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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In particular, The National Trust : Wicken Fen Local Committee continues to allow us unrestricted access for ringing, and furthermore makes a substantial contribution to the cost of the rings used. We also remain indebted to the Chairman and Secretaries of the Committee; to the Warden - Tim Bennett; and to Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Barnes.

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# Wicken Fen Group Report

## No. 11 1979-1980

### INTRODUCTION

This report covers the two years 1979 and 1980, years that have seen a continuation of the work of the Wicken Fen Group, although with a rather lower level of manpower than in the recent past. Nevertheless coverage has been maintained at a fairly steady level and all eight of the two years' "standardised" catches have been completed. A good autumn effort in 1980 also enabled us to raise the annual ringing total back above 2,000, for the first time since 1976.

As well as ringing, records continue to be kept of all general observations of birds at the Fen. It is perhaps of interest that, during the period 1969-1980, 25 new (wild) bird species have been added to the Wicken Fen list, which now stands at almost 200. Group members were responsible for 10 of those records. More noteworthy is the fact that 9 of the species have been added in the last two years (1979-80), most of these records coming from the new warden, Tim Bennett's, routine observations and those of the local "Fen Naturalists". Ornithological interest at the Fen has reached a renewed high level, reflected also in the active working parties (mainly of Cambridge Bird Club members) and the construction of the new hide overlooking the NE corner of the mere.

Thus the Wicken Fen Group activities now represent only a part of Wicken ornithology. It is therefore appropriate that Tim Bennett, who has inspired much of the renewed interest, should have written the review of 1979 and 1980 in this report. In it, he has been able to summarise most of the significant facts of the period. Other material in the report covers the regular ringing, recovery and standardised mist netting results; there are also papers on owls and on the productivity of the Group's nestboxes.



T.J. Bennett

The period under review started without a warden in residence and this, combined with the infrequent visits by Group members at this time of year, meant that records during the first three weeks of 1979 were very scanty, though a Hen Harrier roost and a Great Grey Shrike remained from the previous year. Fortunately the Warden's house had been occupied before the onset of a particularly cold snap which began on the 22nd of January. The unusually heavy fall of snow, which lay around for several days, was preceded by a marked westerly movement of Lapwings, Skylarks and thrushes, but notable species which remained in the area included a handful of Bearded Tits and Brambling. A Bittern was seen on the 30th and again on February 4th.

The warden's frequent excursions round the Fen in an attempt to get familiar with his new patch soon paid dividends, when on February 2nd a group of 12 Grey Geese flew over, later to be followed by another group of 14 identified as White-fronted Geese, a species new to the reserve. The next morning all 14 including several immatures were found on Brett's Piece and although flushed they soon landed again just off the reserve where they remained for the rest of the day. Geese featured again later in the month when 13 Greylags appeared on Rothschild's Lapwing on the 21st/22nd, four remaining in the area until the 25th. Waterfowl in general were very much in evidence during the rest of the month with two more additions made to the reserve list. Firstly on the 16th and again on the 20th a redhead Red-breasted Merganser was flushed from Wicken Lode, while on the 17th a Red-necked Grebe appeared on the Mere, where it remained until the 22nd. The presence this grebe, and that of a single Black-necked Grebe on the 17th/18th and two from the 19th to the 24th coincided with a major influx into the country of these species.

Grebes again provided some of the interest in March with 1/2 Dabchicks being noted on Wicken Lode and a pair of Great Crested Grebes setting up a territory on the Mere before the end of the month. The Mere was also the preferred venue for a small number of Gadwall, a bird which seems to be on the increase generally in the region. The group of 9 Canada Geese, which had by this time established themselves on Adventurer's Fen, were joined on the 14th by a lone Greylag Goose.

Especially heartening among the many owl records during the month were the regular sightings of a Barn Owl at dusk over the Warden's garden, while out on the Fen proper the Hen Harrier roost reached its peak of 10 birds on the 1st.

Despite the unfavourable weather, the first signs of spring came on the 11th with the arrival of a Common Sandpiper followed on the 20th by a Chiffchaff, but it was April before migration really got under way. Most of the expected birds arrived on time and among them was a Stonechat on the 10th, a Tree Pipit on the 28th, and a Redstart from the 27th to 30th. In mid month wader passage was very marked with a Ruff, c.20 Black-tailed Godwits, Curlews, a Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, and 2 Green Sandpipers all being reported between the 3rd and the 17th. By this time the main winter birds such as the Harriers, Bearded Tits and Great Grey Shrike had left, although a passage Shrike was seen on May 5th. On the other hand breeding behaviour had also begun on the Fen with two pairs of Canada Geese, a pair of Kestrels, and a pair of Redshank all involved, and later proved successful.

Migrants provided the interest for the next few weeks with at least 3 Marsh Harriers and a couple of Greenshanks passing through in May. Notable passerines at this time were 2 Whinchats and a Ring Ouzel on the 8th. June was generally quiet, but on the evening of the 1st an unidentifiable Crake was heard calling, and on the 27th a Golden Oriole, the first this century, was seen and heard in full song. In addition

another Marsh Harrier arrived and stayed in the area for a fortnight. The beginning of July saw the rapid departure of adult Cuckoos and the resumption of wader passage with both Greenshank and Green Sandpiper being recorded. The pace hotted up in August when apart from more of the above two species, a Whimbrel was seen on the 15th and 19th, a Spotted Redshank on the 12th and 30th, a Wood Sandpiper on the 30th and a Common Sandpiper on the 31st. However the highlight of the month was undoubtedly the Spotted Crake caught during the morning's first round on the 24th, although more observers were able to see the Hobby which regularly accompanied Swallows gathering to roost from the 17th to the 6th of September.

There was more quality in September, when a Barred Warbler was caught and ringed on the 22nd, this being another addition to the reserve's checklist. Also caught a couple of weeks earlier was a Kingfisher, but little success was experienced when attempts were made to net the roosting Swallows and Martins, which peaked at around 500 birds. Notable passage migrants were yet another Spotted Redshank on the 11th and a Redstart three days later. The month ended with some 30 Redwings already present.

Passage during October involved a wider variety of species. Not only did wildfowl and thrush numbers increase, but another Green Sandpiper was seen on the 12th and a Siskin was heard flying over on the 27th. Not all migrants reached their goal safely however, because on the 8th a Water Rail was found dead below the power cables in the car park.

