

Wicken Reedbed Cetti's Warblers

Cetti's Warbler – a non-migratory warbler and at one time (as recently as the 1920s) found only around the Mediterranean – is a species which is dynamically expanding its range; cold winters permitting. Cetti's was first recorded for the British list only in 1961, and first bred, in Kent, in 1972 or 1973. The first record for Cambridgeshire was 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 (Herts). However, this initial colonisation, centered on Wicken, 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, but not at Wicken).

The first Cetti's Warbler of the current re-colonisation to be ringed at Wicken – a second-year female – was caught on St Edmund's Fen (H) in March 2005; this individual hasn't been caught again. A juvenile was caught on St Edmunds in September 2005, but after that no Cettis at all were caught on H until 2007.

On the other hand, the Reedbed, Harrisons Drove and the Mere have been at the heart of the recolonisation. Of the 77 WFG captures of 37 different individual Cettis 2005-07, 64 captures (83%) have been at our Reedbed sites.

The following short analysis looks at the subset of Reedbed Cettis caught at the linear FR sites, which run along Little (Fullers) Drove. It excludes nine captures at the two K sites east of the Four Pools field, where coverage has been more intermittent.

Ringing visits to the Reedbed during 2005 were significantly fewer than in 2006 and 2007. CDs were also increasingly used in the latter two years, but there is no real evidence that Cettis are particularly responsive to luring. Overall many more males are caught than females. Of the 37 different individuals caught anywhere on the Fen, only 11 have been females. Of 51 captures of 'older' birds (that is, excluding 3Js caught before the end of August) only 12 were of females. There were 23 of these 'older' individuals,

of which 8 were female, 15 were male. Thus males are first caught, and then recaptured, disproportionately frequently. This may be a function of the population (more males; female emigration) or of behaviour (males more mobile and more readily captured). Or just possibly of less marked dimorphism than Svensson claims! Or perhaps it's the extremeness of the dimorphism which may account for differential catchability.

The following table records the number of *different* individuals in each quarter caught at the F sites.

	2005		2006				2007				
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	
Older			A <i>x yy</i>				A	A 1 <i>xx</i>	A 1		
1CY	A <i>x</i>	<i>x</i>			<i>xxx</i>			C	B C D F G <i>xx yyyy</i>	D E H <i>yyy</i>	
'Elsewhere'		A	A		A	A			E	B F G	

In the table, individual birds captured and recaptured across more than one quarter have been given their own letter/number. Birds **A-H** are males and bird **1** is a female. *x* (males) and *y* (females) denote birds, not individually labelled here, which were only recorded in one quarter, and not subsequently. These will include visitors, roving birds and emigrants; and, of course, short-lived juveniles. Birds which were not caught during a quarter but were clearly alive during it are shown in the 'Elsewhere' row. This last group includes birds (**E F B**) which were caught at other sites on the Fen, but not at the Reedbed, during that particular quarter. **G** has just been retrapped (in March).

Four 2005-born juveniles (two at area F, two at K) were the first Cettis to be caught at the Reedbed. This suggested breeding close by, but no adults were caught, which may have been a function of the sporadic ringing coverage that year. Adults were continuously resident from April 2006 and young birds were subsequently caught in 2006; none of these juveniles has been caught again.

In spring 2007, a resident pair (the male being **A**, one of the local juveniles from 2005 who had been on-site through 2006) was joined by a new female, and off and on by two males which had also both been caught elsewhere on the Fen earlier that quarter, and were possibly roving non-breeders. It seems likely that two separate broods were represented in catches of four new 3Js on 5 July, and then five new 3Js on 13 July. It is not possible to say whether these were from two separate females (with a second female uncaught), or from the regular resident having a second brood. Second broods can follow very quickly, as the male can feed fledged young when the female relays.

Polygamy (or mainly, polygyny) is common in Cettis populations. The seminal study of Cettis breeding ecology, from Radipole Lake (*Ibis* 124: 288-301), is by Colin Bibby, a founder member of the WFG, who died so prematurely in 2004. I have happy memories of visiting Colin in Dorset when he was working on his PhD on Dartford Warblers, another non-migratory warbler and an equally challenging study species; the Cettis were just a side-line!

While there is usually a majority of monogamous pairs, dominant males can have up to six females. There is usually a significant proportion of unmated males. There's also polyandry. Precise family dynamics are only resolvable by colour-ringing.

Studies at Minsmere and Radipole suggest that most breeding sites are abandoned in midwinter, with birds making local movements away, then returning in March-April. There is some evidence of this, with only four Dec-Jan-Feb captures of single birds in the period. Singing is nonetheless heard throughout the winter. I hope we'll see **A** and **1** back in 2008, but so far (to March) only three Cettis have been caught anywhere on the Fen (despite at least six different singing males around the Reedbed) – **G** and **H**, both males born last year, and a new male (also age 5, with tail faults that suggest it may be a sibling).

With unsuitable breeding habitat (the Reedbed itself, farmland, Rothschilds) bordering the Little Drove sites, this area is something of a dead-end pocket. Cettis don't sing along the mid-sections of Little Drove, in the Reedbed (other than along the margins) or in the Four Pools themselves. I would therefore imagine that birds caught at K, birds at FR2 (junction of Little and

Harrisons) and vocal birds along Harrisons back to Bakers Fen are usually separate individuals from the FR birds.

Finally, how good are we at catching Cettis? Birds often sing very close to nets and remain uncaught. Birds we do catch are almost invariably in the bottom shelf. They grab and tangle tit-like, so are not escaping from the pocket.

At the Reedbed, wind keeps the nets in motion most of the time. Do Cettis creep, walk and flit such short distances, and so low, that they see the nets? Are they good at braking in mid-flight? Are their sustained flights between song-perches up and down the wet ditches in thick cover and mainly *parallel* to the net rides? I get the feeling we should catch more than we do.

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