

# The Woolston Eyes Conservation Group



Annual Report  
2023



### **Wildlife as a work of art ...**

Colin Woolf has a gift for portraying birds and animals in their natural habitat. His paintings reveal the rich colour and detail of plumage as well as the ever-changing light of the landscape

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# WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP

## ANNUAL REPORT 2023

### CONTENTS

|  |  | <b>Page</b> |
|--|--|-------------|
| <b>Chairman's Report</b>   | <b>B. Ankers</b>   | <b>2</b>    |
| <b>Ornithological Summary</b>  | <b>D. Bowman</b>   | <b>3</b>    |
| <b>Weather</b>   | <b>B. Martin</b>   | <b>4</b>    |
| <b>Birds: Systematic List</b>  | <b>J. Blundell<br/>D. Bowman<br/>D. Hackett<br/>B. Martin<br/>D. Owen<br/>D. Spencer</b> | <b>7</b>    |
| <b>WeBS Counts</b>   | <b>B. Martin</b>   | <b>64</b>   |
| <b>Ringling Report</b>   | <b>M. Miles</b>  | <b>66</b>   |
| <b>Ringling Totals</b>   | <b>M. Miles</b>  | <b>71</b>   |
| <b>Selected Recoveries and Controls</b>  | <b>M. Miles</b>  | <b>73</b>   |
| <b>Breeding Willow Tit Report</b>  | <b>A. Rustell</b>  | <b>77</b>   |
| <b>Butterfly Report</b>  | <b>D. Hackett</b>  | <b>81</b>   |
| <b>Dragonfly Report</b>  | <b>B. Baird</b>  | <b>89</b>   |
| <b>The Significance of the Woolston Population of Broad-leaved Helleborine</b> | <b>B Martin</b>  | <b>96</b>   |
| <b>Editor's Acknowledgments</b>  | <b>B. Martin and<br/>D. Hackett</b>  | <b>97</b>   |
| <b>Trustees and the Officers of Woolston Eyes Conservation Group</b>           |  | <b>98</b>   |

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Firstly, let me say thank you for all your support of the Group by renewing your permits. Being a charity run entirely by volunteers the money that we receive from you is vital in funding habitat management of the Eyes, and also providing facilities that we hope make visiting the Reserve a positive experience.

David Bowman has been Editor of our excellently produced Annual Report for many years. He has, however, decided to stand down and I should like to thank him for his time as Editor and for the many hours of work that he put in. The report this year has been jointly edited by Brian Martin and his fellow Committee member David Hackett.

A notable event this year was the publication of Brian Martin's book, 'Woolston Eyes, from Wasteland to Wetland'. about the history of Woolston Eyes and the WECG, which was well received and the initial print run of 150 copies was soon sold out. The book is being reprinted and those of you wanting to order a copy should visit the Woolston Eyes website and follow the link to where full details are given.

Following the publication of his book and after 43 years as Recorder for WECG, Brian has decided to step down from the role. Throughout his tenure he organised the BTO Wetland Bird Survey and the information gathered resulted in the Reserve gaining S.S.S.I. status in 1985. Brian has also been responsible for liaising with the RSPB, BTO and CAWOS and over the years has played a large part in the production of the Annual Report. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank Brian for his unstinting loyalty and contribution to the WECG. Although no longer the Recorder I am pleased that Brian has agreed to remain a Trustee of the group.

I am very pleased to welcome Dan Owen as our new Recorder. He will assume this role as from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024. Dan is actively involved with monitoring our wildlife on the Reserve and brings a wealth of knowledge to this role.

The Reserve continues to develop, as many of you will know if you have visited the large new wetland on No.4 bed. This is a major addition to the wetland habitat on the site, already attracting a wide variety of wildlife. A wet woodland adjacent to it has also been created, along with a sluice to manage the water level. Other beds are also being managed to sustain their wildlife habitat diversity.

Once again, we owe very many thanks to the renowned wildlife artist Colin Woolf, who has produced an excellent cover for the Report, which this year is of a Pochard brood in recognition of the nationally important number of broods at Woolston in 2023. The original, and many others of his paintings, are for sale. Full details are on the inside cover of this Report and I would highly recommend visiting his website.

As always, our thanks go to Peel Ports, Peel Holdings, Natural England and the RSPB for their invaluable support throughout the year.

Finally, I hope you find this Report an enjoyable read and have very pleasant, rewarding – and hopefully drier – visits to the Reserve in 2024.

**Brian Ankers**

## ORNITHOLOGICAL SUMMARY

With the No.4 bed wetland at full capacity for the first time, it's not surprising that 2023 was a bumper year for some of our wetland breeding species. It was also excellent for species variety, with 150 species recorded and two new ones added to the Reserve list. If accepted, an Alpine Swift over No.2 bed in April and a well-photographed Grey Phalarope on the Weir Basin in September, will bring the list to 248. Equally exciting was the male White-spotted Bluethroat, ringed on No.3 bed by Kieron Foster's ringing team in mid-July. This was our second ever record, the first being another male, ringed in 1996. What was presumably the same Penduline Tit which graced the Reserve in late 2022, was also recorded again in January.

Of the less common species, there were four winter records of Scaup, a March Common Scoter, an April Spoonbill and a July Crossbill, while August produced Spotted Flycatcher and a Yellow-legged Gull. The latter has now been recorded in three successive years. A Bittern then appeared briefly on No.3 bed in October, while November then produced a succession of good sightings. These included a Firecrest on No.3 bed, a Water Pipit on several dates on No.4 bed and a flock of nine Waxwings on the same bed. As ever in recent years there were a couple of records each of Osprey and Red Kite, which are now regular visitors.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the two passage periods occurred in spring, when a minimum of 106 Little Gulls passed through between 19-21<sup>st</sup> April. This coincided with a large-scale movement across much of England and a record number of 67 moved through No.3 Bed on 19<sup>th</sup> April alone. The previous highest day count was of nine back in 1985.

With the greatly increased wetland areas available, our breeding wildfowl populations really benefited. Pochard saw the most dramatic increase, with 36 confirmed broods. This is an astonishing 4.2% of the UK breeding population and places Woolston as the third most important breeding site for the species, in the UK. Black-necked Grebes also put in a solid performance, fledging a minimum of 15 young, despite the Black-headed Gull colony on No.3 bed having been decimated by Avian Influenza. Fortunately, this tragic event was somewhat mitigated by the establishment of a small breeding colony on No.4 bed. Shoveler at last bred, after an absence of 15 years, with four broods confirmed. Garganey had an exceptional year, with at least one pair breeding successfully and other adults regularly present. A moulting flock of sixteen was present in July, which included three juveniles. Mandarin again bred with a brood of four noted at the east end of the Reserve. Perhaps less auspicious was the arrival of a feral pair of Barnacle Geese, from the flock at Knowsley Safari Park, which raised two young on the No.4 bed wetland. Once established, feral populations of these attractive geese can grow very rapidly, and we have enough of a problem with feral Greylag and Canada Geese as it is!

Marsh Harrier again bred, which slightly mitigated the loss of our Peregrines, after 14 successive years of breeding and our Willow Tit population is holding steady, though at a reduced level from the peak years. Overall, the trend for Woolston's birds is an upward one and who knows what 2024 will bring?

**David Bowman**

## THE WEATHER 2023

2023 was a very wet year, with the rainfall total of 1,210mm only a few millimetres below the record of 1,216 in 2012. For the second year in succession the first six months were relatively dry, (381mm) while the period July to December saw huge amounts of rain (829mm). It was also a very windy year, with ten named storms and an ex-hurricane. Despite the high winds it was a warm year with high temperatures, notably in June and September. The well documented effects of climate change continue to cause concern, with 2023 reported to be the warmest year worldwide since records began.

January This was the wettest of the first six months, with 118mm recorded. A very active jet stream brought a succession of depressions into the country and over half the monthly rainfall total between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. High pressure then became established, resulting in frosts, some snow and bitter northerly winds. The cold weather intensified and by the 21<sup>st</sup> all the waters in the Reserve were frozen. The final ten days were mostly dry and a little milder.

February was by far the driest month of the year, with just 11.5mm recorded. It began mild with 13°C recorded on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. This changed a few days later to frosty nights and dry sunny days. The quiet conditions were then replaced by the first named storm, Otto, with strong winds but little in the way of precipitation. Mild spring-like weather from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> soon gave way to cold north-east winds as high pressure became established and temperatures were near to freezing at night.

March in contrast was a wet month, with 108.5mm making it the wettest March for 30 years, according to the Meteorological Office. The first week, however, was dry with high pressure dominating until the 5<sup>th</sup>. Atlantic depressions then took charge, resulting in a total of 59mm of rain between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. During this time temperatures varied from cold to mild, depending on the direction of the wind. The 18<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> were some of the best days of the month, with south-west winds and a maximum of 15°C. A significant arrival of Sand Martins and Chiffchaffs occurred. The weather continued to be very mild, exceptionally so on the 30<sup>th</sup> when 17°C was recorded. The final three days, however, were very wet.

April had below average rainfall (52mm), most of which occurred in the first ten days. The days remained mild during this time, although over-night frosts occurred on several dates. Sunny weather saw the first Orange Tip butterflies on the wing. There was then a significant change to cooler windy weather, courtesy of Storm Noa. Gusts in excess of 50mph were recorded on the 11<sup>th</sup>, while the following day was so cold with the wind from the north-east that it felt more like January or February. The weather remained cool and windy for much of the rest of the month, until finally beginning to warm up with 18°C recorded on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and at last many insects were on the wing.

May with 45.5mm was another dry month, and in fact was the second driest month of the year. Temperatures rose to 18-20°C on many days. Apart from the very wet 10<sup>th</sup> much of the rest of May was dry with high pressure established. Water levels on the Reserve began to fall as no rain was recorded in the final 11 days.

June Little changed during the first ten days, which were settled, dry and increasingly warm. Temperatures of 28°C on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 31°C on the 12<sup>th</sup> were some of the highest of the year. Thundery conditions with much lightning finally brought the long dry spell to an end. Several drier days followed before a total of 46mm of rain fell during the second half of June – a high proportion of the month's total. The final few days were cooler, but over-all June 2023 broke many records and the

Meteorological Office reported it to have been the hottest June since 1884. It also indicated that it was the fourth sunniest June since 1910. All, however, was about to change!

July was the wettest month of the year, with 177mm recorded. It was much cooler than June, with squally north-west winds on many days in the first week. High pressure led to a brief respite on the 13<sup>th</sup>, which was warm and humid. Cool, windy weather returned the following day, however, making it feel more like early April. The 23<sup>rd</sup> was particularly wet with 38mm, the highest total for one day during the year. The 24<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> were much warmer, although 20mm of torrential rain on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 16mm on the 31<sup>st</sup> left the Reserve awash. The Meteorological Office reported it to have been the wettest July since 1884!

August was an unsettled month with rain and cool north-west winds in the first week, due to Storm Antoni. By the 7<sup>th</sup>, however, the wind direction changed to the south and temperatures peaked at a hot 27°C. More unsettled weather returned for a few days, but this was soon replaced by warm weather until 24<sup>th</sup>, apart from yet another named storm, Betty, on the 18<sup>th</sup>. The 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> were wet, the next three days again warm, before a return to cool weather in the final two days of the month. The rainfall total for August was 106mm.

September, with 88mm, was the driest of the final five months. The first ten days were dry, sunny and increasingly warm. With high pressure established and southerly winds temperatures rose from 24°C on the 3<sup>rd</sup> to a peak of 27°C from 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup>, and with high humidity it became unbearably hot. From the 10<sup>th</sup> the weather became unsettled with heavy rain on the 12<sup>th</sup>, but it remained warm. A windy spell followed as ex-hurricane Lee arrived from the Atlantic, dropping 23mm of rain on to the Reserve on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Its effects were felt for several days and although temperatures were warm Storm Agnes brought gale force winds on the 27<sup>th</sup>. This soon passed through and warm days returned. The 30<sup>th</sup>, however, was wet and set the scene for the high rainfall totals in the final three months. The Meteorological Office reported this month as one of the warmest Septembers on record.

October was the third wettest month of the year, with 150mm recorded. It began windy and cool with showers, but by the 6<sup>th</sup> southerly winds became established; in the following days temperatures peaked at 22°C. A cold front then brought much rain and temperatures as low as 9°C. Storm Babet arrived from the south-west and proved to be one of the most damaging storms of the year (particularly in Scotland), with 69mm of rain falling between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. The final week was one of sunshine and showers, with cold misty mornings.

November was the joint second wettest month, with 154mm recorded. It was dominated by strong winds and two named storms. The first, Storm Ciaran, produced some of the heaviest rain of the year and gale force winds between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup>. A 'conveyor belt' of rain followed, with 101mm falling between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. The month was generally cool, apart from the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> which were the only days that were dry and mild. The second storm, Debi, brought strong winds and heavy rain. A cold front moved south on the 24<sup>th</sup> with heavy overnight frosts (-5°C on the 29<sup>th</sup>) and all the waters on the Reserve froze over.

December recorded the same rainfall total as November (154mm). In this very windy month four named storms hit the Eyes. The cold weather in the previous month intensified during the first week, with severe frosts, snow and sleet. Milder and very wet weather followed with the arrival of Storm Elin on the 9<sup>th</sup> and Storm Fergus the next day. From the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> a total of 48mm of rain was recorded as well as gale force winds. The 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> were dry and mild before Storm Pia arrived with gale force winds



and heavy rain in the days before Christmas. Boxing Day was particularly mild and sunny, but ended with Storm Gerrit bringing more rain and gusty winds. The final day of the year was extremely wet, (20mm) and this continued into the New Year, resulting in widespread flooding across the country and extremely high-water levels on the Reserve.

**Brian Martin**



*No. 4 bed west cell*

*John Tymon*



## **BIRDS: SYSTEMATIC LIST**

### **Grey Partridge**

*Perdix perdix*

*Red listed*

There was no evidence of a recovery in the fortunes of this once common resident. The only record was of four in the wood to the north of No.1 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> April.

### **Pheasant**

*Phasianus colchicus*

This species has declined in recent years but numbers appear to have stabilised with a Reserve-wide population of around 25. On 28<sup>th</sup> February 15 were found on No.3 bed including ten feeding on the seed crop. The breeding bird surveys in spring found four on the northern half of No.4 bed and others in the rest of the Reserve. Given the information received and allowing for the fact that there is certainly a degree of under-recording it would be reasonable to assume a Reserve-wide population of between 25 and 30. Breeding certainly occurred; on 8<sup>th</sup> July a female with two young was on the north bank of No.2 bed and in early August a brood of two was seen on Butchersfield Tip on two occasions. Only single figure counts were submitted towards the end of the year with a total of eight present on 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

### **Canada Goose**

*Branta canadensis*

Numbers were well above average in the first winter period, followed by a new record number of breeding pairs.

During January there were peak counts of 236 on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 178 on the WeBS of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 108 on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Large flocks remained into early spring, including 156 on 18<sup>th</sup> February and 97 on 22<sup>nd</sup> March.

The first brood (five young) appeared on No.3 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> April, with a further two on 2<sup>nd</sup> May and a total of five broods there on 6<sup>th</sup> May. May was, in fact, when most of the early broods were reported. From late May into June numerous broods were seen on the new No.4 wetland and the Mersey. With so many adults and young across the Eyes it was a major challenge to avoid double counting, but it is believed that a minimum of 25 broods hatched and there could have been as many as 27; c.f. 21 in 2021 and 20 in 2022.

A number of creches were noted during the peak of the breeding season, including 14 adults with 43 young on 14<sup>th</sup> May and 10 adults with 21 young of various ages on the 28<sup>th</sup>. A very large count of 225 adults and young was recorded on beds two, three and four on 8<sup>th</sup> July. On the same date a well-grown hybrid Canada Goose/Greylag Goose gosling was associating with an adult Greylag.

In the second half of the year numbers of Canada Geese were about average. The Ringing Team caught four juveniles, one of which was later shot in Warrington.

Monthly maxima:

| J   | F   | M  | A  | M  | J  | J   | A  | S  | O  | N   | D  |
|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|
| 236 | 156 | 97 | 74 | 57 | 63 | 225 | 28 | 22 | 55 | 110 | 68 |

### **Barnacle Goose**

*Branta leucopsis*

A very scarce winter visitor to the Eyes, but a pair bred for the first time in 2023. It is believed that they were feral birds.

Two flew east over No.4 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> April and on 21<sup>st</sup> April two observers reported a ringed bird on No.3 bed. It had been ringed at Knowsley Safari Park as part of a national study of a feral flock. It was seen again the next day on No.4 bed, from where all subsequent sightings were made. On 5<sup>th</sup> May two were present on the west cell of the new wetland, with one sitting on a nest on an island. The incubating bird remained on the nest until June, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> the adults were seen on the water with two small young. The only other sighting was of two adults flying east over No.3 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> June.



*Barnacle Goose*

*David Bowman*

### **Greylag Goose**

*Anser anser*

*Amber listed*

Numbers were below the peak counts of the previous three years, while the breeding population was maintained. Greylag Geese were recorded in every month except August.

The year began with 60 on the Ship Canal at Bollin Point on 15<sup>th</sup> January, and 81 flew over No.3 bed nine days later. Apart from 62 on 1<sup>st</sup> February and 33 on 2<sup>nd</sup> March numbers were below average; it was not until early September that many more returned.

The first two broods were reported on 18<sup>th</sup> April on No.3 bed and the Loop of No.4. Nine pairs hatched young, with the possibility of a tenth on the east pool of No.1 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> July, although given the late date they could have bred elsewhere.

The usual autumn build-up began in early September, with 82 on No.3 bed on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, increasing to 121 on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Fewer were noted in October, but the year ended with the year's peak of 164 on the WeBS count of 18<sup>th</sup> November, and there were 72 recorded on the WeBS count of 16<sup>th</sup> December.

One young bird was caught and ringed on No.3 bed.

Monthly maxima:

| J  | F  | M  | A  | M  | J  | J | A   | S   | O  | N   | D  |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|-----|-----|----|-----|----|
| 81 | 62 | 33 | 31 | 16 | 12 | 9 | n/c | 121 | 24 | 164 | 72 |

### **Pink-footed Goose**

*Anser brachyrhynchus*

*Amber listed*

Compared to 2021 and 2022 the record-breaking numbers of Pink-footed Geese that flew over the Reserve, roosted on No.3 bed and also fed on adjacent farmland, 2023 was a disappointing year for this species. It was only in the final two months that large skeins were observed.

The year began with 100 flying east over No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> January. There were only four counts into double figures in the first four months with 100 on the 6<sup>th</sup> January, 150 on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 120 on 6<sup>th</sup> February and 100 on 13<sup>th</sup> February. After that date very few were seen, with the last early-year record being of a single bird flying north over No.3 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> April. A very sickly bird was present on the Morgan Hide scrape for a few days in late March, but eventually left to the east.

The first returning Pink-footed Goose flew east over No.1 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> September, and 350, in seven skeins, were above No.3 bed on the last day of that month. During October there were a further 12 sightings of birds, mostly flying east, with the maximum of 235 on the 24<sup>th</sup>. It was November, however, that brought a significant increase in numbers. On the 1<sup>st</sup> 500 were feeding on a large flooded field to the south of the Ship Canal that they had favoured in recent years, while on the following day 1900 flew over No.4 bed. The highest count of the year was a flock of 2000 feeding on the field south of the Ship Canal on both 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> November. There were six further sightings, with the last being of 100 flying west over No.2 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> December.

### **Mute Swan**

*Cygnus olor*

*Amber listed*

A good year, with many records submitted and six pairs confirmed breeding. Numbers in the autumn and late winter were notably higher than in 2022.

Mute Swans were present throughout the year, with peak counts frequently made during the thorough coverage of WeBS counts. In January 24 were present on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and 40 on 18<sup>th</sup> February. Similar numbers were recorded in March.

On 25<sup>th</sup> March a bird was on a nest at Woolston Weir, where on 11<sup>th</sup> May a pair was seen with a single cygnet. Other broods followed the next being one of five young on the east cell of No.4 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> May. On 6<sup>th</sup> June a brood of four was present on No.3 bed, and one of four on No.4 bed. Yet another new brood, of four small cygnets, was on the Ship Canal by the Reserve car park on 10<sup>th</sup> June. The final brood (two young) was on the Oxbow between Nos.2 and 3 beds on 13<sup>th</sup> July. Reports of a pair with growing young at Latchford Locks in the early autumn could well relate to the family party of 10<sup>th</sup> June, or have bred elsewhere.

Following the breeding season Mute Swans were common on the Eyes, as the figures below indicate.

Monthly maxima:

|    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| J  | F  | M  | A  | M  | J  | J  | A  | S  | O  | N  | D  |
| 24 | 40 | 37 | 25 | 15 | 13 | 36 | 29 | 40 | 37 | 34 | 40 |

**Whooper Swan**

*Cygnus cygnus*

*Amber listed*

Three on 14<sup>th</sup> October was the only record received.



*Whooper Swan*

*David Bowman*

**Shelduck**  
*Amber listed*

*Tadorna tadorna*

Recorded in every month except September; there were fewer pairs confirmed breeding than in 2022. The new wetland on No.4 bed and the Loop were the only parts of the Reserve where broods were seen.

Overall numbers were similar to last year. Shelduck were present throughout January, with ten resting on the frozen No.3 bed on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 20 on beds two, three and four on the 31<sup>st</sup>. The highest count of the year was 24 on 1<sup>st</sup> March. On 8<sup>th</sup> April a pair was present in suitable breeding habitat on No.2 bed, while on 29<sup>th</sup> April a pair was displaying on the east bund of the east cell on No.4 bed.

The first brood, seven half-grown young, was seen on the Ship Canal by No.2 bed on 21<sup>st</sup> June. In early July a further three broods were found, two on the Loop wetland (four and six young), and the other elsewhere on No.4 bed. Pairs were also present on No.3 bed during the breeding season but there was no evidence of successful breeding.

A high proportion of the young is thought to have fledged.

**Mandarin Duck**

*Aix galericulata*

Only five records were submitted this year, all bar one from the favoured east end of the Reserve. One pair did breed however, with four young seen accompanying a female on 1<sup>st</sup> June.

**Garganey**  
*Amber listed*

*Spatula querquedula*

2023 was an astonishing year for this scarce summer visitor, with no less than 65 records submitted.

The first sighting was of a pair on No.3 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> April. They remained there for several days, but apart from a drake seen elsewhere on the Eyes a few days later there were no further reports until mid-May. From then on Garganey were ever-present on the Reserve, mostly involving one or two drakes, although four drakes and a female were discovered on 25<sup>th</sup> May. During June up to four were reported on many dates: for example, three moulting drakes and a female on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July breeding was confirmed when a female was seen with at least three small ducklings. A total of 14 Garganey was present on 8<sup>th</sup> July, four moulting adults on one water and ten, (six moulting drakes, one adult female and the three young) on another part of the Reserve. The peak count, however, was a minimum of 16 Garganey present on 11<sup>th</sup> July, the three ducklings and the remainder moulting adults. At least 14 were counted in the following week, with the observer suspecting that all 16 were probably still on the Reserve. Up to four were seen during August, with two on the 31<sup>st</sup> bringing to an end a remarkable year.



*Garganey pair*

*John Tymon*

**Shoveler**

*Spatula clypeata*

*Amber listed*

A common resident and passage migrant and annual breeder in the 1990s and early 2000s at Woolston, this duck had not been proved to breed on the Eyes since 2007.

The year began with numerous Shoveler present across the Reserve on all beds except No.1. On 21<sup>st</sup> January 61 were seen on the WeBS count, increasing to 128 on the 31<sup>st</sup>. The WeBS count on 18<sup>th</sup> February produced the peak count of the year, 272, on all waters of the Reserve, and there were 80 in the wetland in the centre of No.2 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> February. Large flocks remained into March, no doubt augmented by spring passage migrants. The month began with 158 on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 197 on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 212 on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Into April many Shoveler had paired and display was observed, notably on beds three and four, and two pairs were seen displaying on No.2 bed on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Much attention then turned to the new wetland on No.4 bed, where on 28<sup>th</sup> May there was a flock of seven, which included a pair that was reluctant to leave a small patch of reeds on the east cell. A total of 21 Shoveler was present on No. 4 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> June and five days later a female with six small young was found.

Two days later a second brood of at least two young was present on the east cell of No.4 bed. Meanwhile, three pairs were resident on No.3 bed, with much display observed. Unfortunately no broods were seen, but it is possible that breeding could at least have been attempted. Up to 15 were present in the hidden pools in the centre of No.2 bed where trees and scrub limit viewing. Again, it is possible that pairs could have bred, but no evidence of this was obtained. In July a third brood of five



young was found on the west cell of No.4 bed, followed by a fourth on 11<sup>th</sup> July, also on the west cell; this one of eight small ducklings. Clearly the excellent new habitat on No.4 bed was a crucial factor in the successful breeding after so many years.

After the breeding season many Shoveler were still present, with peak numbers recorded during autumn passage with 95 on 5<sup>th</sup> October increasing to 174 on the 14<sup>th</sup>. In November 100 were present on No.3 bed alone on the 1<sup>st</sup>, and 92 on the 18<sup>th</sup>. An excellent year ended with 75 on No.4 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> December.

Monthly maxima:

| J   | F   | M   | A  | M | J  | J  | A  | S  | O   | N   | D  |
|-----|-----|-----|----|---|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|----|
| 128 | 272 | 212 | 45 | 5 | 21 | 55 | 35 | 80 | 174 | 100 | 75 |



*Shoveler*

*David Bowman*

**Gadwall**

*Amber listed*

*Mareca strepera*

One of the most numerous ducks on the Reserve, Gadwall is a Woolston speciality, with huge numbers present in June and July. The peak count this year was well down on the nationally important 1015 in 2022, but nevertheless was very impressive. Many pairs bred.



The year began with large numbers present, even in the freezing conditions in mid-January. The highest counts were of 103 on the 21<sup>st</sup>, 125 on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 143 on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Every water supported good sized flocks, such as 56 on the Loop of No.4 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> January. Three days later 225 were counted across beds two, three and four, and there were other large gatherings throughout February and into early March, including 208 on 18<sup>th</sup> February and 187 on 11<sup>th</sup> March.

Gadwall pair early in the year and on 11<sup>th</sup> February a pair was seen mating on No.3 bed. Twenty-two pairs were seen on No.3 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> March, and remarkably of the 164 present there on 7<sup>th</sup> April the vast majority were paired. The same situation was noted on 19<sup>th</sup> April when 213 were on No.3 bed.