Some summer visitors lingered on into November. For example a Chiffchaff was in fine voice on the 2nd and the last Swallow was seen on the 4th. The first indication of the Hen Harrier roost was on the previous evening when 2 adult males and a female were seen. By the end of the year six birds were involved. Another bird of prey which one has come to expect to see each winter is the Great Grey Shrike and so it was not surprising to see one on the 23rd. More unusual among the expected increase in duck numbers was the group of 17 Pintail present on the 17th, as what few sightings there are at Wicken tend to be of odd pairs or lone drakes. Smaller numbers occurred on three dates in December, when two other regular species, Bearded Tits and Bramblings were also noted. The main interest however centred on raptors again, because on the 1st a Sparrowhawk was seen twice and later on the 24th and 29th brief glimpses were obtained of a female Merlin, bringing the year to an optimistic end.

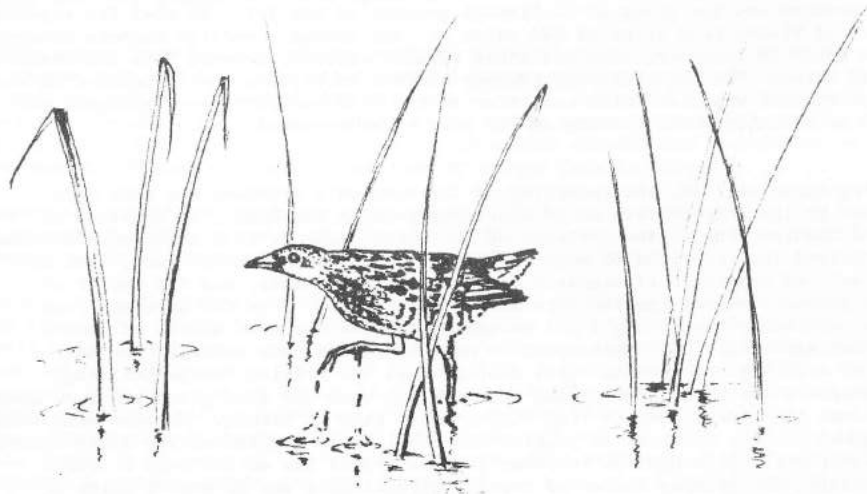
At the beginning of 1980, the recording of the reserve's avifauna was made more systematic by the introduction of an observatory-style log book. In addition to the usual highlighting of the presence of the rarer species, its standardised format has encouraged the recording of more information about the commoner ones, such as the arrival and departure of migrants, cold weather movements, and the number of breeding pairs. Several species have already been shown to be far more numerous than had previously been thought and doubtless in time the true status of others will become apparent. The implementation of this system made possible the introduction of a weekly information sheet displayed at the William Thorpe Building. This summarises the birds seen during the previous week and thus gives visitors some idea of what they are likely to find during their stay at Wicken. Coupled with this is an appeal for the feedback of peoples observations to supplement the daily records of the workforce. Although the response to this appeal has so far been a little disappointing, the growing number of regular birdwatchers who do make a point of passing on their sightings, has meant that coverage during the year was very much improved again.

An indifferent start to the year weatherwise, with a fortnight of mainly dull and damp days, was reflected in the relative lack of avian activity, though several interesting birds first seen a few weeks ago were still present. Another female Hen Harrier joined the roost on January 3rd, so that on suitable evenings, it was possible to see seven birds in the air together from the window of the warden's office.

An influx of birdwatchers eager to see this spectacle were almost certainly responsible for making the birds roost further out on the Fen. On the 6th an elusive Bittern was spotted and the Great Grey Shrike reappeared, but it was not until the weather turned much colder on the 12th that things began to happen. On that day both Bewick's and Whooper Swans were seen flying over the reserve. The two Bewick's showed some interest in the flooded land on Trevelyan's Piece as they circled round several times before heading off, but later three Whoopers were seen taking off from this area. Another group of 17 Whoopers had earlier flown straight over at a great height.

The change in the weather brought in another Bittern on the 13th, when two birds were seen and heard as they flew round over the Mere before disappearing into the reeds again. 3 Woodcock flushed by the Warden's dog on the 19th, suggested that there had been a small influx of this species. On the following day, wildfowl again provided the interest, when the sighting of a Dark-bellied Brent Goose added a new species to the reserve's checklist. This bird which commuted between Brett's Piece, the Mere, and the Cam Washes, remained in the area into February. Also on the 20th a 'redheaded' Smew appeared, this being joined on the following day by a second, larger bird which was clearly a young male. Both birds remained on the Mere until the 26th, when another addition to the checklist was made. During that afternoon 2 males and a female Egyptian Goose flew in from the south and landed in a wheatfield just off the reserve.

Other winter visitors noted before the month's end, included a female Goldeneye on Wicken Lode, a lone Waxwing seen along Spinney Bank on the 27th and at least one Brambling among the Chaffinches collecting to roost. But even at this early stage, there were signs that spring wasn't far away, because by this time Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming regularly and a Redshank had returned to the flood meadows beyond the Mere.



Early in February the expected increase in Shoveler numbers was gaining momentum and a Great Crested Grebe took up residence again on the Mere. The monotonous song of a Snipe heard on the 10th was further evidence that things were beginning to respond to the increasing daylength. Also on the 10th, it became apparent that the Bittern was a creature of habit which could be seen flying to a favoured spot daily at dusk. During the rest of the month, more species began to show territorial behaviour either by singing, drumming or roding, but apart from a group of 23 Bewick's Swans over on the 23rd, there were no notable species.

More passage was observed at the beginning of March, with a Shelduck present on the 1st and a Ringed Plover and a group of 26 Golden Plover on the 2nd, when display was also first noted from the pair of Redshank which had taken up residence. On the 9th there were 20 Gadwall on the Mere, an unusually high number even despite their becoming more regular of late, while the next day saw Shoveler numbers peak at 63. A surprise visitor on the 14th, was a male Black Redstart seen from the Warden's office window as it hopped around on the path across the ditch.

