

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2011 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 44 years, having been founded in 1968. Since that year over 99500 have been ringed at Wicken Fen; 506 of these have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (70 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2011, numbered 46 members and 23 registered "friends". This record membership meant that coverage at the Fen was maintained at the high level seen during the last 6 years. Ringing operations were conducted on 210 different days, involving 4964 member- (man- & woman-) hours. Ringing sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 95, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 85 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53), 44 were at North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23) and 32 at the ride between Sedge Fen and Gardiners Drovers (in Compartment 15 - this was one of the sites used in the 1960/70s by the Group, but subsequently abandoned). In addition there were 17 sessions in the Priors Farm/Burwell Fen/ Guinea Hall areas (Compartments 104, 112, 201-205), 6 to Tubney Fen (Compartment 309) and even one to Oily Hall. Several other areas of the Fen were also visited to ring nestling birds.

The 2011 ringing total was 5606 birds, of 57 different species, the Group's highest ever annual total, and the first of over 5000 birds. In addition to the 5606 "new" birds in 2011, 834 of the "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2011; a further 24 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 862 ringed, Blackcap 650, Swallow 512, Blue Tit 383, Sedge Warbler 279, Reed Bunting 268, Great Tit 251, Chiffchaff 240, Goldfinch 193, Wren 191, Robin and Blackbird both 171, Whitethroat 145, Chaffinch 142, Redwing 103 and Long-tailed Tit 101; the next most numerous were Sand Martin 91, Fieldfare 90, Dunnock 80, Bullfinch 77, Pied Wagtail 65, House Sparrow 58, Goldcrest 56, Song Thrush 55 and Willow Warbler 54. The Reed Warbler, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Whitethroat, Sand Martin and Fieldfare totals, as well as that for Bearded Tit (19) are all-time Wicken records. 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.

Rather few of the more "unusual" species were handled in 2011 (the 57 species caught in 2011 is fewer than the totals for 5 previous years – 67 species in a total of 4701 in 2007 being the high point) – Water Rail, Tawny Owl, Redstart, Firecrest, Coal Tit, Magpie and Mealy Redpoll contributing one each. A few of the birds that once were much more numerous at the Fen, were caught during the year – 16 Lesser Redpolls (the record catch was 261 in 1974), 6 Tree Sparrows (380 in 1970), 5 Linnets (39 in 1973), 2 Cuckoos (13 in 1985) and one Spotted Flycatcher (29 in 1974). No new birds were added to the Group's ringing total, which remains at 103 species.

Of the 85 Group Tit nestboxes (at three sites, 63 at St. Edmund's, 10 at Gallops and 12 at the Reedbed), 39 were used. This total of boxes fledged 13 broods of Blue Tits (123 birds ringed) and 10 of Great Tits (73 birds ringed) successfully. Barn Owls, Jackdaws and Stock Doves were also ringed in the boxes designed for those species. 160 nestling birds of a further 10 species were ringed, the largest total (the 103 Reed Warblers) being the birds under study by Prof. Nick Davies and Dr. Rose Thorogood. A "nesters report" is published separately.

During 2011 we received news of the origins of some ringed birds recently trapped at Wicken Fen – Chiffchaff from Spain, Blackbird from the Netherlands, Swallows from Perth, Lincolnshire and Suffolk, Stonechat from Cumbria, Sand Martin from Yorkshire, Lesser Redpolls from West Lothian and Doncaster, Sedge Warbler from Sussex, Reed Warblers from Sussex and

Hertfordshire, Redwing from Norfolk, Blackcaps from Norfolk and Suffolk, Blue Tit from Essex, Greenfinch from Norfolk and Reed Bunting from Suffolk. Several Wicken-ringed birds traveled far - a Fieldfare to Norway, a Song Thrush to Portugal and both Sedge and Reed Warbler to France. Within Britain, Lesser Redpolls went to Yorkshire and Suffolk, Reed Warblers to Sussex and Suffolk, Sedge Warblers to Gwent and Suffolk, Great Tits to Norfolk and Suffolk, and Swallow, Blue Tit and Reed Bunting to Suffolk.

Longevity records broken in 2011 were a Chaffinch at 8 years 5 months, a Song Thrush at 7 years 5 months, a Great spotted Woodpecker at 6 years 0 months, Tree Creeper at 5 years 1 month and a Whitethroat at 4 years 11 months. Other elderly birds were a Great Tit at 8 years 4 months, a Blue Tit and a Bullfinch both at 6 years 5 months, a Reed Warbler at 6 years 0 months, a Blackbird at 5 years 9 months, a Robin at 5 years 5 months, a Long-tailed Tit at 5 years 4 months and a Garden Warbler at 5 years 0 months.

In summer 2011 we continued (for the 42nd successive year) our “Standard Sites Sessions”. 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 2011, we successfully embarked on a second, parallel, type of monitoring, that of the BTO’s “Constant Effort Sites” project; this requires 12 visits at 10 day intervals in the 4 summer months, while the “Standard Sites Sessions” demand only 4, at monthly intervals. The CES work requires more effort from the ringers, and we are encouraged by the work that our increased membership put in, to achieve this success.

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 2011 assisted the National Trust staff by helping to run some of the “bird walks”, and put one a few “ringing displays” for visitors to the Fen.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (6 in year 2011), 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).