A brood of ten small young on the east cell of No.4 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> June was the first recorded, followed by many more in June and July, with an overall total of 21 broods. The majority were on No.4 bed, with others on No.3, the Loop of No.4 and one on the Mersey. Some large broods were reported, including one of 14 young, two of ten, two of nine and three of eight. A very productive year compared with just seven broods in 2021 and 15 in 2022.

The annual midsummer build-up of Gadwall began in June, with 370 on Nos.3 and 4 beds on the 20<sup>th</sup> , increasing to 530 on No.3 bed alone on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The peak count, however, was 880 on 8<sup>th</sup> July, although it is likely that this was an absolute minimum as the coverage of No.3 bed was said to have been incomplete.

Into the autumn numbers slowly declined, but 462 were recorded on the WeBS count of 14<sup>th</sup> September, 247 on the WeBS of 14<sup>th</sup> October and 202 on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

Monthly maxima:

| J   | F   | M   | A   | M   | J   | J   | A   | S   | O   | N   | D   |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 225 | 208 | 187 | 213 | 205 | 530 | 880 | 240 | 462 | 247 | 153 | 202 |



*Gadwall*

*David Bowman*

**Wigeon***Mareca penelope**Amber listed*

A scarce visitor to Woolston, with small numbers mostly seen on spring and autumn passage. In some years a few pairs linger into late spring.

During January there were six reports, with the maximum being five on the 19<sup>th</sup>. There were only a few sightings of one or two birds in February and early March, but in late March and early April eight were reported on two dates. A pair spent a few days on No.4 bed in mid-May, after which there were no further records until 15<sup>th</sup> August. An unusually high count of 16 on 16<sup>th</sup> September was the only significant number seen in the remainder of the year.

**Mallard***Anas platyrhynchos**Amber listed*

Many records were submitted and there was the joint highest number of broods since 2014.

The year began with large numbers on the Reserve during a very cold spell, peaking at 280 on 21<sup>st</sup> January. Several counts into three figures were made in February and early March.

As always, fewer Mallard were reported as the breeding season approached. The first brood was found on No.2 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> April, after which many others were recorded on many parts of the Reserve, with the last on 26<sup>th</sup> June. An overall total of 29 broods was distributed as follows: 12 on the Mersey, five on the Ship Canal, also five on No.3 bed, four on No.2 bed, two on the Oxbow and one on No.4 bed. This represents the best breeding season at Woolston since 2014, when 34 broods were seen.

*Mallard**David Bowman*

Relatively few Mallard were reported in the second half of the year, with the most significant being 110 on 8<sup>th</sup> July, and from the WeBS counts 143 on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 128 on 14<sup>th</sup> October and 154 on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

In the spring six Mallard were caught and ringed on No.3 bed.

Monthly maxima:

| J   | F   | M   | A  | M  | J  | J   | A  | S   | O   | N   | D   |
|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 280 | 162 | 138 | 59 | 57 | 51 | 110 | 30 | 143 | 128 | 118 | 154 |

### **Pintail**

*Anas acuta*

*Amber listed*

A scarce winter visitor, there were more records than usual in 2023, including several counts in double figures. The majority of sightings were in the first three months, with 12 on 14<sup>th</sup> January and 23 on the 31<sup>st</sup>, the most seen on the Reserve since February 2003. In February 11 were present on the 18<sup>th</sup> and eight in the centre of No.2 bed on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The latter, however, may well have been a minimum number as a large flock of duck was flushed by a nearby Clay Pigeon shoot before a detailed count could be made. A few Pintail lingered into March, and three on No.3 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> April was the final early-year sighting.

The next record was of two on No.3 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> October, followed by five further reports of single birds in November and December. Finally, two were on No.2 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> December.



*Pintail*

*David Spencer*



## Teal

*Anas crecca*

*Amber listed*

A much improved showing this year, notably in the first few months, with wintering numbers higher than for a number of years. As always, a few were seen in the summer, but without any evidence of breeding.

The year began with 900 on No.4 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> January, notably during cold weather. The east cell of the new No.4 wetland was particularly favoured, although reports came from all parts of the Reserve. An influx in the final ten days saw 1990 present on the WeBS count of the 21<sup>st</sup> January and 2038 on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The month ended with 2250 on Beds 2, 3 and 4 – the highest count since 4000 in January 2002 during cold weather and good feeding conditions. On 18<sup>th</sup> February 2085 were still present, after which many departed, with no more than 290 in March being the most significant count until the autumn. During spring and summer small numbers were reported, with some paired, but unlike 2021 breeding was not proved.

Returning birds began to arrive from late June, with the Loop of No.4 bed favoured at that time. The first three-figure count was of 140 on the WeBS count of 12<sup>th</sup> September, with 392 on 18<sup>th</sup> November and a peak at the end of the year of 1007 on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

The Ringing Team on No.3 bed trapped 45 Teal between 4<sup>th</sup> February and 2<sup>nd</sup> April, but unsuitable water levels prevented the duck trap from being set later in the year.



*Teal*

*David Bowman*

Interesting recoveries of Teal from Woolston were one ringed on the Eyes on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023 shot in Finland on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023. Of two others ringed on the Reserve in 2020 one was shot at Pas-de-Calais in France and the other in Denmark, both in 2023.

Monthly maxima:

| J    | F    | M   | A  | M | J  | J  | A  | S   | O   | N   | D    |
|------|------|-----|----|---|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 2250 | 2085 | 290 | 75 | 4 | 50 | 67 | 55 | 140 | 300 | 392 | 1007 |

**Pochard**  
*Red listed*

*Aythya ferina*

Without doubt Pochard was the stand-out wildfowl species at Woolston in 2023, as a result of the record number of pairs that bred.

The year began with very small numbers present during the first week, when most of the waters were frozen. As milder weather arrived double-figure counts became the norm by the end of January, with 32 on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 33 (24 drakes) two days later. As always, February sees peak numbers, with 86 recorded on the WeBS count of the 18<sup>th</sup>, and 79 still present on 1<sup>st</sup> March. Many remained into April, with 43 noted on No.3 bed on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Typically, drakes greatly outnumbered females in most flocks.

What followed was extraordinary. On 18<sup>th</sup> May 15 sitting females were found on the east cell of the new No.4 wetland. The first brood, however, appeared on No.3 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> May, a female with two small young, which was followed by a second brood there two days later. By 6<sup>th</sup> June nine broods were present on No.3 bed. The first brood on No.4 bed was noted on 8<sup>th</sup> June. After this many more new broods continued to be found on both the main waters, with the last on the west cell of No.4 bed on 14<sup>th</sup> July being the 36<sup>th</sup>, which is by far a record for Woolston, exceeding the previous maximum of 22 in both 1999 and 2005.

Following contact with the Secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel the number of Pochard broods at Woolston in 2023 was 4.2% of the United Kingdom breeding population, with only two other wetlands in the country supporting more breeding pairs than Woolston.

Records indicate that many young fledged, with the high count of 90 on 8<sup>th</sup> July including many well grown young.

From August Pochard numbers on the Reserve declined rapidly with no more than 12 recorded in the last five months.

Monthly maxima:

| J  | F  | M  | A  | M  | J  | J  | A  | S | O | N  | D  |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|----|----|
| 33 | 86 | 79 | 43 | 19 | 22 | 90 | 12 | 4 | 4 | 12 | 10 |

## Tufted Duck

*Aythya fuligula*

A much improved showing this year, especially in the breeding season that had been a disaster in 2022.

The year began with high numbers present in freezing weather, notably on the Weir basin, the Mersey and at Bollin Point. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 988 were on the Reserve, the year's maximum count, with 526 on 18<sup>th</sup> February and 571 on 1<sup>st</sup> March. The 231 recorded on 21<sup>st</sup> March was almost certainly a minimum as many more were known to be present on the River Mersey, which was not counted on that day.

In April a breeding birds survey found five pairs on the No.2 wetland, with others known to be present on other parts of the Reserve.

The first brood, of nine newly hatched young, was found on No.3 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> June, followed by another two broods on that bed four days later. On 21<sup>st</sup> June a female with nine young was on the Loop of No.4 bed, and many more broods were recorded across the Reserve throughout June and July. A careful assessment indicates that in all 25 pairs bred. In addition, some broods could have been missed on No.2 bed where Tufted Duck pairs were known to have been present in the breeding season. It is pleasing to see the number of successful breeding pairs return to the high levels of previous years even though the record year remains 2011 when an amazing 39 broods hatched.



*Tufted Duck*

*David Bowman*

On 24<sup>th</sup> June a Pochard brood on No.3 bed included two Tufted Duck young of the same size.

Following the breeding season average numbers were present, and it was not until November that wintering counts began to increase, with peaks of 399 on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 454 on the WeBS count of 16<sup>th</sup> December.

Monthly maxima:

| J   | F   | M   | A   | M  | J  | J  | A  | S   | O   | N   | D   |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 988 | 526 | 365 | 123 | 20 | 23 | 83 | 34 | 108 | 137 | 399 | 454 |

**Scaup***Aythya marila**Red listed*

A scarce winter visitor. The only records this year were of a second calendar year drake on No.3 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> January, a juvenile drake and juvenile female on No.4 bed on 23<sup>rd</sup> November and a first-winter drake, also on No.4 bed, between 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> December.

*Scaup (foreground)**David Bowman***Common Scoter***Melanitta nigra*

An uncommon visitor to the Eyes, the only record this year was of a drake that was briefly on No.4 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> March, before flying off high.

**Goldeneye***Bucephala clangula**Red listed*

An increasingly scarce visitor to Woolston, just five records were submitted in the first winter period, with a maximum of four at Bollin Point on 28<sup>th</sup> January. Interestingly, one of the birds was reported to be displaying.

There were no further reports until 14<sup>th</sup> November when a female was present on No.4 bed. Two (not sexed) were again on No.4 bed a week later, and finally two were on No.3 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> December.

**Goosander***Mergus merganser*

Just six records were received, the first an adult female on 21<sup>st</sup> January. Two days later two, a male and a female, were at Bollin Point on the Ship Canal. In February one was on No.3 bed on the 18<sup>th</sup> and three, a male and two females, were at Bollin Point on 15<sup>th</sup> April. The only other record submitted was of an adult male flying north-west over No.4 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> October.



**Cuckoo***Cuculus canorus**Red listed*

There were only two records this year. One was heard calling at dawn on No.4 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> April and the only other record was from No.3 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> May. This is the worst year for the species in the Reserve's history. They were once a regular sight and found on all four beds but in recent years have declined significantly in common with other areas of England. However, just two records compared to the 12 records in 2022 is concerning and hopefully does not reflect a further and permanent decline.

**Alpine Swift***Tachymarptis melba**Red listed*

One was reported over No.2 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> April and is the first record for the Reserve. There was a country wide influx of this species in the spring. Full details of the sighting have been submitted to the County Recorder and a decision is awaited.

**Swift***Apus**Red listed*

The first record of the year was of one over No.3 bed on the relatively early date of 22<sup>nd</sup> April. Small numbers were then seen during remainder of April and early May with a maximum count of 14 on 2<sup>nd</sup> May. It was not until 26<sup>th</sup> May that the first significant numbers were seen, when 50 were feeding over the west cell of No.4 bed. The peak count of the year was 300 on 2<sup>nd</sup> June again on No.4 bed.

*Swift**David Bowman*

It appeared to be a poor breeding season on the Westy estate adjacent to the Reserve. After a late arrival there were initially hopeful signs in late May and June that it would be a good breeding season. However, then came a period of very wet weather which led to virtually all the Swifts in Westy and elsewhere disappearing for weeks. It was at this time that large numbers were seen flying south along the east coast seemingly leaving the country. Some did return to Westy when the weather improved but not in large numbers resulting in the view that it had not been a successful breeding season.

On the Reserve in July there were regular counts of up to a 100 on No.3 and 4 beds with a peak count of 140 which dropped in ahead of a squall on 27<sup>th</sup> July. Numbers decreased in August with few counts in double figures; the maximum was 67 seen flying south on the 19<sup>th</sup>. The final sighting of the year was of two on 5<sup>th</sup> September.

### **Feral Pigeon**

*Columba livia*

There were 25 records submitted of this species which is often overlooked by observers. As is usual the highest numbers were at Latchford Locks with a peak count of 200 on 15<sup>th</sup> December. Away from the locks, all other counts were in single figures and were mostly of overflying birds. Four were seen on the Thelwall Viaduct where they are thought to breed.

### **Stock Dove**

*Columba oenas*

Stock Doves are a regular species on the Reserve and are thought to breed in small numbers on all four beds. All counts were in single figures with maxima of three on No.1 bed, six on No.2 bed and nine on No.3 and 4 beds; three pairs were seen under the Thelwall Viaduct on 4<sup>th</sup> April.

The ringers on No.1 bed caught and ringed just one on 15<sup>th</sup> March. On No.3 bed two were ringed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April and 27<sup>th</sup> May. As is typical for Woolston, both were adults. The mean for this bed is three per year.

### **Woodpigeon**

*Columba palumbus*

A common and widespread breeding species on the Reserve. During breeding bird surveys nine were recorded on No.1 bed, 25 on No.2 bed, eight on No.3 bed and 15 on No.4 bed. There were some large southerly movements in the autumn and winter including 500 on 7<sup>th</sup> October and in November 7,000 on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 1,300 on the 11<sup>th</sup>. In addition to these movements there was a roost of 900 in the No.4 bed wet woodland on 14<sup>th</sup> November.

The ringers on No.1 bed, as the previous year, ringed just one, caught on 6<sup>th</sup> February. On No.3 bed three were ringed; the average is 4.55.

### **Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto***

Nineteen records were submitted, all of overflying birds. Most records were from No.4 bed with a maximum count of four seen flying north on 24<sup>th</sup> August. There were also records from Latchford

Locks, Woolston Weir and No.3 bed. This species has bred occasionally in the past but there was no evidence of it this year. They do breed on surrounding housing estates but numbers are considered to be declining in these areas.

### **Water Rail**

*Rallus aquaticus*

This often, elusive reed bed resident had a successful year and has now colonised the new wetland area of No.4 bed which accounted for about a fifth of the 128 reported sightings. Records were received from all areas of the Reserve throughout the year with the exception of No.2 bed where difficulties of access to the centre of the bed make surveying problematic. The first of the year was one on the west cell of No.4 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> January, and two were on No.3 bed on the same date. The highest total of the year was on 18<sup>th</sup> February when the WeBS count produced a Reserve total of 12. Six were on No.3 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> March. There were fewer reports as the breeding season approached and the first young appeared on 20<sup>th</sup> May when a small chick was found in a net ride on No.3 bed. A minimum of four broods was reported with three on No.3 bed and one on No.1 bed. Post breeding counts of significance included six on 15<sup>th</sup> July, eight on 18<sup>th</sup> November (WeBS count) and four on 16<sup>th</sup> December. A single bird was ringed on No.1 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> February and three on No.3 bed, all adults, on 26<sup>th</sup> August.

### **Moorhen**

*Gallinula chloropus*

Numbers appears to be stable and were very similar to 2022. There is probably a degree of under recording as birds are usually seen in small numbers and are often ignored. The year began with a count of 20 on Nos. 3 and 4 beds on 5<sup>th</sup> January. Later that month eleven were on No.3 bed including five with colour rings. These are part of a national project to look at the movements of this species. By the end of January 24 were counted across the Reserve and the WeBS count on 18<sup>th</sup> February resulted in a total of 27. Birds were less obvious as the breeding season got underway and the first young were seen on 20<sup>th</sup> May. Breeding was quite successful with a minimum total of 15 broods, an improvement on the 11 found in 2022. As usual the majority (ten) were on No.3 bed and of the rest two were on the new wetland, two on the Loop of No.4 bed and the other on No.1 bed. The highest count of the year was of 32 on Nos. 3 and 4 beds alone on 13<sup>th</sup> July so it seems likely that the Reserve total was around 40. Numbers remained in the low twenties from September to November with a slight decline in December. Overall, there seems to be little seasonal variation in numbers.

The ringing team on No.3 bed colour ringed six new birds and a further three were re-trapped.

### **Coot**

*Fulica atra*

This common resident was seen in good numbers throughout the year and the new wetland on No.4 bed proved particularly productive. The year began with reports of 60 or more, and by the end of January over a hundred were present. Numbers continued to increase during February and the WeBS count on the 18<sup>th</sup> produced a total of 196. By early April pairs were seen nest building and the first brood of two young was reported from No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> April. Although over a hundred were present during the breeding season the number of broods was disappointing with about 15 seen compared with 35 in 2022. Of these, six were on No.3 bed, four on No.4 bed and a further two on The Loop.

The remaining three were found on No.1 bed, the centre of No.2 bed and the Weir Basin. Post breeding numbers were very similar to 2022 with 325 reported on 8<sup>th</sup> July and 348 on the WeBS count on 16<sup>th</sup> December which proved to be the highest of the year. Over two hundred were present on No.4 bed alone at the year end. The ringing team on No.3 bed trapped and ringed five; two on 14<sup>th</sup> January and three on 26<sup>th</sup> August. A single bird was re-trapped.

### **Little Grebe**

*Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Another excellent year at this, its main breeding site in Cheshire. Near record numbers of birds were reported, and many young fledged. The large new wetland on No.4 bed has already proved attractive to this grebe.

The year began with the highest numbers reported on the monthly WeBS surveys - 11 on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 20 on 18<sup>th</sup> February and 12 on 11<sup>th</sup> March. By the end of March Little Grebes were trilling across the Reserve and 19 were present on 22<sup>nd</sup> April WeBS count. The first confirmed breeding was two broods on the west cell of No.4 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> May, with a third brood and four calling adults on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Not to be outdone up to six pairs with young were present on No.3 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> June, with many others appearing almost daily. By 23<sup>rd</sup> June 17 broods had been seen, with two others on 25<sup>th</sup> July and 8<sup>th</sup> August. With a pair known to be in the centre of No.2 bed and single birds reported throughout the breeding season on one of the No.1 bed pools, a minimum of 19 pairs bred, and possibly as many as 21. Many fully-fledged young were present during and post breeding, making 2023 one of the most successful breeding seasons ever at Woolston for this species.

In the autumn the WeBS counts recorded high numbers – 30 on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 33 on 14<sup>th</sup> October and 15 on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

### **Great Crested Grebe**

*Podiceps cristatus*

Although many were present during the year it was another disappointing breeding season.

During the bitterly cold weather in the first two weeks, when most of the main pools froze over, no more than three were reported. As temperatures rose 13 were at Bollin Point, at the east end of the Reserve, on 28<sup>th</sup> January, including a displaying pair. In February and March most sightings were on No.3 bed and at Woolston Weir. On 11<sup>th</sup> February four displaying pairs were on No.3 bed, with three pairs also present on the Weir Pool and the river. On the same date the WeBS count recorded the year's maximum of 32 across the Eyes.

As the breeding season began nest building was reported and the prospect for it being successful seemed good, but sadly this was not to be. The first brood, of two very small young, appeared on No.3 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> May, followed by two others by the end of the month. In all, four broods hatched on No.3 bed, but from careful observations it is doubtful if more than two young fledged. Of the three pairs in the Woolston Weir area, including the annual pair on the Weir Basin, it is believed that only one nest was successful. Two young hatched, one of which soon disappeared, while the other chick was last seen when large but unfledged. Thus, from the seven pairs just two, or possibly three, young fledged. This has been a familiar outcome in recent years.

There were few sightings on the new No.4 wetland, where the supply of food is probably limited.

In the second half of the year reports of Great-crested Grebe were scarce, and the only significant one was of 17 on the 16<sup>th</sup> September WeBS count.

On 16<sup>th</sup> April an adult Great-crested Grebe was found on the Ship Canal track by a member of the No.3 bed Ringing Team. The bird was in good condition, was ringed and safely released.

### **Black-necked Grebe**

*Podiceps nigricollis*

*Amber listed*

Another excellent breeding season, although the number of broods seen was slightly lower than the record-breaking year of 2022.

The first returning bird, in full summer plumage, was on No.3 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> February, which is the earliest date ever recorded at Woolston. It remained on its own until 15<sup>th</sup> March when three were present, two of which were displaying. There then appears to have been a departure for a few days, which often occurs, and this co-incided with an arrival at Pennington Flash in Greater Manchester. Later in March Black-necked Grebes began to be reported on No.4 bed, while on 30<sup>th</sup> March a pair was nest-building on No.3 bed and two days later 17 were present on the Eyes, increasing to an early-year peak of 20 on 21<sup>st</sup> April.

Broods began to appear in May, the first being two on the 18<sup>th</sup> when there were also another three sitting birds. A week later four broods were on No.3 bed, increasing to seven on 27<sup>th</sup>, one of which was of three half-grown young. Adults with young were everywhere on No.3 and a total of 21 (10 adults and 11 young) was recorded on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Woolston's first brood of four was noted on 4<sup>th</sup> June. Two days later a detailed count of Black-necked Grebes on the Eyes found 15 adults and 15 young on No.3 bed and 6 adults and 6 young on No.4 bed. One of the large young on No.3 bed at that time was taken and eaten by a Lesser Black-backed Gull, the only case of predation reported in 2023.

More new broods appeared in June, 17<sup>th</sup> July and the last on 25<sup>th</sup> July. Many fully independent young were present in July and August and although it is never easy to assess the number that fledge, as young Black-necked Grebes depart over many weeks, it is likely to have been a minimum of 15. The last adult was seen on 24<sup>th</sup> August and the last, juveniles (three), on 16<sup>th</sup> September.

For the first time Black-necked Grebes bred on three of Woolston's four beds, and remarkably another wetland in the region had a higher number of breeding pairs than Woolston, while at least two pairs bred on a small wetland in another part of Warrington. It is tempting to conclude that those sites were colonised by birds raised at Woolston in 2022, but one cannot be sure. It will be interesting to see how breeding numbers are distributed in 2024, especially with recent information indicating that the site with the higher population than Woolston in 2023 has had much of its water removed. This will be a major setback for the very small United Kingdom breeding population of Black-necked Grebes; the displaced birds having to relocate elsewhere. It is possible that Woolston, not too far away and with its new expanded wetland, could be that place.



*Black-necked Grebe*

*David Spencer*

**Oystercatcher**

*Haematopus ostralegus*

*Amber listed*

More than 80 records of this conspicuous large wader were received between 6<sup>th</sup> February and 9<sup>th</sup> September. Nearly all sightings were from Nos. 3 and 4 beds but there were also three reports from No.1 bed. On 25<sup>th</sup> February three were on No.3 bed and a further two on the west cell of No.4 bed. Three days later a pair was seen displaying on one of the nest rafts whilst on 20<sup>th</sup> March six were on the east cell of No.4 bed. A total of seven was present on 2<sup>nd</sup> April and two were seen regularly throughout the rest of that month. This species has not bred at Woolston since the 1940's so it was exciting to find a pair on a nest on an island on the west cell of No.4 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> May. However, although the birds were still present two days later the nest appeared to have been abandoned. In spite of this disappointment good numbers remained throughout the breeding season with five on No.4 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> May and up to four throughout June. A minimum of four was reported across the Reserve on 8<sup>th</sup> July and up to four remained during the rest of the month. Two were seen on 1<sup>st</sup> August and singles were present until 9<sup>th</sup> September when two on No.3 bed were the last of an encouraging year.

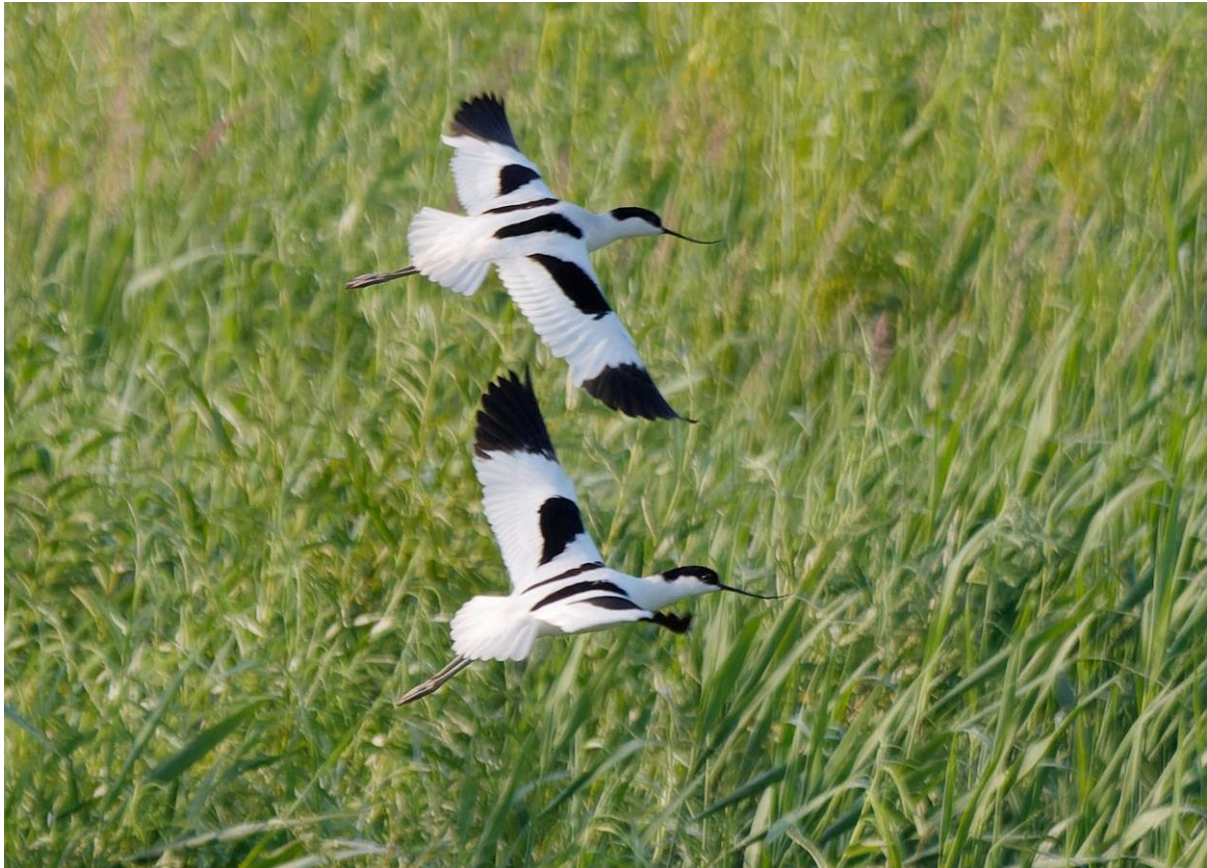
**Avocet**

*Recurvirostra avosetta*

*Amber listed*

After a blank year in 2022 it was good to receive three reports of this attractive wader. All sightings were from No.4 bed; two on 28<sup>th</sup> April and two on 21<sup>st</sup> May. The final record was of two which flew in from the east and circled the bed three times before departing to the west without landing.





