

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2010 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 43 years, having been established in 1968. Since that year over 94000 birds have been ringed at Wicken Fen; 481 of these have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (66 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2010, numbered 41 members and 22 registered "friends". This healthy membership meant that coverage at the Fen was maintained at the high level seen during the last 5 years. Ringing operations were conducted on 205 different days, involving 4174 member- (man- & woman-) hours. Ringing sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 110, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 75 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53) and 42 were at North Field/Gallops/Milner-Whites (Compartments 15, 19, 20-23); in addition there were 12 sessions in the Priory Farm/Burwell Fen/Guinea Hall areas (Compartments 104, 108, 200-220). Several other areas of the Fen were also visited to ring nestling birds.

The 2010 ringing total was 4743 birds, of 59 different species, the Group's second-highest ever score. In addition to the 4743 "new" birds in 2010, 886 of the "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2010; a further 19 were "controls" (birds originally ringed away from the Fen, but captured at Wicken). Several species topped the 100 mark, the highest scores being Reed Warbler with 675 ringed, Blue Tit 494, Swallow 399, Great Tit 297, Blackcap 292, Reed Bunting 228, Sedge Warbler 220, Chaffinch 209, Goldfinch 194, Chiffchaff 173, Robin and Blackbird both 136, Wren and Redwing both 117 and Greenfinch 111; the next most numerous were Long-tailed Tit 97, Whitethroat 92, House Sparrow 88, Meadow Pipit 87, Bullfinch 71, Dunnock 70, Willow Warbler 62 and Song Thrush 57. The several records broken for annual totals were those for Blue Tit, Whitethroat, Meadow Pipit, Fieldfare (36), Jay (12) and Barn Owl (12). As usual, nut and seed bait was available at our ringing sites in the winter, and this helped to boost the numbers of finches, buntings and tits caught.

Several less usual species were ringed during 2010: Great spotted Woodpecker 15, Tree Creeper 15, Bearded Tit 14, Grasshopper Warbler 12, Sparrowhawk 7, Kestrel 6, Kingfisher 6, Stock Dove 5, Green Woodpecker 5, Cuckoo 3, Coal Tit 3, Siskin 3, Jackdaw 2, Mealy Redpoll 2, Yellowhammer 2, Hobby 1, Water Rail 1, Moorhen 1, Woodcock 1, Turtle Dove 1, Redstart 1, Wheatear 1, Nuthatch 1 and Linnet 1. Two new birds (the Wheatear and Nuthatch) were added to the Group's ringing total which now stands at 103 species.

The Group's nest-boxes were reasonably successful in 2010: 105 of the year's Blue Tits and 76 of the year's Great Tits were ringed as nestlings in the boxes. A further 230 nestling birds of 14 species were also ringed in the year, 155 of them Reed Warblers and 11 Barn Owls.

The Group received notification of 15 Wicken-ringed birds being recovered away from the Fen during 2010. The furthest distance moved was by Sedge Warbler L093480 that reached Abbotsbury in Dorset. Other emigrants were two Reed Warblers to Sussex and one to Berkshire, a Chiffchaff to Norfolk, a Lesser Redpoll to Suffolk, a Greenfinch to Hertfordshire and eight other birds to various parts of Cambridgeshire. Rather more exciting distances had been moved by the 13 birds arriving at Wicken from elsewhere: a Chiffchaff from Spain; a Blackbird from the Netherlands; a Sedge Warbler and a Blackcap from Sussex; a Reed Warbler from Kent; a Swallow, a Blackcap and a Reed Warbler from Norfolk; a Reed Warbler from Hertfordshire; a Reed Bunting from Suffolk; a Blue Tit from Bedfordshire and two other birds from elsewhere in Cambridgeshire.

Several elderly birds were retrapped at Wicken during 2010 – a Great Tit at 8 years and 4 months, a Chaffinch at 7 years and 4 months, a Woodpigeon at 4 years 11 months, a Cetti's Warbler at 4 Years 8 months and a Whitethroat at 3 years 9 months all broke longevity records for those species at the Fen. The longest lived of other species were a Long-tailed Tit at 6 years 9 months, a Blue Tit at 6 years 5 months, a Reed Warbler at 6 years 1 month, a Blackbird and a Reed Bunting both at 5 years 11 months, a Song Thrush at 5 years 0 months, a Robin at 4 years 9 months, a Goldfinch at 4 years 4 months, a Bullfinch at 4 years 2 months, a House Sparrow at 3 years 11 months, a Tree Creeper at 3 years 9 months, a Wren at 3 years 6 months, a Garden Warbler at 3 years 1 month, a Sedge Warbler and a Blackcap both at 3 years 0 months and a Chiffchaff at 2 years 10 months.

A number of "Ringing Demonstrations" for the public were put on during the year; and Group members assisted with some National Trust guided walks.

In summer 2010 we continued (for the 41st successive year) our "standard sites sessions". These special ringing visits involve placing nets in exactly the same sites, for exactly the same time, at exactly the same dates every year, and enable us to monitor the breeding population of birds at the Fen. As well as trapping and ringing birds, Group members during the year also conducted several bird surveys, to establish the overall winter and summer bird populations of the Fen (both on the "classical" Fen and the more recently acquired "Vision lands"). A start was made in analysing some Group records, including Great and Blue Tit survival rates, and the dynamics of the Fen's Cetti's Warbler population. In more detailed breeding studies, Group members reported to the BTO on the progress of 218 nests of 26 species of bird. Bird breeding overall was reasonably successful at the Fen in 2010, although there was no evidence of Bittern or Stonechat breeding, and the Cuckoo population was down to just one female bird.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (6 in year 2010), 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).