The now annual owl census on the evening of the 15th suggested there were 10 Tawny Owl sites and three of Long-eared Owls. The monthly wildfowl count was carried out the following day, but numbers were well down because of the disturbance of the previous day, when there was a work party on the Mere.

Migrants featured again on the 23rd, when a Jack Snipe and a male Ring Ouzel were spotted in close proximity near the N.E. corner of the Mere. The first Chiffchaff was heard on the relatively late date of the 28th, but within a couple of days several birds had set up territories. Another first for Wicken was located on the 30th when a male White-spotted Bluethroat tested the patience of those attempting to gain a fleeting glimpse of this colourful vagrant.

A bright, mild start to April was conducive to the arrival of more migrants, with an early Swallow appearing on the 2nd, when a lone Black-tailed Godwit was also seen. On the same day, it was realised that the resident Great Grey Shrike had been joined by a second bird. By mid-month when the weather had become exceptionally mild, Whimbrel, Ruff, Little Ringed Plover, Common Tern, Sand and House Martins, Yellow Wagtail, Blackcap, Sedge and Willow Warblers had all put in an appearance. Most attention, however, was centred on a Savi's Warbler which set up a territory on the edge of the Mere from the 13th. Although rarely seen, the bird sang freely and within a couple of days, it was possible to stand on the Lode bank and compare the calls with that of a Grasshopper Warbler nearby.

Yet another newcomer was found on the 20th when the explosive song of a Cetti's Warbler was picked out from a remote part of the Fen. Because of the location it was possible to keep its presence a secret for several weeks, but eventually the bird was mist-netted and shown to have been reared at Rye Meads, Herts. the previous year.

Most notable among the further arrivals before the end of the month was a White Wagtail on the 22nd, a female Marsh Harrier on the 23rd/24th, an early Reed Warbler also on the 23rd and a Bar-tailed Godwit on the 29th.

The mainly dry, bright weather continued well into May bringing a steady flow of summer visitors with it. Waders in the form of Little Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, and Whimbrel were much in evidence, while among the passerines two Nightingales had established territories at opposite ends of the reserve. On the 6th/7th two Marsh Harriers were around, but they were not seen again. Two other birds which had been in the area for a couple of weeks were a pair of Greylag Geese, whose origins seemed rather dubious; they were last seen on the 11th, the day on which the first pair of Canada Geese produced 7 goslings. Also on the 11th two medium sized young Great Crested Grebes were seen riding on their parents backs. The following day brought the fourth increase to the reserve checklist, when several visitors had excellent views of a male Nightjar as it hawked for insects over the bushes adjacent to the reedfield and Lode bank at dusk.

Apart from the presence of 3 Shelduck on the 18th, and more waders, most interest for the rest of the month centred on breeding birds. The first brood of Redshank emerged on the 23rd, while the next day saw a pair of Mute Swans along Monk's Lode accompanied by 7 cygnets. Even more optimistic was the concern shown by a pair of Bearded Tits to the Warden's presence on the Mere.

A changeable June was rather quiet ornithologically speaking, although another Marsh Harrier appeared on the 8th, but this gave ample opportunity to check on the numbers of the less common breeding birds such as Jackdaws and Garden Warblers.

The changeable weather continued into July and interest again centred on how breeding was going. The Savi's Warbler, first noted in April, had maintained its territory throughout the period and this fact combined with the pattern of its singing behaviour being similar to that of the Grasshopper Warblers, suggested that breeding was a distinct possibility. Renewed activity started on the 5th when a second male set up home nearby. This bird obliged observers for much of the month by often singing from a well exposed perch. Confirmation that a pair of Bearded Tits had bred came on the 6th when 2 adults were seen with 4 youngsters and later in the month there were indications that there may have been a second group about.

A Curlew on the 9th indicated that wader passage was already under way again. Two days later a pair of Oystercatchers were on the 'flashes' at the end of Trevelyan's Piece. They were presumably the pair which had attempted to breed alongside the river Cam at Padney. By this time, all the Redshank had left, now that their offspring had fledged and Common and Green Sandpiper had taken their place.

Wader passage gained momentum in August with the 2nd producing a single Ruff, Green Sandpiper and 4 Wood Sandpipers. All three species were present on a number of dates during the month and occasional sightings of Whimbrel, Curlew, Greenshank, and Common Sandpiper were also recorded. Lapwings on the other hand were present daily and increased to over 500 by mid month. Earlier Starlings and Hirundines were beginning to roost in some numbers in the reeds in and around the Mere and these attracted the attention of a Hobby for the second year in succession. This was seen on a number of occasions at dusk, especially later in the month.

With many young passerines now around ringing activity was getting a bit more hectic. On the 9th one of the rounds produced a juvenile Cetti's Warbler and within a couple of weeks six more had been added to the totals, this indicating that two broods had been reared on the Fen in the species first year of colonisation. Another passerine which seems to be becoming more frequent at Wicken is the Redstart, three individuals apparently being involved in a number of sightings at the month's end. A surprisingly early Bittern, seen on the evening of the 31st, brought the month to a close.

Views of the Hobby became more frequent during September with a bird which remained until the 21st being joined by a second one on the 3rd. The following morning two visitors found an emaciated and exhausted Wryneck close to the main entrance to the Fen. Despite being taken into care by the Warden this fifth addition to the checklist had died by evening. Another oddity appeared on the 20th when a netting session at the now large Hirundine roost produced a Swallow/House Martin hybrid.

With a recent spate of sightings of a Green Woodpecker all three species were being regularly recorded by mid month. The last appearance of a Marsh Harrier for the year, occurred on the 11th, when a male was seen several times hunting over Adventurer's Fen, but wader passage continued throughout the month. Single Spotted Redshank were noted on the 13th and 25th, while the interest shown by a Green Sandpiper in the recently-dug area in front of the new hide on the Mere on the 10th gave cause for optimism that this area could become very attractive in time.

Among the larger species, a Bittern was seen between the 21st and 25th, while a Cormorant flew over on the 29th. Small birds were well represented by the chats with two more Redstarts, a Wheatear and two Whinchats passing through on their way south. Signs that the Fen was already being viewed as a potential wintering site were evident from the 18th when the first Fieldfares arrived, followed on the 30th by a Siskin.

