



Dunkirk avocets

Newsletter 1 - May 2010

INTRODUCTION

In April 2007 a 3Ha (8 acre) scrape was created and flooded in farmland at the hamlet of Dunkirk, near Pymore, Cambridgeshire (52° 27'N, 0° 13'E, Grid Ref TL5286). Within weeks, islands in the scrape were occupied by breeding waders, including avocets. The site has developed and matured since then, and 25 young avocets have been colour-ringed, allowing individual recognition. Eleven of these birds have been seen since fledging from the natal site, and reported from locations across East Anglia. This newsletter is the first in a series to keep observers informed about the breeding site and movements of the birds they and others have reported. I suspect that other birders may have also seen marked avocets from Dunkirk without knowing how to report their sightings or the origin of the birds. If this newsletter reaches people who remember having seen avocets with red rings on their tibia from July 2007 onwards, I hope that they will be encouraged to dig out their field notes and send in their records to the email address shown below.

THE SITE

Developed from an arable field in land of heavy clay, the scrape was formed using heavy plant including a 25-tonne excavator, two 30-tonne dumpers, a D6 bulldozer, and a sheeps-foot roller. The work took 4 weeks and involved the moving of some 30,000 tonnes of soil. In effect, a waterproof clay basin was created, within which the scrape and its islands were formed. Water is retained in the scrape year-round, apart from a short period in late summer when it sometimes dries completely. Most of the water comes directly from rainfall, but levels are topped-up in summer using water from a nearby lake. This, in turn, is supplied from a drainage channel.

Maximum water depth across the scrape is approximately 20-25cm, but in late spring and summer this is allowed to slowly diminish through evaporation. By autumn, only a few pools remain, but these attract migrating waders, of which 19 species have been recorded. Water levels increase again in early winter, and the scrape often hosts more than 1000 roosting swans



(mostly bewicks) between December and February. The scrape and its surrounding fields are protected from predators and human disturbance by a 2m fence with electrified wires, together with a weldmesh skirt to prevent foxes digging below it. Wader nest predation is low, although moorhens and black-headed gulls are known to take some eggs and young. Ironically, the greatest loss of avocet young in 2009 was due to attacks by adults of the same species (see below). Flooding of the nesting islands, often the cause of breeding failure on the nearby Ouse Washes, is prevented by the engineering design of the site.

The scrape is part of an Environmental Stewardship agri-environment scheme (HLS), administered by Natural England. The scheme funded about half of the capital costs of the project, and contributes to the maintenance of the site each year.

BREEDING SUCCESS

The site has successfully produced fledged oystercatchers, redshanks, little ringed plovers, lapwings and avocets, though this newsletter focuses on the avocets alone. The adjacent Table shows breeding performance over the seasons to date. Breeding success

	No. Avocet nests	No. Fledged young	No. colour ringed	Fledged young per nest
2007	17	2	2	0.12
2008	13	26	11	2.0
2009	24	13	12	0.54

(fledged young per occupied nest) was low in 2007 due to poor weather at a critical stage in the chick-rearing stage, and to predation by black-headed gulls. Success was much greater in 2008, but fell again in 2009 due to inter-specific aggression brought on by a drought and the subsequent crowding of feeding pools. Steps will be taken to better preserve water levels in 2010.

THE COLOUR-RINGING SCHEME

With consent from the Wader Study Group, and a Schedule 1 ringing permit from the BTO, Dunkirk avocets receive a red colour ring on the tibia (above the knee) on each leg. Each colour ring is engraved with 2 white characters reading from the bottom upwards - a letter followed by a number (A3, E7 etc) and each bird carries two identical rings. A metal BTO ring is placed on the tarsus (below the knee) on the right leg only. The colour rings are light in weight and seem to be tolerated by the birds very well; none have been seen to peck at their rings or try to rub them off. The rings also last well - the white lettering (sometimes looking yellowish with age) is easily visible, at distances of up to 100m with the aid of a telescope. A small proportion of birds carry only a single



colour ring, caused by the second ring breaking on application because they are quite brittle. Hitherto, no bird has been known to lose a ring after fitting.

REPORTS OF RINGED BIRDS

POST-FLEDGING

Fledged juveniles leave the Dunkirk site between late June and late July, and in subsequent weeks have been reported from WWT Welney (10km NNE), the Cam Washes (16km S) and Cley (79km NE). A particularly interesting observation was reported by David Wileman, who saw siblings D3 and D5 with a parent at Cley in July 2009.

WINTER

The only reports from winter months were sent in by Mike Marsh, who saw A3 in two consecutive winters at Orfordness in Suffolk. The larger wintering assemblages in Devon apparently offer fewer opportunities for observers to approach closely enough to read rings, so it is plausible that Dunkirk birds do winter in the West Country but have not yet generated sightings. No birds from this site have yet been reported from overseas.

