks of willow that were coppiced in 2009. The ringing team on No.3 bed considers that the record number of birds which they have caught this year is almost certainly related to the new growth from the coppiced trees.

Reed management, which involved cutting and removing areas of phragmites in front of the old tower hide, has been repeated in the same area this autumn, being extended further east. In due course this will be expanded, with channels cut to provide more open water and easier movement for waterfowl between various pools. This is all part of the long-term strategy of improving the

health of the reed bed. One of the benefits of the reed clearance was the excellent views of Water Rails and their broods in the spring, with at least four or five pairs with chicks seen.

During the autumn work was carried out on the various scrapes on No.3 bed, involving spraying and cutting to provide loafing and feeding areas as well as improved viewing from the hides. In late November the scrape in front of the new John Morgan hide was extended further towards the hide and a ditch dug around the scrape making it, in effect, an island. Spraying to remove Himalayan Balsam and Giant Hogweed was also carried out, work which will need to be continued for many years to come.

An area of concern in the past few years has been the steady decline of the Black-headed Gull breeding colony on No.3 bed. The reasons are not clear, but one factor is the reduction of Juncus clumps which they favour for their nests. To try and reverse the decline WECG is to purchase and position on the bed four rafts which we hope the gulls will use. Black-headed Gull colonies are important in attracting Black-necked Grebes to breed, so maintaining a thriving gull population is essential for the future of the grebes.

Special thanks are due to John Verdon for his many hours of unpaid work, cutting the paths, and his herculean efforts in opening up and maintaining the west bank of the No.3 bed after years of neglect.

### **Higher Level Stewardship**

As many of you, will know work on the Eyes is financed from various sources. Income from Permit Holder subscriptions is one, together with Grant Aid wherever possible. Over the past ten years we have also received an annual sum from DEFRA under Countryside Stewardship, something in the order of £2,000. This has now terminated and the Group is in the process of applying for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), which, if we are successful, will provide income to manage all of the SSSI, unlike Countryside Stewardship which was for management of the Loop of No.4 bed only. The process of applying for HLS has been long and involved, and is being led by the Group's Vice-Chairman, David Bowman. David has been helped by experts from the RSPB as well as the landowners, who have been very supportive of our application. We should hear whether or not we have been successful in the next few months. Potentially this could provide considerable funds for management on the Reserve with possibilities, for example, of wetland creation on a fairly large scale on Beds two and four. We are keeping our fingers crossed!

### **Artificial Sand Martin Colony**

Over the past two years WECG has been investigating the viability of constructing an artificial Sand Martin wall or bank on No.3 bed. These have proved successful at a number of sites, and in May of last year we were invited to Lockerbie to see a colony that has attracted up to 200 pairs over many years. Inspired by this plans were made for a similar construction inside the south bank of No.3 bed. An application for grant aid has been submitted and at the time of writing we are awaiting a decision. In the meantime, a temporary face has been created by a digger on the south bank of No.3 bed below the Sybil Hogg Hide and adjacent to the River Mersey. It will be interesting to see if it attracts any Sand Martins – or maybe even a Kingfisher – next spring.

### **Nuisance Motorcyclists**

In last year's Newsletter I reported on the impending erection of kissing gates to exclude motorcyclists. Unfortunately, the design that was followed proved unsatisfactory, and after many meetings and discussions between WECG, the Ship Canal Company and Warrington Borough Council a modification was made which hopefully will keep out all but the smallest machines. The motorcyclists are determined, however, and we may well have to return to this issue during the coming year.

### **Subscriptions**

The present subscription level of £8 for a single permit and £16 for a family one has stood for at least five years, but faced with increasing costs, notably of postage, the Committee has decided that a modest increase in subscriptions has become necessary. From April 2011 a single permit will cost £10 and a family permit £20. As always, all of the money we receive from your permit renewals is ploughed back into the Reserve by helping towards the costs of habitat management, production of the Annual Report, purchasing feed, building hides and so on. The cost of the Annual Report will remain unchanged.

### **E-mail addresses**

Last year about 40 Newsletters that had been sent out by e-mail bounced back. If you have changed your e-mail address please let Brian Ankers know as soon as possible so that we do not waste time and effort sending information to non-existent addresses.

### **Wildlife Highlights**

2010 has seen two extremely cold spells, one in January and now in late November and early December. These conditions usually result in large numbers of Tufted Duck concentrating on the river and Ship Canal. In January 1187 were present (a record), but this has just been exceeded with 1528 counted on 9th December 2010.

After their poor showing in 2009, when only six pairs were confirmed Black-necked Grebes bounced back; ten pairs bred this year and many young fledged. Great Crested Grebes also did well, with a record count of 37 present in the spring and 12 pairs confirmed breeding. Most of the wildfowl bred well, apart from Gadwall. A Spoonbill was a rare visitor in May and up to six Little Egrets were seen. Eighteen Whooper Swans were a good find on No.3 bed on 21st November and a Nightjar heard churring in May was most unexpected and the first reported for many years.

Marsh Harriers were seen on many dates in the spring, raising hopes of possible breeding, and there were numerous reports of Hobbies. A Red Kite was noted over No.1 bed on 16th October. A few Mediterranean Gulls were present in the spring but, as usual, did not stay long. In May up to seven species of wader were seen on the scrape in front of the John Morgan Hide, with Black-tailed Godwits being the pick of the bunch (up to 24) with multiple sightings.

In July, up to 100 Swallows and 300 Sand Martins roosted on No.1 bed and it was yet another record year for Willow Tits (a Woolston speciality) with 51 caught, the majority of which were juveniles. Clearly, many pairs breed at Woolston, and one of our permit holders with an interest in this species found at least four nests. In the spring up to ten Grasshopper Warblers were heard reeling, whilst

other warbler highlights included 750 Reed Warblers ringed, 696 Blackcaps(over 60 in one morning alone on No.3 bed!) and 488 Chiffchaffs. The 225 Bullfinches ringed was also a record. Just one Cetti's Warbler was caught this year, but there was a fascinating recovery of one of the juveniles ringed on No.3 bed last autumn. It was found breeding this summer at a site in Norfolk.

### **Butterflies**

A number of species enjoyed a successful year, the highlights being 200 Common Blues, and a welcome recovery for Small Tortoiseshells with 120 present in late August. Brimstones and Small Coppers were present in good numbers and there were a few sightings of Holly Blue after a blank 2009.

**Brian Martin**