



Wicken Fen Group. Report for 2020.

Administration.

The Steering Group has met 4 times during the year, twice in person as normal, followed by twice on Zoom, with regular email contact in the intervals to keep abreast of changes.

There have been changes to membership of the Steering Group, and their responsibilities during the year.

Nets and other equipment have been maintained and stored safely during the year. The only major purchase of equipment was a new set of bamboo poles, which will be treated with preservative before entering use.

Ringling bulletins are circulated to membership quarterly, and records of detailed observations are maintained.

Please find below a summary of recent Steering Group discussions and activities, which has been circulated to members, and so also to you at the National Trust.

Notes from the Wicken Fen Ringers Steering Group

We hope that you are aware that strategic decisions, ongoing development, and day to day maintenance decisions are democratically managed by the Steering Group.

We thought, rather than simply copying the basic action notes of the meetings, it may be more helpful to provide you with a bit more of a narrative.

Steering Group membership

We have said goodbye to Sophie Mowles, Jo Jones and Neil Larner from the Steering Group this autumn and have welcomed Sergio as our first Trainee on the group. We would particularly wish to pass on our thanks to Neil, who is also retiring from the role of Group Ringing Secretary, which he has carried out diligently for many years.

To keep you up to date the current Steering Group members are:

Chris Quy: Group Leader

Andy Wood: Treasurer & Ringing Secretary

Michael Holdsworth

Ann Beeby

Mark Peck

Sergio Tomey

Since Covid, we have been holding our meetings via Zoom, which has made them far more accessible to participate in. We would be more than happy to accept new members on the steering group if you are interested. Alternatively, if there is something you would like us specifically to address, please contact Chris Quy about it. Our next meeting is scheduled for 22/02/21

Covid and ringing sessions at the Fen

As you are aware, with the initial lock down in the spring, all activities by volunteers on National Trust property were curtailed, resulting in no ringing carried out until mid-August. Since then, we have tried our best to resume ringing sessions, but apologise that in the majority of circumstances, due to Covid precautions, including social distancing, they have been solo sessions run by Senior members.

The steering group have agreed that any Ringers in Charge of a session must follow Government guidelines and it is their decision if they feel they are able to accommodate a trainee on their session without putting themselves or the trainee at risk.

Membership fees

In recognition of the limited opportunities for active ringers to get out in 2020 and continued uncertainty as we move towards 2021, we have decided to reduce the membership fee for active members in 2021 from £30 down to £10 for the year. If you have not already done so, we would be very appreciative if you can renew your membership.

Wicken Fen Group Bulletins

We would like to thank Peter Bircham, who is stepping down from producing the Group Bulletins, this role will be taken on by Ann Beeby. The plan is to produce 4 bulletins per year plus an Annual Report. If you have any information of interest involving your ringing or nesting at the Fen, or photos, please pass them on to Ann.

BTO winter ringing project

The group is participating in the new BTO Winter Ringing Project (A bit like a winter CES)

This is being led by Carole Davis and will be run at the St Edmunds Site. We are allowed to use feeders to attract birds to the site and will be seeking to keep them topped up throughout the winter to encourage the birds to maintain site fidelity. Keep an eye on session plans for any opportunities to join in.

We would like to wish you a safe and healthy Christmas and hope to see you in the field, as soon as possible in the New Year.

Best wishes

All on the Steering Group

Ringling.

As mentioned in the Steering Group report, ringling sessions were severely reduced by the lockdown and other restrictions caused by the Covid 19 pandemic.

In fact, there were only 15 sessions before the first lockdown, and 36 sessions from early August to the end of the year.

The main impact of this reduction in ringling is that none of the CES (constant effort scheme) visits were made. This will make a deficiency to short-term population and productivity estimates, but hopefully not affect the longer-term data-set.

Total captures by species 2020.

The table shows the total captures for 2020, prepared by Neil Lerner.

The figures must be read in the context of reduced netting opportunities, if compared with other years.

btospfullname	C	N	R	X	Total
Blackbird		20	8		28
Blackcap	2	203	3		208
Blue Tit		204	297		501
Bullfinch		23	9		32
Cetti's Warbler		2	1		3
Chaffinch		47	6	1	54
Chiffchaff		80	6		86
Dunnock		16	18		34
Fieldfare		15			15
Garden Warbler		8			8
Goldcrest		15	15		30
Goldfinch	1	87	16		104
Great Spotted Woodpecker		3			3
Great Tit	1	87	190		278
Green Woodpecker		1			1
Greenfinch		36	2		38
House Sparrow		15	1		16
Jay		1			1
Lesser Redpoll	1	71	4		76
Lesser Whitethroat		7			7
Linnet		1			1
Long-tailed Tit	1	38	66		105
Meadow Pipit		260	3		263
Pied Wagtail		9			9
Redwing		126	2		128
Reed Bunting		253	18		271
Reed Warbler		13			13
Robin		24	18		42
Sedge Warbler		1			1
Siskin		2			2
Song Thrush		11			11
Sparrowhawk		2	1		3
Stonechat		7			7
Tawny Owl		1			1
Treecreeper		3	9		12
Whitethroat		8			8
Willow Warbler		3			3
Wren		32	14	1	47
Yellowhammer		1			1
TOTALS	6	1736	707	2	2451

The BTO has introduced a winter ringing survey, which the Group applied to join, but sadly only 2 sessions of the planned 6 were achieved. This year was planned as a pilot year. Please see Carole Davis' report on this survey below, as we hope to contribute to this again in subsequent years.

BTO Winter Ringing Pilot 2020/2021. Carole Davis.

Background

The BTO has been exploring winter ringing data collected on passerines over the last few years, focusing on the potential for generating survival trends and age ratios for passerines at winter feeding sites.