During October there were further signs that winter wasn't far away as more migrants arrived. Although the first Redwings appeared on the 4th, it was mid month before the big thrush influx took place. On the 19th a Jack Snipe was flushed from the ditch alongside Brett's Piece, while across the Fen on Spinney Bank, a Brambling was found among a mixed finch flock. Another welcome arrival took place on the 25th, when the now customary Great Grey Shrike set up residence on Adventurer's Fen. Other migrants noted were a Stonechat on the 16th and a Blackcap, which flew into a window and killed itself on the 22nd.

A bright start to November helped a late Swallow, seen on the 3rd, on its way, but raptors soon took the limelight. A Sparrowhawk first seen on the 2nd stayed in the area throughout the month and Hen Harrier records showed that three different birds were involved in the roost which re-established itself later. Wildfowl numbers were slow to build up, but the lack of quantity was made up by quality in the form of six Bewick's Swans, which circled round several times on the 6th and a Goosander seen on the Mere on the 7th and 30th.

A group of Bearded Tits first seen at the end of October increased, so that on the 7th a single flock of 30 could be seen on the edge of the reedfield, two being caught and ringed. Starlings were another species which increased during the month. Among the hundreds of thousands coming in to a spectacular roost on the Mere, was at least one pure white bird. Also mainly on the Mere were the Water Rails, which regularly were heard screaming throughout the day. Other species of note in November, were another Bittern on the 16th and several records of Bramblings.

With most things established in their winter quarters by December this month was not surprisingly rather quiet, although the Harriers, Shrike and Bearded Tits remained. Duck numbers in general rose but the most notable increase was in the Tufted Duck flock, which reached 90 on the 12th. This was probably due to the temporary lowering of the water level at their preferred site on Burwell brick pits. Bitterns again featured among the records, when two were seen together on the 7th, while from the 13th Short-eared Owls were noted in the area. After a very eventful few months the year drew to a quiet close with an immature male Goosander on the 29th providing new interest.



RINGING TOTALS 1979 and 1980

1901 birds of 50 species were ringed in 1979, 2498 of 47 species in 1980. 77 birds of the 1979 total were nestlings (44 in the Group's nestboxes), in 1980 the nestling total was 76 (52 in the nestboxes). Species new to the ringing lists were Spotted Crake, Barred Warbler and Cetti's Warbler.

In the table, the usual division is made between Adventurers Fen (areas F,G, J, and K on the map on the back cover), where the Group's hut is located and where more of the ringing operations are carried out, and the areas north of Wicken/Monks Lodes (areas A,B,E,H and W)

	1979			1980			Grand Total 1968-80
	Sites A,B&W	Sites F,G,J&K	Total	Sites A,B,E,H&W	Sites F&G	Total	
Mallard	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Kestrel	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Red-legged Partridge	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
Water Rail	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Spotted Crake	-	1	1	-	-	-	1
Moorhen	1	-	1	-	-	-	8
Ringed Plover	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Lapwing	-	1	1	-	-	-	12
Jack Snipe	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Snipe	-	2	2	-	-	-	81
Woodcock	-	1	1	1	-	1	7
Redshank	-	-	-	-	-	-	13
Woodpigeon	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
Collared Dove	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
Turtle Dove	1	1	2	2	1	3	34
Cuckoo	-	1	1	-	-	-	32
Little Owl	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Tawny Owl	1	-	1	1	-	1	15
Long-eared Owl	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
Swift	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
Kingfisher	-	1	1	2	2	4	112
G.S. Woodpecker	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
L.S. Woodpecker	1	-	1	1	1	2	9
Skylark	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Sand Martin	-	17	17	-	13	13	84
Swallow	3	32	35	12	386	398	3314
Swallow/Martin	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
House Martin	1	-	1	-	-	-	13
Tree Pipit	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Meadow Pipit	-	-	-	-	-	-	17
Yellow Wagtail	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
Pied/White Wagtail	-	-	-	3	-	3	11
Wren	20	50	70	48	55	103	1290
Dunnock	31	25	56	59	49	108	1797
Robin	26	45	71	55	34	89	1012
Nightingale	-	-	-	2	-	2	12
Redstart	1	-	1	-	-	-	10

	1979			1980			Grand Total 1968-80
	Sites A,B&W	Sites F,G,J&K	Total	Sites A,B,E,H&W	Sites F&G	Total	
Whinchat	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Blackbird	31	53	84	67	87	154	1422
Fieldfare	-	7	7	-	2	2	69
Song Thrush	19	62	81	44	88	132	1790
Redwing	-	29	29	-	13	13	236
Mistle Thrush	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Cetti's Warbler	-	-	-	-	7	7	7
Grasshopper Warbler	-	-	-	-	5	5	114
Sedge Warbler	18	94	112	57	98	155	2611
Reed Warbler	57	363	420	50	288	338	4851
Great Reed Warbler	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Barred Warbler	-	1	1	-	-	-	1
Lesser Whitethroat	4	8	12	2	4	6	286
Whitethroat	1	1	2	3	3	6	162
Garden Warbler	1	4	5	3	7	10	138
Blackcap	25	26	51	34	45	79	935
Chiffchaff	1	22	23	3	12	15	335
Willow Warbler	20	33	53	20	24	44	1159
Goldcrest	-	-	-	-	11	11	48
Spotted Flycatcher	4	5	9	14	7	21	189
Pied Flycatcher	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Bearded Tit	-	5	5	-	2	2	40
Long-tailed Tit	10	29	39	19	47	66	580
Willow Tit	2	6	8	9	10	19	230
Coal Tit	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Blue Tit	36	109	145	41	97	138	1651
Great Tit	36	40	76	23	36	59	521
Treecreeper	4	2	6	8	6	14	95
Red-backed Shrike	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Jay	-	1	1	-	1	1	22
Starling	2	2	4	2	2	4	23
House Sparrow	2	2	4	3	-	3	24
Tree Sparrow	2	11	13	11	26	37	1127
Chaffinch	9	14	23	13	11	24	349
Brambling	-	-	-	-	-	-	31
Greenfinch	8	153	161	3	38	41	850
Goldfinch	4	11	15	5	17	22	472
Linnet	1	4	5	-	1	1	317
Redpoll	5	20	25	4	104	108	1435
Bullfinch	12	60	72	34	60	94	1878
Yellowhammer	1	5	6	7	2	9	101
Reed Bunting	4	129	133	8	119	127	2859
Corn Bunting	-	8	8	1	2	3	34
	405	1496	1901	674	1824	2498	34869

RECOVERIES

The following list covers all recoveries and controls of birds more than 10 km from the place of ringing, notified to the Group by the BTO since the last report.