*Avocet*

*David Bowman*

**Lapwing**  
*Red listed*

*Vanellus vanellus*

Our most common wader was present throughout the year although some records were of birds over flying the Reserve. The year began with 15 on the nest rafts on No.3 bed and a further 40 on No.4 bed. The next few days saw large flocks of 270 and 400 flying west over No.3 bed, the latter being the highest count of the first winter period. The WeBS count on 21<sup>st</sup> January resulted in a Reserve wide total of 210 and by the end of the month up to 60 were on the new wetland on No.4 bed, feeding amongst Teal. About 120 were on the east cell on 1<sup>st</sup> February and on the 11<sup>th</sup> 45 landed on the nest rafts on No.3 bed. Early March saw four territorial males on an island on the west cell of No.4 bed and one appeared to be on territory on No.1 bed on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Other March sightings of note included 60 on an island on the west cell on the 5<sup>th</sup> and a pair displaying there on the 25<sup>th</sup>. A male was displaying on No.3 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> April and by the end of the month five pairs were present on No.4 bed. The first young were seen on 17<sup>th</sup> May when a female with two very small chicks was on the east cell. Around the same time two pairs were on No.3 bed. On 17<sup>th</sup> June three broods were seen on the east cell of No.4 bed, one of three, one of two and the third comprising two newly hatched young. A further brood was found on the east cell on 11<sup>th</sup> July making a minimum total of four broods, all on No.4 bed. Over a hundred adults were present on Nos. 3 and 4 beds on 15<sup>th</sup> July and good numbers were reported from the WeBS counts in September and October, the latter being of 375 mostly over flying birds. The highest counts of the year occurred during October and November, with 450 over flying on 21<sup>st</sup> October, 475 moving west over No.4 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November and the highest total of the year, 650 on the migration watch on



11<sup>th</sup> November. There were several counts in excess of two hundred over flying during November and December.



*Lapwing*

*David Bowman*

**Golden Plover**

*Pluvialis apricaria*

There was just one sighting of this infrequent visitor. Two were seen on the migration watch on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

**Ringed Plover**

*Charadrius hiaticula*

*Red listed*

There were twelve reports of this wader between 15<sup>th</sup> April and 6<sup>th</sup> July. The first record was of a pair near the elevated pools on No.1 bed and at the end of that month one flew east over No.3 bed. All the remaining sightings were from No.4 bed. On 16<sup>th</sup> May three were present including one of the *tundrae* subspecies. Singles were noted on two other dates in May. Between 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> June there were a series of reports of up to three, many being *tundrae* birds. The final sightings were of two on 22<sup>nd</sup> June and one on the east cell on 6<sup>th</sup> July. There was no suggestion of breeding this year.

**Little Ringed Plover***Charadrius dubius*

The first records of this regular spring and summer visitor were from No.1 bed where singles were seen on 18<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> March. Further March records were received from both No.3 and No.4 beds with two in front of the John Morgan Hide on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Two were on No.4 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April and on the 15<sup>th</sup> five on No.1 bed included two pairs by the elevated pools. Later in the month up to three were reported from No.4 bed and sightings continued through May, again mostly from No.4 bed where up to two were present. A further pair was on No.1 bed from where four were reported on 1<sup>st</sup> June. Two pairs bred successfully on No.1 bed. A juvenile was seen on No.4 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> July but it was thought to have bred elsewhere.

**Whimbrel***Numenius phaeopus**Red listed*

Just two records were received this year. Two flew west at dawn over No.3 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> May and one flew east over No.4 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> July.

**Curlew***Numenius arquata**Red listed*

There were eleven sightings of this large wader. The first was on the February WEBS count (18<sup>th</sup>) when two were present. Three flew north west on 5<sup>th</sup> March and singles were reported on three occasions that month, two from No.3 bed and one from No.1 bed. On 4<sup>th</sup> April two were flushed from the east cell of No.4 bed and later that day two more were seen flying west. The final spring record was of one flying west over No.4 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> April. Autumn passage consisted of singles on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> June, 4<sup>th</sup> July when one was on the east cell, and 9<sup>th</sup> September. Most of these were over flying the Reserve.

**Bar-tailed Godwit***Limosa lapponica**Amber listed*

There was a single record of this rare visitor. One flew south over No.3 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> May. This was the first sighting since 2019.

**Black-tailed Godwit***Limosa limosa**Red listed*

Unlike 2022 when there were no spring records, this year there were sightings from 4<sup>th</sup> April to 2<sup>nd</sup> November, all from No. 3 and 4 beds. On 4<sup>th</sup> April five flew west over No.4 bed and on 30<sup>th</sup> May seven landed on the east cell. June saw five records including the highest total of the year (22) on No.4 bed on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Up to four were on No.3 bed between 20<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> June when 15 flew west. Single figure numbers were noted on both No.3 and No.4 beds during July and then sightings tailed off until 5<sup>th</sup> September when eleven flew south over No.3 bed. In October three and two were on No.3 bed on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> and the final report was of two on No.4 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. Numbers continue to decline in recent years and the reasons for this are unclear.

**Ruff***Calidris pugnax**Red listed*

Eleven records of this occasional visitor were received. There was a single spring sighting of one on the east cell on 25<sup>th</sup> April. On 30<sup>th</sup> June one arrived on No.3 bed where it remained for three days before relocating to No.4 bed where it stayed until 11<sup>th</sup> July. The remaining records were of a juvenile which flew in from the east onto No.4 bed, circled and flew back east, and one found on the WeBS count on 16<sup>th</sup> September.

*Ruff**David Spencer***Dunlin***Calidris alpina**Red listed*

The ten records submitted were nearly all from the new wetland on No.4 bed. The first was noted there on 26<sup>th</sup> April and was seen again the following day. Four were present on 28<sup>th</sup> April and the next day a westward movement of 11 included at least five dropping in to the east cell before moving off. Spring records concluded with singles on 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> May.

There were just three reports of autumn passage; two flew west over No.4 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> July and there were two records of singles on No.3 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> October when one landed on the John Morgan Hide scrape, and the last of the year on 24<sup>th</sup> October.

**Woodcock**  
*Red listed*

*Scolopax rusticola*

Of the 16 records submitted eight were in January when two were on each of Nos. 1 and 3 beds and a single on No.4 bed. The only other reports in the first winter period was of one on the February WeBS count and one on No.3 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> March. There were five November sightings; singles were reported from No.1 bed with two found there on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The year ended with three on No.3 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> November. One was ringed on No.1 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> February, only the third there since 1995. Fewer records than usual were received but given the secretive nature of this species it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to its prevalence on the Reserve.

**Jack Snipe**

*Lymnocyptes minimus*

The twelve records were in both winter periods from January until 18<sup>th</sup> March and from 14<sup>th</sup> October to the year end. No more than two were seen early in the year. Most were from No.1 bed where the elevated pools proved attractive. There were also four sightings from No.4 bed and this species appears to be increasing in number at Woolston in recent years. The highest counts of the year came in November; on the 11<sup>th</sup> eight were found at the elevated pools on No.1 bed and a week later the WeBS count produced a total of six including four on No.4 bed.

**Snipe**

*Amber listed*

*Gallinago gallinago*

Records were received throughout the year and the usual gap in sightings around June and July did not occur. On the downside, numbers were low and this species seems to have declined at Woolston in the last couple of years. Most reports were from Nos. 3 and 4 beds and there were winter sightings from No.1 bed but no more than two were found in that area of the Reserve. Very few were seen at the beginning of the year until 24<sup>th</sup> April when ten were on No.3 bed. Again, very low numbers were reported thereafter, the exceptions being 13 on the migration watch on 11<sup>th</sup> November, which proved to be the highest count of the year, and four on WeBS counts in September, November and December.

**Grey Phalarope**

*Phalaropus fulicarius*

This species had never been recorded at Woolston so it was a pleasant surprise when a first winter bird was found on the Weir Basin on 20<sup>th</sup> September. It flew upriver but could not be relocated.





*Grey Phalarope*

*David Spencer*

**Common Sandpiper**

*Actitis hypoleucos*

*Amber listed*

There were reports of spring and autumn passage from both No.3 and No.4 beds. The first was one on No.4 bed on 22<sup>nd</sup> April and two were seen there a week later. Singles were reported from No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> April and 22<sup>nd</sup> May, the last of the spring records. Autumn passage began on 8<sup>th</sup> July when one flew west along the River Mersey north of No.2 bed, the only record from this part of the Reserve. Five were on the Loop of No.4 bed on 12<sup>th</sup> July and three on No.4 bed on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Otherwise only one or two were present on a number of dates in July and there was then a gap until 20<sup>th</sup> August. Singles were seen regularly from then until 12<sup>th</sup> September. An interesting record was of two juveniles on No.3 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> August but it was not thought they were a result of breeding on the Reserve.

**Green Sandpiper**

*Tringa ochropus*

*Amber listed*

This is now the most common Sandpiper on the Reserve and the year began with records of overwintering birds during January. One was on the west cell of No.4 bed on the 5<sup>th</sup> and one flew along the canal to the south of No.1 bed on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The only other spring record was of one on No.2 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April. None were then reported until post-breeding birds began to appear on 28<sup>th</sup> June when one was seen on No.1 bed. Most subsequent records were from Nos.3 and 4 beds and were of singles until an increase in numbers in mid-July. Four were on the Loop of No.4 bed on the 13<sup>th</sup> and the highest total of the year came two days later when four were again on the Loop and a further two on No.3 bed. Two were found on No.1 bed on 24<sup>th</sup> July. Records continued into August and on the 8<sup>th</sup> three were on No.4

bed and a fourth on No.3 bed. Up to three were present during September and there were three October sightings of singles until the 23<sup>rd</sup>. There were no further reports.

No birds were ringed on No.3 bed due to a combination of poor weather and high water levels.

**Redshank**

*Tringa totanus*

*Amber listed*

In what was a fairly average year for this species, 17 records were submitted from Nos.3 and 4 beds. The first was a single on the east cell on 1<sup>st</sup> April and the remaining records were of just one or two; in total 12 sightings from No.4 bed and five from No.3 bed. There was no suggestion of breeding having been attempted.



*Redshanks and Common Sandpiper*

*David Spencer*

**Wood Sandpiper**

*Tringa glareola*

*Amber listed*

This visitor has become more frequent and has been recorded in seven of the last eight years. One was found on the east cell of No.4 bed at dawn on 25<sup>th</sup> April and two were in the same location on 4<sup>th</sup> May where they remained until the 6<sup>th</sup>. One was seen there the following day and what was probably the same bird was reported regularly until 22<sup>nd</sup> May.



**Greenshank**  
*Amber listed*

*Tringa nebularia*

Just five reports of this elegant wader were received. Singles were found on No.3 bed on four dates; 17<sup>th</sup> April, 27<sup>th</sup> May, 5<sup>th</sup> June and 5<sup>th</sup> September. The other record was from No.4 bed where one was present on 1<sup>st</sup> August.



*Greenshank*

*David Bowman*

**Black-headed Gull**  
*Amber listed*

*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

2023 was a year of mixed fortunes. The year began in a typical fashion, with a mixture of flyover totals from birds moving to and from a local overnight roost site, and a handful of birds using No.4 Bed as a site to rest and bathe. Numbers were steady, although a little lower than expected, with a peak count of 450 flying east at first light on 28<sup>th</sup> January.

As spring progressed it became apparent something was ‘wrong’, with April’s peak count standing at 550 on No.3 Bed on the 1<sup>st</sup>, whereas you would typically expect somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500 there during the month, with a combination of breeding birds and birds on passage. Numbers remained stable into May, and a survey of the colony on 2<sup>nd</sup> May revealed 315 nests, and a total of 630 birds. Compared to recent years this is an excellent total, and a small colony started to form on No.4 Bed, with 14 pairs present on the same date. A handful of birds were also lingering in some flooded woodland on No.2 Bed. However, by 13<sup>th</sup> May only 120 nests were remaining on No.3 Bed. A combination of factors should be considered, with Avian Influenza resulting in a loss of adults within the colony – although, fortunately, not as devastating as at other sites. Predation from Lesser Black-backed Gulls also occurred, although nothing drastic, and increased predation from local Marsh Harriers took place, with the male watched taking several chicks from nest rafts in a single morning. Presumably due to a



combination of the above, numbers plummeted on No.3 Bed, although low double-figures did fledge, so not a complete failure there.

An unlikely positive arose as a result of this disruption, with the main breeding colony splintering into three, with pairs successfully fledging juveniles on three of the Beds. Although hard to estimate, c.15 pairs nested on No.2 Bed and up to 100 pairs on No.4 Bed. The Reserve's productivity levels never rank highly, and incredibly this season was about average.

Following the breeding season, many triple-figure counts were received for birds overflying the Reserve, including 570 on 30<sup>th</sup> September.

It will be interesting to watch the 2024 season unfold, and whether the colony abandons No.3 Bed for more productive parts of the Reserve.

### **Little Gull**

*Hydrocoloeus minutus*

It was an astonishing year for this occasional visitor, with a minimum of 106 birds passing through the Reserve between 19-21<sup>st</sup> April. This coincided with a large-scale movement across much of England due to favourable weather conditions and many reserves saw new record counts – least of all Woolston, with a new record of 67 through No.3 Bed on 19<sup>th</sup> April alone, beating the previous day record of nine back in 1985! Eleven were present on the bed at dawn on 20<sup>th</sup> April, and another 28 flew through on 21<sup>st</sup>. The majority of these were adults in full breeding plumage, making a spectacular sight as they wheeled through the Reserve.

A first-summer lingered on No.4 Bed on 15<sup>th</sup> May, which was the only additional record during the year.



*Little Gull*

*David Spencer*

### **Mediterranean Gull**

*Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

*Amber listed*

Unfortunately, it was a relatively poor year for this attractive gull, perhaps a product of the splintered Black-headed Gull colony. The first bird was recorded on the early date of 20<sup>th</sup> February, but it wasn't until April before regular sightings were made. At least one pair of adults made near daily visits to the gull colony on No.3 Bed, though never settled. The peak count of three came on 3<sup>rd</sup> April. Sightings tailed off quickly during May, and the last bird was reported on 10<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Common Gull**

*Larus canus*

*Amber listed*

Common Gull is an infrequent passage bird through the Reserve, with 27 records received. Numbers remained low throughout the first part of the year, with a peak count of four across the Reserve on 21<sup>st</sup> January. Three were noted in a movement of Little Gulls on 19<sup>th</sup> April, which would be the last record until 2<sup>nd</sup> November. Eight were recorded during the November WeBS.

### **Great Black-backed Gull**

*Larus marinus*

*Amber listed*

Whilst a decent total of 46 records were submitted for the year, the actual number of birds took a sharp decline from recent years. Reports were received for every month of the year, although no breeding was suspected this year, and no fresh juveniles were noted during the summer – a disappointing result after the local success of last year. Most sightings during the first half of the year relate to birds dropping into No.3 and No.4 Beds to bathe. Typically, records from the second half of the year were flyovers, leaving overnight roosts to the west of the Reserve.



*Great Black-backed Gull*

*David Bowman*

**Herring Gull***Larus argentatus**Red Listed*

Although never as numerous as Lesser Black-backed Gull, reports were received in every month of the year. Most records are of flyover birds, typically leaving an overnight roost east of the Reserve, and 17 overflying the Reserve on 28<sup>th</sup> January was the peak count for the first half of the year. A small number breed within the local Lesser Black-backed Gull colony, and a handful are reported on the Reserve throughout the breeding season. A few juveniles were reported on the Reserve in August, presumably locally reared. Numbers typically peak in the latter part of the year, with a high count in 2023 of 48 on 18<sup>th</sup> November.

**Yellow-legged Gull***Larus michahellis**Amber listed*

Once a real rarity for the Reserve, this Mediterranean species has seen an increase in sightings and was recorded for the third successive year. A juvenile was found on No.3 Bed on 17<sup>th</sup> August, before flying west towards No.4 Bed.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull***Larus fuscus**Amber listed*

As always, Lesser Black-backed Gull continues to be the most numerous large gull species on the Reserve. Numbers remained low in the early winter period, largely keeping to single figures. A count of 27 on No.4 Bed on 20<sup>th</sup> March marked the sign of the spring arrival, although numbers remained steady until the locally-bred juveniles arrived en masse. The peak count came on 8<sup>th</sup> August, when 185 were counted on No.3 Bed. Numbers then tailed away, with a winter peak of 31 on 18<sup>th</sup> November being respectable for the time of year.

With depleted numbers of Black-headed Gulls on No.3 Bed, fewer Lesser Black-backed Gulls were recorded during the breeding season. In fact, the local Marsh Harriers can take the crown for number of gull chicks predated. However, one unfortunate side effect may have been the reduced protection the Black-headed Gulls typically provide for Black-necked Grebes, and an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull was seen eating a juvenile grebe on No.3 Bed on 6<sup>th</sup> June – although the gull wasn't seen to catch the grebe itself.

**Common Tern***Sterna hirundo**Amber listed*

Thirty-five records were received during 2023, largely helped by semi-resident birds favouring both No.3 and No.4 Beds. The first arrival came on 13<sup>th</sup> April, a fairly early date for the Reserve. No real flocks were recorded throughout the season, with a peak count of three on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, and again on 18<sup>th</sup> July when an adult was accompanied by two juveniles, presumably from a local breeding site. The last record was on 30<sup>th</sup> July.

Two records of ‘comic’ terns were received this year. One flew west through No.3 Bed in thick fog at dawn on 15<sup>th</sup> April whilst on 21<sup>st</sup> April, a distant flock of 11 terns flew west along the River Mersey to the north of No.3 Bed. In both instances, the observer favoured Common Tern over Arctic Tern, though viewing conditions prevented a secure ID.



*Common Tern*

*David Bowman*

**Arctic Tern**

*Amber listed*

*Sterna paradisaea*

2023 was an average year by Woolston standards, with just one record of this well-travelled species on 20<sup>th</sup> April when two flew east over No.3 Bed at dawn.

**Black Tern**

*Chlidonias niger*

It was a poor spring with no records of this charming species. Thankfully, there was a good return passage nationally: two juveniles flew east through No.4 Bed on 19<sup>th</sup> August, and a single juvenile lingered on the bed on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.



**Cormorant***Phalacrocorax carbo*

Reported throughout the year in increasing numbers. The roost in trees by Woolston Weir has been maintained, with a number of counts of 30 or more during the year. The highest daily total was 85 on 21<sup>st</sup> January WeBS count that included some diurnal roosts on pylons, the birds leaving the Weir roost and overflying groups.

**Spoonbill***Platalea leucorodia*

A rare visitor to the Eyes, an adult and an immature circled No.3 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> April then flew towards No.4 bed. Soon afterwards they flew back along the Mersey north of No.3 bed.

This represents just the fourth record ever for Woolston.

**Bittern***Botaurus stellaris**Amber listed*

A very scarce visitor to Woolston, the only report in 2023 was of one that flew across the north phragmites reed bed on No.3 bed on the early morning of 17<sup>th</sup> October.

**Grey Heron***Ardea cinerea*

Observed throughout the year in small numbers, this species bred at the Eyes in the early 2000s, but not since. Interestingly, however, one was seen flying low over No.4 bed carrying sticks, suggesting the presence of a heronry nearby. On 28<sup>th</sup> May, when water levels at the Eyes were low, 14 Grey Herons were present on one of the Loop islands, five of which were newly fledged young. Five that were possibly part of the flock were still there two weeks later.

*Grey Heron**David Bowman*



**Great White Egret**

*Ardea alba*

*Amber listed*

An uncommon visitor, with just eight records submitted, all of single birds. The majority of records were in the early autumn, which is a feature of most years.



*Great White Egret*

*David Bowman*

**Little Egret**

*Egretta garzetta*

Given its high numbers in parts of the County Little Egret is an uncommon visitor to Woolston and, like Great White Egret, most sightings are in the autumn. Many records are of over-flying birds, usually one or two, but exceptionally ten flew over No.4 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> June.

**Osprey**

*Pandion haliaetus*

*Amber listed*

Normally seen only on passage, there were two sightings of singles flying north over No.3 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> April. This species is becoming a more common sight in recent years.

## **Sparrowhawk**

*Amber listed*

*Accipiter nisus*

Nearly eighty records of this resident species were submitted. Most were from Nos.3 and 4 beds but there were also reports from the less watched eastern end of the Reserve. Although there were sightings throughout the year, there was just one report in June which is typical as nesting is taking place. In the early months just one or two were seen, but on 19<sup>th</sup> April three were on No.3 bed and a fourth on No.4 bed. On 15<sup>th</sup> April one was seen hunting a flock of Linnets on No.4 bed. A pair was observed displaying over the north bank of No.3 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> April and again on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Mid-July saw two on each of Nos. 3 and 4 beds and on 10<sup>th</sup> August an adult female and two juveniles were spotted soaring over the wet woodland on No.4 bed. There were further sightings of the juveniles later in August and on 9<sup>th</sup> September a pair was on No.3 bed. On 13<sup>th</sup> September a female was seen chasing a Kingfisher on No.1 bed but it made its escape! At the end of the month four were soaring over No.3 bed and the year ended with one narrowly failing to catch a Stock Dove at the John Morgan Hide feeders. From information received it would appear that at least one pair bred on No.4 bed.

Two were ringed on No.1 bed in August; both young males, whilst on No. 3 bed a juvenile male was re-trapped on 26<sup>th</sup> December. It was found to be suffering from a nematode worm infection. This is the first time this has been recorded in a Sparrowhawk ringed at Woolston.



*Sparrowhawk*

*David Bowman*

**Marsh Harrier***Circus aeruginosus**Amber listed*

Now established as a breeding species this has become the most recorded raptor at Woolston with nearly 150 sightings. Birds were present throughout the year and were reported from all areas of the Reserve. Up to two were present in January with a third calendar year male and a second calendar year female regular. On 31<sup>st</sup> January three were seen across the Reserve and two females were noted on 24<sup>th</sup> February. Early April saw three on No.3 bed and display was observed with at least four reported (two males and two females) on the 6<sup>th</sup>. Later that month it became clear that a pair was nesting with the male seen carrying nest material and later food to the nest site. On 24<sup>th</sup> June two young in the nest were fitted with green colour rings. The two adults and two juveniles were seen on 7<sup>th</sup> July and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> the female and one of the colour ringed juveniles were seen. It was confirmed from the letters on the ring (VAL) that this was one of the birds ringed at the end of June. Sightings continued to the end of the year with an adult female and two juveniles reported over No.3 bed on 14<sup>th</sup> November.

*Marsh Harrier**David Spencer***Red Kite***Milvus milvus*

There were just two records of this infrequent visitor which has now been seen annually for the last ten years. One flew north west over No.3 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> June and during the migration watch on 11<sup>th</sup> November one was observed moving south well to the east of the Reserve.

**Buzzard***Buteo buteo*

This resident species is now taken for granted by many observers and is probably under recorded as a result. Nonetheless, records were received throughout the year with the exception of October. There were also only single sightings in February, June and December. Most records were of one or two

birds. Counts of significance included seven on No.1 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> March and five on No.3 bed two days later. The highest total of the year came on 1<sup>st</sup> April when a breeding bird survey found eleven on No.3 bed which included three pairs. A further pair was on No.2 bed the following week. Although a number of pairs were seen around this time there was no concrete evidence of breeding having taken place. On 15<sup>th</sup> July the five present included three on No.3 bed and two on No.4 bed. After early September no more than two were reported and sightings decreased towards the end of the year.

A second-year bird was ringed on No.1 bed, only the second ever for that area of the Reserve.



*Buzzard and Sparrowhawk*

*David Spencer*

### **Barn Owl**

*Tyto alba*

There was only one sighting this year. One was seen on No.1 bed being mobbed by Blackbirds on 31<sup>st</sup> May. Just a single sighting in a year is unusual; most winters birds are seen on No.3 bed and occasionally roost under the John Morgan Hide.

### **Tawny Owl**

*Strix aluco*

*Amber listed*

There were records from and evidence of breeding on No.1, No.2 and No.3 beds. On No.1 a Barn Owl and a Kestrel nest box were both occupied by Tawny Owl as was a Kestrel box on No.2 bed. It is unknown whether any of these pairs were successful. On No.3 bed there was one nesting attempt, but this failed.

The lack of records from No.4 bed probably reflects the lack of observer coverage of this area at dusk rather than their absence.

**Long-eared Owl**

*Asio otus*

There were no sightings; they were last recorded in 2020 on No.2 bed.

**Kingfisher**

*Alcedo atthis*

*Amber listed*

Recorded on all four beds and in all months except February and June. Most sightings were from No.3 bed with a maximum of three on 18<sup>th</sup> July. There were no nest holes found this year, but they are presumed to have bred both on the River Mersey and Ship Canal as is the norm.



*Kingfisher*

*David Bowman*

**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**

*Dryobates minor*

*Red listed*

For the second successive year there were no records of this species. There was a single sighting in 2021 and none in 2020. The last male seen drumming was in 2019.



## Great Spotted Woodpecker

*Dendrocopos major*

A common species regularly seen, and thought to breed on all four beds. Maximum counts were two on No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, four on No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April, four on No.3 bed on 7<sup>th</sup> February and three on No.4 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> April.

On No.1 bed, five were ringed, although unusually, three were in the first winter period, all males. The fourth was in spring (a female) while the only young one was caught on 4<sup>th</sup> August. The female was the only one caught in breeding condition, having an active brood patch. There were two re-traps from previous years, one from 2020 and one from 2021.

On No.3 bed it was a below average (10.7 birds) year with nine ringed. Seven were birds of the year. No new birds were ringed after 20<sup>th</sup> August. Birds were re-trapped from 2020 (1), 2021 (1) and 2022 (6).



*Great Spotted Woodpecker*

*David Bowman*

## Green Woodpecker

*Picus viridis*

After last year when there were no records, three were reported in 2023. Two sightings were on No.1 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> April and 31<sup>st</sup> May. The only other record was of one near the entrance to No.3 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> May.

**Kestrel**

*Amber listed*

*Falco tinnunculus*

There were 63 reports of a species that has been in decline in recent years and although this year appeared to show a slight improvement it is probably too early to talk of a significant recovery. Records were submitted in every month but there was only a single sighting in three months; February, June and December. There were reports from all areas of the Reserve, mostly of singles. A pair on the Thelwall Viaduct, a traditional breeding site, on 22<sup>nd</sup> April raised hopes, but they were not seen there again. A single was on No.4 bed the same day. On 8<sup>th</sup> July singles were noted on Nos.2, 3 and 4 beds and three were found on No.1 bed on 3<sup>rd</sup> November. The final record was of one on 9<sup>th</sup> December. On 8<sup>th</sup> February a female was ringed on No.1 bed, the first there since 2018.