The BTO has now decided to extend this study, inviting individual ringers and ringing groups with suitable winter ringing sites to take part in a Winter Ringing Pilot, similar in many ways to the current CES and RAS projects. The aim of the project is to obtain data for species which, based on preliminary work, appear to show good site fidelity during the winter and for which CES and RAS are not so useful (mainly due to the difficulty in catching sufficient numbers during the summer). In addition to survival estimates it is hoped that the project will provide data on age ratios. Although many species at winter feeding sites are already well-monitored by CES (such as Blue Tit, Dunnock, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit and Robin), trends for other species would fill a monitoring gap.

Top of the list of potential candidates for the generation of winter survival trends are Bullfinch, Chaffinch and Goldfinch. Although Chaffinch and Goldfinch are formally CES species, the breeding season data do not currently permit generation of robust survival estimates. The initial data suggests that Greenfinch, Redpoll and Siskin are less site faithful but the BTO is interested to see whether these results change with a more concerted effort. Results for Great Spotted Woodpecker also look promising. Following on from the apparent success of the garden CES project over summer 2020, the BTO hoped to recruit sufficient participants for this new project to make it realistic.

Operating protocols

Many of the operating protocols for the Winter Ringing Pilot are similar to those with which Wicken Fen Group is already familiar from their involvement with CES, including the standardisation of the number of mist nets and the length of time the nets are open. Food provision, fundamental to many winter ringing activities, is permitted so long as there are no substantial changes to the type of food provided. Sound lures are not permitted as these are known to bias catches towards juveniles with age ratios being one of the most useful outcomes of the project.

The pilot planned to operate between 5th December 2020 and 28th February 2021 (with the possibility of extending the dates to include November in future years) with fortnightly visits totalling six sessions over the survey period. The aim is to capture a minimum of 200-300 birds (total catch across all species) over the six sessions. There is the potential to operate sites more frequently so long as there is a minimum of three days between any ringing and the next pilot session (as with CES).

With sufficient interest from WFG members, including experienced ringers to run the six sessions as well as volunteers to top up feeders, it was agreed by the group that we should trial this pilot. There was concern as to whether we would catch enough individual birds in the six sessions and whether the cost and effort required to maintain food over this time period would be prohibitive. It was generally agreed that we would need to keep all the feeders topped up throughout the period to maintain the site fidelity of the birds.

Four nets are being used for the study, all in the HBF area, to reduce the effort required for keeping the feeders filled and so that each session can be undertaken by one experienced ringer, a necessary precaution given on-going Covid restrictions.

Results so far

Session 1 8th December 2020

Blue Tit	1 + 6
Great Tit	3 + 8
Blackbird	2 + 1
Robin	2 + 4
Dunnock	1 + 2
House Sparrow	6 + 0
Bullfinch	2 + 2
Total	17 + 23 = 40

Session 2 22nd December 2020

Blue Tit	15 + 13
Great Tit	7 + 8
Long-tailed Tit	0 + 2
Dunnock	1 + 1
Robin	1 + 1
House Sparrow	8 + 1
Total	32 + 26 = 58

We caught a total of 91 individual birds in the first two sessions and were therefore on track to catch the minimum number of birds across all species for the pilot. On a less positive note, for the pilot, only the four Bullfinches represented target species.

Session 3 was scheduled for Tuesday 5th January. The preparations were all in place for this session when Boris Johnson made his announcement, on the evening of Monday 4th January, that England was to immediately enter its third lockdown. It was decided to put this session on hold pending guidance from the National Trust and the BTO. Following the recommendation from the BTO that ringing should only take place within the boundaries of a ringer's home, it was decided that the Winter Ringing Pilot, as well as all other ringing at Wicken, would be suspended until further notice. The timescale for the current lockdown makes it unlikely that any further sessions will be completed for the project this winter but hopefully the project will be restarted in more favourable conditions next winter.

Nest-monitoring.

Unfortunately no nest monitoring was possible on the Reserve this year.

Nonetheless, it was with great pleasure that we heard the Reserve's report that 4 pairs of Marsh Harriers had bred successfully, with probably 11 young fledged.

Marsh Harriers nesting 2020. Martin Lester.

There were 4 Marsh Harrier nests on the Reserve in 2020. Two were on the Sedge Fen, within 60 m of each other, and 10 m & 30 m from the boardwalk respectively. There were 2 females on the Sedge Fen and 1 male. Each female managed to fledge 4 young. Considering there were only 3 adults feeding, this is quite impressive. A third nest was south of Wicken Lode, where we know of at least 3 young fledging. There was a fourth female/pair, but we have no information for this. Assuming she fledgd an average brood (3-4), there could be as many as 11 juvenile Marsh Harriers from Wicken Fen in 2020. Some hung around into the autumn, but most dispersed.

Nest-boxes.

As with open nests, no monitoring was possible in 2020. The current extensive circuit round 55 boxes on St Edmunds Fen was considered impractical, and a shorter circuit of 20 boxes has been devised. Repairs to damaged boxes have been planned and will progress as soon as possible. The 12 boxes at Gallops will also be repaired, and moved away from public access if necessary.

Chiffchaff project.

The 2020 spring migrant season was looking good in early March, with the first Chiffchaff heard on 9th March. Seven males were colour-ringed in the following ten days, with 4 individuals from previous years seen back on the same territories as in 2019. Further visits were planned, but unfortunately the onset of the first lockdown pulled the rug from under us, and no observations have been possible on the Reserve this year. As I write, 2021 is also looking doubtful.

Acknowledgments.

The Group remains grateful to the National Trust and the staff at Wicken Fen for their continued support and practical assistance.