

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2015 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 48 years, having been founded in 1968. By the end of the year 2015 the overall ringing total was 115776; of this total, about 650 birds have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (89 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2015, numbered 40 members and 21 registered Friends or Associates. Additionally there were, at any one moment, about 10-15 would-be ringers/trainees/visitors on the Group's "books". Coverage at the Fen, measured in hours, was almost exactly the same as that in 2014. Ringing operations with nets were conducted on 155 different days, involving 3432 member- (man- & woman-) hours. These netting sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 103, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35) while 31 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53). It was hoped that the ringing hut at North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23) would be used regularly throughout the year, but in the event only 50 sessions were held there, mainly due to hornets nesting in the hut itself and displacing the humans for 3 months in the summer! In the autumn there were also 6 sessions in the more "remote" areas (Burwell and Tubney Fens – Compartments 201-205 and 303-308 respectively). In addition, many days (estimated as 530 hours, this year separated from mist-netting hours) were spent in nest-finding, and the subsequent ringing of nestling birds (184 in all) – these involved both nestboxes and open nests, the latter involving almost all areas of the "old" and "new" (vision) Fen. The Nesters Report forms a separate publication.

The 2015 ringing total was 3913 birds, of 59 different species. In addition to the 3913 "new" birds in 2015, 831 "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2015; and a further 17 were "controls" (birds originally ringed away from the Fen, but captured at Wicken) – so a total of 4761 different birds were handled. Several species topped the 100 mark, the highest scores being Blackcap 409, Blue Tit 360, Reed Warbler 351, Reed Bunting 267, Chiffchaff 194, Greenfinch 186, Swallow 161, Great Tit 160, Goldfinch and Robin both 148, Wren 137, Meadow Pipit and Goldcrest both 119, Blackbird 113 and Redwing 100; the next most numerous were Sedge Warbler 99, Long-tailed Tit 98, Chaffinch 92, House Sparrow 85, Bullfinch 66, Lesser Redpoll 63, Pied Wagtail and Dunnock both 50.

The Goldcrest total is an all-time Wicken record, while other Wicken Fen ringing records broken in 2015 were the 35 Siskins, 17 Jackdaws and 11 Coal Tits. The Jackdaws were all nestlings; the others were birds whose numbers were boosted by an unusually large autumn 2015 arrival.

The more "unusual" species, normally ringed in small numbers, remained much the same as in recent years – Sparrowhawk 3, Kestrel 2, Hobby 1, Cuckoo 2, Kingfisher 8, Green Woodpecker 2, Jay 8, Magpie 1, Firecrest 1, Redstart 1, Tree Sparrow 1, Brambling 1, Mealy Redpoll 1. No new species was added to the Group's ringing list which thus remains at 106 species.

Although the overall ringing total (3913) is about a thousand lower than that of 2014 (4949) and some 1700 lower than the highest ever total (5608 in 2011), a simple look at the annual ringing totals does not allow more than the sketchiest interpretation of the year, in comparison with former years (the Group's Standard Sites and now Constant Effort Sites provide this data more accurately), the 2015 totals suggest that, while many species remained at 2014 levels, some were much more variable. Continued gains were made by Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs, losses by Willow Warblers. Woodpecker scores were lower than usual, as were those of Bearded Tits and Chaffinches. Blue and Great Tits had a disastrous nesting season (see Nesters Report), so pullus ringing was minimal; but full-grown birds were caught in reasonable numbers.

A number of the species caught in significant numbers were those repaying the effort put in by a small number of dedicated Group members, using lure calls in the autumn (after the end of the Constant Effort Sites sessions) at the Reedbed, Burwell and Tubney Fens. These efforts produced all of the Meadow Pipits and 135 of the Reed Buntings. But the latter total was well down on that of 2014 (439); and the Swallow attempts at the Reedbed were almost entirely unsuccessful in 2015 (the only successful roost catches were at the St. Edmunds area).

So some at least of the large variation in numbers of birds caught is due to "happenstance".

During 2015 we received news of the origins of some ringed birds recently trapped at Wicken Fen – Swallow from Sussex, Sand Martin from Yorkshire, Reed Warblers from France, Sussex, Lincolnshire and Suffolk, Sedge Warbler from France, Reed Bunting from Suffolk, Blackcaps from Norfolk, Meadow Pipit from Derbyshire and Goldfinch from Lincolnshire. The total of ringed "imports" to Wicken Fen during the lifetime of the Group so far, stands at 291, with 23 of these coming from abroad.

39 Wicken-ringed birds were reported from elsewhere in 2015; but none of them abroad. In fact, the reporting rate by "members of the public" for ringed birds is decreasing – most of the records are now coming from other ringers, often not so far away, catching "our" birds. The more distant travellers were Reed Warblers to Sussex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Tyne and Wear, a Sedge Warbler to Suffolk, a Chiffchaff to Lincolnshire, a Willow Warbler to Norfolk, a Goldcrest to Hampshire, a Goldfinch to Sussex, Greenfinches to Norfolk and Suffolk, a Chaffinch to Norfolk and Reed Buntings to Norfolk and Rutland. A further 24 birds moved lesser distances, to other parts of Cambridgeshire, sadly some falling prey to cats or to traffic. These included a Barn Owl to Fordham, a Kingfisher to Waterbeach and a Swallow to Hinxton.

Recapturing our own birds showed some longevity, the oldest birds being a Sparrowhawk at 7 years, 6 months (strictly just the interval between first ringing, and last recapture), a Great Tit and a Chaffinch both at 6 years 8 months, a Great Tit and a Blackbird both at 6 years 7 months, a Robin at 6 years 5 months, a House Sparrow at 6 years 1 month, a reed Warbler at 5 years 1 months and a Garden Warbler at 5 year 0 months.

In 2015, for the fifth successive year, Constant Effort Sites monitoring of the birds at the Reedbed (REECES) was carried out. The second CES, at St. Edmunds Fen (STECES), following the same pattern as REECES, with twelve 8-hour sessions at approximately 10-day intervals, was also completed in its second year. These CES efforts are organized, and analysed, by WFG members Michael Holdsworth and Peter Bircham/Chris Quyn respectively.

The task of digitizing the backlog of the Group's ringing and retrap data (going back to 1968) continues and is nearing completion (just as was said in last year's Report!)

The Group remains most grateful to the National Trust for granting permission for ringing on the Reserve, and for assisting with expenses. In turn, the Group in 2015 assisted the National Trust staff by putting on some ringing demonstrations. The University of Cambridge, in their turn, made a significant financial contribution to the National Trust, to assist with scientific studies at the Fen (the Ringing Group qualifies under this heading). Group members also collaborated with Anglia Ruskin University for the fourth year by demonstrating ringing to its MSc (Animal Behaviour) students. Some Group members assisted with bird-ringing away from the Fen – an increasing habit; they were able both to gain more experience, and to contribute expertise. Specific scientific support was also given, by Group members, to the University of Cambridge studies on Great and Blue Tits under the leadership of Dr. Hannah Rowland in Madingley Wood.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (9 in year 2015), keeping Members and Friends informed, not only of ringing activities, but also of general bird observations at Wicken Fen. He also produced monthly summaries of the Group's activities, which are displayed in the Thorpe Building at the Fen. Anyone interested in joining the Group is welcome to contact him, Dr. Chris Thorne, at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, CB2 1RL (phone 01954-210566, email cjrt@cam.ac.uk).

C.J.R. Thorne, 20 January 2016