

WOOLSTON EYES CONSERVATION GROUP

Newsletter January 2019

Up to 2015 a regular Newsletter was produced to keep permit holders informed of developments on the Eyes, and generally up-to-date with any changes on the Reserve. Our website www.woolstoneyes.com is now used to communicate such information, but recognising that not everyone will look at that we have decided to issue a Newsletter again to all registered permit holders to inform them of important issues on the Eyes. The Newsletter is intended to complement our Annual Report on flora and fauna which many permit holders already receive, either by e-mail or as a paper copy.

New Assistant Warden

Over the past few years your permit fees and support from the Countryside Stewardship scheme have allowed us to pay the RSPB in order to employ an Assistant Warden. Many of you will have met Ashley Radford, our Warden for the past two years. Ashley worked extremely hard during his time with us and had a particular talent for recruiting volunteers, whom he supervised in many important management tasks, including constructing a number of breeding rafts on No.3 bed and the shingle island in front of the Morgan Hide. WECG is very grateful for the commitment shown by all the volunteers. Ashley has moved to a new post in north Yorkshire and his enthusiasm will be missed. We are pleased to have appointed a new Assistant Warden, Daniel Gornall, who began working for us just before Christmas. We are sure you will have an opportunity to meet him on the Reserve and if you have any questions or would like to help as a volunteer Daniel can be contacted on 07906 024 354 or at gornalldaniel@gmail.com.

Carbon Landscape Trust workshops

After being approached by the Carbon Landscape Trust WECG ran a number of workshops on the Reserve for people wanting to develop skills in surveying wildlife. These took place during the summer and early autumn and were generally well attended. The topics covered were butterflies, ringing, breeding wildfowl, and wildfowl counts. Hopefully many of those who attended will have been inspired to become involved in local and national surveys. The workshops will be repeated during 2019.

Roy Taylor : an appreciation

Not many of you will have known Roy, who sadly died in his late forties in October 2018, after a long and courageous struggle with Motor Neurone Disease. Brian Martin writes that he first met Roy and his Dad at Woolston when Roy was about eight years old. They lived near the Reserve and it soon became Roy's favourite site, and continued to be a special place for him throughout his life. He was a very keen and knowledgeable birdwatcher and it is clear that his love for Woolston Eyes was a very big factor in deciding his career choice. After graduating from University he volunteered for the RSPB at a number of their Reserves, including Fair Isle where he was highly regarded. He soon obtained a full-time post with the RSPB and eventually became a Senior Conservation Officer in the North of England office. Roy was responsible for many innovative projects and continued to work

until a matter of months before he died. A few years ago when he was forced to use a motorised buggy Roy did an epic trip across the country to raise funds for the provision of better access for the disabled to RSPB Reserves. Many improvements resulted and much awareness raised of this issue and it was typical of Roy's determination to succeed in everything that he did. He was highly regarded by so many people in nature conservation, as the number of tributes at his memorial service revealed. It all started at Woolston in the late 1970s and it is certain that Roy would have achieved so much more but for his cruel illness. He will be greatly missed.

Water levels on No.3 bed

Regular visitors will have observed the low water levels on this bed following the long hot summer and the annual release of water to allow the exposed mud to become covered with a mixed flora whose seeds can provide food for the wildfowl when water levels rise. The bed also becomes attractive to waders, notably Black-tailed Godwits, Green Sandpipers. Snipe and Lapwing, as well as some less common species. Fortunately the wet weather in December has seen water levels rise, but some more rain would be most welcome!

The Ship Canal track

During the summer the dry weather allowed us to fill in many of the potholes on the track to the car park, using road planings. This proved successful, and although the recent rains have exposed some holes the track is still much easier to use. Any problems areas will be dealt with quickly when the weather improves. Thanks are due to Brian Ankers and Ashley Radford for their hard work.

Stairs on the Morgan Hide

Just before Christmas it became apparent that the wood on the lower flight of stairs to the hide had begun to deteriorate and the hide was quickly closed and declared unsafe. A new set of stairs was made by Wardens and the hide is now open to visitors once again. Those involved deserve thanks for their quick response and expertise for a job well done.

Annual Report

Work will soon begin on producing the WECG Annual Report on flora and fauna. The Report is wholly produced by us with generous support from Colin Woolf, the renowned wildlife artist, for the cover design. Please note that this is not a financial statement, but a record of wildlife sightings on the Eyes. The quality of WECG Reports is high and full of interesting information. We would urge you to buy a copy, either in paper form or the on-line version, when renewing your permit. We are certain you will not be disappointed.

Sightings on the Eyes in 2018

The Black-necked Grebes had another successful breeding season, with ten pairs fledging up to 17 young, making Woolston and a site in Yorkshire the two main breeding sites in the U.K. Wildfowl had a mixed year, with good numbers of Gadwall and Shoveler. Wintering Pochard continue their worrying decline, but many pairs did breed, however. There were more sightings than usual of Garganey on spring passage. More Black-headed Gulls returned to breed than in recent years, but there was an unexplained desertion of the gullery when adults were still on nests and consequently only a few young fledged. Birds of prey never disappoint at Woolston, and there were many sightings of Marsh Harriers, Peregrine, Sparrowhawk, Hobby, and of course Buzzard. As for waders, more Avocets were seen than usual and Black-tailed Godwits were present until quite late in the year.

Willow Tits continue to thrive, with many nests located and over 40 ringed, the majority juveniles. Cetti's Warblers continue to expand their population at the Eyes and a record 28 were ringed. Other notable ringing totals were an outstanding 1002 Blackcaps, 631 Reed Warblers, 837 Greenfinches and a record 247 Bramblings, and it was also a record year for catches of Garden Warblers. Bramblings are currently to be found below the Morgan Hide feeders. Finally, on New Year's Day a Starling roost, estimated at 10,000 birds, was found on No.3 bed. A few days later it had doubled in size, with spectacular murmurations. It is definitely worth a visit!

Butterflies

The extreme weather resulted in a mixed year for our butterflies. The cold and prolonged spring meant that many species emerged later than usual, whilst the hot dry summer produced an early emergence but a shortened flight period. It was a good year for Purple Hairstreak, Common Blue, Large and Small Whites, and the recovery of Small Copper was welcome after its virtual disappearance from Woolston in the past few years. Species which depend on grassland in mid-summer fared poorly as the drought took its toll. Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper totals were disappointing and there were no records of Ringlet. Perhaps the major surprise of the year was the appearance of Dark-green Fritillary, of which there were three sightings from a small area of No.1 bed. There had only been one previous record of this butterfly at Woolston, whose nearest breeding sites are in the Pennine foothills to the east.

Insect surveys

On-going surveys of beetles and other insects continue to reveal surprising and interesting species at Woolston. Some have been shown to be very uncommon, including the recent find of a Stored Grain Fungus Beetle (*Litargus balteatus*), which is an extremely rare immigrant from the United States.

Brian Martin