

WOOLSTON EYES NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2012

Introduction

Fortunately, the harsh winter of 2010/2011 has not been repeated, although most resident species did not appear to have been unduly affected by the low temperatures at that time. An exceptionally wet December 2011 (the wettest month at the Eyes since August 2004) has led to a much needed increase in water levels following yet another dry spring and early summer.

Many groups from outside the area visited the Eyes during 2010 and an article about the Reserve appeared in "Birdwatching" magazine.

Higher Level Stewardship

In the last Newsletter we reported on the Group's application to DEFRA for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). This has proved a lengthy process but all the indications are that we have been successful, although at the time of writing we are awaiting final confirmation. Given the present state of the economy we will not be receiving funds for managing all of the SSSI, as we had hoped, but only for No.3 bed and the Loop of No.4 bed. Even so, funds from HLS will enable the Group to carry out much needed habitat management. A major piece of work that has been identified is the enhancement of the phragmites reed bed on No.3, which to date has been beyond the means of WECG. It will also mean that many other routine management tasks, such as tree coppicing and maintaining scrapes, will become much more affordable.

Giant Hogweed

Those of you who visit No.4 bed will be aware of the extent of Giant Hogweed that covers the bed during the spring and summer. As well as being a major health hazard it has taken over vast areas of once prime breeding habitat for Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings. In the last Newsletter I mentioned that work had begun to control it. This continued in early spring last year, but not on the scale anticipated. A programme is in place, however, for contractors to hit the Hogweed hard this coming spring - before the breeding birds return - and this will continue for several years. The contractor is experienced in dealing with Giant Hogweed and is confident that in time he will eradicate the bulk of it. Let us hope he is right and the large flower heads will no longer be seen on Google Earth!

Details of spraying dates will appear on the Eyes website, but if you venture on to the bed when spraying is taking place please stay well clear of areas where work is being carried out and observe any instructions from the contractors.

Artificial Sand Martin Colony

Our application for funding to construct a Sand Martin wall on No.3 bed was not successful, but there will be opportunities to apply again in the future. Unfortunately, the vertical face which was dug out at the bottom of the south bank of No.3 did not attract any Sand Martins in 2011, but this is a project that the Group will return to when funding becomes available.

Hides

Apart from general maintenance little work has been carried out on the hides this year. The vandalised hide in the north-east corner of No.3 bed awaits re-construction; the delay to the work being due to unauthorized access to that part of the bed still taking place. Hopefully, an opportunity to stop this may soon arise, with the Ship Canal Company planning to remove the dredging pipes from the top of the west bank of No.2 bed and from the `beach` by Wooston Weir. This will allow access for a JCB to deepen the water that people presently wade through, and thus prevent all but the most determined and foolhardy from reaching No.3 bed.

Rafts

Early in 2011 we purchased four metal rafts and positioned them on No.3 bed, as many of you will have seen. The aim was to encourage Black-headed Gulls to breed on them and try to reverse the gulls` recent decline on that bed. Black-necked Grebes like to breed alongside Black-headed Gulls so it was felt very important to try to minimize the loss of breeding gulls. About eight pairs of gulls did nest on the rafts and we are hopeful that once they get used to them more will be encouraged to breed.

Car Park by Ship Canal

Many permit holders will have noticed the poor state of the car park in recent weeks. This has arisen as a result of heavy vehicles working for Scottish Power regularly driving through it during the heavy rain in December. Following a site meeting with a representative of Scottish Power the company has agreed to re-instate the car park as soon as possible.

Dogs on No.3 bed

For some years now it has been the policy of WECG to allow permit holders to take their dogs on to No.3 bed, providing that they are kept on leads at all times and steps are taken to remove any mess. We know that the majority of people respect this, but we simply wish to remind you of the importance to the wildlife and habitat on No.3 bed that dogs are kept under control. The WECG Committee does, however, periodically review this policy.

Legacy and Donation

In recent months WECG has benefitted from a very generous legacy from the will of the late Keith Gourlay, who was a permit holder, and from donations from the family and friends of Derek Bradburne, who sadly died recently. Derek loved the Eyes and was a very frequent visitor with his wife Sue. We are extremely grateful to Sue for asking that donations in Derek`s memory be given to the Eyes.

Contacts

Once again, a reminder to let Brian Ankers know of any change to either your e-mail or home address.

Wildlife highlights

Full details of wildlife sightings in 2011 will appear, as usual, in the WECG Annual Report, which will be published in the summer. A few highlights were a County record count of over 2,600 Tufted Duck in early January (most concentrated at Woolston Weir and on the river) and two sightings of Bittern. Bramblings appeared in record numbers, with 40 or more regularly attracted to the feeders at the

new hide. In contrast, the Black-necked Grebes had a disappointing year, with probably no more than four pairs successfully raising young.

Butterflies

The unusual weather patterns during 2011 had a mixed effect on butterflies at Woolston. Warm and sunny spring conditions produced excellent counts of Orange Tip and the earliest ever record of Common Blue on 9th April. Summer was largely cool and cloudy, and the only species to thrive were Small and Large Skippers. The unusually warm autumn saw Red Admirals in flight until mid-November. The highlight of the year was undoubtedly the discovery of Purple Hairstreak on the Reserve for the first time.

Brian Martin

Recorder WECG