Only 17 birds are involved, a reflection of the lower numbers of birds ringed in the late nineteen seventies. Distant recoveries are few, but ED 55376 is the Group's first Woodcock recovered and KJ 69575 is the first foreign-recovered Lesser Whitethroat. The other recoveries are typical; A 008430 is interesting evidence of the route by which Cetti's Warbler is rapidly colonising Southern England.

Four of the recoveries, KS 34553, KJ 70272, KS 34236, and KC 01485 are a direct result of ringing operations by Group members at sites in the vicinity of the Fen.

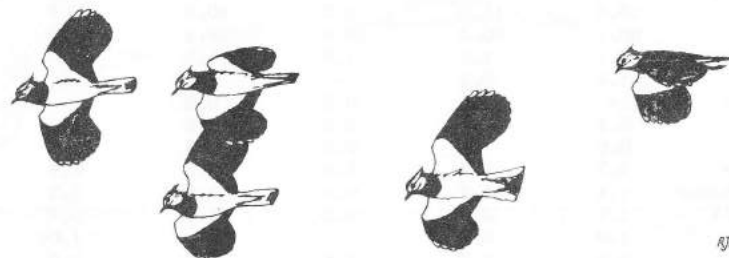
Key to symbols and terms in the list:

- 2 - bird ringed as full-grown, age unknown.
- 3 - bird hatched during the calendar year of ringing.
- 4 - bird hatched before calendar year of ringing, but exact year unknown.

- m - male
- x - found dead
- + - shot or killed by man
- v - controlled (caught alive and released)

Woodcock	↖ ED 55376	3	29.8.75	WF		
		+	30.12.78	Whitland, Carmarthen	340 km W	
Swallow	↖ A 430851	3	14.9.79	Halstow, Kent		
		v	12.9.80	WF	98 km NNW	
	↖ KC 01314	3m	18.9.76	WF		
		v	29.6.80	Clowne, Derbyshire	150 km NW	
Song Thrush	↖ NX 32206	2	20.10.79	WF		
		x	10.4.80	Ghent, BELGIUM	275 km ESE	
	↖ XA 04349	4	16.4.77	WF		
		+	15.1.79	Ile d'Yeu, FRANCE	640 km SSW	
Duncock	↖ KS 34553	3	24.6.79	WF		
		v	28.12.79	Ely	11 km N	
Cetti's Warbler	↖ A 008430	3m	12.8.79	Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire		
		v	23.5.80	et. seq. WF	61 km NNE	
Sedge Warbler	KJ 70272	4	10.6.78	WF		
		v	10.6.79	Fulbourn Fen	12 km S	
	↖ KJ 70284	3	15.7.78	WF		
		v	3.8.79	Wraysbury, Berkshire	110 km SSW	

Reed Warbler	↖ KS 34236	4	13.8.78	WF		
		v	17.6.79	Fulbourn Fen	12 km S	
↖ Lesser Whitethroat	KJ 69575	4	1.7.77	WF		
		x	30.4.79	Ghlin, BELGIUM	315 km SE	
↖ Bearded Tit	HC 13939	4m	6.9.78	Stodmarsh, Kent		
		v	14.1.79	WF	122 km NNW	
↖ Redpoll	JV 44985	4m	28.9.74	WF		
		v	10.10.75	Oost-Vlaanderen, BELGIUM	275 km SE	
↖ Bullfinch	KC 01485	4m	9.10.76	WF		
		v	13.7.80	Ely	11 km N	
↖ Reed Bunting	JV 47730	3m	25.10.75	WF		
		v	18.2.79	Perivale, Middlesex	95 km SSW	
	↖ KC 01687	4m	23.10.76	WF		
		v	28.2.79	Tilbury, Essex	90 km S	
	↖ KS 35765	2m	13.10.79	WF		
		x	26.12.79	Needham Market, Suffolk	56 km ESE	



C.J.R. Thorne

The sites and techniques used in the Group's standardised mist netting programme were described by Milwright (3). In summary, six areas (4 on the Sedge Fen, areas A and B on the map on the back cover, and 2 on Adventurer's Fen, area F on the map) are worked on four designated weekends (in May, June, July and August) each year, the number and position of mist nets being substantially constant. The total number of different individual adult birds caught (at any of the sites on any of the four dates) is determined and expressed as a percentage of the total adult catch. Table 1 shows the results for the years 1970 (the first year of the programme) and 1977-1980. The previous publication (4) gave totals for all the years from 1970 to 1978.

The mode of expression used in Table 1 is relative, rather than absolute (allowing for different effort, weather and other year-to-year variations), so that direct comparison with census values is difficult. However, the total adult catch for the years 1977-1980 was 346, 324, 315 and 306 respectively, a variation of only 13% - so changes in the percentage composition also, in the main, represent parallel changes in the absolute numbers of the species concerned.

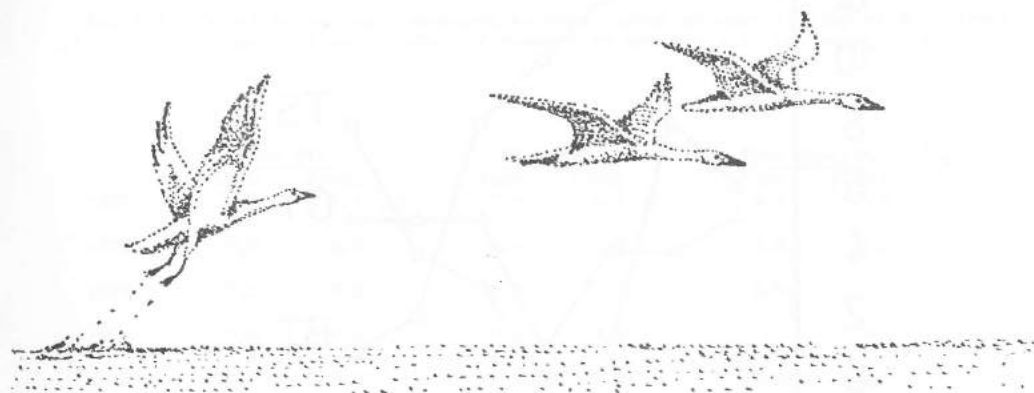
Table 1. Species composition of the catch of adult passerines at Wicken Fen

