

WOOLSTON EYES NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2012

Introduction

This slightly earlier than usual Newsletter is prompted by the need to advise permit holders of the impending start of major works on No.3 bed, financed by a Higher Level Stewardship agreement, as outlined in the Newsletter of January 2012. Our Vice-Chairman, David Bowman, gives more details of this below, in particular how it will affect permit holders and the need to observe health and safety issues at all times.

Two months of 2012 remain, but the year will be remembered for rain, rain and more rain! Meteorological Office records indicate that this has been the wettest year since 1912, with only March having below-average rainfall. To date a total of 820mm (33 ins.) has fallen, with the months of July to September all experiencing totals in excess of 100mm, and April only just below the hundred mark. All this has meant high water levels on No.3 bed and as a consequence many breeding birds had a poor season.

Changes on No.3 bed

During the next few months permit holders will see a significant amount of disturbance on No.3 bed. We have made a successful bid for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) funding which will enable us to reverse the encroachment across the bed by reed and scrub. Our advice was that failure to do so would result in significant loss of open water and a reduction in key breeding species. So, starting imminently and continuing until early next year, heavy machinery will be moved onto the bed and be working five days a week. All current permit holder paths will be kept open and won't be used by machinery, so access will continue as normal. I must stress the importance, for obvious health and safety reasons, of not straying from the paths marked on your permit. Fencing and signs will be erected to indicate areas where access is not permitted.

How will the work impact on the wildlife? Well, in the short-term disturbance is inevitable, though being optimistic, the lowered water levels and exposed mud may be attractive to waders, rails etc. In the longer term the aim is to have the water levels back up to normal levels by the start of next year's breeding season. You should then see more open pools and channels, a better wader scrape in front of the main hide and eventually a wetter and more productive reed bed.

We hope you will bear with us during this process and if you have any questions or concerns please use the e-mail facility on the website to contact us.

Enviroloo

The toilet in the centre of No.3 bed has been a much needed facility, well received by permit holders. Unfortunately, in recent months problems have arisen from a design fault which required the toilet to be closed. Sadly, despite work by the supplier the problem has returned and the Enviroloo will be out of action once again until it is completely resolved. We are making every effort to have it fully operational as soon as possible, and ask that visitors do not attempt to use it in the meantime.

Giant Hogweed

In the last Newsletter I confidently predicted that work would begin to eradicate the acres of this alien weed in the middle of No.4 bed. Sadly, the contractor employed to do the work died suddenly and it took some months to find a replacement. The Manchester Ship Canal Company, as the landowner responsible for alien weed removal, has now hired a company to do the work, which hopefully will begin in early spring 2013. This will involve spraying with a herbicide approved by English Nature. Permit holders visiting No.4 bed when spraying is in progress need to observe any instructions from the contractors and stay well clear of any spraying. WECG will endeavour to advise permit holders of the work programme via our website and by notices in the hides on No.3 bed.

Mink Control

Many of you will be aware of the high numbers of mink seen on both the River Mersey and No.3 bed in recent years. A trapping programme was set up about four years ago and this has proved successful with up to 80 mink caught. In 2012 many fewer mink have been reported and clearly the population on No.3 bed and surrounding river has been reduced. That the Black-necked Grebes had their most productive year in terms of young fledged could be the result of lower mink numbers.

Management Work

During the year much work has been carried out as part of the Reserve Management Plan. This has included coppicing of trees, maintaining the wildflower meadows and removal of Himalayan Balsam. The wet summer provided ideal conditions for the Balsam and working parties, including volunteers from United Utilities, spent many hours pulling it out by hand. Other, less accessible, areas were mown using the Group's tractor. This is a long-term task which will continue next year and beyond. The paths on No.3 bed continue to be mown regularly by Volunteer Warden John Verdon, and the Group is grateful for all John's hard work.

The John Morgan hide has been treated with preservative and the Sybil Hogg hide on the south bank of No.3 bed has had a small section of flooring replaced and a weather board fitted to the door, which has also been re-hung and is now much easier to shut.

Open Day

It is now a number of years since we organized an Open Day, an event which has proved very popular and attracted many hundreds of visitors. WECG has decided to begin planning for another Open Day in Summer 2013 and more details will follow in the coming months.

Off-road Motorbikes

Many of you will be familiar with this recurring problem at Woolston, although with the help of the Police and extra metalwork at the entrances to the Reserve motorbikes are not the problem they once were. Even so we are aware that people do come to the Eyes in transit vans from which they unload motorbikes and lift them over the barriers. If you ever see this happening please do not approach the individuals concerned, some of whom can be unpleasant. It would, however, be helpful if you would take the number of the vehicle and inform either Brian Ankers or Brian Martin (tel. nos. on your permit). Details can then be passed to the Police, who will visit the people concerned and warn them off.

Feedback

It has been very pleasing to receive very positive comments from the RSPB about the standard of maintenance and habitats at Woolston and the quality of the hides. A well-known wildlife artist has described the Eyes in his recent catalogue as his 'favourite Reserve in the U.K'. Nice though this is we are always looking to improve the Reserve and if you have any ideas or thoughts about how we could achieve this then please let us know.

Wildlife sightings in 2012

Birds: After the poor showing in 2011 the Black-necked Grebes had an excellent year, with a maximum of 24 adults present in the spring. Eleven pairs bred, fledging a minimum of 19 young. The 1.73 young per pair that fledged is the highest ever at Woolston and this in one of the worst summers on record! Our waterfowl fared less well, with most of the Great Crested Grebe nests washed out on No.3 bed and the young that did hatch soon succumbed in the cold, wet conditions. Little Grebes did slightly better, but few young fledged. Mallard and Gadwall had poor breeding seasons, but Pochard and Tufted Duck did reasonably well.

On a more positive note, Buzzards were proved breeding for the first time – two pairs which each fledged three young – and Little Ringed Plovers fledged at least two young, the first successful breeding on the Reserve for over 20 years. A number of pairs of Lapwings also bred.

Ringling highlights included a rare Siberian Chiffchaff caught on No.3 bed in April, and a Kingfisher ringed on No.1 bed in June 2011 which was retrapped in Holland in May 2012, the first BTO-ringed Kingfisher to be controlled there!

Butterflies: The butterfly year began well with the warm dry weather in March producing high counts of Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell, as well as early records of Orange Tip and Speckled Wood. Thereafter the weather went downhill and the near continuous rain in the summer months led to few sightings of any species. However, better conditions in August resulted in exceptional numbers, with over 500 Meadow Brown, over 20 Small Copper and 14 Purple Hairstreak. Early September was marked by an emergence of more than 100 Small Tortoiseshell and good counts of other species.

Changes to home or e-mail address

Please let us know of any changes to your address or e-mail so we can keep in touch with you.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Bowman (WECG Vice-Chairman) for writing the section on the Higher Level Stewardship work and to David Hackett for the Butterfly Report.

Brian Martin
Recorder, WECG