

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2013 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 46 years, having been founded in 1968. By the end of the year 2013 the overall ringing total was 106894; of this total, 586 birds have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (84 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2013, numbered 42 members and 22 registered "friends". This represents a slight rise in membership, while the coverage at the Fen was very similar to that in 2012. Ringing operations with nets were conducted on 188 different days, involving 4303 member- (man- & woman-) hours. These netting sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 90, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 53 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53), 28 were at North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23), 9 at the Brickpits, working from the Roger Clarke Hide (Compartment 24) and 14 on the ride between Sedge Fen and Gardiners Doves (Compartment 15), although this area was so wet that no ringing could take place until August. There were also 14 sessions in the more "remote" areas (Burwell Fen/Guinea Hall/Tubney Fen/Westmere – Compartments 201-205, 108, 303-308 and 48-49 respectively). In addition, many days were spent in nest-finding, and the subsequent ringing of nestling birds (291 in all) – these involved nestboxes and "open nests", the latter involving almost all areas of the "old" and "new" (vision) Fen. The "nesters report" will form a separate publication.

The 2013 ringing total was 4112 birds, of 62 different species. In addition to the 4112 "new" birds in 2013, 721 "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2013; and a further 21 were "controls" (birds originally ringed away from the Fen, but captured at Wicken) – so a total of 4854 different birds were handled. Several species topped the 100 mark, the highest scores being Reed Warbler with 484 ringed, Reed Bunting 388, Blue Tit 327, Blackcap 242, Meadow Pipit 238, Swallow 214, Great Tit 199, Chaffinch 188, Sedge Warbler 186, Goldfinch 171, Lesser Redpoll 149, Chiffchaff 136, Wren 134, Blackbird 125, Robin 114 and Greenfinch 104; the next most numerous were Long-tailed Tit 80, Dunnock 66, Whitethroat 52, Bullfinch 49, Pied Wagtail 47, Redwing 42, Bearded Tit and House Sparrow both 41, Willow Warbler 38, Song Thrush and Goldcrest both 31.

The Meadow Pipit and Bearded Tit totals are all-time Wicken records. Other Wicken Fen ringing records broken or equalled in 2013 were the 14 Stock Doves, 10 Yellow Wagtails and 8 Skylarks.

The more "unusual" species normally ringed in small numbers remained in much the same small numbers in 2013 – Sparrowhawk 3, Water Rail 2, Collared Dove 1, Cuckoo 1, Tawny Owl 1, Kingfisher 4, House Martin 3, Grasshopper Warbler 5, Spotted Flycatcher 1, Firecrest 1, Coal Tit 1, Jay 1, Magpie 1, Tree Sparrow 1, Brambling 1 and Siskin 3. One new species was added to the Group's ringing list – the 3 young Black-headed Gulls from the new colony on Burwell Fen: this now stands at 106 species.

After the very poor weather of 2012, when the breeding success for many species was low, 2013 saw something of a recovery (although not back to 2011 levels, and sometimes patchy). Of the commoner warblers, Sedge, Reed, Whitethroats and Chiffchaffs had higher ringing

totals in 2013 than in 2012, but this still left them at only 67%, 56%, 37% and 57%, respectively, of their 2011 levels. Garden Warblers, Blackcaps and Willow Warblers fared worse, their 2013 totals remaining below both their 2012 (33%, 83% and 90% respectively) and 2011 (22%, 37% and 70% respectively) levels.

Wintering birds also showed modest numbers in 2013 – Blackbird and Song Thrush (both of course breeders as well) were only just above their 2012 levels, while Redwing, Fieldfare and Goldcrest were well below. Lesser Redpolls, however, were very numerous, their ringing total of 149 being the highest for several years.

The species with the largest increase in numbers caught were mainly those that repaid a lot of effort by a small number of dedicated Group members, using lure calls in the autumn at the Reedbed, Burwell or Tubney Fens. These were the Reed Buntings (388), Meadow Pipits (238), Pied Wagtails (47), Yellow Wagtails (10) and Skylarks (8).

During 2013 we received news of the origins of some ringed birds recently trapped at Wicken Fen – a Reed Warbler was from France and three from elsewhere in Britain, a Meadow Pipit and a Chaffinch from Yorkshire, a Greenfinch from Lincolnshire, a Sand Martin from Teesmouth and a Swallow from Norfolk. Wicken-caught Lesser Redpolls were from Lincolnshire, Suffolk, Surrey and Sussex, showing something of the movements of these attractive birds. The total of ringed “imports” to Wicken Fen during the lifetime of the Group so far stands at 260, with 21 of these coming from abroad.

Several Wicken-ringed birds also travelled far during 2013 – a Chiffchaff and a Reed Warbler to Portugal, a Sedge and a Reed Warbler both to France. Within Britain, Lesser Redpolls went to Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, Reed Warblers to Hertfordshire, Kent, Suffolk and Sussex, Sedge Warblers to Hertfordshire and Kent, a Goldfinch to Lincolnshire, a Cetti’s Warbler to Bedfordshire and a Greenfinch to Suffolk. Shorter journeys, to other part of Cambridgeshire, were made by Blackcaps, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Sedge Warblers and a Sparrowhawk.

Longevity records broken in 2013 were a Greenfinch at 8 years 0 months and a Wren at 5 years 6 months; a Reed Bunting came close to its record at 8 years 11 months. The oldest birds (or rather the longest intervals between ringing and recapture) of other species were a Long-tailed Tit at 6 years 7 months, a Robin and a Bullfinch both at 6 years 4 months, a Chaffinch at 6 years 0 months, a Reed Warbler at 5 years 11 months, a Blackbird at 5 years 10 months, a Great spotted Woodpecker at 5 years 9 months, a Cetti’s Warbler and a Great Tit both at 5 years 6 months and a Blue Tit at 5 years 2 months.

In summer 2013 we continued (for the 44th successive year) our “Standard Sites Sessions” (SSS). These special ringing visits involve placing nets in exactly the same sites, for exactly the same time, at the same dates every year, and enable us to monitor the breeding population of birds at the Fen. In addition, in 2013, we continued, for its third year, the parallel monitoring system called “Constant Effort Sites” at the Reedbed (REECES). An analysis of the REECES work in 2013 confirmed that some adult bird numbers were less than those seen in 2012 (a result of the poor productivity of young in that year), but that 2013 productivity was a little better. A decision was taken, at a meeting of the Group in November 2013, to discontinue the “Standard Sites Sessions”, but to replace them with a second CES (to be

called STECES) from the 2014 season, with that STECES to encompass an area very close to, and overlapping with, the former SSS (to allow comparison).

During 2013, harnessing the computer skills of several of the Group members, the task of digitizing the backlog of the Group's ringing and retrap data (going back to 1968) has been continued, and is now nearing completion. When complete, there will be some 180000 records, a very valuable database.

The Group is grateful to the National Trust for granting permission for ringing on the Reserve, and for assisting financially with expenses. In turn, the Group in 2013 assisted the National Trust staff by putting on ringing demonstrations for visitors to the Fen, including some at the Roger Clarke Hide. Group members also collaborated with Anglia Ruskin University for a second year by demonstrating ringing to its MSc (Animal Behaviour) students. Scientific support was also given, by Group members, to the Great and Blue Tit studies of Dr. Hannah Rowland and also to the Jackdaw work of Ms. Gabrielle Davidson and Ms. Alison Greggor at Madingley Wood and Madingley Hall.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (7 in year 2013), 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 and included in the National Trust Wicken Fen website (<http://www.wicken.org.uk>). 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, 27 January 2014