*Kestrel*

*David Bowman*

**Merlin**

*Red listed*

*Falco columbarius*

For the first time since 2015 there were no sightings of this dashing small falcon.

**Hobby***Falco subbuteo*

Reports of this summer visitor were received from April to September. Most were of singles and from Nos.3 and 4 beds. Two were seen over the east bank of No.3 bed at dawn on 25<sup>th</sup> May and what may have been the same birds were on No.4 bed two days later. Records from No.1 bed included one on 9<sup>th</sup> June and one carrying prey on 7<sup>th</sup> July which could be indicative of local breeding. A juvenile was reported from No.4 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> August. The final reports of a fairly typical year were of singles on No.3 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September.

**Peregrine***Falco peregrinus*

This proved to be a disappointing year for a species that had bred annually from 2008 until 2022. Fewer records than usual were submitted and there was no evidence of breeding. Singles were observed during January and February including one on the Thelwall Viaduct, a traditional breeding site. There were four records of singles during April and one in each of May and June. One was seen mobbing a Marsh Harrier on 1<sup>st</sup> June on No.4 bed and there were no further sightings until 7<sup>th</sup> August. A juvenile flew south over No.4 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> August and on the 24<sup>th</sup> two were hunting over No.4 bed. None were then seen until 11<sup>th</sup> November when one was found on the migration watch. The only other report was of a juvenile male on No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

**Ring-necked Parakeet***Psittacula krameri*

There were two sightings, both on No.4 bed. One was in the wet woodland on 18<sup>th</sup> April and two were seen on 30<sup>th</sup> November.

**Jay***Garrulus glandarius*

Recorded on all four beds in small numbers. Maximum counts were four on No.1 bed, two on No.2 bed, four on No.3 bed and four on No.4 bed. There were no significant arrivals in the autumn as occurs in some years, the maximum Reserve wide count in the year was six on 15<sup>th</sup> July which included two juveniles.

It was a poor year for the ringing teams; on No.1 bed only two were ringed, the worst year since 2017. The first was a female with a brood patch on 24<sup>th</sup> May, the second was a young one on 9<sup>th</sup> September. On No.3 bed just two were ringed. The mean is nine new birds.

**Magpie***Pica pica*

A common resident species, present on all four beds. Maximum counts were seven on No.1 bed, three on No.2 bed, 12 on No.3 bed and 52 on No.4 bed. The latter count was a gathering at dusk by the entrance to the bed before they flew towards No.3 bed, presumably to roost.



On No.1 bed three were ringed, the best year since 2008; the first was on 2<sup>nd</sup> January followed by one on 3<sup>rd</sup> April and the only young bird on 3<sup>rd</sup> November. On No.3 bed just two were ringed during the year. The mean is 3.45 birds.



*Jay*

*David Bowman*

### **Jackdaw**

*Corvus monedula*

Jackdaws do not breed on the Reserve but are regularly seen over flying the Reserve throughout the year. Maximum counts during the year were 20 flying west over No.1 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 74 flying north-west over No.4 bed at dawn on 17<sup>th</sup> June and 36 flying north over No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> September. The new east cell on No.4 bed also attracted feeding birds with a least 20 there on 4<sup>th</sup> May. These birds were also gathering nest material before flying west towards Latchford.

### **Rook**

*Corvus frugilegus*

*Amber listed*

A typical year with 12 sightings, all of over flying birds. Most counts were of one or two birds; the maximum count was five over No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

## **Carrion Crow**

*Corvus corone*

A common and widespread species but one which is ignored by most observers as only 14 records were submitted. The maximum count was 13 seen on No.4 bed during a breeding bird survey on 30<sup>th</sup> March.

The second ever to be ringed on No.1 bed was caught on 22<sup>nd</sup> May. It was a second-year male and was in breeding condition, the first one was in 2016.

## **Raven**

*Corvus corax*

Raven can regularly be seen and heard overflying the Reserve. This year 30 sightings were submitted with most records of single birds and a maximum count of three. The most interesting record involved three juveniles seen on No.4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> July. Ravens have bred in recent years on a nearby park, but it is not known if this was repeated this year.

## **Waxwing**

*Bombycilla garrulus*

A scarce autumn/winter migrant but in most years, flocks visit Warrington's town centre where they feed on ornamental Rowan, Hawthorn and Cotoneaster berries. However, they are rarely seen on the Reserve with only five previous records this century, the last in 2018. The sixth record, on the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> November was a flock of nine which flew west over No.4 bed heading for Warrington Town centre. Later, a similar sized flock was reported feeding on Rowan in Battersby Lane and were probably the same birds.



*Waxwing*

*David Bowman*



## Coal Tit

*Periparus ater*

Once a scarce species, Coal Tits are now well established on the Reserve in the areas of mature woodlands, particularly the trees along the south bank and central copse of No.3 bed. They are also a regular visitor to the Sybil Hogg Hide feeding station and the maximum count on this bed was six on 11<sup>th</sup> November. On No.1 bed two were present on 15<sup>th</sup> January including a singing male and on No.4 bed there was a maximum count of three on 31<sup>st</sup> October.

For the ringers on No.1 bed after the low total (six) of 2022, things were back to normal with 14 ringed during the year. There is usually a mini-influx in June and July when presumed local breeders (possibly from Butchersfield Tip) arrive on the Reserve. This year the first was caught on 7<sup>th</sup> June followed by one on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and two in July. There were no further captures until 15<sup>th</sup> September. The final record of the year was on 29<sup>th</sup> November. All the new ones were birds of the year. There was one re-trap from a previous year, originally ringed on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021 and it seems to spend just the winters on the bed, only being caught between mid-September and early March.

On No.3 bed seven new birds were ringed during the year, the mean is 3.95 for the bed. Six were juveniles. The first of the year was caught on 22<sup>nd</sup> April and was an adult male in breeding condition. The rest were ringed between 14<sup>th</sup> October and 25<sup>th</sup> November. Two were re-trapped from 2022.

## Willow Tit

*Poecile montanus*

*Red listed*

The decline in the Willow Tit population has been noted in recent annual reports. In 2023 numbers remained low but appear to have stabilised. Breeding was confirmed on all four beds.

On No.1 bed one pair bred near the Viaduct pools and it is believed four young successfully fledged. Ringing data also suggest that at least one other pair bred. In total nine were ringed on the bed, all juveniles with the first on 9<sup>th</sup> June. Three of the juveniles were re-trapped later in the year along with a juvenile from No3 bed. There were no adults caught in the year and the final capture was on 4<sup>th</sup> September.

A pair bred near to the Pumping Station on No.2 bed, and it is thought they were successful.

On No.3 bed birds were heard singing in the central copse and near the garage. A nest was discovered near the latter location and was believed to be at least partially successful. At least one other pair is likely to have bred as eight juveniles were caught on the bed, thought to be from at least two broods. The first was ringed on 10<sup>th</sup> June and the last on 24<sup>th</sup> August. The mean for the bed is 15.75 new birds. The last four years have seen seven, nine, eight and eight ringed. In 2019 25 birds were ringed, the best year was 2010 when 33 new birds were ringed. Three birds were re-trapped from 2022. During the breeding season one male in breeding condition was re-trapped.

On No.4 bed three singing males were noted: one in the Sandpit Pond area, one in the wet woodland and a third on the north bank of the east cell. No nests were found, and no ringing occurs on No.4, so breeding success is difficult to assess but, in July, family parties were noted along the central track and in the north-east area of the Loop.

A report by Allan Rustell on his nest finding surveys can be found towards the end of this Report.

The conservation group has been fortunate to have succeeded in our application to the national Species Recovery Programme for funding aimed at improving habitat for Willow Tits. The fund, which is administered by Natural England, has been created to try and halt the decline in some of the nation's most important species. The money will be used to employ a contractor to coppice 54 hectares of woodland and scrub across the Reserve, turning back the succession to mature woodland. Willow Tits need young, low scrub with diverse ground cover and a supply of rotting stumps, in which they excavate their nests, in order to thrive. Research is another aspect of the programme, with successful bidders being required to contribute to our knowledge of species recovery nationally. So, we will be trialling different approaches to coppicing and monitoring their outcomes, in terms of breeding Willow Tit pairs.



*Willow Tit*

*David Bowman*

### **Blue Tit**

*Cyanistes caeruleus*

A common resident species which breeds on all four beds. Maximum counts were 18 on No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 14 on No.2 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> April, 25 on No.3 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> November and 10 on No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

The species is under recorded by most observers and its status is best judged from ringing data. On No.1 bed following the poor previous year, 2023 proved to be the seventh best year since 1995 with 196 ringed. A further 66 were caught that had been ringed in previous years, the oldest from 26<sup>th</sup> August 2016, others were from 2017 (1), 2018 (3), 2019 (4), 2020 (10) with the remainder from the previous two years. Only four were in breeding condition, three females and one male while the first juvenile was caught on 31<sup>st</sup> May.

On No.3 bed 261 new birds were ringed, the yearly average being 196.45. Although the number of new birds ringed was above average there were fewer than usual re-traps during the year. Fifty-seven young were ringed in the nest boxes. The first fledged juvenile was caught on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, a typical date. One hundred and eighty-eight were ringed as fledged juveniles. No new adult birds were ringed during the year. Birds were re-trapped from the following years: 2019 (1), 2020 (2), 2021 (6) and 2022 (16). Four males and four females were caught in breeding condition between March and August.

### **Great Tit**

*Parus major*

A common resident species although, similar to Blue Tit, one which is under recorded by observers. Maximum counts were 10 on No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, nine on No.2 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 10+ on No.3 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> January and 14 on No.4 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> March.

The ringing team on No.1 bed had their eighth best year since 1995 with 113 ringed. A further 31 were caught that had been ringed in previous years; the oldest was from 18<sup>th</sup> July 2018; others were from 2019 (1) with the remainder from the previous two years (2021 and 2022) with one also being ringed on No.3 bed. Only three were caught in breeding condition two males and a female, while the first fledged juvenile was ringed on 9<sup>th</sup> June.

On No.3 bed it was a slightly above average year for the ringing team with 207 ringed compared to the average of 193. Fewer young were re-trapped than would be expected in a typical year. In total 89 young were ringed in the nest boxes. In addition, nine just fledged young were caught in mist nets and must have bred in natural holes, the first four of these on 27<sup>th</sup> May, the next five on 3<sup>rd</sup> June and are therefore from different broods. Birds were re-trapped from 2019 (1), 2020 (4), 2021 (6) and 2022 (22). During the breeding season 12 males and five females were caught in breeding condition. One hundred and two were ringed as juveniles post fledging, three as adults from previous years and 12 as birds hatched in 2022.

### **Penduline Tit**

*Remiz pendulinus*



One was heard calling in the area of the No.3 bed duck trap on 26<sup>th</sup> January and the next day it was heard at the south end of the western cell on No.4 bed. It is presumed, although not confirmed, that this

is the same bird originally caught on No.3 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022 and which was re-found on No.4 bed on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022.

**Skylark**  
*Red listed*

*Alauda arvensis*

Skylark breeds in small numbers on No.1 bed in the area of the Elevated Pools on the Maher's site. A maximum of six was recorded in this area in the spring period. In addition to breeding, overflying birds were recorded in the autumn and winter periods. Maximum counts were 21 on 19<sup>th</sup> January flying west over No.3 bed and 43 on 30<sup>th</sup> September flying south over the same bed.



*Skylark*

*David Bowman*

**Sand Martin**

*Riparia*

The first sighting of the year was of three on 14<sup>th</sup> March on No.3 bed. There were no further records until 19<sup>th</sup> March when 14 passed through the same bed. The first major movement was on 23<sup>rd</sup> March when 300 flew through No.3 bed in the morning. Other significant counts in the spring period, all on No.3 bed were 145 on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 720 on 1<sup>st</sup> April and 675 on 4<sup>th</sup> April. An exceptional spring roost also developed on No.3 bed. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 120 were seen leaving at dawn. The roost had increased by the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> April to 600 and peaked at 1200 on 15<sup>th</sup> April. Breeding colonies have declined in recent years, so it is very pleasing to report that a colony was found at a new site on the Maher's tip on No.1 bed. On 20<sup>th</sup> May, 68 nest holes were noted. Not all these were successful; some holes collapsed or were only partially scraped and on 6<sup>th</sup> June it was estimated that there were 30 active holes. The only other nest holes discovered were on 20<sup>th</sup> April when birds were seen entering three nest holes in the sandstone bank of the Ship Canal just west of Latchford Locks.

In the summer months birds were regularly seen feeding over Nos. 3 and 4 beds with a maximum count of 300+ on 11<sup>th</sup> July. By mid-August birds were moving south with 105 seen on the 19<sup>th</sup>. The last sighting was of 10 on No.1 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> August.

An attempt to catch some of the adults at the colony on No.1 bed resulted in 24 being captured including 9 males and 15 females, all in breeding condition. The only other capture on No.1 bed was of an adult female at a roost on 8<sup>th</sup> August.

On No.3 bed, at the exceptional April roost, 119 were ringed on the 7<sup>th</sup> April, 172 on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 159 on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 22 on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The turnover of birds was very quick, and birds were controlled in Lancashire. In total 472 were ringed; the annual mean is 45.

## **Swallow**

*Hirundo rustica*

The first sighting of the year was on 2<sup>nd</sup> April when two flew through No.3 bed. For the remainder of the first half of April birds continued to arrive in small numbers only and it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> the first large arrival was noted with 60 moving through No.3 bed during the morning. Other notable spring counts were 35 on 24<sup>th</sup> April and 122 on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, all on No.3 bed. The only evidence of breeding was at the Pumping Station on No.2 bed, a traditional breeding site. Birds were regularly seen here with a maximum count of three on 6<sup>th</sup> May.

Return passage appeared to start early, perhaps indicating a poor breeding season; fifty flew west in one flock on 18<sup>th</sup> July and on 25<sup>th</sup> July 37 were brought down by a rain shower onto No.3 bed. Passage continued in August and September with maximum counts of 153 over No.1 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> September and 76 on No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> September, all moving south. There was only one sighting in October when one flew south over No.3 bed on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

On No.1 bed a small roost was found in August and on the 8<sup>th</sup> the ringers caught 10 which comprised seven juveniles and three adults.

For the ringers on No.3 bed, it was a very poor year with just two ringed, both adult males, on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April. The mean is 154.75 new birds, generally caught in autumn roosts, but the last year that reached more than single figures was in 2019 when 184 were ringed. The days of autumn hirundine roosts seem to be gone unfortunately.

## **House Martin**

*Delichon urbicum*

*Red listed*

The first arrival was on a typical date of 6<sup>th</sup> April when four were seen over No.2 bed. Small numbers continued to arrive for the first two weeks in April and it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> when there was a significant arrival (the same day that there were the first large numbers of Swallows); seventeen were seen on No.3 bed. The maximum count was 160 on 2<sup>nd</sup> May feeding over No.4 bed in small groups and then moving north. There is no information on breeding in the locality but 20 were seen on No.4 bed on 27<sup>th</sup> June suggesting there is a breeding population in the housing estates and business parks surrounding the Reserve. In August return passage commenced with counts of 41 on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 36 on the 26<sup>th</sup>. The last sighting was on 16<sup>th</sup> September when 51 passed through No.4 bed.



### **Cetti's Warbler**

*Cettia cetti*

First bred on the Reserve in 2015 and now an established breeding resident recorded in every month of the year. Most records were of between two and eight birds but double-figure counts were reported on five dates: 12 on 28<sup>th</sup> February on No.3 bed, 10 on 1<sup>st</sup> April on the same bed, 11 and 15 Reserve wide on 25<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April. The maximum count was 19 on 13<sup>th</sup> May split as follows: two on No.1 bed, three on No.2 bed, six on No.3 bed and eight on No.4 bed. Three breeding pairs were monitored, one on No.3 bed and two on No.4 bed, all were successful and fledged young.

In total, 50 Cetti's Warbler were caught by the ringing team, 19 on No.1 bed and 31 on No.3 bed. Forty were ringed and ten retrapped, the oldest from 2021. Around a third of the juveniles were aged 3J, indicative of local breeding and the first was caught on 24<sup>th</sup> July. Six were caught in breeding condition, four males and two females.



*Cetti's Warbler*

*David Spencer*

### **Long-tailed Tit**

*Aegithalos caudatus*

Frequently encountered and worthy of scrutiny as autumn and winter-feeding flocks often attract tit, crest and leaf warbler species. Typically, most reports related to sightings in this period which also provided the highest observed counts: 40 across No. 1, 3 and 4 beds on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 25 on No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September and again on 11<sup>th</sup> November on No.3 bed. A flock of 20 was recorded on No.4 bed on four dates between 31<sup>st</sup> October and 21<sup>st</sup> December. In contrast, the highest breeding season counts were seven birds on 8<sup>th</sup> April on No.2 bed which included three pairs carrying nest material and four individuals in suitable breeding habitat on No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April.

The ringing totals suggest it was a poor year for the species with a low figure of 86 ringed, 40% lower than in 2022. Only 13 juveniles were ringed, the first on 31<sup>st</sup> May when six were caught on No.1 bed with No.3 bed's first on 8<sup>th</sup> July, a late date beaten only by the latest on record on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2016.

The monitoring of a dozen nesting pairs found across the Reserve also provided evidence of a poor breeding success with only a single nest fledging young. It is not known if the cause of the nest failures was due to predation or a result of local weather conditions and desertion.



*Long-tailed Tit*

*David Bowman*

**Willow Warbler**

*Amber listed*

*Phylloscopus trochilus*

The first returning migrant was recorded on 30<sup>th</sup> March when two were present, with one in song on No.4 bed. Three were on No.1 bed the next day and four were singing on No.4 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April. Numbers stayed in single digits until a Breeding Birds Survey of 19<sup>th</sup> April provided a count of 26, 14 on No.4 bed, ten on No.3 bed and one on each of No.2 bed and the Canal Track. Counts dropped again into single figures from 13<sup>th</sup> May until the last record on 19<sup>th</sup> August, a single, on No.4 bed.

It was a mixed year for the ringing teams with No.1 bed catching 101 birds (a typical total), 96 ringed and five retrapped and No.3 bed catching just 14, all juveniles, over a 36-day period from 20<sup>th</sup> July to 24<sup>th</sup> August. A stark contrast in numbers and one which has been developing over recent years.

Of the No.1 bed captures, the first of the year was caught on 24<sup>th</sup> April and the final one on 21<sup>st</sup> September. Nineteen were caught in breeding condition, eight females and 11 males and the first juvenile on 21<sup>st</sup> June. The oldest of the five retrapped was originally ringed on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

### **Chiffchaff**

*Phylloscopus collybita*

A common, breeding summer migrant which is increasingly over-wintering. Eleven reports were received from 1<sup>st</sup> January until 10<sup>th</sup> February, ten of single birds and one of two present on 5<sup>th</sup> January on No.4 bed. There was further over-wintering evidence in the autumn and onset of winter with 13 records from November to the year end. Seven of those records related to three or more individuals, six were reported on three dates, 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> November and 16<sup>th</sup> December and lastly, seven reported on 19<sup>th</sup> December.

The first returning migrants were probably on 4<sup>th</sup> March with two on No.4 bed followed by a single in song on No.3 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> March. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 53 singing males were counted around the Reserve. The highest counts of singing males were: eight on No.1 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 65 on No.4 bed and 36 on No.3 bed both on 1<sup>st</sup> April and 36 on No.2 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> April.

An incredible 1,139 Chiffchaff were ringed on the Reserve, a record total and 20% above the previous high of 913 in 2022. No.1 bed ringed 824, more than twice their average and No.3 bed 315, two-thirds above their average. Additionally, 35 were retrapped: two from 2019, one from 2020 and the remaining 32 from 2021 and 2022. In total, 54 males and 38 females were caught in breeding condition and the first juvenile on 7<sup>th</sup> June.

There was a fourth consecutive year record of the scarce autumn vagrant, Siberian Chiffchaff, the eastern sub-species *Phylloscopus collybita tristis*. A single report from No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> December of one close to the entrance gate.

### **Sedge Warbler**

*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

*Amber listed*

A seriously declining breeding summer migrant. The first arrival was reported on 1<sup>st</sup> April from No.4 bed. A further 24 records were received through the year, 60% of which were reports of just single birds sighted or in song. The highest day count, from a Breeding Birds Survey, was 13 on a walk of the Reserve on 13<sup>th</sup> May. The highest counts from individual beds were: three on No.1 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> May, one on No.2 bed, five on No.3 bed and seven on No.4 bed all on 13<sup>th</sup> May. The last record of the year was a single on No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> September.

The long-term decline in this species was further emphasized by the data submitted by the ringing teams. Both had poor catches, just six on No.1 bed and 33 on No.3 bed. The average annual total ringed over the last five years, 2019-2023 is 76 with the average for the previous five years 2014-2018 being 129. The 38 ringed this year is concerning for the species being half that expected and around a quarter of the expected number six years ago. Only a single returning bird was retrapped, originally ringed in 2021 and only three were caught in breeding condition, two males and a female. The first capture was on 29<sup>th</sup> April and the last on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. In total, 27 were juveniles, the first ringed on 8<sup>th</sup> July.

## **Reed Warbler**

*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

The 6<sup>th</sup> April heralded the return of this common summer migrant with two reported on No.4 bed. Subsequent counts stayed in single digits until 25<sup>th</sup> April when 13 were recorded followed by 20 on 29<sup>th</sup> on walks of the Reserve. The highest count of the year was of 43 on the Breeding Birds Survey of 13<sup>th</sup> May with singing males numbering: 12 on No.1 bed, 12 on No.3 bed and 18 on No.4 bed along with a silent individual. Surveys of No.3 and 4 beds reported 35 on 15<sup>th</sup> July and almost a month later on 7<sup>th</sup> August recorded 15. The last report was of three on No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> September.

The total of 332 ringed was significantly lower than expected and together with the 328 ringed in 2021 were the two lowest totals over the last twenty years. The trend in five-year averages for that period have been 532 in inclusive years 2004-2008, 562 in 2009-2013, 526 in 2014-2018 and 422 in 2019-2023. The last five-year average shows a 20% decline in numbers which is not solely down to the influence of the two poor ringing years 2023 and 2021. Seventy-nine were caught in breeding condition, 42 males and 37 females and the first juvenile was ringed on 7<sup>th</sup> July. The oldest of the 33 retrapped was ringed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2017 with three from 2019 and 2020 and the remaining 26 in the last two years.

## **Grasshopper Warbler**

*Locustella naevia*

*Red listed*

Now a scarce breeding summer migrant. There were 14 records of this secretive warbler between the dates 19<sup>th</sup> April and 11<sup>th</sup> July. All except one of the reports were submitted of sightings or audible reeling males from No.4 bed, the exception, a single on No.3 bed on 21<sup>st</sup> April. The No.4 bed records were of singles except two males reeling on 29<sup>th</sup> April and six were in the prime breeding period, four in early May and one in mid-June and early July.

Both ringing teams caught single late summer birds, a juvenile on No.1 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> August and an adult female with remnants of a brood patch on No.3 bed on 9<sup>th</sup> September although it was not considered to have bred at Woolston; it was also the last record of the year.

## **Blackcap**

*Sylvia atricapilla*

A common breeding summer migrant. The first arrival was on 25<sup>th</sup> March, a single recorded on the Canal Track. The counts reached double-figures on 11<sup>th</sup> April with ten on No.4 bed and the highest, 72, occurred on 19<sup>th</sup> April on a Breeding Birds Survey, comprised of the following singing males, three on the Canal Track, 32 on an incomplete circuit of No.3 bed, 33 on No.4 bed plus four silent birds. Forty-one were recorded around the Reserve on 13<sup>th</sup> May after which counts reduced to single-digit numbers by mid-August. The final record of the year was of two on No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> September.

The ringing teams caught an above average number of Blackcaps with a total of 684 ringed and five retrapped, all originally ringed in 2022. The first of the year was ringed on 8<sup>th</sup> April and 58 were in breeding condition comprising 30 males and 28 females. The first juvenile was ringed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Two were caught in November, the last of the year, on the 4<sup>th</sup> on No.3 bed and the 29<sup>th</sup> on No.1 bed. Both of these were probably attempting to over-winter given the penultimate capture to these was on 14<sup>th</sup> October.





*Blackcap*

*David Bowman*

### **Garden Warbler**

*Sylvia borin*

A breeding summer migrant recorded annually in low numbers. Sixteen records were submitted with more than one from each of the four beds. The first, a singing male was on No.1 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> April. Three were on No.2 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> May, two on No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> May and two singing males on No.1 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> June. Additionally, twelve reports of single birds were submitted on ten dates between 29<sup>th</sup> April and 13<sup>th</sup> July when singles were on No.4 bed and No.3 bed, the last records of the year.

Forty-two were ringed during the spring and summer, above average for the species and typically there were none retrapped from previous years. The first and last of the year were on typical dates of 10<sup>th</sup> May and 2<sup>nd</sup> September respectively. Four were caught in breeding condition, a male and female on both No.1 and 3 beds and the first juvenile was ringed on 8<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Lesser Whitethroat**

*Sylvia curruca*

A scarce breeding summer migrant. Six records were submitted, all of single individuals, the first, a singing male, on 18<sup>th</sup> April on No.3 bed and the remaining five on No.4 bed over the period 22<sup>nd</sup> April to 11<sup>th</sup> July.

Only a single juvenile was caught and ringed on the Reserve on 26<sup>th</sup> August on No.3 bed.

**Whitethroat**

*Sylvia communis*

*Amber listed*

The first for the year of this common breeding summer visitor were recorded in April when four were in song on the 18<sup>th</sup>, one on No.3 bed and three on No.4 bed. Fourteen were counted on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 18 on the 29<sup>th</sup>, both totals from walks around the Reserve. The maximum count of 25 was recorded on 13<sup>th</sup> May, a total of two on No.1 bed, two on No.2 bed and four on No.3 bed, (all counts from incomplete tours of the beds) and 17 on a circuit of No.4 bed. The last sighting of the year was on 14<sup>th</sup> September, a single on No.1 bed.

In total, 67 Whitethroat were ringed and four were retrapped. No.1 bed caught no adults, all 21 ringed were juveniles, the first on 28<sup>th</sup> June and the last on 6<sup>th</sup> September. No.3 bed caught their first spring bird on 22<sup>nd</sup> April and 12 adults in breeding condition, eight male and four female. Their first juvenile was ringed on 22<sup>nd</sup> June and four adults were retrapped, all ringed in 2022.



