

Welcome to the latest issue of the Woolston Eyes Conservation Group Newsletter. These newsletters have been published periodically since 1996 to provide permit holders with an update and summary of information on current issues and developments on the Reserve.

2024 will be long remembered for the deluges in the first winter period and spring that led to very high water levels and many of the paths being flooded for weeks at a time which had a major impact on the Reserve's wildlife.

However, it was also the year which saw the official opening of the new wetland and viewing platform on No 4 bed. Senior management of the landowner, Peel Ports, performed the ceremony and were most impressed with what they could see we were achieving there.

Wildlife sightings

Despite the appalling wet and windy weather huge numbers of wetland species were regularly present on the Reserve: for example, 2107 wildfowl were counted on the January WeBS (Wetland Birds Survey). Among the highlights were 205 Shoveler, 151 Gadwall and 493 Tufted Duck. The February count discovered a rare visitor, a Lesser Scaup, which is a duck native to North America, while the earliest-ever Black-necked Grebe returned to No.3 bed on the 19th February and a flock of 15 Whooper Swans was recorded on a nearby flooded field. A brief warm spell in early March saw the first butterflies – a Speckled Wood and a Peacock.

A Sandwich Tern, a scarce inland visitor, was present on No.3 bed on 20th March and an amazing 66 pairs of Gadwall. By then the numbers of Black-necked Grebes had increased to 15 and a roost of Sand Martins held an estimated 1000 birds. The discovery of a drake Ruddy Duck on No.3 bed on 26th March sparked a huge demand from across the country to see this now rare bird, most of which have been culled. A decision was made by the Committee to open up the Reserve for one day and several hundred people from as far away as Scotland and London came to the Eyes, and most were able to see the bird. Their donations were a welcome boost to our funds, and during the day two of our visitors discovered a pair of Ferruginous Ducks on the Loop of No.4 bed. These stayed into April, providing close views on the Oxbow below the footbridge on to No.3 bed. More rarities appeared in mid-April, with a Slavonian Grebe in summer plumage – only the third record for Woolston – followed by a Little Bittern, which was a new species for the Reserve.

Sand Martin numbers continued to increase, with a at least 5000 roosting on No.3 bed on the evening of 23rd April and another observer estimating that double that number may have been present. By May most of the Black-necked Grebes had moved on to No.4 bed, where the majority of the Reserve's Black-headed Gulls now breed; their presence is an important requirement in this Grebe's nest site selection. At this time the numbers of Black-necked Grebes peaked at 28, with 24 of them on No.4 bed. Worryingly, as the weeks passed, they showed no sign of breeding on either bed in what turned out to be one of the strangest springs ever. However, a brood did appear on No.3 bed on 13th June, followed almost daily by others.

In all ten pairs have been proved breeding, and the last on No.4 bed on 30th July is the latest-ever brood.

Marsh Harrier is now a well-established breeding raptor at Woolston, and a pair successfully fledged three young in 2024.

In general terms 2024 has been a year of mixed fortunes for wildlife at Woolston. Certainly, it has been the worst on record for butterflies, with few seen even on warm sunny days. In contrast Odonata (damselflies and dragonflies) have been seen in large numbers, particularly on No. 4 bed. Clearly the extensive areas of water at Woolston have been to their advantage, and have also provided high numbers of aerial insect populations that have benefitted an important local breeding Swift population.

Woolston Eyes is one of the most important breeding sites in the United Kingdom for Pochard, and the 36 broods in 2023 represented 4.2% of the national population. So far this year 20 broods have been recorded, which is near to the yearly average since they were first proved breeding in 1980. A large flock of up to 95 Pochard has been present on No.4 bed during July, a number that would be an excellent winter count. It may well be that the current exceptional numbers are the result of very successful breeding in the past few years.

The annual build-up of Gadwall reached new heights in the past month, with a new County record on 1115 in July, while at the same time there were 636 Coot at Woolston. It seems that in the main and despite the weather wildlife continues to flourish on the Reserve.