	1970	1977	1978	1979	1980
Wren	1.9	5.5	4.9	2.2	1.6
Duncock	7.8	9.5	6.2	6.7	6.5
Robin	2.7	2.3	2.8	2.5	1.3
Nightingale	0.2	0.3	-	-	-
Blackbird	5.3	6.1	4.9	4.8	6.9
Song Thrush	4.2	5.5	5.2	4.1	5.6
Cetti's Warbler	-	-	-	-	0.3
Grasshopper Warbler	1.0	-	-	-	-
Sedge Warbler	15.9	11.0	8.3	10.8	15.7
Reed Warbler	20.1	20.2	28.4	38.1	29.7
Lesser Whitethroat	2.1	1.4	1.5	1.3	1.0
Whitethroat	1.8	0.3	-	-	-
Garden Warbler	-	1.2	0.6	0.6	-
Blackcap	3.1	4.6	2.2	3.8	3.6
Chiffchaff	0.6	1.4	0.3	0.3	0.7
Willow Warbler	2.7	1.7	2.8	3.5	3.9
Spotted Flycatcher	1.1	1.7	0.6	1.3	1.3
Long-tailed Tit	1.3	2.9	1.2	3.2	0.7
Willow Tit	1.0	0.6	-	-	1.0
Blue Tit	2.4	3.2	4.6	1.6	2.0
Great Tit	1.1	2.3	1.2	0.6	1.3
Treecreeper	0.2	-	0.3	-	0.7
Tree Sparrow	2.3	1.4	3.4	0.3	1.6
Chaffinch	1.3	0.6	2.2	1.3	0.3
Greenfinch	2.9	0.6	0.9	2.2	1.6
Goldfinch	1.9	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.7
Linnet	-	0.3	0.3	-	-
Redpoll	3.6	4.9	1.5	2.2	2.6
Bullfinch	6.8	7.7	12.7	6.7	6.9
Yellowhammer	0.3	-	0.9	-	0.3
Reed Bunting	4.2	2.3	1.5	1.3	2.3

The significance of any year-to-year changes is hard to assess, but several of the data support subjective impressions gained from regular visits to the Fen. Thus a fall in Redpoll breeding numbers occurred between 1977 and 1978 (17 birds in 1977; 5, 7 and 8 in the years since); the Wren numbers fell between 1978 and 1979 (19 and 16 in 1977 and 1978, 7 and 5 in 1979 and 1980). For the latter species, a nationwide population drop was attributed to the hard winter of 1978-9 (1). Marchant and Hyde, using BTO common bird census data for 1978-79 (2) showed that small birds suffered most, with Wrens decreasing by 47%, Goldcrests 43% and Long tailed Tits 42% on the woodland plots. The Wicken Wren decrease was 56%, similar to the national figure, but the Long tailed Tit, rather variable in numbers in the standardised netting sites, showed no comparable decrease.

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A.K. Naylor

Prominent among hole-nesting birds at Wicken are the Great Tit and Blue Tit. In the natural state, these birds nest in holes in older trees, principally willows. Nests in these holes, however, are totally inaccessible, and it was with the intention of studying the nests and ringing the pulli that in 1973 fifty boxes were positioned on the Fen, at the western side of area E (see map on back cover), along the edge of the carr.

At the outset I must acknowledge the inspiration of the R.S.P.B. who provided the nestboxes with a request to find how a new type of box (plastic) compared with the classical design (wooden). The unsuitability of the plastic boxes was discovered very early on when they rapidly became very wet inside, resulting in the death of several broods of young. For this reason they were removed, and only the thirty wooden boxes have remained.

It is these thirty boxes, whose nesting records for the last seven years I have examined, to see what variation there has been in the number of birds using boxes, the number of eggs laid, and the number of young raised (from hatched clutches). Great Tit, Blue Tit and Tree Sparrow are the three species involved; data are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

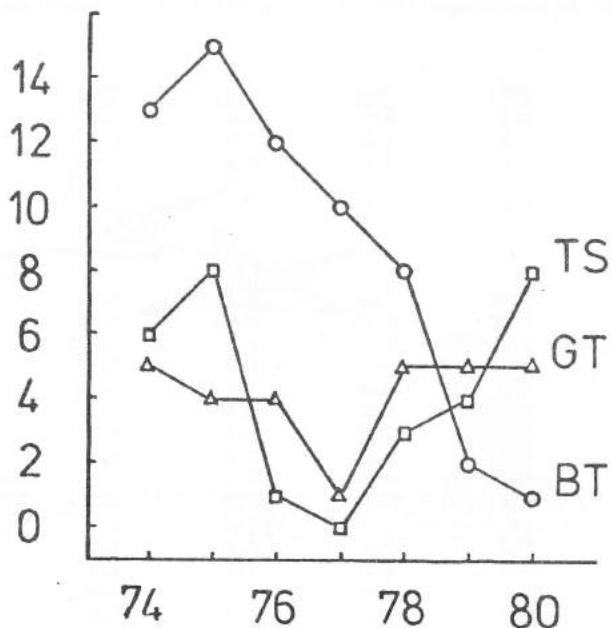


Figure 1. Number of boxes occupied each year by Tree Sparrows, Great Tits and Blue Tits.

Initially, Blue Tits were the predominant occupants of the boxes, but the number has fallen steadily until in 1980 only one box was used by Blue Tits. Great Tits have shown a steady level of four or five boxes occupied most years. Both these species have shown consistently low rates of desertion.

Tree Sparrows were prominent in total number of nests for the first two years, but at this time the nests were scattered, there was low hatching rate, poor survival of the few young hatched, and at all stages a high rate of desertion whether or not the adult was in the box when the nest was examined. More recently, the number of boxes used has increased again and the majority of these nests have been close together in a tight colony. The hatching and fledging rates have been high, the adults have been present and calling near the boxes, and there have been no desertions even when the adult was handled. This change in behaviour and success requires further observation.

