

## **Wicken Reedbed Cetti's Warblers: update November 2010**

Cetti's Warbler – a non-migratory warbler found as recently as the 1920s only in the Mediterranean – is still dynamically expanding its range. Cetti's was first recorded for the British list only in 1961, and first bred, in Kent, in 1972/3. The first record for Cambridgeshire was in 1977, and the first proven county breeding – at Wicken, of course – was 1980; a bird caught on the Fen that year had been ringed at Hoddesdon. However, this initial colonisation petered out after the hard winter of 1984/5, and no Cettis were to be proved breeding again in the county until 2004 (at two different sites that year, but not at Wicken).

The first Cetti's Warbler of the current recolonisation at Wicken was caught on St Edmund's Fen in March 2005. Then four juveniles were caught in late summer 2005 at the Reedbed in the south-west corner of the Fen – perhaps youngsters dispersing from St Edmunds, where a fifth juvenile had also been caught.

Five years on, Cetti's are now widely distributed across the Fen wherever there are damp ditches and deep cover. However, the Reedbed remains at the heart of this recolonisation. Of the 288 Wicken Fen Group captures of 121 different individual Cettis since 2005, 213 captures (74%) have been at Reedbed sites – in fact, in the small study area within 300 yards of the Group's Reedbed ringing hut. Other parts of the Fen, and in particular the wooded carr of St Edmunds, provide less suitable Cetti's habitat and hold fewer birds.

Cettis are usually polygynous and multi-brooded, so can be very productive in a good year. The 2009 breeding season proved exceptionally good for all reedbed species, particularly Reed and Sedge Warblers, and the Reedbed Cetti's were no exception. In the six months from 1 June, the WFG handled 45 different Cettis at the Reedbed – that is again all within a few hundred yards of each other. Most of these were young birds of the year; in fact only five certain adult individuals were caught in this period. The five comprised the oldest male, one of the birds first ringed as a juvenile in 2005, and perhaps his harem of four females. This dominant male was the only adult male at all caught during the six months from June 2009.

Other studies have suggested that most breeding sites are abandoned in midwinter, with birds making local movements away, then returning in

March and April. This isn't really true at Wicken where singing is heard and birds are caught throughout the winter. But there is some evidence of certain birds being present either in winter or summer but not both.

With numbers having been so high in Autumn 2009, there was naturally some concern as to the effect of the severe weather of early January 2010 on this very susceptible species. In fact, the Reedbed Cettis seemed to come through well. As it turned out, seventeen birds (ten males, seven females) are known to have been alive in this small study area at some point during the three winter months December-February, either because they were caught then, or have been caught subsequently. In the spring period March-May this had dropped to ten (seven males and three females), and by the summer to seven (including three newcomers), but this number is difficult to interpret.

At any time of year many more males are caught than females. Males may be more readily caught, as they actively defend or encroach upon territories while females maintain a lower profile, particularly when breeding. Or there may be simply more males in the population. In common with other species, it is female Cetti's which tend to disperse further and pioneer new colonisations. The first arrival at Wicken in 2005 was a female, as was the only incoming controlled bird (ringed as a juvenile at Hollesley, Suffolk, two years earlier) and as have been all the adult birds arriving unringed into the study area.

By the end of the summer, it looks as if things haven't gone so well for the Cetti's in 2010 – at least within this very small study area. Fewer than twenty juveniles have been caught up until the end of October, way down on 2009. While three younger males were around during the summer, the old dominant male from 2005 hasn't been caught since April, so he may sadly have finally died. With his passing we may have lost the high productivity of the last few years.