No. 4 Bed

The new wetland, as it matures, continues to attract large numbers of birds, and other wildlife. Wetlands are important carbon sinks - much more than woodlands - and the water on No.4 bed is trapping thousands of tons of carbon each year. This statistic impressed the Peel Ports Management during their recent visit and clearly the Eyes as a whole is making an important local contribution to tackling climate change.

When access to No.4 bed became available to permit holders the landowners insisted that the route for them to the viewing platform had to be via the west bank. This is a long way, particularly for older and less able people wanting to visit and enjoy this fine new wetland. For this reason WECG may have to review access conditions with the landowner in the future. This year viewing the wetland from the west bank has been severely limited by the numerous Giant Hogweed plants and tall willows. Plans to spray the Hogweed in the spring were thwarted by the weeks of continuous rain but eradicating it will definitely be a management priority next spring.

The Ship Canal track

The potholes on the Thelwall Lane approach to the Reserve and along the track to the car park have been a source of concern for many years. It is the responsibility of the landowners to repair the road and the track, but the work that has been done in the past has been limited and

potholes have soon reappeared. It must be said that the worst damage to the road and track has been caused by large heavy vehicles. In the past year Peel has largely eliminated the potholes on Thelwall Lane, but the track to the car park is still bad. Approximately 200 metres of potholes has been infilled recently, but much remains to be done, and WECG will do all it can to complete the work using materials and methods that are long-lasting

Les Jones and Warwick Lowe

Sadly, two major contributors to the development of the Eyes over the years died this year.

Les Jones was a member of the Eyes Committee for many years, with a special interest in Odonata. He also carried out much management work on site until increasingly poor health meant he was unable to carry on. He was a good colleague who had lived an active life, including working his way across Europe and Asia to Australia when a young man. Les had a passionate interest in music and was a long-time member of the Warrington Male Voice Choir. To this he was so committed that he insisted, against medical advice, on singing with them a matter of days before he died. He will be sadly missed by everyone who knew him and was a caring man who offered much support to others during difficult times in their lives.

Warwick Lowe, who died shortly after Les, was an active voluntary Warden in the first twenty or so years of the Reserve. He was reliable and hard-working, despite suffering from ill health, particularly in recent years.

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Reserve Recorder

In May 2024, after nearly 44 years of being responsible for maintaining wildlife records of the Eyes, producing the Annual Report for many years and inviting experts to study species on the Reserve about which we had little or no knowledge I decided that it was time to hand over the reins. Our new Recorder is Daniel Owen, who is well qualified for the role. He has a wide knowledge of wildlife and exceptional identification skills. His email address is woolstonrecords@gmail.com and he will welcome records or wildlife queries. One of our priorities for some time has been to find someone with the knowledge to survey moths on the Eyes – this was last done in any detail in 2003. If you think you can help, or know someone who might be interested, Dan would be very pleased to hear from you.

'Woolston Eyes, from Wasteland to Wetland'

In the Newsletter of June 2023, I indicated that the book I was writing about the history of WECG and the Reserve was nearing completion. It was finally published last November and has sold well, with the initial 150 copies being bought in a little over two months. Soon after a revised edition, also of 150, was printed and it too is selling well. Some of you may well have acquired the book, for which I offer my thanks. Full details of how to purchase a copy can be found on the Eyes website at www.woolstoneyes.com. The book is also on sale in the shops at the RSPB Burton Mere Wetland Reserve and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Reserve at Martin Mere.

Feedback from the RSPB, the BTO and readers has been overwhelmingly positive, for which I am very grateful.

The Eyes continues to attract new permit holders, and experts keen to study all aspects of the Reserve. In August 2024, for example, a group of invertebrate enthusiasts under the leadership of Liverpool World Museum carried out a bioblitz of Beds 3 and 4, and we await their results with great interest.

We should like to thank all our permit holders for their support, and we hope that you continue to have many enjoyable visits to the Eyes.

Brian Martin