

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2007 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 40 years, having been established in 1968. Since that year over 81000 birds of 99 different species have been ringed at Wicken Fen; 420 of these have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (63 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2007, numbered 44 members and 18 registered "friends"; this total of 62 is the highest ever. The record membership is reflected in another increase in activity at the Fen during the year. Ringing operations were conducted on 237 days, involving 4923 member- (man- & woman-) hours. Ringing sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 125, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 83 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53), while 47 were at North Field/Gallops/Milner-Whites (Compartments 15, 19, 20-23). There were additional ringing sorties to some of the more recently acquired, and more remote, parts of the reserve – 14 visits to Bakers Fen (Compartments 101-104), 9 to Burwell Fen (Compartments 200-214), 5 to Tubney Fen (Compartments 300-310) and even 2 (to ring Barn Owls) to Guinea Hall (Compartments 108-112).

The 2007 ringing total was 4701 birds, of 67 different species. These totals were an increase on the previous year, and in fact represented the second highest total ever. In addition to the 4701 "new" birds in 2007, there were 4418 handlings of "retraps" (birds already bearing rings), 857 of them originally ringed in years earlier than 2007. Several species topped the 100 mark, the highest scores being Greenfinch 388, Blue Tit 376, Blackcap* 322, Reed Warbler 320, Great Tit* 288, Blackbird* 284, Swallow 262, Reed Bunting 231, Wren* 227, Redwing* 206, Robin* 181, Long-tailed Tit* 171, Chaffinch 167, Chiffchaff* 154 and Goldfinch* 123; the next most numerous being Bullfinch 95, Song Thrush 90, Dunnock 86 and Pied Wagtail* 85. The birds marked with an asterisk were the ones whose ringing total was an all-time record for any year. Nut and seed bait was available at our ringing sites in the winter, and this helped to boost the numbers of finches and tits caught; but the Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Blue Tit totals were not as high as in the previous year.

Not surprisingly in a year with such a large total, several unusual or noteworthy species were ringed: 42 Meadow Pipits, 25 Cetti's Warblers, 16 Kingfishers, 13 Great spotted Woodpeckers, 12 Grasshopper Warblers, 10 Sparrowhawks, 10 Lapwing, 9 Snipe, 8 Barn Owls, 6 Collared Doves, 6 Bearded Tits, 5 Green Woodpeckers, 5 Redshank, 5 Stonechats, 5 Yellowhammers, 4 Moorhen, 3 Water Rails, 3 Ringed Plovers, 3 Woodcock, 3 Cuckoos, 3 Tawny Owls, 3 Spotted Flycatchers, 3 Coal Tits, 3 Jackdaws, 2 Turtle Doves, 2 Mealy Redpolls, 1 Mallard, 1 Kestrel, 1 Redstart, 1 Mistle Thrush, 1 Magpie, 1 Tree Sparrow, 1 Siskin and 1 Linnet. Many of these totals were the result of much more diligent nest finding during 2007, for which we have to thank a small number of our more dedicated members. Others represent a genuine increase in the Fen population (Cetti's Warbler, Sparrowhawk). Sadly, some of the smaller numbers are a result of the opposite, a long-term decline in the numbers at the Fen (Turtle Dove, Yellowhammer, Spotted Flycatcher, Tree Sparrow, Linnet). Jackdaw was the only addition to the Wicken Fen ringing list, which is now just one species short of 100.

The Group's nest-boxes were very successful in 2007, in contrast to a reported National situation. 78 of the year's Blue Tits and 116 of the year's Great Tits were ringed as nestlings in the boxes; and by the end of 2007, some 40% of them were still to be found somewhere on the Fen (they are very mobile after leaving the nest).

The Group received notification of 31 Wicken-ringed birds being recovered away from the Fen during 2007; Reed Warblers to Sussex, Suffolk and Spain; Goldfinches to Fordham and Suffolk; a Sedge Warbler to Suffolk; a Jay to Soham, a Chiffchaff to Surrey, a Great Tit to Fulbourn and Greenfinches to Fordham, Ely, Exning, Burwell, Balsham, Steeple Bumpstead, Soham and Suffolk. And during the year, Wicken Fen also welcomed several birds that had been ringed elsewhere – Sedge Warblers from Wales and Spain; Barn Owls from Norfolk and Stretham, a Blue Tit from Ely; a Blackbird from the Netherlands, a Blackcap from Sussex, a Chiffchaff from Kent and a Goldfinch and a Greenfinch both from Fordham.

Some elderly birds were retrapped at the Fen during 2007 – there were no records broken but a Bullfinch at 8 years 0 months and a Robin at 7 years 0 months were very close to their respective longevity records. Other old birds were a Long-tailed Tit at 6y 9m, a Great Tit at 6y 6m, a Garden Warbler at 6y 0m, a Reed Bunting at 5y 11m, a Blue Tit at 5y 6m, a Dunnock at 5y 4m, a Reed Warbler at 5y 1m, a Chaffinch at 4y 10m, a Blackbird at 4y 1m, a Wren at 3y 4m and a Whitethroat at 3y 0m.

In summer 2007 we continued (for the 38th successive year) our “standard sites sessions”. These enable us to monitor the breeding population of birds at the Fen. The Group also put on three “bird-ringing demonstrations” for the public, on 30 June, 28 July and 25 November.

Several of the Group’s active members are undergraduate or graduate students at Cambridge University or Anglia Ruskin University, and some of these students are using Ringing Group activities as either part of their academic project work, or as training for using ringing to further their studies at sites elsewhere in Britain or abroad. Senior members of both Universities are also using Group data or facilities to further their own research. Some scientific papers have been published, using Ringing Group data (“Simple species lists to monitor trends...” R.L. Roberts, P.F. Donald & R.E. Green, *Animal Conservation* 10 [2007] pp 332-339; “Impact of non-native flora on breeding success in Blue Tits and Great Tits” J.A. Mackenzie, S.M. Harrison & S.A. Hinsley, *Association of Field Ornithologists Orono, Maine* July 2007).

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (6 in year 2007), 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).