BREEDING SEASON

Ringed birds have been reported in the breeding season from the natal site and two others within a radius of 20 km - the WWT reserve at Welney (Jon Smith) and Tubney Fen near Swaffham Prior (Simon Gillings). Birds A4 and C9 (a known female) both hatched young in 2009 at

Dunkirk (both aged 1 year), and A2 visited briefly. C9 has also laid eggs at Dunkirk in 2010. Much larger numbers of adults than before are now using Dunkirk for breeding (peak of 72 in April 2010), but very few of these were fledged at the site. On the basis of a relatively small sample size to date, it seems likely that fidelity to the natal site is not strong, perhaps reflecting the species' propensity to be mobile and take advantage of newly-available sites each year.

ORIGIN OF BIRDS BREEDING AT DUNKIRK

The vast majority of avocets nesting at Dunkirk are unringed, but eight have carried colour rings from other sites. Most were ringed as pulli at WWT Welney, including ET45254 - a bird that died having successfully fledged young in 2009. This bird was ringed as a juvenile in 2004 & had also bred at Dunkirk in 2008. Another breeder was ringed by the NW Norfolk Ringing Group.



REPORTS OF IDENTIFIABLE BIRDS SEEN AFTER FLEDGING FROM DUNKIRK

Bird	Date	Location	Distance from Dunkirk	Observer	Comments	Season ringed
A2	24/6/09	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin	Brief visit	2007
A3	1/11/08 - 14/12/08	Orfordness, Suffolk	99km ESE	Mike Marsh		2008
	1/1/10 - 17/1/10	Orfordness, Suffolk	99km ESE	Mike Marsh		
	4/5/10	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin		
A4	21/9/08	Trimley Marshes, nr Felixtowe, Suffolk	88km SE	Nigel Odin		2008
	30/4/09 - 15/5/09	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin	Bred. Hatched 2 but lost them at 1 day old. A4 not seen after 15/5	
	29/5/09	Trimley Marshes, nr Felixtowe, Suffolk	88km SE	Nigel Odin	Id not certain, but must be a Dunkirk bird	
	28/4/10	Tubney Fen, nr Swafham Prior, Cambs	19km SSE	Simon Gillings	In group of 7 with another Dunkirk bird A?	
A5	30/8/08	Snettisham, Norfolk	49km NNE	Tristan Folland		2008
A7	31/8/08	Holme Dunes, Norfolk	62km N	Gary Hibberd		2008
A8	4/5/10	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin		2008
C6	4/5/10	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin		2008
C9	26/4/09 - 9/6/09	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin	Bred. Hatched & prob fledged 2 chicks.	2008
	30/4/10 - 5/5/10	Dunkirk, Cambs		Tony Martin	Incubating	
D3	7/7/09 - 25/7/09	Cley, Norfolk	79km NE	David Wileman / Peter & Sue Morrison	With sib D5 & parent	2009
D5	7/7/09 - 16/7/09	Cley, Norfolk	79km NE	David Wileman	With sib D3 & parent	2009
E6	30/7/09	Cam Washes, nr Waterbeach, Cambs	16km S	Mick Whitehouse		2009

2010 SEASON

At the date of writing (5 May 2010) some 34 pairs of avocets have laid eggs, and other birds are still prospecting. A3, A8, C6 & female C9 have returned, the latter laying a clutch on the same island as in 2009. One other adult has Dunkirk rings, but has not yet stood still enough to allow identification! Laying dates are at least a week later than in 2009. The greater number of nests has inevitably resulted in a higher density of incubating birds, and for the first time the majority

of avocet pairs have chosen an island with few black-headed gull nests. In all three previous seasons, avocets have differentially selected the island with the greatest number of nesting gulls. Perhaps the number of avocets has now reached a threshold, whereby they don't need the close presence of gulls to protect them from potential nest predators.



Map of East Anglia, showing the location of the Dunkirk colony, and sites at which colour-ringed Dunkirk-fledged avocets have been seen (yellow pins).

PURPOSE AND FUTURE OF THE STUDY

The Dunkirk breeding site is newly established, and represents a fascinating opportunity to follow the development of a colony and the seasonal movements of its birds. Protected from flooding and mammalian predators, and with a high rate of productivity, the Dunkirk colony is rapidly increasing in size and already contributes significantly to the number of avocets fledged each year in the UK. Monitoring the breeding performance of the colony, and the post-fledging

behaviour of its birds, will contribute directly to site management decisions here and elsewhere, and help enhance the conservation status of this exquisite bird in the UK.

Ringling of juveniles will continue into the foreseeable future, with the objective of bringing about an understanding of where these birds spend the winter, where they breed, and which sites they use on migration. This knowledge can only be derived by learning of sightings of colour-ringed birds, and I would be very grateful if anyone with such information could get in touch.

REPORTING SIGHTINGS OF DUNKIRK AVOCETS

With the colour rings lasting well, and more ringed birds entering the population each year, it is likely that Dunkirk-reared avocets will be seen more frequently and at more sites. Please do check all avocets you see for rings, and let me know if you encounter any of these birds or have heard of others who have seen them. Even if the characters on a ring cannot be seen, just the knowledge that an avocet with red rings on the tibia was present at a site on a particular date will add to our understanding of this population of birds. I will acknowledge all emails or phone calls, and provide information on the birds reported. Unless otherwise requested, reporters of ringed birds will receive subsequent updates of this newsletter.

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