During their history the nestboxes have been moved on three occasions. Each time about half of the boxes were moved, and the boxes have always remained within a total area of about 40 h.a. in the SW of Wicken Fen. The original placings, in the north west and middle of area E were in 1973; subsequent movements were - winter 1974-5 north-west E to south-east E; winter 1975-6 south-east E to G; winter 1977-8 mid E to F/K. These moves appear to have had little effect on the occupancy of the boxes nor on the breeding success. Furthermore, the number of birds using

Table 1 Breeding success, measured as mean number of eggs in completed clutches (eggs) and mean number of young from hatched clutches reaching fledging age (young)

	Great Tit		Blue Tit		Tree Sparrow	
	Eggs	Young	Eggs	Young	Eggs	Young
1974	7.0	4.1	7.1	6.3	4.1	3.0
1975	7.5	5.0	6.8	5.7	4.8	2.0
1976	7.0	7.0	8.5	7.2	5.0	0
1977	7.0	7.0	6.6	5.0	-	-
1978	9.6	7.0	7.9	7.1	5.2	4.7
1979	8.7	8.7	10.5	10.5	6.0	6.0
1980	9.3	6.7	13.0	9.0	5.1	4.2



the boxes shows no correlation with the 'population index' of birds on the Fen, derived from the number of each species caught in the standardised mist netting (Thorne, W.F.G. report 10, 1978, 10-11, and this report). The winter weather and particularly the food supply during the breeding season are likely to have a far more marked effect on the Fen population level than the provision of a relatively small number of extra nesting sites. The abundance of old and pollarded willows on the Fen suggests that availability of nesting sites cannot be a limiting factor.

Both Blue Tits and Great Tits show slight increases over the years in the mean number of eggs laid and young raised. Always there are a few nests with a small number of eggs unhatched or a dead pullus left behind (not always the runt of the brood as might be expected). These nests show no relationship with the age of the female; in fact first-year females are as likely as older birds to lay large clutches or raise large broods. The age of the breeding male is rarely known, since incubating birds examined are almost always female. Again food supply and weather conditions must be the principal determining factors in the outcome of a nest.

As regards the future, it seems that the present carefully-hidden arrangement of boxes is safe for the birds and affords opportunity to both study the nests and assist in training ringers in the handling of pulli. In addition, by long-term records of incubating adults, it is hoped to investigate such factors as the attachment of a bird to a particular area and the tendency (if any) of box-reared young to return to boxes to breed. We shall also watch with interest the development of the Tree Sparrow colony. I hope to assess these factors in a subsequent report.



## OWLS AT WICKEN FEN

H.J. Harvey

All of the five common species of British owl have been recorded at Wicken in the last ten years, two of the species breed regularly and one intermittently. This paper summarises the present status of these five species and the results of the ringing activities since the inception of the Group. In contrast to a previous paper (1) no attempt is made to analyse in detail all of the Group's records. The current status of the species is compared to that in the past, in so far as it is known. This comparison relies on published material and no attempt has been made to extract data from other sources. The limitations of published information, when as small an area as the Fen is involved, will become clear.

Any changes in the status of bird species at Wicken need to be assessed in relation to the changes in the vegetation of the reserve which are known to have occurred (2). The major change over the past one hundred years has been the replacement of open sedge and litter communities on the Sedge Fen by scrub (carr) and woodland. Sedge was still cut on much of the Sedge Fen until about 1875 and at this time open herbaceous communities occupied most of its three hundred acres (3), by 1885 however the cutting of sedge was declining and some areas had been colonised by bushes (4). Invading bushes were widely distributed by the early years of this century but large areas of open vegetation still persisted (5). The subsequent development of scrub was rapid and by about 1935 less than fifty acres could be classified as sedge or litter (6). Between 1940 and 1944 large areas of scrub were cut but regrowth was rapid and by 1960 as little as twenty-five acres were still open (6). Since 1960 much scrub has been cleared and open communities now occupy about seventy-five acres of the Sedge Fen. The Adventurers' Fen section of the reserve has probably always been more open than the Sedge Fen. The majority of owl records are from the Sedge Fen or those parts of Adventurers' Fen closest to it.

### Barn Owl

In recent years the Barn Owl has been seen regularly in all seasons but has been especially prominent during the summer. Most observations have been at dusk and seem to be of hunting individuals, these are presumably birds breeding near the Fen for there is no evidence of recent breeding on the reserve. The species was much less frequently seen in the early seventies but it appears to have been common in the early sixties when breeding on the Fen was suspected and winter sighting predominated (7). There is no information on its status before about 1960.

### Little Owl

This species is occasionally seen but is not a permanent or regular component of the avifauna of the Fen. It breeds in some years, as in 1975 and also possibly in 1973 and 1979, but in other years seems to be a winter or casual visitor. There is no reason to suspect any change in status since the species first reached Cambridgeshire about 1898 (8). An adult bird was ringed in May 1973, it has not been recovered.

### Tawny Owl

This species breeds annually and is presumably resident. Censuses of calling birds, conducted at dusk in the late winter, indicate that it is currently the most abundant breeding owl. The success and accuracy of the censuses has varied and their interpretation presents difficulties but the results are adequate to

suggest that there were at least five pairs on the reserve in each year between 1977 and 1980. In each year there appeared to be two pairs on St. Edmund's Fen, while on the Sedge Fen estimates ranged from a minimum of three pairs, in 1979 when census conditions were poor, to a possible seven pairs in 1980. In 1978 a pair bred on Adventurers' Fen. This abundance contrasts with the situation as little as fifteen years ago when the species was reported to be only an occasional breeder (7). There seem to be no definite published records before 1967, perhaps because the species was uncommon at Wicken as it was at nearby Burwell in 1939 (9).

Tawny Owls must certainly have benefitted from the development of scrub and woodland as both provide nest sites, either in the abandoned nests of other species (7,10) or in holes in trees. The distribution of calling birds suggests that at Wicken abandoned nests are the more important as nesting sites.