*Whitethroat*

*David Bowman*



## Firecrest

*Regulus ignicapilla*

A scarce passage migrant generally recorded at least annually. Just a single Firecrest was recorded, typically in the autumn passage, on 9<sup>th</sup> November amongst a roving tit flock on No.4 bed. None were ringed and it is now four years since a Firecrest was ringed on the Reserve; six were ringed in four successive years from 2016-2019.

## Goldcrest

*Regulus regulus*

A breeding resident species with numbers boosted by autumn passage. All records related to low single digit counts with the exception of a record of ten on No.4 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. A singing male or males were present on No.4 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 18<sup>th</sup> April and 29<sup>th</sup> April. The other high counts occurred during the autumn passage with nine on 31<sup>st</sup> October on No.4 bed and eight and seven on No.3 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> November.

A total of 306 Goldcrest was caught by the ringers, 299 were ringed and seven retrapped, the oldest ringed on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2021 and six from 2022. No.1 bed had a higher than usual spring passage with 13 caught in March followed by a break until locally bred juveniles appeared from 7<sup>th</sup> June. The majority of the numbers are caught in the autumn passage from mid-August through to the end of November with a peak in October. The last of the year was ringed on 1<sup>st</sup> December.



Goldcrest

David Bowman

**Wren**

*Amber listed*

*Troglodytes troglodytes*

Often overlooked and under-reported the Breeding Birds Surveys provide a more consistent record of their presence. Maximum counts this year were 30 in song on the west cell of No.4 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 12 on the northern section of No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 35 in song on No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April and 37 in song on No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April.

It was a slightly below average year for the numbers ringed on the Reserve with a total of 142 and a further 17 retrapped. Thirteen females and ten males were caught in breeding condition and the first juvenile was ringed on 16<sup>th</sup> June. The oldest of the 17 retrapped was ringed on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018.



*Wren*

*David Bowman*

**Nuthatch**

*Sitta europaea*

Locally resident and becoming more frequent on the Reserve, particularly on No.3 bed in recent years. There were 21 records in the year, four from the traditionally favoured eastern side of No.1 bed and Butchersfield Tip and 16 from No.3 bed. All were reports of single individuals except the presence of two on three dates, once in January, once in April and again in August. There was a single bird seen on No.4 bed on 31<sup>st</sup> August and it is possibly the first record of this species on this bed.

Five were ringed during the year, two adults and two juveniles on No.3 bed and a single juvenile on No.1 bed, the 16<sup>th</sup> ringed on the bed since 1995. The change in status of the species at the western end



of the Reserve is further emphasized by the ringing numbers on No.3 bed with the first record occurring in 2017 when two were ringed and in seven years their total ringed now stands at 20.



*Nuthatch*

*David Bowman*

### **Treecreeper**

*Certhia familiaris*

Similar to Nuthatch, locally resident and becoming more frequent on the Reserve. They were recorded in every month of the year with the majority of records, 70%, of single birds. A single male was on territory on No.4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April, with two on the 25<sup>th</sup>. One was on the south bank of No.3 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April. Records of two were reported on six dates, two in February, one in April, one in May and two in September and three were present on No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> January and a reserve walk on 9<sup>th</sup> November. Family parties with recently fledged young were reported on 25<sup>th</sup> May from No.4 bed and No.2 bed and another party of five at Bollin Point on 1<sup>st</sup> June confirmed breeding on the Reserve.

The 24 caught by the ringing teams was slightly above average and comprised 20 ringed and four retrapped, one ringed in 2020 and 2021 and two ringed in 2022. Five males, two on No.1 bed and three on No.3 bed were in breeding condition and the first juvenile was ringed on 2<sup>nd</sup> June.

### **Starling**

*Sturnus vulgaris*

*Red listed*

A common resident species in the surrounding area and overflying the Reserve with generally small roosts forming in autumn/winter and occasional large congregational roosts with spectacular pre-roost murmuration's. Small local flocks were regularly recorded flying over the beds throughout the year,

the largest count of the spring and summer was of 50 perched on the power lines north of No.3 bed on 24<sup>th</sup> August. In autumn a small roost formed in October which numbered 25 on the 19<sup>th</sup>, 50 on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 80 on the 24<sup>th</sup> but did not develop further. Significant flocks in November were reported from No.4 bed with, 200 overflying on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, possibly the same 200 counted on the power lines adjacent to the bed on 16<sup>th</sup> and 150 overflew on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The only winter record of note was of 35 on 5<sup>th</sup> January overflying No.3 bed.

### **Blackbird**

*Turdus merula*

A common resident species across the Reserve. The highest count of the year was 20 on an incomplete walk of the Reserve on 13<sup>th</sup> May with a breakdown of two on No.1 bed, two on No.2 bed, three on No.3 bed, 11 on No.4 bed and two on the Canal Track. The highest individual bed counts were: eight on both No.1 and No.3 beds on 2<sup>nd</sup> September and 8<sup>th</sup> April respectively, 12 on No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April and 11 on No.4 on 13<sup>th</sup> May.

The total of 42 ringed and 11 retrapped was a record low for the species in recent times. Twenty-three were caught in breeding condition 12 males and 11 females and the first juvenile was ringed on 23<sup>rd</sup> June. The oldest of the retrapped birds was ringed on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2016 and was at least seven years old.

### **Fieldfare**

*Turdus pilaris*

*Red listed*

A common autumn/winter visitor from Fennoscandia, Russia and eastern Europe. There were two records in January, 20 on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 50 on the 21<sup>st</sup> and the last of the winter were two on 12<sup>th</sup> February, eight on 30<sup>th</sup> March and a single on 6<sup>th</sup> April. The first returning migrant reported was a flock of 18 passing over No.3 bed on 12<sup>th</sup> October. The maximum count in the month was 289 over No.4 bed on the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup>. November 4<sup>th</sup> saw 1660 flying south over No.3 and 4 beds during the morning but by December numbers reported had dropped with just two records, 12 on the 9<sup>th</sup> and four on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

Fieldfare are not as easy to tempt into a mist net as their close migratory cousin the Redwing and ringing records on the Reserve are few and infrequent. Just one was ringed in 2023, a juvenile male on 11<sup>th</sup> November on No.3 bed and was the first ringing record of this species on the bed.

### **Redwing**

*Turdus iliacus*

*Red listed*

A common autumn/winter visitor from Fennoscandia and Iceland, the latter detected in the ringing process being slightly longer winged. Generally recorded as 'flyovers', counts in the first quarter were on average less than 30 as the large flocks of the autumn arrivals have dispersed into smaller feeding groups. The last sightings of the season were in April, three on 4<sup>th</sup>, 22 on the 6<sup>th</sup> and a single on the 13<sup>th</sup>. The first arrival of the second winter period was on 9<sup>th</sup> October with a flock of 52 flying south over No.1 bed. Reports and numbers increased quickly, 120 were feeding around No.3 bed on 21<sup>st</sup> and

the maximum count of 580 occurred on 4<sup>th</sup> November, typically flying south over No.3 and 4 beds through the morning.

The 41 Redwing ringed represented a very poor result for the ringing teams who have become used to the success of the Latvian lure in previous years. In fact, the last four years have seen ringing numbers well below expectation with a four-year total of 314 ringed compared with the previous four-year total of 1022. The reason for this change is not known.

The first autumn arrival was ringed on 9<sup>th</sup> October, a typical date and 39 were ringed to the end of the year. Only two were ringed in the January to March period, both in January when they prove more difficult to attract to lures.

### **Song Thrush**

*Turdus philomelos*

*Amber listed*

A common breeding resident whose loud sibilant song of the male advertises its presence and it is no coincidence that maximum counts occur during spring with males on territory. The highest counts during the Breeding Bird Surveys were 15 on No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March, seven on No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April and nine, two pairs and five singing on No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April. On 5<sup>th</sup> May a walk around the Reserve but not complete coverage recorded 11, split one on No.1 bed, two on No.2 bed, one on No.3 bed, one along the Canal Track and six on No.4 bed. All other reports related to lower single-digit numbers.

The 24 Song Thrush ringed was the joint lowest total for the species, matched in 1997, and 2015 and there was only one retrapped, from 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021. As expected, a high percentage, 72% (18) were caught in breeding condition, 14 males and four females but only four juveniles were ringed, the first on 5<sup>th</sup> July. The low capture number and lack of juvenile birds suggest 2023 was not a successful year for the species at Woolston.

### **Mistle Thrush**

*Turdus viscivorus*

*Red listed*

The largest of the UK thrush family is an occasional breeder on the Reserve. In January, a male was in song close by the Morgan Hide on No.3 bed on the 5<sup>th</sup> and perhaps the same individual was again in song in the centre of the bed on the 24<sup>th</sup>. A singing male was also at Bollin Point on the 28<sup>th</sup> and a second was heard in song across the Canal on Lymm Golf Course. Single records in February and March were both territorial males, one on No.3 bed and one south of the Canal opposite No.3 bed. The last reports in the breeding season were of single birds on 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> April. The only other report was of a single on No.4 bed on 24<sup>th</sup> August. Mistle Thrush are rarely caught on the Reserve, the last and fifth to be caught and ringed was in 2009.

### **Spotted Flycatcher**

*Muscicapa striata*

*Red listed*

A scarce spring and autumn passage visitor to the Reserve generally in very low numbers. Only a single bird was recorded hawking for insects from trees east of the footbridge to No.3 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> August.

**Robin***Erithacus rubecula*

A common but under-recorded species with the Breeding Bird Surveys and ringing records providing the most meaningful data. This year's maxima of singing males were: 21 on No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 38 on No.3 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April and ten on No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April.

The 184 processed by the ringing teams was slightly below average with 133 ringed and 51 retrapped, the oldest of which were two ringed in 2018. Twenty-five were caught in breeding condition, 17 males and eight females and the first juvenile was caught on 10<sup>th</sup> May, an early date for the species.

**Bluethroat***Luscinia svecica*

A rare passage migrant, was unexpectedly captured on No.3 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> July. It was an adult male "White-spotted" form in active wing moult. It was not seen after its release. However, as it was in active moult when caught it was likely to have been present on the Reserve before its capture and would not have moved far until its moult was complete. This was the second Bluethroat ringed at Woolston Eyes, the first, also a male White-spotted form, was ringed on No.1 bed in July 1996. Coincidentally, this year's bird was caught in the same net ride as last year's Penduline Tit. What will it provide in 2024?

*Bluethroat**David Bowman*



## **Stonechat**

*Saxicola rubicola*

An annual spring and autumn passage visitor with generally more records in the latter period. Seventeen records were received from three beds, five from January to April and 12 from October to December. A female was reported on No.3 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> January and the same day a pair was present on No.4 bed followed by single males on 4<sup>th</sup> March and 4<sup>th</sup> April. It is possible the last two records were of the same bird but it would be unusual that it could remain hidden for a month without being sighted in a well watched area suggesting four individuals were involved over the period.

In the autumn an unsexed single was reported on No.1 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> November and a single female on the same bed on 18<sup>th</sup> November. These two reports could have been of the same individual or a pair if the unsexed bird was a male. The records on No.4 bed were numerous; a male was recorded on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, the 31<sup>st</sup> October and 2<sup>nd</sup> November, which probably related to the same individual. However, on 9<sup>th</sup> November three were reported on the bed and then two, five days later on the 14<sup>th</sup>. A series of five sightings from 16<sup>th</sup> November to 19<sup>th</sup> December are of at least two birds but could have been more. The presumption is that at least four Stonechat were present in the quarter but it could have been five or higher.

## **Wheatear**

*Oenanthe oenanthe*

*Amber listed*

Recorded annually in spring and autumn passage there were just two reports for the year, both in spring on No.4 bed. The first on 30<sup>th</sup> March and the second on 7<sup>th</sup> May. This was disappointing when recent years have produced seven, eight, five and six records in spring and autumn.

## **House Sparrow**

*Passer domesticus*

*Red listed*

A resident breeding species on the peripheries of the Reserve and all the records this year are associated with those areas closest to the urbanisation surrounding the Eyes in particular the Woolston Weir area and along the Canal Track and its margins. The Weir area recorded the highest counts with 20 on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 12 on 18<sup>th</sup> March and 20 on 7<sup>th</sup> April. The Canal Track reports included ten on 6<sup>th</sup> August and 12 on 23<sup>rd</sup> September.

House Sparrows are seldom caught on the Reserve with only 26 ringed since 1980 the last in 2015.

## **Dunnock**

*Prunella modularis*

*Amber listed*

An under-recorded resident species, apart from occasional records most information comes from the Breeding Bird Surveys and the data supplied by the ringing teams. The high counts from the surveys of singing males were: eight on No.4 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> March, nine on No.2 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> April, five on No.3 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> April and ten on a walk of the Reserve on 13<sup>th</sup> May.

The ringers caught 113 Dunnock during the year, 92 were ringed and 21 retrapped, the three oldest from 2020. Twenty-four were caught in breeding condition, ten females and 14 males. The first juvenile was caught on 13<sup>th</sup> May, an early date, and 65% of those ringed were aged 3J, associated with local breeding.



*Dunnock*

*David Bowman*

**Yellow Wagtail**

*Motacilla flava*

*Red listed*

This colourful wagtail is a summer migrant which breeds in small numbers on local farmland and is an uncommon visitor to the Reserve. There were sightings in all months from April to August, except for June. Of the 22 records received all but two were from the No.4 bed wetland and most were of over-flying birds. The first one was noted on 11<sup>th</sup> April, with a further eight sightings through to month end. Apart from one which flew east over No.3 bed on the 27<sup>th</sup>, all were from No.4 bed, with maxima of three each on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> and eight on the 29<sup>th</sup>. May counts included overflying singles on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, two on the 6<sup>th</sup> and the final one of the spring was on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Return passage started with a juvenile feeding on the west cell of No.4 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> July. Finally, August produced over-flying singles on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> with the latter being the only sighting of the year from No.1 bed.

**Grey Wagtail**

*Motacilla cinerea*

*Amber listed*

Grey Wagtails can be encountered across all four beds, throughout the year, with one or two pairs usually breeding. Peak numbers occur in autumn when a light passage is usually noted. The highest counts from the first half of the year were of three on the No.4 bed wetland on 7<sup>th</sup> January and again on 7<sup>th</sup> February. While there was no conclusive evidence of successful breeding, a male was observed in

song at a regular nest site, under Thelwall Viaduct, on 7<sup>th</sup> April, with one still present there on 1<sup>st</sup> June. Return passage was first noted on 18<sup>th</sup> August, when five flew south over No.1 bed. The only double-figure count of the year came when 13 flew south over No.1 bed during the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> September.

It was a relatively poor year from a ringing perspective, with just eight ringed compared with 24 in 2022. On No.1 bed it was the worst year since 2013 with just two ringed, both birds of the year and caught on 8<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> September. The No.3 bed ringing team fared slightly better, with six juveniles ringed between 20<sup>th</sup> August and 16<sup>th</sup> September. The dates and ages are typical for the species.

### **Pied Wagtail**

*Motacilla alba*

This, our commonest wagtail, is present throughout the year and one or two pairs usually breed. In addition, small winter roosts usually form on No.3 bed while the No.4 bed wetland is proving increasingly attractive to small feeding flocks. Seven were present on the No.4 bed wetland on 7<sup>th</sup> January, with 25 also there on 21<sup>st</sup> January. On that date the wetland was frozen over and the flock was feeding around the edge of a small pool on the east cell, which was being kept open by an industrious flock of Teal and Coot. They probably originated from a roost on No.3 bed, which numbered at least 16 on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> January. Small feeding flocks were subsequently noted in the same area, with 12 on the 7<sup>th</sup> February and 11 on the 18<sup>th</sup>. On 24<sup>th</sup> February 25 were resting on the No.3 bed nest rafts prior to going to roost, with many more thought to have already roosted. The 80 which then left the No.3 bed roost on the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> February was the year's highest count.

Although small numbers were present during the early part of the breeding season there were no June records and no suggestion of breeding. Single figure counts were the norm for the rest of the year with a maximum of seven flying south over No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> September.

### **Meadow Pipit**

*Anthus pratensis*

*Amber listed*

This inconspicuous pipit is a passage migrant and winter visitor, most often encountered at the Reserve's extremities, attracted by the more open aspects and feeding opportunities provided by Bed Nos.1 and 4. Maxima from the first half of the year were of nine around the Elevated Pools on No.1 bed on 14<sup>th</sup> January and six feeding on the No.4 bed wetland on 4<sup>th</sup> February. There were no May or June sightings this year and return passage was first noted on 8<sup>th</sup> July, when one flew south over No.4 bed. Moderate southward movements were then observed with 42 over No.4 bed on 16<sup>th</sup> September and 35 over No.3 bed on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Other double-figure counts were all of feeding flocks, with 10 on the No.4 bed wetland on 9<sup>th</sup> November and 35 around the Elevated Pools on No.1 bed on the same date. Fifteen were again at the latter site on 16<sup>th</sup> November, rising to 35 by the 18<sup>th</sup>, with ten on No.4 bed on the same date.

The five ringed was by far the lowest total since 2012. On No.1 bed it was the worst year since 1997 and the third worst since 1995, with just two caught, both on 15<sup>th</sup> March. It is highly unusual for none to be caught in autumn on this bed. It was a more typical year on No.3 bed with three ringed in September (2 on 13<sup>th</sup> and 1 on 23<sup>rd</sup>). These are typical dates, but one was an adult which is unusual for this species.

**Tree Pipit***Anthus trivialis**Red Listed*

After a bumper year in 2022, it was back to meagre fare for this declining, migratory pipit. The only sighting was of one which flew south over the No.4 bed wetland on 18<sup>th</sup> August, which is a typical passage date.

*Tree Pipit**David Bowman***Water Pipit***Anthus spinoletta*

After a 25-year absence 2022 saw a single record of this elegant pipit, which is a scarce winter visitor to freshwater bodies in the UK, so it was pleasing to see an upward trend this year. There were four sightings, all from the No.4 bed wetland. The first was both watched and heard, moving repeatedly between the two cells of the wetland. A similar pattern was repeated on 2<sup>nd</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> November and it was thought that it probably roosted on the bed.

**Chaffinch***Fringilla coelebs*

This is the UK's commonest finch with numbers supplemented in winter by large influxes from Fennoscandia. Nevertheless, a previously rising population has seen a sharp decline over the past fifteen years, due to the impact of Trichomonosis, transmitted by unhygienic garden feeders and bird baths. Despite the high level of supplementary feeding on the Reserve, winter numbers continue to reflect the national decline. Small numbers breed.



As ever, most of the year's notable counts came from No.3 bed, where the sacrificial crop is particularly attractive to this ground-feeding species. Maxima from the early winter period, all from No.3 bed, included: 65 on 17<sup>th</sup> January, 55 on the 28<sup>th</sup>, 90 on 11<sup>th</sup> February and 60 on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Elsewhere, 35 were present on No.4 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> January, with 25 on No.1 bed on the same date. The only breeding record came with one in song on No.3 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> April, a reduction from previous years which may be indicative of a real decline, rather than a result of less systematic survey work taking place. In the second half of the year no more than 60 were noted on No.3 bed, with 22 on 31<sup>st</sup> October on No.4 bed. Data from the ringing teams confirms a continuing decline with the 118 birds ringed being the lowest number since 1999 and a long way below the ten-year average of 294. Just 12 juveniles which might have been locally hatched were caught across the Reserve. On No.1 bed it was the worst year since 2013 with 58 ringed. A further three were caught that had been ringed in a previous year, the oldest from 12<sup>th</sup> February 2018. None of those caught was in breeding condition and the first juvenile (of only six) was caught on 5<sup>th</sup> July. The decline on No.3 bed was even more dramatic, with just 60 ringed, the lowest total since 2004, compared with an average of 169. Worryingly only six were presumed to be locally bred juveniles. This used to be such a common breeding bird with many young being ringed during the summer (44 in 2019, 38 in 2020, 16 in 2021, 0 in 2022 and now just 6 in 2023). In addition, no adults were ringed during the breeding season, raising the question of what has happened to our breeding Chaffinches.

### **Brambling**

*Fringilla montifringilla*

This attractive winter visitor and passage migrant sometimes occurs in high numbers, with movements triggered by poor seed crops in Fenno-Scandia. This was not a good Brambling year, however, with no more than one or two reported from both winter periods, all from Nos.3 and 4 beds. This was reflected in the ringing data with just one, a female, ringed on No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March.

### **Bullfinch**

*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

*Amber listed*

This colourful but unobtrusive finch is present across all four beds throughout the year and breeds in small numbers. The national population trend is complex, with a severe decline starting in the 1970s seeming to have moderated in recent years. Most counts came from around the various feeding stations, with maxima of ten on No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> January and a similar number on No.3 bed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of the month. Unusually, there were no reported sightings from June and July.

Although well below the ten-year average of 215, the 100 Bullfinches ringed might represent stabilisation after the 102 in 2022. The notable paucity of juveniles caught in the breeding season, though, is worrying. On No.1 bed it was an average year with 42 ringed and, a further four processed from earlier years, the oldest being from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2019. Eight were caught in breeding condition, three females and five males, and juveniles were caught from 26<sup>th</sup> June. On No.3 bed the total of 58 was the lowest since 2006 when 47 were ringed. The average is 113.95 and the maximum was achieved in 2017 with 297 ringed. Since 2019 the number ringed per year has steadily decreased. During the summer 14 males and nine females were caught in breeding condition, along with just 25 juveniles which were probably local bred.



*Bullfinch*

*David Bowman*

**Greenfinch**

*Chloris chloris*

*Red Listed*

This stocky finch has been hit really hard by Trichomonosis and is experiencing a rapid population decline, which is reflected in the numbers now found on the Reserve. Throughout January and into early February moderately sized flocks were on both Nos.3 and 4 beds. The No.3 bed flock was around 50 till late in the month, rising to 80 by month end. Seventy-five were still present on 11<sup>th</sup> February and 45 by the 28<sup>th</sup>. On No.4 bed the flock hovered around the 25 mark till month end. Thereafter, both flocks dispersed as the breeding season approached. Breeding was suggested by the presence of males in song in suitable habitat: three on No.2 bed on 25<sup>th</sup> March and again on 8<sup>th</sup> April, plus one singing near the No.4 bed Platform on 29<sup>th</sup> April. There were five notable autumn counts from No.3 bed, where flocks frequent the feeding stations. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 60 were counted, with 50 on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 70 on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 100 on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 50 still present by 9<sup>th</sup> December. Away from No.3 bed 12 were perched in trees near to the entry barrier.

The total of 302 Greenfinches ringed appears healthy compared with the 214 birds ringed in 2023, though it pales in comparison with our historical totals. For No.1 bed it was the worst year since the current ringing regime began in 1995, with only 76 ringed. Just one was caught from the previous year and that was one originally ringed on No3 bed. Three were caught in breeding condition, two females and a male while the first juvenile of the year was ringed on the late date of 7<sup>th</sup> August. The No.3 bed team ringed only 138 compared with a mean of 329 since 2004. To emphasise the level of decline, in 2003 the team ringed an astonishing 1199. This year's total is the lowest since then.

**Linnet***Linaria cannabina**Red listed*

This small finch prefers open country and farmland, where its slow decline has been linked to agricultural intensification. On the Reserve it is usually encountered in the open spaces of Nos.1 and 4 beds, though flocks occasionally take advantage of the No.3 bed seed crop. During the first part of the year a small flock was feeding in No.3 bed, with 15 on 17<sup>th</sup> January and 12 on the 19<sup>th</sup>. What was perhaps the same flock was then regularly observed feeding on the masses of *Persicaria* seed around the bunds of the No.4 bed wetland, steadily increasing in size to a maximum of 90 on 7<sup>th</sup> February. Sixty were still present in early March and 22 were also on No.1 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> March. Breeding was confirmed when five Linnet nests were located around the bunds of No.2 bed in late spring. In addition, one was noted in song on No.1 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> May. Post-breeding flocks were particularly attracted to the No.3 bed seed crop, with 120 on 12<sup>th</sup> October and 80 still present on the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month with up to 25 then on many dates through to year end. Elsewhere on the Reserve 25 were on No.1 bed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

Two juveniles, both females, were ringed on 14<sup>th</sup> October and 11<sup>th</sup> November, both on No.3 bed, which is typical.

**Lesser Redpoll***Acanthis cabaret**Red listed*

This agile and irruptive little finch, which feeds on the seeds of Birch, Alder and Larch, underwent a sharp decline towards the end of the last century, when it was also lost as a breeding species on the Reserve. There were just four double figure counts from the first quarter of the year: ten at Bollin Point on 14<sup>th</sup> January, ten around Butchersfield on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 15 on No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> March and 19 feeding in alders around the Loop of No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March. The final spring sighting was of eight on No.1 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> April. All the highest counts of the year came from No.4 bed, with maxima of 60 on 31<sup>st</sup> October, 50 on 9<sup>th</sup> November and 65 on 14<sup>th</sup> of the month.

Lesser Redpolls are irruptive at Woolston and were present in average numbers on No.1 bed but record numbers on No.3 bed. The total of 144 ringed was the best year since 1997, well above the ten-year average of 77. On No.1 bed 48 were ringed with a further one caught that had been ringed elsewhere in the UK. The No.3 bed team had better fortunes with 96 ringed. During the spring 14 were ringed between 11<sup>th</sup> March and 22<sup>nd</sup> April and the first autumn migrant was caught on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, with catching continuing regularly up to 30<sup>th</sup> November.

**Common Crossbill***Loxia curvirostra*

These sturdy finches are denizens of the UK's pine forests. They are an irruptive species and can move long distances in search of suitable feeding. The UK population can be swelled in winter by the arrival of continental birds. They are a scarce visitor to the Reserve and one which flew over near the entry barrier on 22<sup>nd</sup> July was the year's only sighting.

## **Goldfinch**

*Carduelis*

These colourful finches seem to have escaped the depredations of Trichomonosis, despite sharing the habit of attending garden feeders and bird tables with its less fortunate congeners, the Greenfinch and Chaffinch. It is a common resident across all four beds, breeds in small numbers and forms sizeable post-breeding flocks. The maxima from the first winter periods were: 25 on No.3 bed on 5<sup>th</sup> January, 20 on No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> January and 40 on No.4 bed on 28<sup>th</sup> of the month. Although a regular breeding species, no breeding records were received this year. It seems to have been a good breeding season for Goldfinches, though, based on the sizes of the post-breeding numbers. On No.4 bed the seed-rich bunds of the wetland were particularly attractive to the species. On 11<sup>th</sup> July 40 were there, building to 65 by 19<sup>th</sup> August and to 200 by the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month. On 12<sup>th</sup> October No.3 bed held a flock of 100, feeding on Thistle seeds, while the No.4 bed flock had declined to 50 by mid-December.

