

WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2020

NEW WETLAND ON NO.4 BED

After several years of planning and negotiations we are pleased to announce that Phase I of a new wetland on No. 4 bed has begun to the south of the Loop. The wetland has been designed by the RSPB and our contractor has already cleared a large area that had been covered by acres of Giant Hogweed. Work is scheduled to continue until March, although this may be subject to review given the current high water table on No.4. We have been working closely on this project with the landowners, Peel Holdings and the Manchester Ship Canal Company, both of whom have been very supportive throughout. This has led to WECG being granted a lease on the land. This is an exciting development which, if all goes to plan, will treble the amount of wetland at the Eyes, with funds for all of the project now secured.

Permit holders are advised that as the work area is subject to Health and Safety regulations, including the wearing of hard hats and high visibility clothing, they should not go on to No.4 bed while the work is in progress. Our web site will keep you up to date with developments, but please feel free to ask our Warden, Dan Gornall, or any WECG Committee member if you have any questions or require further information about this major development. Many thanks must go to David Bowman in particular, and also to Brian Ankers and David Spencer for the huge amount of time that they have given to making this project possible. Vital help and expertise has also been received from the RSPB, Natural England, Defra and many others, including the landowners.

CONDITION OF SHIP CANAL TRACK AND PATHS ON NO.3 BED

You will not be surprised to know that 2019 was the wettest year at Woolston since we began recording rainfall amounts in 2004. A total of 1,216mm was recorded, just under 49 inches, compared to an average of 30-35 inches. As a result the paths on No.3 bed have become extremely muddy and we can only hope for some more settled weather to help them dry out. In some of the worst areas we have placed new boardwalks, but it would be a major task to cover the near half-mile of paths on the bed. We can only apologise for the state of Thelwall Lane as you approach the Reserve from Latchford, and the track leading to the Car Park.

The maintenance of Thelwall Lane is not our responsibility; rumours persist that Peel may take action to fill in the potholes or even resurface the road, but we will have to wait and see. As far as the Ship Canal track is concerned WECG spent some time last spring filling in many of the potholes, with the result that the track was in the best condition it had been for many years. Unfortunately, later in the year contractors working on No.2 bed brought heavy equipment on and off site, and as rainfall totals mounted these journeys led to the track being badly broken up. The work on No.2 bed should soon be completed, after which we will need to look at how access to the car park can be improved once again. Please bear with us.

NOT SUCH GOOD NEWS

While illegal activities on the SSSI such as rough-riding motorcycling, shooting and fishing have reduced significantly in recent years, serious incidents still occur from time to time. In late November, for example, a group of men believed to be badger baiters appeared at Woolston Weir with dogs, and spent some time on No.2 and No.1 beds.

This was during daylight hours and by all accounts they were quite brazen, playing hunting horns and generally making no attempt to keep a low profile. The incident was reported to the Police Rural Crime Unit, which is investigating this serious matter.

If you see anything like this then our advice is not to approach the people concerned because some can be unpredictable, but obtain as many details as you can – descriptions, time, place, number plates of vehicles etc. and immediately contact a Warden on site, or ring one of the telephone numbers on your permit. You can also dial 999 if you believe what is occurring is serious, or 101 for other activities such as trial bikes or fishing, the latter being a prohibited activity on the SSSI. If you do ring the police please also let either Brian Ankers or Brian Martin know as soon as possible.

NEW FEEDING STATION ON No.3 BED

In the past few months much work has been done to create a new feeding station in front of the Hogg Hide on the south bank of No.3 bed next to the viewing platform. It is already attracting lots of birds, with a growing list of species that can be found on the white board inside the hide. The birds do not seem to be fazed by observers in the hide and can be viewed at close range. It is certainly well worth a visit and our thanks go to Dan Gornall and another of our young voluntary wardens for their hard work.

RESERVE MANAGEMENT

Dan Gornall and his team of volunteers have worked hard in the past year to improve habitats across the Eyes, including removing large amounts of Himalayan Balsam, coppicing trees which is already having benefits for Willow Tits, reed bed improvements and the construction of rafts to attract more breeding Black-headed Gulls, whose numbers have been declining at the Eyes

SIGHTINGS

Late in 2019 a Starling roost formed on No.1 bed, with spectacular murmurations. At its peak 100,000 were thought to be present, and they attracted many birds of prey, including a long-staying Hen Harrier. The roost moved on to No.3 bed and reduced in size to about 10,000. At the time of writing, however, it appears to have broken up completely.

2019 was excellent for birds, with a total of 154 species recorded, the highest number for many years. In the breeding season the highlight was a brood of Garganey seen and photographed on the Loop of No.4 bed pools, the first brood seen in Cheshire since 1960! Our Black-necked Grebes continue to do well, with at least 10 pairs fledging up to 10 young despite the very wet June and July. Other wildfowl had a mixed year, however, with Pochard breeding well including one amazing brood of 17 young. There has, though, been a huge fall in their wintering numbers. Tufted Duck also had a good 2019 with big flocks present in winter and many broods seen. Mallard, however, had a poor year, as did Little Grebe and Great Crested Grebe, both of which fledged few young. Other fine records included Bearded Tits (the first since 2007), Bar-tailed Godwit (the first since 2011), Wood Sandpiper and Scaup. There were four records of Kittiwake, a Black Tern and an Osprey. Two unexpected species were a Little Bunting, ringed on No.1 bed, only the second-ever at Woolston, and an Iceland Gull of the race *kumlienii*, a Reserve first. Finally, on 24th January 2020 Dan Owen found and photographed another new Woolston species, a Tundra Bean Goose, which is a rare visitor from Arctic Russia. Field notes and photographs have been submitted to the County Recorder.

In the late autumn we received some interesting film from underwater cameras at Woolston Weir of Salmon and an Otter, confirming how clean the Mersey has become.

For those interested in the flora of the Eyes a chance discovery has completely re-written the status of one orchid species – the Broad-leaved Helleborine. Until 2019 we knew of about 20 flower spikes on the Reserve each year, but a walk along the Ship Canal track in July revealed a population of at least 215 in a relatively small area of deep shade, which is their preferred habitat. With other plants on Nos. 1 and 3 beds a minimum of 225 Broad-leaved Helleborines was believed to the present on the Eyes. We hope you continue to support our work at the Eyes and enjoy your birdwatching at a time of a major new development on the Reserve.

Brian Martin

January 2020