

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2008 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for over 40 years, having been established in 1968. Since that year over 85000 birds have been ringed at Wicken Fen; 446 of these have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (65 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2008, numbered 44 members and 22 registered "friends"; this total of 66 is the highest ever. However, despite the record membership, coverage at the Fen was less than in 2007. Ringing operations were conducted on 154 different days, involving 3738 member- (man- & woman-) hours. Ringing sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 111, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 59 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53), 18 were at North Field/Gallops/Milner-Whites (Compartments 15, 19, 20-23) and 3 were in the Baker's Fen/Priory Farm area (Compartments 101-104). In addition, several other areas of the Fen were visited to ring nestling birds.

The 2008 ringing total was 2999 birds, of 59 different species. In addition to the 2999 "new" birds in 2007, 845 of the "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2008; a further 10 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 312 ringed, Blue Tit 268, Reed Bunting 188, Great Tit 186, Blackcap 177, Goldfinch 160, Chiffchaff 156, Chaffinch 144, Greenfinch 136, Wren 133, Blackbird 131, Long-tailed Tit 110 and Robin 100; the next most numerous were Swallow 92, Bullfinch 70, Goldcrest 62, Willow Warbler 59, Sedge Warbler 55, Dunnock 54 and Song Thrush 50. The only records broken for annual totals were those for Meadow Pipit (45), Chiffchaff, Goldcrest and Goldfinch.. 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 2008: Cetti's Warbler 23, Lesser Redpoll 17, Pied Wagtail 11, Tree Sparrow 11, Cuckoo 10, Kestrel 8, Barn Owl 7, Heron 6, Stock Dove 6, Great spotted Woodpecker 6, Yellowhammer 6, Green Woodpecker 5, Jay 5, Jackdaw 5, Carrion Crow 4, Sparrowhawk 3, Kingfisher 3, Magpie 3, Siskin 3, Moorhen 2, Woodcock 2, Grasshopper Warbler 2, House Martin 1, Stonechat 1, Bearded Tit 1, Coal Tit 1 and Common (Mealy) Redpoll 1. The Herons and Crows were the only additions to the Wicken Fen ringing list, which now stands at 101.

The Group's nest-boxes were not so successful in 2008, several nests being predated, probably by weasels. 71 of the year's Blue Tits and 34 of the year's Great Tits were ringed as nestlings in the boxes. A further 162 nestling birds of 17 species were also ringed in the year.

The Group received notification of 25 Wicken-ringed birds being recovered away from the Fen during 2008. Pride of place go to the two Blackbirds which reached Netherlands and Denmark respectively. A Kingfisher reached Wrestlingworth in Bedfordshire, a Reed Warbler went to Northamptonshire, a Lesser Redpoll to Suffolk, a Sand Martin to Sussex, Chiffchaffs to Hertfordshire and Duxford and Greenfinches to Leicestershire, Suffolk and Bedfordshire. And during the year, Wicken Fen also welcomed several birds that had been ringed elsewhere – a rewing from Wales, a Blackbird from Northumberland, a Swallow from Nottinghamshire, a sedge Warbler from Rutland, a Blackcap and two Greenfinches all from different parts of Norfolk.

Some elderly birds were retrapped at the Fen during 2008 – a Blue Tit at 7 years 7 months equalled the longevity record for that species at the Fen. Other record breaking birds were a Goldfinch at 4 y 11m and a Cetti's Warbler at 3y 2m. The longest lived of other species were a Reed Warbler at

6y 10m, a Reed Bunting at 6y 3m, a Robin at 5y 9m, a Blackbird at 5y 8m, a Chaffinch at 5y 6m, a Dunnock at 5y 4m, a Bullfinch at 5y 2m, a Great Tit at 5y 0m, a Long-tailed Tit at 4y 8m, a Greenfinch at 4y 1m, a Whitethroat at 3y 9m, a Great spotted Woodpecker at 3y 9m, a Song Thrush at 3y 7m, a Chiffchaff at 3y 0m and a Collared Dove at 2y 0m

In summer 2008 we continued (for the 39th 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 28 June, 3 August and 30 November. On April 27th, the exact 40th anniversary of the Group’s ringing of its first bird, nets were erected in exactly the same spot as in 1968 and, despite the very different habitat (due to clearance, fencing and the presence of Highland cattle) a few birds were caught. There was also a splendid birthday cake, thanks to Jo Jones, to mark the occasion. This 40th anniversary gained the Group some publicity, with articles in the local press and in the magazine “British Birds”. Further publicity may yet occur, because on 29 June we entertained Griff Rhys Jones and his television film crew, and taught him how to ring *Phylloscopus* warblers.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (6 in year 2008), 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, 31 January 2008