Just 18 Goldfinches were ringed, the lowest total since 2016. The ten-year average is 36 but as this species tends to be where the seeding thistles are, catches do fluctuate. On No.1 bed it was an average year with nine ringed between 3<sup>rd</sup> March and 16<sup>th</sup> October. Seven of these were in breeding condition, four females and three males, and only one juvenile was ringed, on 16<sup>th</sup> October. On No.3 bed it was a below average year with just nine ringed, compared with an average of 14.6. The mean has been inflated due to four good years, nine is more typical for us. Three males were caught in breeding condition during the summer, but no females.

## **Siskin**

*Spinus spinus*

This acrobatic little finch is another pine forest species which, outside of the breeding season, roams in search of its preferred winter food, the seeds of Alder and Birch. Notable early counts came with 25 around Butchersfield Tip on 15<sup>th</sup> January and 20 on No.3 bed three days later. There were then only single-figure counts and the last one of the spring flew over No.1 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> April. Return passage was first noted on 17<sup>th</sup> June when single juveniles were present on both Nos.3 and 4 beds. The only notable count from the remainder of the year was on 31<sup>st</sup> December, when 25 were on No.3 bed.

Typically, just two were ringed, both males on No.3 bed, an adult and a juvenile on 4<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November respectively.

## **Yellowhammer**

*Emberiza citrinella*

*Red listed*

These strikingly coloured buntings breed in small numbers adjacent to the eastern end of the Reserve and are occasionally encountered in that area. There were just three sightings this year, starting with a single on 29<sup>th</sup> April on No.1 bed. Then, unusually, one passed over No.4 bed, at the western end of the Reserve, on 31<sup>st</sup> October. Finally, two were on No.1 bed on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

None was ringed this year.



## Reed Bunting

*Amber listed*

*Emberiza schoeniclus*

After a period of decline at the end of the last century the population of this, our commonest bunting, has stabilised. At Woolston they are present on all four beds throughout the year, breed in small numbers and usually form winter roosts. During the first winter period there were just four double figure counts with: at least 12 leaving a roost on No.3 bed on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> January, 11 on No.4 bed on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 15 taking advantage of the No.3 bed seed crop on 11<sup>th</sup> February and 10 on No.4 bed on 18<sup>th</sup> February, three of which were males in song. During the breeding season males were noted in song on three of the beds, with maxima of two on No.2 bed on 29<sup>th</sup> April, two on No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March and four on No.4 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> March. The only counts of note for the rest of the year were of ten on 7<sup>th</sup> October and 30 on 12<sup>th</sup> October, both involved flocks taking advantage of the No.3 bed seed crop.

For the ringing teams it was the worst year for Reed Buntings since 2015 with just 90 ringed and just 13 were caught in breeding condition. On No.1 bed it was another poor year with just 46 ringed and a further 19 processed from previous years, the oldest from 24<sup>th</sup> February 2017. The only one in breeding condition was a female and the only juvenile of the year was trapped on 21<sup>st</sup> August.



*Reed Bunting*

*David Bowman*

### WeBS COUNTS 2023

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is organised jointly by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). WECG has been contributing data to this survey since 1978. Counts from over five hundred sites are analysed by the BTO and used to assess species' trends and to aid in habitat conservation. The WeBS counts were critical in establishing the Reserve's status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

|                      | Jan  | Feb  | Mar | Apr |  | Sept | Oct | Nov  | Dec  |
|----------------------|------|------|-----|-----|--|------|-----|------|------|
| Canada Goose         | 178  | 156  | 74  | 74  |  | 22   | 55  | 95   | 68   |
| Barnacle Goose       | 0    | 0    | 0   | 1   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Greylag Goose        | 1    | 53   | 29  | 31  |  | 0    | 2   | 164  | 72   |
| Pink-footed Goose    | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 2000 | 0    |
| Mute Swan            | 17   | 40   | 37  | 25  |  | 40   | 37  | 34   | 35   |
| Whooper Swan         | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 3   | 0    | 0    |
| Shelduck             | 15   | 17   | 19  | 5   |  | 0    | 0   | 1    | 7    |
| Shoveler             | 61   | 272  | 197 | 8   |  | 53   | 174 | 92   | 133  |
| Gadwall              | 103  | 208  | 187 | 170 |  | 462  | 247 | 153  | 202  |
| Wigeon               | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 16   | 0   | 5    | 5    |
| Mallard              | 280  | 162  | 138 | 59  |  | 143  | 128 | 118  | 154  |
| Pintail              | 0    | 11   | 2   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 1    |
| Teal                 | 1990 | 2085 | 279 | 30  |  | 114  | 223 | 392  | 1007 |
| Pochard              | 0    | 86   | 47  | 36  |  | 4    | 0   | 12   | 10   |
| Tufted Duck          | 245  | 526  | 365 | 123 |  | 108  | 137 | 399  | 454  |
| Goosander            | 1    | 1    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Water Rail           | 1    | 12   | 1   | 1   |  | 4    | 0   | 8    | 4    |
| Moorhen              | 12   | 27   | 16  | 10  |  | 24   | 23  | 21   | 15   |
| Coot                 | 47   | 196  | 153 | 59  |  | 232  | 237 | 236  | 348  |
| Little Grebe         | 11   | 20   | 12  | 19  |  | 30   | 33  | 10   | 15   |
| Great Crested Grebe  | 2    | 13   | 32  | 26  |  | 17   | 2   | 4    | 1    |
| Black-necked Grebe   | 0    | 1    | 1   | 19  |  | 3    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Oystercatcher        | 0    | 2    | 2   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Lapwing              | 210  | 13   | 12  | 7   |  | 152  | 370 | 277  | 32   |
| Little Ringed Plover | 0    | 0    | 0   | 1   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Curlew Sandpiper     | 0    | 2    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Ruff                 | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 1    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Woodcock             | 1    | 1    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 0   | 1    | 0    |
| Ruff                 | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 1    | 0   | 0    | 0    |
| Jack Snipe           | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 3   | 6    | 0    |
| Snipe                | 0    | 4    | 0   | 5   |  | 4    | 7   | 4    | 4    |
| Green Sandpiper      | 0    | 0    | 0   | 0   |  | 0    | 1   | 0    | 0    |

|                          | <b>Jan</b> | <b>Feb</b> | <b>Mar</b> | <b>Apr</b> |  | <b>Sept</b> | <b>Oct</b> | <b>Nov</b> | <b>Dec</b> |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Black-headed Gull        | 121        | 561        | 279        | 296        |  | 40          | 137        | 253        | 162        |
| Common Gull              | 4          | 1          | 1          | 0          |  | 0           | 0          | 8          | 2          |
| Great Black-backed Gull  | 0          | 2          | 0          | 1          |  | 3           | 0          | 3          | 0          |
| Herring Gull             | 2          | 2          | 0          | 8          |  | 1           | 0          | 48         | 2          |
| Lesser Black-backed Gull | 3          | 15         | 13         | 24         |  | 6           | 3          | 31         | 12         |
| Cormorant                | 85         | 41         | 13         | 7          |  | 21          | 35         | 16         | 12         |
| Grey Heron               | 9          | 4          | 5          | 4          |  | 13          | 12         | 0          | 3          |
| Kingfisher               | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          |  | 2           | 0          | 3          | 0          |

## WOOLSTON EYES RINGING REPORT 2023

Ringling operations in 2023 were carried out in two areas of the Reserve: the east end of No.1 bed and the centre of No.3 bed.

The year ended with 5,579 birds of 60 species ringed. This represents a decrease of 9% when compared with 6,106 birds, of 63 species, ringed in 2022. As is usually the case, there are a number of different factors at play. One of these factors is ringling effort. On No.1 bed ringling took place on 100 days in 2023 compared with 121 days in 2022. On No. 3 bed the equivalent figures were 83 days in 2023 compared with 104 days in 2022. This reduction in ringling effort resulted, in part, from weather conditions that were not conducive to ringling with more rain and higher winds. As our climate warms, we must expect these conditions to become “the norm”. At first sight it might appear that, given an approximate twenty percent reduction in ringling effort, the nine percent reduction in birds ringed represents a “good” year. However, a number of species appear to have had a bad breeding season and the ringling totals have been boosted by some exceptional events which are referred to below.

In 2023 Woolston continued to avoid the worst impacts of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (“Bird Flu”) and on No.3 bed it was possible to operate the fixed duck trap between February 4<sup>th</sup> and April 2<sup>nd</sup>. During this period 145 Teal were ringed. Water levels did not allow the trap to be used in the second winter period but a single bird was caught in a Potter Trap. Finland was the furthest east that a Woolston Teal was reported from but the absence of reports from the breeding grounds in Russia is probably a result of the global situation rather than an absence of possible records. The trap also produced six Mallards and a drake Shoveler, the first of this species to be ringed on No.3 bed. Also on No.3 Bed, the sprightlier members of the ringling team managed to chase down a young Greylag Goose and four young Canada Geese. Strangely, one of the latter was later shot on the outskirts of Warrington.

On April 16<sup>th</sup> an adult male Great Crested Grebe was found stranded on the track near the Penny Ferry. It was, in all other respects, healthy and was ringed and released onto water thus becoming the first of this species to be ringed at Woolston. The opportunistic deployment of Potter Traps accounted for four Water Rails, five Coots and six Moorhens. The colour-ringing of Moorhens continues on No.3 bed but, apart from ringed birds re-sighted from the Morgan Hide, no “wanderers” have been reported as yet.

After the first proven breeding in 2022, the Marsh Harriers again produced two chicks which were ringed. Otherwise, it was a modest year for birds of prey with nearly all the action on No.1 bed where a second-year Buzzard turned up in a mist net on July 10<sup>th</sup> and a female Kestrel on February 8<sup>th</sup>. Sparrowhawks have become less frequent captures in recent years and two were ringed on No.1 bed and a single bird re-trapped on No.3 bed.

Water levels and weather conditions were not conducive to the operation of the seasonal net across the channel by the Duck Trap on No.3 bed with the result that it was deployed on just one occasion, catching a Cetti’s Warbler. As a result, it was a blank year for the target species, Green Sandpiper. The only wader ringed in 2023 was a second-year Woodcock trapped on No.1 bed on February 10<sup>th</sup>.

Four Woodpigeons and three Stock Doves were ringed in 2023, much in line with 2022 and typical of recent years. It was a blank year for Owls.



With respect to Kingfishers, it was “a game of two halves.” On No.1 bed a respectable total of eight birds was ringed, all juveniles. On No.3 bed, the inability to use the net set for Green Sandpipers also removed the ability to catch Kingfishers and none were ringed.

Fourteen Great Spotted Woodpeckers were ringed. The five-year average up to 2022 is 21. Only eight birds were aged as juveniles so it is possible that it was not a good breeding season for this species. Five Magpies were ringed, three of these on No.1 bed. It was the worst year for Jays since 1994 with just four birds ringed, two on each bed. A second-year male Carrion Crow was ringed on No.1 bed on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. This was just the second ringed on the bed after one in 2016.

Both Blue Tits and Great Tits had a reasonable breeding season in the nest boxes on the Reserve with 155 chicks ringed on No.3 Bed (2022-147, 2021-137 and 2020-134). The number of boxes has remained constant so this annual trend does represent a slight increase in productivity but note that 173 chicks were ringed in 2019. In terms of total numbers ringed, Great Tits were ringed in very similar numbers to the previous three years but the 457 Blue Tits ringed was a significant advance over the three-year average of 359 so it is likely that this species had a better breeding season. After a very poor year in 2022 the 21 Coal Tits ringed represents a return to a typical figure for the years prior to that. For a species that tends to be associated with mature woodland it is odd that twice as many birds were ringed on No.1 bed as on No.3. It may be that juveniles disperse into other habitats to find food.

It is to be hoped that the 15 Willow Tits ringed in 2022 represents the low point for Willow Tits at Woolston. Given the reduced ringing effort in 2023, the 17 birds, all juveniles, ringed in 2023 may be considered as a slight improvement, or at the least, a stabilisation. The following totals of the number of different Willow Tits handled by the two ringing teams combined supports this view. 2018-54, 2019-50, 2020-24, 2021-32, 2022-18, 2023-22.

The Goldcrests ringed at Woolston are overwhelmingly birds of the year and a mixture of locally bred birds and migrants from farther north in Britain and the continent. This latter element can fluctuate significantly depending on conditions in their areas of origin. With that caveat, the 300 Goldcrests ringed in 2023 was fifteen percent above the average for the previous five years. It is now five years since a Firecrest was ringed at Woolston.

As was the case in 2022 a small autumn hirundine roost formed on No.1 bed which yielded just eight Swallows and a single Sand Martin. A small breeding colony on the bed yielded a further 24 Sand Martins. There were no autumn roosts on No.3 bed but the pre-breeding roost of Sand Martins that was a notable event in spring 2021 repeated itself and an impressive total of 472 were ringed. After two fairly poor years in 2020 and 2021 the 142 Long-tailed Tits ringed in 2022 seemed to be a recovery but proved to be a “false dawn” as the 86 birds ringed in 2023 was the lowest total since 2015. On the bright side, numbers did recover after the 2015 low point and hopefully the same will be true in 2024.

A total of 2,446 warblers of ten species were ringed in 2023 compared with 2,529 of eleven species in 2022.

The “missing” species, when compared with 2022 was Yellow-browed Warbler which is not caught annually at Woolston. Although, in light of the reduced ringing effort, this appears to be a reasonable outcome there are significant “winners” and “losers” amongst the ten species caught. Although not at the record level recorded in 2022, the 40 Cetti’s Warblers ringed represents the second best ever year

for this species at Woolston. Turning first to the “winners” it was a good year for *Sylvia* warblers. Chiffchaffs must have had an excellent breeding season as the total of 1,139 ringed is a record for Woolston and compares with a five-year average (up to 2022) of 552. Blackcaps had a good year with 684 ringed, average 681, and the 42 Garden Warblers compared with an average of 34. Common Whitethroats are in long-term decline at Woolston, probably as a result of habitat change, and 67 were ringed compared with the five-year average of 90. The same is true for Willow Warblers although numbers may have stabilised with 110 ringed compared with a four-year average of 120. However, this species is close to disappearing from No.3 bed where just 14 were ringed. The “losers” were the *Acrocephalus* warblers. The 323 Reed Warblers ringed is the lowest total since 2001 and compares with a five-year average of 477. The situation with Sedge Warblers was even worse with just 38 ringed, the lowest total since 1986 when David Norman was the only ringer at Woolston. The five-year average for this species is 90. There are several possible reasons for these very poor totals. One might be that adult birds returned in ‘lower than normal’ numbers from Africa. The following analysis is very “broad brush” and based on small samples but, if the number of adults encountered in the period up to June 30<sup>th</sup> in each year is taken as a surrogate for adults returning to breed, we find the following; Reed Warblers, 2022-43 and 2023-50. For Sedge Warblers the numbers are 2022-7 and 2023-3. The numbers for Sedge Warblers are too small to reach a conclusion but it seems that Reed Warblers returned in similar numbers to 2022. This implies that poor breeding performance is at the root of the low ringing returns. Possibly the rain and wind made life difficult in the reed beds. Finally, as in 2022, two Grasshopper Warblers were ringed, one on each bed. The capture on No.1 bed was, typically, a dispersing juvenile but the bird ringed on No.3 Bed was an adult female with the remains of a brood patch. Given the late date of September 9<sup>th</sup>, it is likely that this bird was already on migration and local breeding should not be implied. Just a single Lesser Whitethroat was ringed, a dispersing juvenile. This species does not breed on the Reserve.

The following comments concerning first juveniles are drawn from the combined experience on the two beds.

The following first ringing dates for juvenile birds indicate that for resident species the timing of their breeding season was in the normal range for Wrens and Bullfinches but some two weeks earlier than recent years for Robins and Dunnocks.

Ringling Date of First Juvenile

|           | 2023   | 2022    | 2021   | 2020   |
|-----------|--------|---------|--------|--------|
| Robin     | 10-May | 21-May  | 27-May | 25-May |
| Wren      | 16-Jun | 15-Jun  | 04-Jun | 09-Jun |
| Dunnock   | 13-May | 01-June | 26-May | 22-May |
| Bullfinch | 10-Jun | 15-Jun  | 18-Jun | 07-Jun |

In the case of our migrant warblers the following table of “first juvenile” dates indicates that the breeding season was very much in line with recent years.

### Ringling Date of First Juvenile

|              | 2023   | 2022   | 2021   | 2020   |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Chiffchaff   | 02-Jun | 06-Jun | 28-May | 26-May |
| Blackcap     | 03-Jun | 04-Jun | 17-Jun | 07-Jun |
| Whitethroat  | 22-Jun | 11-Jun | 26-Jun | 16-Jun |
| Reed Warbler | 22-Jun | 24-Jun | 26-Jun | 16-Jun |

Amongst the resident species, Wrens had an exceptional year in 2022 and although 2023 did not reach those heights the 142 ringed was in line with the ten-year average of 150, whereas 133 Robins were ringed which is at the lower end of numbers over the last ten years with an average of 164. It was the same story for Dunnocks where the 92 ringed was a little below the ten-year average of 106. The first juvenile dates shown above do not imply a significant loss of early broods. Treecreepers and Nuthatches were ringed in what might now be considered as typical numbers and, both species having become established on the Reserve, do not appear to be increasing.

If the “small residents” appeared to cope reasonably well with the conditions during the year, the same cannot be said of the resident thrushes with just 42 Blackbirds ringed, the lowest number since 2015. Of these, 23 were in breeding condition but only 19 juveniles were caught, the earliest on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. It appears that early breeding attempts have a high failure rate, possible as a result of dry springs making invertebrates hard to find. For the second year in succession, the situation on No.3 bed was significantly worse than that on No.1 bed. It is necessary to go back to 1994 to find a lower total than the 24 Song Thrushes ringed. Eighteen of these were in breeding condition yet only four juveniles were caught so my comments about Blackbirds apply even more severely to Song Thrushes. Redwings are an irruptive species with numbers arriving varying from autumn to autumn. It was not a big “Redwing year” and just 41 were ringed. A juvenile male Fieldfare, ringed on No.3 bed on November 11<sup>th</sup>, was the first on the bed and the first at Woolston since 2018.

It was a blank year for passage migrants but, in what was probably the ringling highlight of 2023, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, a Bluethroat of the white-spotted race *Cyanecula*, was caught on No.3 bed in the same net that caught the Penduline Tit in 2022. The bird was an adult male in wing moult and showing signs of breeding condition. This is the second of this species to be ringed at Woolston after a bird on No.1 bed in 1996.

Meadow Pipits are ringed on passage and numbers fluctuate but in 2023 passage was extremely light and just five were ringed, the lowest number since 2008. It was a blank year for Tree Pipits. After 24 Grey Wagtails ringed in 2022, just eight were ringed in 2023, the worst total since 2015. On No.3 bed the inability to deploy the seasonal net over the channel affected catches but passage was also lighter than in recent years with just two birds ringed on No.1 bed.

The eight species of finch that appear regularly in the Woolston ringling report again had mixed fortunes. In last year’s report I said “two comments that I have read recently about Chaffinches are, firstly, that Trichomonosis has moved from Greenfinches into Chaffinches and secondly, that a warming climate has reduced the winter influx of continental finches into the U.K.” The relentless decline of this species at Woolston continues with the 118 birds ringed being the lowest number since 1999 and a long way below the ten-year average of 294. Just 12 juveniles that might have been locally

hatched were caught across the Reserve. Again, last year I said “it is probably unhelpful to compare the 302 Greenfinches ringed with a ten-year average as we adjust our expectations to a “new normal” given the endemic nature of Trichomonosis.” Last year’s total appears healthy compared with the 214 birds ringed in 2023 and this is another species in serious long-term decline, not a situation unique to Woolston. Neither winter period was a “Brambling Winter “and just a single bird was ringed. Although well below the ten-year average of 215, the 100 Bullfinches ringed might represent stabilisation after 102 in 2022. This is another species that appears to be in long-term decline with a notable paucity of juveniles caught in the breeding season.

In the case of Goldfinches, 18 were ringed, the lowest total since 2016. The ten-year average is 36 but this species tends to be where the seeding thistles are and catches do fluctuate. Lesser Redpolls are irruptive at Woolston and were present in average numbers on No.1 bed but record numbers on No.3 bed. The total of 144 ringed was the best year since 1997, well above the ten-year average of 77. Siskins are never caught in numbers at Woolston and just two were caught on No.3 bed. Linnets are also now rare in the ringing returns and, again, two were caught on No.3 bed. It was a blank year for Yellowhammers. It was the worst year for Reed Buntings since 2015 with just 90 ringed. Just 13 birds were caught in breeding condition.

In 2023 individual species milestones were headlined by the migrant warblers for which Woolston is so important with the 15,000<sup>th</sup> Blackcap, 14,000<sup>th</sup> Reed Warbler and 12,000<sup>th</sup> Chiffchaff. Amongst residents ringed were the 9,000<sup>th</sup> Great Tit, 8,000<sup>th</sup> Reed Bunting and 7,000<sup>th</sup> Wren. The success of the duck trap was evidenced by the 1,000<sup>th</sup> Teal and 100<sup>th</sup> Mallard.

The Great Crested Grebe was the first to be ringed at Woolston so the number of different species ringed at Woolston rises to 115.

All birds are ringed by members of Merseyside Ringing Group, licensed under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 by the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology). Ringing in Britain is supported by the JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) on behalf of the government's nature conservation agencies including Natural England. Data on all birds ringed and re-trapped are computerised and submitted to the BTO for incorporation into the national database and large-scale analyses. Readers wanting to know more of the technical aspects of ageing and sexing birds can find many photographic examples of Woolston birds on the Merseyside Ringing Group website [[www.merseysiderg.org.uk](http://www.merseysiderg.org.uk)].

**Michael Miles on behalf of the ringing team (John Blundell, Kieran Foster, Theo Hall, Dan Owen, Jen Page, David Riley, Jasmine Smith, Anthony Spicer and Natasha Tyrer.)**



**RINGING TOTALS 2023**

|                     |             |             | <b>Reserve Total</b> |  | <b>Grand Total</b> |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|--|--------------------|
| <b>SPECIES</b>      | <b>No.1</b> | <b>No.3</b> | <b>2023</b>          |  | <b>1980-2023</b>   |
| Greylag Goose       |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 2                  |
| Canada Goose        |             | 4           | 4                    |  | 12                 |
| Teal                |             | 146         | 146                  |  | 1062               |
| Mallard             |             | 6           | 6                    |  | 105                |
| Shoveler            |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 2                  |
| Great Crested Grebe |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 1                  |
| Marsh Harrier       |             |             | 2                    |  | 4                  |
| Buzzard             | 1           |             | 1                    |  | 6                  |
| Sparrowhawk         | 2           |             | 2                    |  | 147                |
| Kestrel             | 1           |             | 1                    |  | 5                  |
| Water Rail          | 1           | 3           | 4                    |  | 112                |
| Moorhen             |             | 6           | 6                    |  | 369                |
| Coot                |             | 5           | 5                    |  | 46                 |
| Woodcock            | 1           |             | 1                    |  | 5                  |
| Stock Dove          | 1           | 2           | 3                    |  | 88                 |
| Woodpigeon          | 1           | 3           | 4                    |  | 150                |
| Kingfisher          | 8           |             | 8                    |  | 176                |
| Great Spotted       |             |             |                      |  |                    |
| Woodpecker          | 5           | 9           | 14                   |  | 448                |
| Magpie              | 3           | 2           | 5                    |  | 170                |
| Jay                 | 2           | 2           | 4                    |  | 404                |
| Carrion Crow        | 1           |             | 1                    |  | 19                 |
| Goldcrest           | 221         | 79          | 300                  |  | 4460               |
| Blue Tit            | 196         | 261         | 457                  |  | 13597              |
| Great Tit           | 113         | 207         | 320                  |  | 9112               |
| Coal Tit            | 14          | 7           | 21                   |  | 333                |
| Willow Tit          | 9           | 8           | 17                   |  | 958                |
| Sand Martin         | 25          | 472         | 497                  |  | 1949               |
| Swallow             | 10          | 2           | 12                   |  | 14679              |
| Cetti's Warbler     | 12          | 28          | 40                   |  | 271                |
| Long-tailed Tit     | 48          | 38          | 86                   |  | 4760               |
| Chiffchaff          | 824         | 315         | 1139                 |  | 12387              |
| Willow Warbler      | 96          | 14          | 110                  |  | 8921               |
| Blackcap            | 319         | 365         | 684                  |  | 15395              |
| Garden Warbler      | 17          | 25          | 42                   |  | 1152               |
| Lesser Whitethroat  |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 285                |
| Whitethroat         | 21          | 46          | 67                   |  | 5600               |
| Grasshopper Warbler | 1           | 1           | 2                    |  | 213                |

|                      |             |             | <b>Reserve Total</b> |  | <b>Grand Total</b> |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|--|--------------------|
| <b>SPECIES</b>       | <b>No.1</b> | <b>No.3</b> | <b>2023</b>          |  | <b>1980-2023</b>   |
| Sedge Warbler        | 6           | 32          | 38                   |  | 5908               |
| Reed Warbler         | 113         | 210         | 323                  |  | 14197              |
| Nuthatch             | 1           | 4           | 5                    |  | 36                 |
| Treecreeper          | 13          | 7           | 20                   |  | 377                |
| Wren                 | 62          | 80          | 142                  |  | 7025               |
| Blackbird            | 28          | 14          | 42                   |  | 3164               |
| Fieldfare            |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 45                 |
| Song Thrush          | 12          | 12          | 24                   |  | 1478               |
| Redwing              | 17          | 24          | 41                   |  | 1947               |
| Robin                | 68          | 65          | 133                  |  | 5646               |
| Bluethroat           |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 2                  |
| Dunnoek              | 18          | 74          | 92                   |  | 4553               |
| Grey Wagtail         | 2           | 6           | 8                    |  | 182                |
| Meadow Pipit         | 2           | 3           | 5                    |  | 1187               |
| Chaffinch            | 58          | 60          | 118                  |  | 7157               |
| Brambling            |             | 1           | 1                    |  | 1524               |
| Greenfinch           | 76          | 138         | 214                  |  | 18585              |
| Goldfinch            | 9           | 9           | 18                   |  | 1038               |
| Siskin               |             | 2           | 2                    |  | 95                 |
| Linnet               |             | 2           | 2                    |  | 1149               |
| Lesser Redpoll       | 48          | 96          | 144                  |  | 2664               |
| Bullfinch            | 42          | 58          | 100                  |  | 4431               |
| Reed Bunting         | 46          | 44          | 90                   |  | 8046               |
|                      |             |             |                      |  |                    |
| Others (55 species). |             |             |                      |  | 2080               |
|                      |             |             |                      |  |                    |
| <b>Totals</b>        | <b>2576</b> | <b>3003</b> | <b>5579</b>          |  | <b>189955</b>      |

## SELECTED RECOVERIES AND CONTROLS

This section lists some of the Woolston-ringed birds that were reported from elsewhere ('recoveries') and birds caught at Woolston already wearing rings ('controls'). In addition to these birds, numerous birds ringed at Woolston were caught again ('re-trapped') on the Reserve this year, some of them having undertaken long journeys in between ringing and recapture, and these all add to our knowledge of migration, survival/ mortality and longevity, habitat use and so on.