Between 1969 and 1980 sixteen birds have been ringed, more than for any other species of owl. No birds were ringed in 1971, 1972 or 1977 but four were ringed in 1969. All birds have been ringed between May and early September, half of them being pulli or juveniles, and three of the four retraps have been in this period. An adult ringed in June 1980 was retrapped in August 1980 and one ringed in May 1974 was retrapped in September 1976, in both cases the recapture was close to the site at which the bird was first caught. A juvenile ringed in June 1975 was retrapped near the same site in August of that year and in December 1980 was retrapped again just over one kilometre away.

#### Long-eared Owl

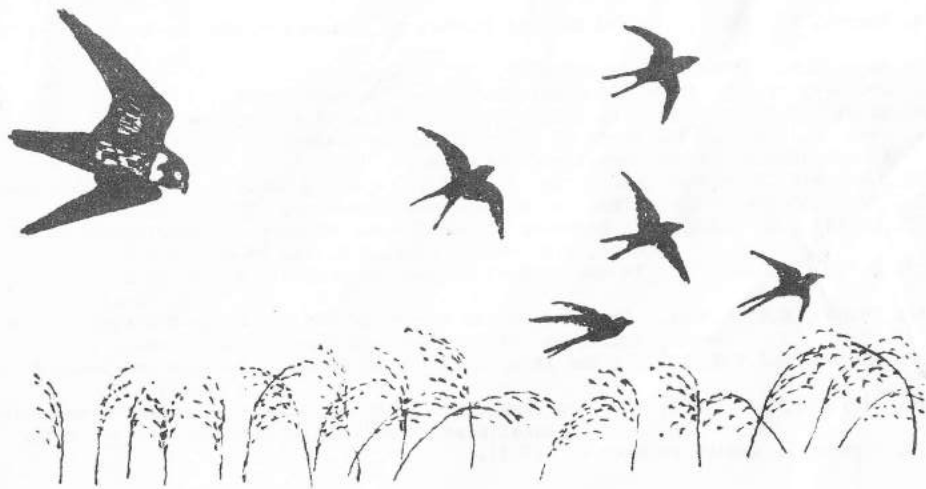
This species also seems to be a resident breeder and is the second most common owl on the reserve. Late winter surveys of calling birds suggest that from one to three pairs have bred on the Sedge Fen in each year since 1977. This status seems to have changed little for the past thirty years for one or two pairs appear to have bred regularly since 1948 (9, 6), although in 1963 and 1964 the species was only recorded during the winter. In 1959 three nests plus an additional male were located (9). The species also bred on the Fen, a single pair, in 1936 and 1937 (9) but there are no published breeding records between 1937 and 1948 (9). There appear to be no records prior to 1936. The Long-eared Owl, like the Tawny Owl, would presumably benefit from the development of scrub and woodland.

The seven birds ringed were caught between April and October, one in both 1971 and 1972, three in 1975 and two in 1976, none were aged as juveniles. Long-eared Owls at Wicken have a higher retrap/recovery rate than Tawny Owls; with five subsequent records from seven birds, in contrast to four from sixteen in the case of Tawny Owls. A bird ringed in October 1975 was retrapped in April of the next year. A bird ringed in June 1972 was retrapped in July 1974 and was found dead eleven kilometres south of the Fen in April 1977. Another recovery away from the Fen involved a bird ringed in May 1976 which was found dead six kilometres north-west of the Fen in April 1980. These recoveries away from the Fen are somewhat difficult to explain as both were in the breeding season but involved adults which had been present on the Fen in one or two previous breeding seasons. The distances involved in the two movements seem to be too great to be feeding excursions.

#### Short-eared Owl

This species is an uncommon winter or spring visitor with fewer than twenty-five records, generally of birds hunting over open areas or disturbed from roost sites, between 1969 and 1980. The Fen is a much less regular winter haunt of the Short-eared Owl than is Wilbraham Fen, twelve kilometres south-south-west of Wicken, and the number of birds recorded at any one time has generally been lower, although up to fifteen birds were present in the winter of 1960-1961.

The present status of this species contrasts markedly with its status before about 1950. In the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth the Fen was an important breeding site for what was then a rare British breeding species (11, 12). Numbers may have increased by about 1920 when three or four pairs bred (13) and were maintained until the late thirties (9, 14). Reports for 1931 and 1932 refer to from four to six breeding pairs but some of these pairs almost certainly bred on parts of Burwell Fen (9). Between 1940 and 1953, the year of the last reported breeding, there are only seven definite breeding records, of which five refer to only single pairs (9). Birds were reported in the summers of 1963 and 1964 but breeding was not confirmed (9). Since Short-eared Owls still sometimes breed in Cambridgeshire (9) the decline at Wicken can probably be partially ascribed to habitat change, especially the loss of open communities and the invasion of scrub. It seems possible, given the abundance of the species in young forestry plantations (15,16) that the increase in numbers around 1920 was associated with bush colonisation at this period. There seem to be no definite records for the Fen prior to 1899 (11) but earlier records (8, 17) could possibly have referred to Wicken.



## Discussion

Two features of the owl population of the Wicken Fen reserve are of special interest.

Prior to about 1940 the reserve was important as a breeding site for Short-eared Owls, this being one of the chief features of the reserve stressed in reviews of the avifauna of the Fen or of Cambridgeshire (12, 13, 14). From about 1940 this species began to decline, the decrease being about exactly balanced by an increase in the number of Long-eared Owls. Since about 1950 the Fen has been the only consistently reported breeding site for Long-eared Owls in Cambridgeshire and in many years was the only reported site (9). This change in the dominant *Asio* species on the Fen can largely be ascribed to habitat changes. The possible requirement of the Short-eared Owl for freedom from excessive human disturbance (15) could be a contributory factor and might well prevent recolonisation.

It has been suggested (15) that Long-eared Owls are absent from many suitable sites because of competition from Tawny Owls, the Fen is therefore of interest because the two species currently co-exist. The limited data available perhaps suggest that the Tawny Owl has increased at Wicken in recent years and it will be interesting to see whether or not the Long-eared Owl maintains itself on the Fen. The apparent ability of the Long-eared Owl to breed in marshes (10) may mean that Wicken is a site at which the species is better equipped to survive. The co-existence of Tawny and Long-eared Owls on the Fen raises many interesting ecological questions. Unfortunately the nature of the vegetation, especially the impenetrable nature of the scrub, makes the site a difficult one in which to search for answers.

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