The age when ringed and method of finding are coded as follows:

- 1 Pullus (nestling or chick)
- 1J Fledged, but flying so weakly that it is obviously incapable of having flown far from nest.
- 2 Fully grown – year of hatching unknown
- 3 Definitely hatched during the calendar year of ringing
- 3J Definitely hatched during the calendar year of ringing and still completely or partially in juvenile body plumage
- 4 Hatched before calendar year of ringing – exact year unknown
- 5 Definitely hatched during previous calendar year
- 6 Hatched before last calendar year – exact year unknown

Sex, when determined at time of ringing or finding:

- M Male
- F Female

Circumstances of finding:

- R Caught and released by a ringer
- B Breeding
- RR Alive and probably healthy, ring or colour marks read in the field by ringer
- VV Alive and probably healthy, ring or colour marks read in the field by non-ringer
- SR Sick or injured – released with ring
- S Sick or injured – not known to have been released
- X Found dead
- XF Found freshly dead or dying
- // Circumstances of finding unknown
- +F Shot

### **Canada Goose**

5176362 1 01/07/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington

+F 20/09/2023 Warrington, 6km 270°

Canada Goose is not a quarry species for sport shooting. They taste "foul" apparently (with apologies for the pun.) It is not clear whether this first-year bird was targeted or shot by accident when the target was another species.

### **Teal**

EM17468 5M 02/04/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington

+F 20/08/2023 Valkeisjarvi, Kiuruvesi, Kuopio, FINLAND, 2028km 56°

This Teal was probably on migration back to Woolston for the winter when shot in Finland.

### **Teal**

EA68531 5M 08/02/2020 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington

+F 07/08/2023 Marek, Pas-de-Calais, FRANCE, 410km 132°

Described as “hunted” in the report from France, it is very likely that this Teal was shot.

### **Teal**

EA68611 6M 21/03/2020 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington

+F 10/09/2023 Tjaerby, Randers, Aarhus, DENMARK, 873km 68°

In addition, Woolston- ringed Teal were shot at Pleasington and Singleton, both in Lancashire, and at Rixton, just 4km from No.3 Bed.

### **Tawny Owl**

GR72787 1 15/05/2021 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington

SR 06/06/2023 Lymm, 4km 91°

This Tawny Owl was ringed as a chick in a box on No.3 Bed and found tangled in fishing line at Lymm Dam. It was successfully untangled and released.

### **Great Tit**

PL43211 1(7/7) 13/05/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington

R 17/10/2023 Ince Blundell, Sefton, Merseyside, 37km 295°

Examples of dispersal of this distance relating to chicks hatched in the Woolston nest boxes are unusual.

### **Chiffchaff**

PJL720 3J 20/07/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington

R 08/09/2023 Rostherne Mere, Knutsford, 11km 111°

### **Chiffchaff**

PJH297 3J 07/08/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 1, Warrington

R 30/09/2023 Gravelly Marsh nr Needs Ore, Hampshire, 300km 166°

This Chiffchaff was undertaking a fairly leisurely southerly migration to the Mediterranean when trapped in Hampshire.

### **Chiffchaff**

PJH723 3 09/10/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 1, Warrington

R 17/11/2023 Whixall and Fenn’s Mosses, Shropshire 57km 105°

This Chiffchaff was either a very late migrant or was wintering in Shropshire.

### **Blackcap**

AAX8190 3J 19/06/2023 Woolston Eyes No 1 bed, Warrington.

R 02/09/2023 Gunners Park, Shoeburyness, Essex 303km 134°

### **Reed Warbler**

ACV7628 3J 12/05/2022 Pickmere, Knutsford

R 15/07/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington 12km 344°

**Reed Warbler**

AAX4178 3J 28/07/ Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington  
 R 16/06/2023 Rostherne Mere, Knutsford, 11km 111°

**Reed Warbler**

ALK5741 3J 02/09/2021 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington  
 R 02/06/2023 Rostherne Mere, Knutsford, 11km 111°

**Reed Warbler**

AFR3187 3J 11/08/2022 Knutsford Moor  
 R 06/08/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington, 14km 313 °

These four movements demonstrate that these sites, and others along the Mersey such as Moore, Oxmoor and Frodsham, support a “meta-population” of Reed Warblers which move between sites from year to year.

**Reed Warbler**

AJR3341 3J 21/07/2022 Woolston Eyes No 1 bed, Warrington.  
 R 07/05/2023 Oakley, nr Martin Hussingtree, Worcestershire, 132km 171°

**Reed Warbler**

PJH239 3J 28/07/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 1, Warrington  
 R 16/08/2023 Pitsford Reservoir, Northampton, 162km 138°

**Reed Warbler**

AAX8106 4 12/05/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington  
 R 14/08/2023 Braud-et-Saint-Louis, Gironde, FRANCE 912km 172°

**Reed Warbler**

AAX8456 3J 26/07/2023 Woolston Eyes No 1 bed, Warrington  
 R 14/08/2023 Plaisance, Saint-Froult, Charente-Maritime, FRANCE 838km 174°

**Blackbird**

LK55646 3M 30/10/2019 Woolston Eyes Bed No.1, Warrington  
 XF 01/04/2023 Borlange, Arby, Kopparberg, SWEDEN, 1340km 55°

This unfortunate Blackbird had probably survived eight crossings of the North Sea before flying into a window.

**Grey Wagtail**

AYH3566 3J 20/08/2022 Woolston Eyes Bed No 1, Warrington  
 R(M) 14/09/2022 Water Recycling Centre, Thetford, Norfolk, 240km 117°

**Greenfinch**

VZ97735 3F 03/12/2021 Penrhiw, Conwy  
 R 04/09/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington 85km 81°

**Greenfinch**

TY14796 3M 04/10/2021 Woolston Eyes No1 bed, Warrington  
 R 19/06/2023 Thornton, Sefton, Merseyside, 36km 286°



**Greenfinch**

PF56115 3F 21/10/2022 Woolston Eyes No 1 bed, Warrington  
R 13/11/2023 Lostock, Woodford, Poynton, 24km 104°

**Greenfinch**

PL43112 3JF 02/09/2022 Woolston Eyes Bed No 3, Warrington  
S 17/08/2023 Thelwall, Warrington, 3km 211°

This Greenfinch was recorded as “unhealthy” and taken to a vet. The likely cause is Trichomonosis and the likely outcome euthanasia.

**Greenfinch**

PL43088 4F 25/08/2022 Woolston No 1 bed, Warrington  
XF 09/10/2023 Warrington 4km 270°

**Lesser Redpoll**

AAZ3125 5 03/04/2023 Heysham Harbour, Heysham, Lancashire  
R (=F) 09/10/2023 Woolston No 1 bed, Warrington 76km 159°

**Lesser Redpoll**

S556490 3 11/12/2021 Ramsley Reservoir, Hope Valley, Derbyshire  
R (=4F) 30/11/2023 Woolston Eyes No 3 bed, Warrington 65km 282°

**Reed Bunting**

APJ7908 3M 24/11/2019 Moss Brow Farm, Warburton, Greater Manchester  
R 27/02/2023 Woolston Eyes No.1 bed 4km 70°

**Reed Bunting**

AYL5360 6F 01/01/2021 Lostock Woodford, Poynton, Cheshire  
R 08/03/2023 Woolston Eyes Bed No 1, Warrington 25km 283°

Exchanges of wintering Reed Buntings with sites in East Cheshire and the western fringes of Greater Manchester are now an annual feature of this report.

## REPORT ON BREEDING WILLOW TITS

As with the past three years, breeding evidence is stark. Despite regular surveys, only three nests were located which is the equal lowest number recorded since regular monitoring began. Two nests were successful and one predated by Great-spotted Woodpecker, although it was hoped this may have had a partial fledge.

### **No.1 Bed**

Large swathes of wet woodland and scrub have been cleared from around the west pool and adjacent marsh, and Great Crested Newt fences erected to enable further expansion of the landfill site. It has been previously mentioned how large areas of prime Willow Tit breeding habitat has now been lost on this bed.

On 25<sup>th</sup> April a nest was found at the Viaduct Pools in a Willow stump. At least three eggs appeared to be covered. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May the female was incubating nine eggs and on 13<sup>th</sup> May there were at least four naked chicks. On 28<sup>th</sup> May there were at least four large chicks and on the 5<sup>th</sup> June the nest was intact, empty and presumed successful.

Between 9<sup>th</sup> June and 4<sup>th</sup> September, eight juveniles were caught by the ringers; plus, a juvenile re-trapped from No.3 bed. No adults were caught. Possibly the juveniles were from the brood at the Viaduct Pools.

Other visits were made to past nest sites and territories, but no birds were seen or heard and all searches proved negative.

### **No.2 Bed**

More thorough searches were made on this bed than in previous years, but despite playback no sightings were made. This was particularly disappointing in the areas along the Viaduct and the scrub between the south bund and Ship Canal, which have held regular territories in the past.

However, on 24<sup>th</sup> April a bird responded at the pool near the north bund and was tracked as it moved through the scrub eastwards to the Viaduct. The bird sang frequently and at one stage shivered its wings at the presence of a Blue Tit. Despite searching all suitable timber, no nest was found and it was thought perhaps the bird could be unmated. Later, near the Pumping Station an aberrant song was heard which may have been a Willow Tit.

On 28<sup>th</sup> April a nest was found below the south bund, not far from the Pumping Station. The cock was seen to call the hen off the nest which was about 3 m high in a dead multi-stemmed Elder. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May both birds alarmed in the vicinity, but it was impossible to inspect the nest safely because of its height and the poor nature of the branch. On 13<sup>th</sup> May the female was seen to exit the nest hole and on the 28<sup>th</sup> a bird entered the nest with a caterpillar. The size of the prey indicated medium-size young. On 5<sup>th</sup> June the nest cavity was intact and no birds were present, indicating a successful fledge.

### **No.3 Bed**

As with the rest of the Reserve, sightings were few and far between, most being in the vicinity of the centre copse. Interestingly, a bird was caught which had been ringed at Elton near Bolton. In April, on one occasion, a pair of Willow Tits were observed to be hostile towards a Woodpecker and behaved as though they had a nest. However, despite several searches and one visit to the bed lasting over five hours, no nests were found.

Then on 16<sup>th</sup> May, acting on information received of a pair calling, a nest was eventually discovered near the centre copse. The pair was feeding young in a very high nest about 2.3 m up in a decrepit stump. It was difficult to inspect satisfactorily, but the chicks appeared to be about half grown. On 28<sup>th</sup> May the nest was found to have been attacked by Great Spotted Woodpecker and the lining pulled through a hole level with the base of the cavity. It was reported that the site was intact on 20<sup>th</sup> May, so it was hoped there may have been at least a partial fledge.

Between 10<sup>th</sup> June and 1<sup>st</sup> July six juveniles were caught, and judging by body plumage, at least one bird being from a separate brood. Further juveniles were caught and ringed on 13<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> August. Five adults were re-trapped in the area of the centre copse.

### **No.4 Bed**

Encouragingly, a bird responded to playback at the Sandpit Pond on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. It sang for some time before moving away towards the south woodland. Despite several visits and searches throughout the season at this location, no further birds were seen or nests found other than one shallow boring. However, on 5<sup>th</sup> June a pair scolded excessively from an area adjacent to the south woodland. Vegetation was dense and although no nest was found there was the possibility of newly-fledged young.

Birds were heard from other parts of the bed including the new track through the south woodland and along the centre track.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April a bird responded to playback and sang for a while on the north bank. The bird was seen briefly again on the 29<sup>th</sup>. It was felt there must be a definite territory, but despite intensive searches along the length of the north bank on the 11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April, no breeding evidence was found.

Visits were made to previous breeding haunts in the north-east corner and also to woodland outside the Reserve, adjacent to the western boundary, but no birds were seen or heard. Historically it has been estimated that No.4 Bed has held the largest number of pairs and the lack of confirmed breeding evidence was most disheartening.

However, reports of sightings of juveniles were received from near the viewing platform and the vicinity of the Sandpit Pond later in the year.

## **Summary**

Overall, based on poor results from breeding surveys, sightings and numbers caught, it is estimated that the number of breeding pairs on the Eyes is now as low as ten. It is also worrying that there are no known records from areas near to the Reserve, such as Woolston 'New Cut' and Paddington Meadows.

**Allan Rustell**



*Roesel's Bush Cricket*

*John Tymon*



## **BUTTERFLY REPORT**

The highlight of an excellent year for butterflies on the Reserve was the discovery of the long-awaited Essex Skipper which is spreading northwards as a result of climate change. The year was also marked by record numbers of Comma, Red Admiral and Ringlet and near record numbers of Large White and Speckled Wood.

The year began with March sightings of Brimstone (17<sup>th</sup>), Peacock (18<sup>th</sup>), Small Tortoiseshell (21<sup>st</sup>) and Comma (22<sup>nd</sup>) which are typical dates for these species which emerge from hibernation in early spring sunshine.

Common Blue appeared in good numbers from mid-May and peaked at about a hundred at the end of the month. June proved to be hot and dry and this may have had an adverse effect on the second brood which was very disappointing.

Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock had contrasting fortunes with the former appearing in reasonable numbers in spring whilst the second brood was seen in low numbers. For Peacock the reverse was the case with the second brood showing an improvement on the previous poor year.

Purple Hairstreak had an average year but it was encouraging to have sightings from Nos. 1, 2 and 4 beds for the first time.

It was not a good year for Small Copper and very few Painted Ladies were recorded. A record of two Fritillaries (presumed to be Dark-green) from No.1 bed was a bonus.

All three “whites” were seen in good numbers and over a hundred Small, Green-veined and Large were present in July. This is the first time this has occurred since 2009.

In spite of unsettled weather from July onwards there was an upturn in the fortunes of Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper while Speckled Wood was seen in excellent numbers in August and early September.

The year ended with a late record of Small Tortoiseshell on 14<sup>th</sup> November.

As Woolston Eyes is a large site it is not practicable to survey the whole area in a single day. In order to arrive at Reserve-wide totals it is necessary to aggregate counts from different areas of the Reserve undertaken on different days.

I am grateful to Derek Britch for regularly monitoring the river and to him and Les Jones for monitoring the Butterfly Transect in my absence. The Transect was covered every week from April to the end of September and the results submitted to Butterfly Conservation. By mowing the canal track sections of the Transect and removing Brambles during the winter months Birds-foot Trefoil has spread to the benefit of Common Blue which increased dramatically from one in 2022 to a maximum of eleven this year. Thanks go to Brian Ankers for carrying out this work.

As always, thanks are due to all permit holders and fellow wardens who have contributed sightings without which this report would be incomplete. I am also grateful to Rupert Adams, Cheshire Butterfly

Recorder, for providing information on a county-wide basis and, in particular for speedily confirming the identity of Essex Skipper from photographs taken by David Spencer.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

### Small Skipper

*Thymelicus sylvestris*

This was a reasonable year for a species which is present in suitable grassland habitat in mid-summer. A sighting of three on No.2 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> June was the earliest since 2011 and was no doubt the result of a prolonged period of hot, dry weather at this time. Butterflies were then reported regularly until 28<sup>th</sup> July. A maximum of 25 was recorded with 17 on No.2 bed alone on 8<sup>th</sup> July. Very few were found in other areas of the Reserve with three on both No.1 and No.4 beds and singles on No.3 bed and Butchersfield Tip. This year's maximum was an improvement on the eleven seen in 2022 and the flight season was longer. Now that Essex Skipper is known to be present, identification will be more problematic in future years.

### Essex Skipper

*Thymelicus lineola*

This species was first seen in Cheshire in 2018, having been expanding its range in a north-westerly direction in recent years, probably as a result of climate change. It is very similar to the Small Skipper and it is worth enumerating the often-subtle differences between the two species. The most noteworthy is that the undersides of the tips of the antennae are a glossy black in the Essex Skipper as opposed to orange-brown in the case of Small Skipper. There are other slight differences, namely the slightly more pointed wings in the Essex Skipper and, in the case of males, the sex brands. None of these are immediately obvious in the field and patience and detailed observation are required to confirm identity. To date the Cheshire Butterfly Recorder has required photographic evidence before records can be accepted. The Essex Skipper emerges about a week later than the Small Skipper.



*Essex Skipper*

*David Bowman*

In spite of searching for this unobtrusive butterfly in recent years none had been found until David Spencer discovered and photographed one on the north bank of No.2 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> July. Two were seen there the following day. The opinion of wardens was that these were Essex Skippers and this was soon confirmed by Rupert Adams the Cheshire Recorder. A further search of the area on 8<sup>th</sup> July by a number of wardens produced a total of three and on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Derek Britch found a further two on the opposite bank of the river. There was a further report of three or four by permit holders in the south west corner of No.2 bed on 24<sup>th</sup> July. In total about eight or nine were present and these could be the first records for the area covered by VC 59.

### **Large Skipper**

*Ochlodes sylvanus*

Hot weather at the end of May resulted in an early sighting when one was on the Butterfly Transect on 27<sup>th</sup> May, which equalled the earliest ever record set in 2022. There were 15 sightings of a butterfly which is never plentiful at Woolston. One was on Butchersfield Tip on 30<sup>th</sup> May whilst on 8<sup>th</sup> June three were on No.4 bed and one along the river. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June Dan Owen found a total of four; two on each of Nos.3 and 4 beds. The final record was of two on No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> July. It seems that nine or ten butterflies were present during the flight season which is above average for the site.



*Large Skipper*

*David Bowman*

### **Brimstone**

*Gonepteryx rhamni*

The first record was of one on No.1 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> March and this was followed by singles on both No.1 bed and Butchersfield Tip on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. The highest count of the year came on 18<sup>th</sup> April when no less than four were present. Singles were found on Nos. 1 and 2 beds and along the river, whilst a female was on Butchersfield Tip. There were no further spring records and the only sighting of the summer

brood was of one by the footbridge on 15<sup>th</sup> July. This represents a fairly average year for a species which is never common at Woolston.



*Brimstone*

*David Riley*

### **Large White**

*Pieris brassicae*

A single along the river on 18<sup>th</sup> May was the first of what proved to be an exceptional year for a species that is not normally present in large numbers. Further sightings of single butterflies continued at the eastern end of the Reserve until the end of May. There were no June records and the second brood emerged at the beginning of July. Around mid-month there was a huge emergence; on the 19<sup>th</sup> 73 were on No.1 bed and a further 29 on Butchersfield Tip. A week later, 42 were on Butchersfield Tip and a Reserve total of 123 was close to the highest ever count of 127 in 2009. Very few were found on the rest of the Reserve which is the same pattern as in 2009. Reasonable numbers remained into August when a maximum of 34 included ten on Butchersfield Tip on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 13 on No.1 bed

on the 20<sup>th</sup>. The last records were of two on the Butterfly Transect on 6<sup>th</sup> October and two on No.4 bed the following day.

### **Small White**

*Pieris rapae*

The first record was of one on the Butterfly Transect on 4<sup>th</sup> April and about five were present by mid-month. On 14<sup>th</sup> May eleven were on No.2 bed and three on No.1 bed, and a Reserve total of about 50 was a good count for May. The last report of the first brood came on 28<sup>th</sup> May. The second brood which is usually more plentiful emerged on 21<sup>st</sup> June and numbers built up rapidly during July when a Reserve total of about 146 was very similar to the previous year and the highest since 2018. Interestingly no Small Whites were positively identified on No.4 bed at this time. The distribution was as follows; 54 on No.1 bed, 35 on No.2 bed, 21 on No.3 bed, ten on Butchersfield Tip, 12 along the river and 14 on the Canal track. Numbers declined in August with a maximum of 37 across the Reserve and a successful season ended with one at Latchford Locks on 23<sup>rd</sup> September.

### **Green-veined White**

*Pieris napi*

The first record was on 18<sup>th</sup> April when two were seen on Butchersfield Tip and one along the river. By mid-May over 30 were present and the last of the first brood was noted on 30<sup>th</sup> May. The second brood appeared on 29<sup>th</sup> June and peaked around mid-July when about 113 were counted which is above average, and the highest since 2014. As always, totals are an estimate given the difficulty of distinguishing between the various “whites” when seen in flight or at a distance. Of this total 12 were on Butchersfield Tip, 14 on No.1 bed, 27 on No.2 bed, 11 on No.3 bed and 32 on No.4 bed. Nine were along the river and eight on the Canal track. Green-veined Whites were more common at the western end of the Reserve in contrast to Small Whites which tended to be more numerous at the eastern end. It will be interesting to see if this pattern is repeated in future years. Numbers declined in August when a maximum of 40 was recorded and the final report was of one on No.1 bed on 3<sup>rd</sup> September.

### **Orange Tip**

*Anthocharis cardamines*

This attractive butterfly is usually to be found during April and May and this year the first sighting was of two on 8<sup>th</sup> April. Numbers peaked about the end of April to early May. A maximum of 80 was the second highest ever for a species that has been becoming more prevalent in the last few years. The distribution was as follows; four on Butchersfield Tip, nine on No.1 bed, 22 on No.2 bed and 14 on each of Nos. 3 and 4 beds. Twelve were on the Canal track and five along the river. There were no June records and the final report was on 28<sup>th</sup> May.

### **Purple Hairstreak**

*Favonius quercus*

It was a good year for this often-elusive species and for the first time there were sightings on all four beds. The main colony on the south bank of No.3 bed and the canal track was surveyed regularly by Derek Britch and myself. Our three evening surveys produce a total of about nine different butterflies which is about average. None were seen after mid-July in spite of visits taking place in suitable



conditions. It has long been suspected that there are butterflies in other areas of the Reserve where there are Oak Trees and this was confirmed with reports of singles from Nos.1, 2 and 4 beds. One was on Brambles on the north bank of No.4 bed on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, and Dan Owen found one on a small Oak Tree on the south bank of No.2 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> July. A record of one on No.1 bed from John Blundell and Dave Riley on 10<sup>th</sup> July showed that butterflies were present across the Reserve. It would be helpful if evening surveys could be carried out in these areas in future.

### **Small Copper**

*Lycaena phlaeas*

Unfortunately, this species shows no sign of recovery and this was another poor year with just five records. The only spring sighting was on 13<sup>th</sup> May when Kieran Foster found one on the south bank of No.3 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> May. The remaining four reports were from No.1 bed between 17<sup>th</sup> July and 28<sup>th</sup> September when one or two were seen. There has not been a count in double figures since 2018.



*Small Copper*

*David Riley*

### **Common Blue**

*Polyommatus icarus*

Two on No.2 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> May were the first of the year and numbers increased rapidly in the warm sunny weather prevailing at that time. By the end of May, no less than 96 had been found across the Reserve, an excellent total for the first brood. Butchersfield Tip held 42 and No.1 bed 17 but surprisingly only seven of these were on the usually favoured recycling area. The rest were distributed fairly evenly between Nos. 2 and 4 beds and the Canal track but none were found on No.3

bed. On No.4 bed ten were found in the Sandpit Pond area. The section of the Butterfly Transect which had been mowed during the winter proved particularly attractive with eleven seen, compared with just one the previous year. Bird's-foot-Trefoil is spreading well in this area and Brian Martin and I added to these with some plants he had raised from seed. Low numbers were present in June and the second brood emerged in early July. Normally the second brood is more numerous than the first but this was certainly not the case this year with a maximum of 13 recorded during August. It seems likely that the relative failure of the second brood was connected to the hot dry weather in late May and June which had an adverse effect on vegetation. The final sighting of an unusual, but not totally unsuccessful year was of four on No.1 bed on 3<sup>rd</sup> September.



*Common Blue*

*David Bowman*

### **Holly Blue**

*Celastrina argiolus*

After the previous year's record totals numbers were reduced but it was still a good year for this attractive species. There were 17 reports between early April and the end of August. The first was an early sighting on 8<sup>th</sup> April and singles were seen later that month on No.3 bed and the eastern end of the Reserve. On 26<sup>th</sup> April one was on the Canal track. The last of the spring brood was on 23<sup>rd</sup> May. There was then a gap until 15<sup>th</sup> July when a series of reports from Nos. 2, 3 and 4 beds and the river continued until 30<sup>th</sup> August. Most were singles but two were found on No.2 bed, whilst on 28<sup>th</sup> July one was on No.4 bed and another along the river. It is estimated that a maximum of five butterflies were present.





*Holly Blue*

*David Bowman*

### **Red Admiral**

*Vanessa atalanta*

The first of an excellent year appeared on 1<sup>st</sup> June when three were on No.4 bed. About 13 were present during June and numbers increased dramatically in July when the peak occurred around the 20<sup>th</sup>. A series of visits at this time produced a record count of 91 which exceeded the previous maximum of 78 in 2017. These were distributed fairly evenly across the Reserve although only eight were found on No.4 bed. Numbers declined during August when up to 24 were present. There was an increase in September however with a maximum of 58 of which 17 were attracted to Buddleias on the northern section of No.1 bed. There were six October sightings with four on each of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> and the final report of a single on the 29<sup>th</sup>. There have been suggestions that the increased numbers of this species are a result of butterflies overwintering in Britain due to climate change but the fact that none were seen at Woolston until June would suggest that they are more likely to be migrants.



*Red Admiral*

*David Bowman*

**Painted Lady**

*Vanessa cardui*

There were just three records of this migrant which is seen in very variable numbers from year to year. One was on No.1 bed on 19<sup>th</sup> July and singles were also reported at the end of the month; one was along the river on 28<sup>th</sup> July and the following day one was on No.3 bed. This year was very similar to 2022 when just four were found.

**Small Tortoiseshell**

*Aglais urticae*

Towards the end of March there were two sightings as butterflies emerged from hibernation. One was on No.3 bed on the 21<sup>st</sup> and one on Butchersfield Tip on the 27<sup>th</sup>. There was an increase during April but a spring maximum of 41 was somewhat disappointing. The vast majority (29) were on No.4 bed with hardly any at the eastern end of the Reserve. The last spring record was on 24<sup>th</sup> May and the second brood began to emerge on 21<sup>st</sup> June although there were no further reports until July. In contrast butterflies were quite plentiful on nearby Rixton Moss where 24 were counted on 29<sup>th</sup> June. Numbers in July were again low with a maximum of 15 and from August to November. Singles were recorded on just five dates with the final sighting of one on No.3 bed on 14<sup>th</sup> November.





*Small Tortoiseshell*

*John Blundell*

### **Peacock**

*Aglais io*

In contrast to the previous species numbers were low in spring but showed a recovery in the summer brood. This was a little surprising as these two species have similar life cycles, hibernating in winter to emerge in spring with a second brood appearing in mid-summer. There was just one March record with one on No.2 bed on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Up to 17 were present in April, of which ten were on No.4 bed. The 26<sup>th</sup>. May saw a maximum of nine and the last spring record was on 6<sup>th</sup> June. The summer brood appeared from 9<sup>th</sup> July and by mid-month a total of 72 was present across the Reserve. Nos.2 and 3 beds were the most productive with totals of 29 and 17 respectively. The second brood showed a recovery from 2022 when there were no counts in double figures at this time. Butterflies were still fairly plentiful in August when there was a maximum of 43. The last report was of one on No.2 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> September, a relatively early date.

### **Comma**

*Polygonia c-album*

What proved to be a record year for this species began in typical fashion with the first sighting on 22<sup>nd</sup> March when two were found on No.2 bed. There was only one subsequent spring record on 18<sup>th</sup> April when two were at the eastern end of the Reserve. The summer brood was first noted on 17<sup>th</sup> June and from then there were frequent reports with numbers building to a record count of 83 in mid-July. This comfortably exceeds the previous highest total of 63 in 2006. The distribution was as follows; 17 on No.1 bed and Butchersfield Tip, 35 on No.2 bed, 20 on No.3 bed, seven on No.4 bed and four along the river. By August just 22 remained and nine were still present in early September. The final sighting was of one on No.3 bed on 6<sup>th</sup> October. This species has extended its range in recent years and while



the reasons are not fully understood there seems little doubt that the warming climate is a significant factor.



*Comma*

*John Blundell*

### **Dark Green Fritillary**

*Argynnis aglaia*

On 7<sup>th</sup> July John Blundell reported two fritillaries on No.1 bed. Although their identity was not confirmed it seems highly likely that they were of this species which was last seen at Woolston in 2018. It does not breed in Cheshire but there are occasional sightings of butterflies which have moved from their nearest breeding areas in the Pennine foothills to the east of the county.

### **Speckled Wood**

*Parage aegeria*

This is another species that has increased in number in recent years and has benefitted from the warming climate and the increase in wooded areas at Woolston. The first was reported from No.1 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> April and numbers gradually increased during spring with a May maximum of 18. The summer months saw further increases; the June and July maxima were 44 and 61 respectively. The highest counts of the year came in late August when a series of surveys across the whole Reserve resulted in a total of 233, just short of the highest ever total of 235 which occurred in 2016. Butterflies were distributed as follows; 41 on No.1 bed, 85 on No.2 bed, 28 on No.3 bed and 37 on No.4 bed. Butchersfield Tip held 16, the Canal track 17 and nine were counted along the river. Good numbers continued into September and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 26 were on No.3 bed and 12 on No.1 bed. The last record of an excellent year was on 6<sup>th</sup> October.

## Gatekeeper

*Pyronia tithonus*

The season began with an early record of two on No.4 bed on 23<sup>rd</sup> June and by the end of the month 52 were counted across the Reserve. Peak numbers appeared around mid-July when detailed surveys produced a total of 455 which represents an improvement on the 2022 maximum of 298. No.2 bed attracted 106, followed by No.4 bed with 84. No.1 bed held 44 with 47 on Butchersfield Tip, 36 on No.3 bed, 59 along the river and 79 on the Canal track. No less than 62 were counted on the Butterfly Transect part of the Canal track, where it may be that the mowing regime, designed to attract Common Blues, was also to the benefit of this species and Meadow Brown. A Reserve total of 76 in early August was the beginning of the usual decline and the year ended with two at the eastern end of the Reserve on 30<sup>th</sup> August.



Gatekeeper

John Blundell

## Meadow Brown

*Maniola jurtina*

A record on 6<sup>th</sup> June equalled the earliest ever sighting of this species in 2018. Eight were found on the Butterfly Transect four days later and there was a rapid increase to a year maximum of 148 around the end of the month. This is a considerable improvement on 2022 when a total of 86 was particularly disappointing. As usual the highest numbers of this grassland butterfly were at the favoured eastern end of the Reserve. Butchersfield Tip accounted for 32 and No.1 bed 46, the majority on the northern section. Twenty were on No.2 bed, five on No.3 bed, 15 on No.4 bed and 30 on the Canal track of which 28 were on the Butterfly Transect. Good numbers remained during July with a maximum of 94 and declined in August to a Reserve total of just 14. The final report was of one on Butchersfield Tip on 30<sup>th</sup> August.



*Meadow Brown*

*John Blundell*

**Ringlet**

*Aphantopus hyperantus*

This was the best year for this species since it first appeared on the Reserve in 2014. An early sighting on No.4 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> June was the earliest ever and no doubt a result of the hot dry weather at that time. There were 18 records between then and 18<sup>th</sup> July as the flight period finished early. No less than 15 were recorded during June as butterflies were seen in all areas of the Reserve. Sightings continued into July and from analysis of the records submitted it would appear that up to 23 were present across the Reserve as a whole, far exceeding the previous highest total of eight in 2022. A total of eight on No.4 bed showed this to be the favoured area but up to six were also present on the Butterfly Transect, mostly along the Canal track. A faded individual was on No.4 bed on 13<sup>th</sup> July and the final report was also from No.4 bed on the 18<sup>th</sup>.



*Ringlet*

*David Bowman*

**David Hackett**



## DRAGONFLY REPORT

There were mixed fortunes for the Reserve's Odonata in 2023, due to the changeable weather pattern from the spring until the autumn period. Fifteen species were recorded, which was one less than the previous year. The season began in sunny conditions on 13<sup>th</sup> May, when numerous immature Azure Damselflies, a single Large Red Damselfly and a few Four-spotted Chasers were present on No.1 bed. On the same day, a couple of Broad-bodied Chasers were also reported. On 18<sup>th</sup> May the first of a record number of Black-tailed Skimmers appeared on No. 4 bed. Two days later several Blue-tailed Damselflies were on the south bank of No.3 bed. The first of many Banded Demoiselles was recorded on the relatively early date of 23<sup>rd</sup> May. By the end of May, Common Blue and Red-eyed Damselflies, as well as the first Emperor Dragonflies had been recorded. During the very warm spell which followed the first Southern Hawker and Common Darter were noted on 15<sup>th</sup> June. A week afterwards on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, both Brown Hawker and Ruddy Darter were added to the species list. Migrant Hawker, which typically appears later in the season, was first reported on 13<sup>th</sup> July.

The majority of damselfly records occurred during the favourable conditions in late May and June. During this period, exceptional numbers of Banded Demoiselles were seen across the Reserve and along the River Mersey. From mid-May until 24<sup>th</sup> June, several hundred Azure Damselflies were recorded on Nos.1 and 3 beds. Increased numbers of Red-eyed Damselflies were recorded during the early summer period. This less common species continues to expand its range, and it was pleasing to see a small number in June on No.4 bed. Very few damselflies were observed during the wet weather in July, resulting in reduced numbers of both Common Blue and Blue-tailed Damselflies. Unfortunately, there were no records of Emerald Damselfly, which emerges later in the season. It continues to be a scarce species at Woolston, with only single-figure counts in recent times. It is concerning that for the second year in a row there was just one record of a single Large Red Damselfly which typically emerges early in the season.

Dragonflies were recorded from May until November although very few were present in July. During the warm spell in June record numbers of Black-tailed Skimmers were present, especially on No.4 bed, where a peak count of 133 on 8<sup>th</sup> June was remarkable. Good numbers of Broad-bodied Chasers were also present during this period. Four-spotted Chasers however, were below average and unusually, none were recorded after the middle of June. Eleven Southern Hawkings were recorded, which is about average for this species. There was a small improvement of Brown Hawker sightings this year, although the last record on 2<sup>nd</sup> September was earlier than usual. Compared with the previous five years there was also a slight increase of Emperor Dragonfly records from across the Reserve. A good total of 57 Ruddy Darters was the highest for several years. The majority were recorded on No.1 bed, where there was a peak count of 19 on 26<sup>th</sup> August. Common Darters were recorded in good numbers from the middle of June onwards, mostly on Nos.1 and 4 beds. The final record was a late Common Darter on No.3 bed, which brought the season to a close on 14<sup>th</sup> November.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have contributed their records during the season, without which this report would be less complete. Special thanks are also due to David Bowman for including his records on the Group Website and on social media, and to David Hackett, Daniel Owen, Brian Martin, David Spencer and Helen Wynn for their valued contributions.

As usual, the Woolston Eyes Dragonfly records were submitted to the County Dragonfly Recorder.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

### **Emerald Damselfly**

*Lestes sponsa*

There were no sightings of this metallic-green damselfly, which was disappointing, after seven had been recorded in the previous year. It is a scarce species at Woolston, as the majority of records in recent years have been in low single figures. The breeding habitat includes shallow, well-vegetated ponds, where they often spend long periods perched on emergent vegetation and surrounding grasses.

### **Banded Demoiselle**

*Calopteryx splendens*

It was an excellent season for this large damselfly with a total of 40 being recorded across the Reserve, compared with small numbers previously. All the records were in the late spring and early summer period commencing on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, when a male was seen on No.2 bed. Singles were reported on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> May, followed by two at Butchersfield Tip, at the east of the Reserve on 30<sup>th</sup> May. Peak numbers occurred on 1<sup>st</sup> June when 11 were present at Butchersfield Tip, a single on No.4 bed and a couple along the River Mersey opposite No.1 bed. A few singles were reported at the beginning of June, followed by five on 6<sup>th</sup> June, along the north bank of No.2 bed. Four males were present at Woolston Weir on 8<sup>th</sup> June, whilst two were in flight along the river, opposite No.2 bed. Also on 8<sup>th</sup> June, a displaying male and a female were spotted along the River Mersey, opposite No.1 bed and oviposition was observed. A male was perched on the south bank of No.3 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> June and another single was reported at Butchersfield Tip on 21<sup>st</sup> June. The last sighting was on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, when a single was reported on No. 4 bed.



*Banded Demoiselle*

*Brian Baird*



## Azure Damselfly

*Coenagrion puella*

As usual, this common damselfly was the most numerous, with around 400 recorded from across the Reserve. The first of these was on 13<sup>th</sup> May when 97 were counted around the west pools on No.1 bed, including many newly emerged insects. A week later, on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 43 were present along the south bank of No.3 bed. On 24<sup>th</sup> May, a female blue-form type, which was photographed by a permit holder on No.3 bed, initially raised an identification issue. During another visit to No.1 bed on 27<sup>th</sup> May at least 100 were present at the west pools whilst ten were also recorded on No.3 bed. Twenty-five were counted along the bank-side vegetation of the River Mersey, opposite Nos.1 and 2 beds, on 1<sup>st</sup> June. Meanwhile, on No.1 bed, approximately 50 were still present on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Two couples were observed ovipositing eggs in the River Mersey on 8<sup>th</sup> June. Six copulating pairs were included in a count of 50 on No.3 bed, on 10<sup>th</sup> June, when two singles were also spotted on No.4 bed. Despite the overcast conditions on 17<sup>th</sup> June, at least ten were present on No.3 bed. The last record was on 24<sup>th</sup> June when 12 were on the south bank of No.3 bed, including another female blue-form type.



*Blue-form Azure Damselfly*

*Brian Baird*

## Common Blue Damselfly

*Enallagma cyathigerum*

It was a relatively poor season as far as numbers of this widely distributed species were concerned. A total of 136 was recorded, which was roughly half that recorded in each of the previous two years. Unusually, there were no records during the often wet and cool weather in July. The first sightings were on 27<sup>th</sup> May when 20 were noted on No.1 bed and a single was on No.3 bed. By 15<sup>th</sup> June, numbers had increased on No.3 bed, to at least 20 along the south bank. On 17<sup>th</sup> June, 13 were present on No.2

bed, nine on No.4 bed and two were spotted on No.3 bed. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June, a minimum of 20 were present on No.4 bed. The next record was not until 8<sup>th</sup> August, when 40 plus were reported on No.4 bed. However, by 10<sup>th</sup> August, numbers had declined to seven. The remaining records were of singles on 26<sup>th</sup> August and 2<sup>nd</sup> September, on Nos.1 and 4 beds respectively.

### **Red-eyed Damselfly**

*Erythromma najas*

This localised species seems to be extending its range at Woolston. Sightings this year included a small number on No.4 bed, where it was last recorded in 1998. The majority of records were once again from the Oxbow, to the south of No. 3 bed, beginning with 17 on 30<sup>th</sup> May. On 8<sup>th</sup> June, 28 were present below the footbridge to No.3 bed and two singles were noted at the Weir Basin. On the same day, six were perched on floating vegetation further along the River Mersey, east of the Weir. The highest number were present along the Oxbow on 10<sup>th</sup> June, when 32 were counted, including two copulating pairs and three couples, apparently ovipositing on submerged pond weed. On 15<sup>th</sup> June, ten males and a female were discovered at the east cell of the No.4 bed wetland. During a further visit to the bed on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 14 males were recorded in the same area. On No.3 bed, numbers had reduced to ten by 24<sup>th</sup> June, followed by a single on 8<sup>th</sup> July. The last record was earlier than usual on 13<sup>th</sup> July when two males were reported on No.3 bed.

### **Blue-tailed Damselfly**

*Ishnura elegans*

After two very good years it was a more average season for records of this common and widespread damselfly. The first sighting was on 20<sup>th</sup> May when six were present on the south bank of No.3 bed. On 27<sup>th</sup> May at least 12 were noted at the pools on No.1 bed, including two immature (*rufescens*) females. A minimum of five were present on No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> May and on 1<sup>st</sup> June 12 were counted along the River Mersey, north of Nos.1 and 2 beds. Around the pools on No.1 bed at least 20 were spotted on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, including a copulating pair. On No.4 bed, four were present on 10<sup>th</sup> June, six on the 17<sup>th</sup> increasing to a minimum count of 20 by 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Meanwhile, along the south bank of No.3 bed on 24<sup>th</sup> June 17 were basking in the sunshine. During the damp conditions in July, the highest count was 12 on 8<sup>th</sup> July on No.1 bed. The only other records in July were both from No.3 bed, where six were noted on the 27<sup>th</sup> and a single on the 29<sup>th</sup>. As the weather improved, around 40 were present on No. 4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> August, although just two days later only seven were spotted. The last record was a single on No.1 bed, on 26<sup>th</sup> August.

### **Large Red Damselfly**

*Pyrrhosoma nymphula*

For the second consecutive year, there was just one record on No.1 bed of this distinctive damselfly. The species emerges early in the spring and it was on 13<sup>th</sup> May that a single male was spotted at the west pools. It seems to have declined or re-located on the Reserve, as all the records in the preceding five years have been in single-figures.



*Large Red Damselfly*

*David Bowman*

### **Southern Hawker**

*Aeshna cyanea*

Small numbers of this solitary species are recorded annually. Typically, the majority of sightings were of singles, beginning with one on 15<sup>th</sup> June on No.4 bed. Another single was reported on No.2 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> June. The next sighting was not until 27<sup>th</sup> July, when one was spotted on No.3 bed. Further singles were recorded on No.4 bed, on 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> August. Three were reported on No.1 bed on 26<sup>th</sup> August. The last sightings were on 2<sup>nd</sup> September when two were on No.1 bed and a single was present along the south bank of No.3 bed.

### **Brown Hawker**

*Aeshna grandis*

As usual, the majority of records came from No.3 bed, although there were more sightings on No.4 bed this year. The first were recorded on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, when four were on No.4 bed and a similar number on No.3 bed. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, three were spotted on both Nos.2 and 3 beds, whilst four were reported again on No.4 bed. On No.3 bed, six were recorded on 29<sup>th</sup> June and on 8<sup>th</sup> July a single was in front of the Morgan Hide. On 13<sup>th</sup> July, five were present on No.3 bed and three were on No.4 bed. During a sunny spell after rain on 29<sup>th</sup> July, six were in flight on No.3 bed and five were reported on No.4 bed. On 10<sup>th</sup> August, four were noted on No.4 bed and on 12<sup>th</sup> August two were on No.3 bed. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, a single was patrolling the south bank of No.3 bed. The last records on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, of two on No.4 bed and singles on Nos.1 and 3 beds, were about two weeks earlier than usual.

### **Common Hawker**

*Aeshna juncea*

There were no records again of this large, dark-coloured dragonfly, which has become a rare visitor to the Reserve. The most recent sighting was of a single in 2014.

### **Migrant Hawker**

*Aeshna mixta*

It was a below average season for this medium-sized dragonfly, which was recorded on just nine dates from mid-summer onwards. The first reports were all singles on No.3 bed on 13<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> July. On No.4 bed, three were present on both the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> August. Three were also recorded on Nos.1 and 3 beds on 26<sup>th</sup> August, plus a single on No.2 bed. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, five were reported on No.1 bed and singles were also present on Nos.3 and 4 beds. In warm and sunny conditions on 9<sup>th</sup> September, two were noted on No.3 bed. The last record was on 7<sup>th</sup> October, when six were seen by several observers on No.4 bed.

### **Emperor Dragonfly**

*Anax imperator*

Unlike the previous species, there was a small increase in the numbers recorded for our largest dragonfly. The majority of sightings were of patrolling males, during the warm and sunny conditions in late spring and early summer. The first singles were recorded on 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> May, on both Nos.1 and 3 beds. On 1<sup>st</sup> June, six were patrolling along the riverbank of the River Mersey opposite Nos.1 and 2 beds. Two were present at the west pools on No.1 bed, on 3<sup>rd</sup> June and the following day five were reported on No.4 bed. A single was spotted along the river on 8<sup>th</sup> June and another was on No.3 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> June. Four were reported on No.4 bed on 15<sup>th</sup> June, followed by two on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Two days later singles were reported on Nos.2 and 4 beds. During the wet conditions in July, there was just one record on the 13<sup>th</sup> of two on No.3 bed. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, a single was reported on No.1 bed. The final sighting was also a single on No.1 bed, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

### **Broad-bodied Chaser**

*Libellula depressa*

Around fifty of this medium-sized dragonfly were recorded during the early season. It is known to frequent newly created shallow water-bodies and, like last year, most of the records came from the No.4 bed wetland. On 13<sup>th</sup> May, the first singles were noted on both Nos.3 and 4 beds. Another single was present on No.4 bed on 17<sup>th</sup> May. Shortly afterwards, on 20<sup>th</sup> May, three were on No.3 bed and seven were noted at the pools on No.1 bed. On 22<sup>nd</sup> May, at least five were reported on No.4 bed and on 30<sup>th</sup> May two were spotted on No.3 bed. On 3<sup>rd</sup> June, three were along the Canal track by No.1 bed and a single was at the west pools. The peak count was on 4<sup>th</sup> June, when a minimum of 15 were reported on No.4 bed, followed by seven on 8<sup>th</sup> June. A single was on No.3 bed on 10<sup>th</sup> June, when two were also present on No.4 bed. On 15<sup>th</sup> June, there was a further report of two on No.4 bed and on 24<sup>th</sup> June a single was present on No.3 bed. There were no sightings in July, but there was one more record of a single on No.4 bed on 1<sup>st</sup> August.





*Broad-bodied Chaser*

*Brian Baird*

**Four-spotted Chaser**

*Libellula quadrimaculata*

In contrast with the previous species, there was a decrease in numbers of this common and widespread dragonfly. Unusually, there were no records in July, which resulted in a shortened flight period this year. The majority of sightings came from No.1 bed, beginning on 13<sup>th</sup> May, with two along the Viaduct track and a single at the west pools. A similar number was reported on No.4 bed, on 18<sup>th</sup> May. Numbers peaked on 20<sup>th</sup> May, when 13 were present at the pools on No.1 bed followed by 12 there on 27<sup>th</sup> May. However, during a further visit to No.1 bed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, only two were still present. Since there were no records during the unfavourable conditions in July, the last record on 15<sup>th</sup> June, of a single on No.4 bed, was earlier than usual.



*Four-spotted Chaser*

*Brian Baird*



**Black-tailed Skimmer***Orthetrum cancellatum*

It was a record season for the abundance of this active medium-sized dragonfly, which was first discovered on the Reserve in 2006. The habitat includes lowland lakes, ponds and gravel pits usually with exposed margins, bare earth and stones nearby on which they frequently rest in the sunshine. Numbers have been improving gradually over the years, but there has been a significant increase of late, resulting from the creation of the wetland on No.4 bed. Appropriately, the majority of sightings were from No.4 bed, beginning with an immature single on 18<sup>th</sup> May. On 27<sup>th</sup> May, two were resting on the south bank of No.3 bed and another was noted on No.1 bed. The following day, three were reported on No.4 bed and three were present on No.3 bed on 30<sup>th</sup> May. After this date, numbers began to increase on No.4 bed, with 35 plus on 1<sup>st</sup> June and around 55 on 4<sup>th</sup> June. A peak count of 133 was recorded on No.4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> June, followed by over 40 on both 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> June. On 17<sup>th</sup> June, 16 were reported on No.2 bed, whilst 60 were present on No.4 bed. However, by 22<sup>nd</sup> June the numbers on No.4 bed had reduced to 38. There were no records during July, but there was one later sighting of two on No.4 bed, on 10<sup>th</sup> August.

*Black-tailed Skimmer**David Bowman***Black Darter***Sympetrum danae*

There were no records again of this small dragonfly, which usually breeds in acidic boggy pools and moorland habitats. It is a scarce visitor to the Reserve with just isolated records in recent years of singles in 2013 and 2017 and three in 2021.

**Ruddy Darter***Sympetrum sanguineum*

Compared with the previous three years, there was an improvement in the abundance of this small bright red and black dragonfly. Immature and female insects are yellow and black, but both sexes have all black legs. There were records from all four beds, beginning with eight on No.3 bed on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, four were present on No.3 bed and two were reported on No. 2 bed. On No.3 bed, a single was recorded on 13<sup>th</sup> July and two on 29<sup>th</sup> July when nine were also reported on No. 4 bed. A single was on No.4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> August and two were present there on 10<sup>th</sup> August. However, the highest number was recorded on No.1 bed, where 19 were counted on 26<sup>th</sup> August. The final records were in warm and sunny conditions on 2<sup>nd</sup> September when six were reported on No.1 bed and three were recorded on No.4 bed.

*Ruddy Darter**Brian Baird***Common Darter***Sympetrum striolatum*

This common and widespread species was recorded in fairly good numbers from mid-summer onwards, notably on No.4 bed, where the first three were noted on 15<sup>th</sup> June. Numbers increased on the bed to 28 on 17<sup>th</sup> June, when a few were also on No.2 bed. Fifteen were present on No.4 bed on 22<sup>nd</sup> June and two days later a single was on No.2 bed. There were just three records in July, beginning with four on No.1 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> July followed later on 29<sup>th</sup> July by two on No.3 bed and 13 on No.4 bed. Thirteen were also present on No.4 bed on 8<sup>th</sup> August. Around the pools on No.1 bed, 51 were recorded on 26<sup>th</sup> August, when a single was also spotted on No.3 bed. During the warm spell at the beginning of

September, 60 were reported on No.1 bed, whilst 11 were present on No.4 bed and three on No.3 bed. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, over 20 were reported on No.4 bed, increasing to a maximum count of 62 on 7<sup>th</sup> October. On 14<sup>th</sup> October, eight were present on No.1 bed. On 22<sup>nd</sup> October, a single was noted on No.4 bed. The final record of the season was a single on No.3 bed on the comparatively late date of 14<sup>th</sup> November.



*Common Darter*

*David Bowman*

**Brian Baird**



### The Significance of the Woolston Population of Broad-leaved Helleborine

In the 2019 Woolston Report I reported on the discovery at the Eyes of a large number of the orchid Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactus helleborine*) and followed this with a further article in the 2022 Report after many more plants were found across the Reserve. In 2023 fieldwork located a total of 970 flower spikes, with the main populations on No.4 bed, the Ship Canal track and No.1 bed. Almost exclusively they were growing in shaded copses.

Since then, I have been attempting to establish the importance of these large numbers in a national context. This led me to

contacting Professor Ian Denholm, a leading expert on wild orchids in the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland who replied as follows:

*“Epipactis helleborine* is the commonest member of the genus and the most widespread. Having said that it is rarely to be found in the sort of abundance you describe.... In the county where I record (Hertfordshire) we have a number of locations, but none get close to the numbers at Woolston, nor can I think of sites in neighbouring counties that would match yours. While I don’t have access to detailed census data that would enable some quantitative ranking, I would regard a colony that regularly contains ca 1000 plants to be of national significance”.



*Broad-leaved Helleborine*

*John Blundell*

**Brian Martin**

## EDITOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The contribution of our ringing teams cannot be overstated. Their dedicated work throughout the year provides invaluable information, in particular about passerines, which would not otherwise be available. We would like to mention Mike Miles, Kieran Foster and the team based on No.3 bed and Dave Riley and John Blundell on No.1 bed.

We would also like to thank those who have proof read the various articles, a laborious and apparently thankless task but essential to maintaining the high standards which have been a feature of these Reports through the years. These include Sue Haddock and Ros Martin. We hope that this year's Report lives up to expectations!

Thanks, are also due to the photographers whose images are as always of a high standard and provide that extra visual appeal. We would urge visitors to the Reserve to post their pictures on our website [www.woolstoneyes.co.uk](http://www.woolstoneyes.co.uk) as without them both the website and this Report would be the poorer. Many of the photos appearing in this Report are taken from that source.

Particular thanks are also due to Colin Woolf, the renowned wildlife artist and friend of Woolston Eyes. His painting of our breeding Pochard, a highlight of 2023, is of his usual outstanding quality.

Finally, our thanks go to you, our readers, for purchasing this Report and thereby supporting what we believe to be one of the most important Reserves in the north-west of England. We hope that you spend many happy hours reading it and hope to see you at Woolston Eyes in the future.

**David Hackett and Brian Martin**



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