

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2012 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 45 years, having been founded in 1968. In April 2012, the 100000th bird was ringed, and by the end of the year the overall ringing total was 102782; of this total, 546 birds have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (80 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2012, numbered 39 members and 22 registered "friends". This represents a slight fall in membership, and the corresponding coverage at the Fen was below the average of the last 6 years. Ringing operations were conducted on 175 different days, involving 4288 member- (man- & woman-) hours. Netting sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 84, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35). 62 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53), 39 were at North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23), 18 on the ride between Sedge Fen and Gardiners Doves (Compartment 15) and 7 at the Brickpits, working from the Roger Clarke Hide. In addition there were 15 sessions in the more "remote" areas (Priory Farm/Burwell Fen/ Guinea Hall/Oily Hall). Several of these latter areas of the Fen were visited to ring nestling birds.

The 2012 ringing total was 3368 birds, of 58 different species. In addition to the 3368 "new" birds in 2012, 825 of the "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2012; and a further 15 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 469 ringed, Blackcap 292, Blue Tit 271, Great Tit 192, Goldfinch 151, Chaffinch 147, Reed Bunting 137, Wren 135, Redwing 126, Chiffchaff 125, Robin and Blackbird both 113 (this is the second year running that the totals for these two species have been identical), Greenfinch 111, Sedge Warbler 109 and Meadow Pipit and Goldcrest both 105; the next most numerous were Long-tailed Tit 73, Swallow 71, Lesser Redpoll 53, Bullfinch 49, Willow Warbler 42, Dunnock 37 and Pied Wagtail 36.

The Meadow Pipit and Goldcrest totals, as well as that for Bearded Tit (35) are all-time Wicken records. Other Wicken Fen ringing records broken in 2012 were the 14 Stock Doves, 2 Firecrests, 4 Coal Tits and 7 Siskins.

Rather few of the more "unusual" species were handled in 2012 – Hobby 1, Water Rail 1, Lapwing 6, Woodcock 1, Collared Dove 1 and Tawny Owl 1. A few of the birds that once were much more numerous at the Fen, were caught during the year – 53 Lesser Redpolls (the record catch was 261 in 1974), 5 Cuckoos (13 in 1985) and 2 Spotted Flycatchers (29 in 1974). Two new species were added to the Group's ringing total, 3 Common Terns (nestlings on a raft at Pout Hall) and a Little Grebe (which had crash-landed close to a Member's car); this now stands at 105 species.

A major reason for the lower number of birds ringed at the Fen in 2012, was the very poor weather (the 2012 Cambridgeshire rainfall was the highest for many years). This poor result was also reflected in the Group's nest recording. Although 93 nests of 25 species were found and monitored (these totals much the same as those for 2010 and 2011), nesting success was poor. The Group's Tit nestboxes exemplify this: of the 85 boxes, 49 were used in 2012 but the success rate was only 22% for Great Tits (average 50 % for 2009-11), and 19% for Blue Tits (average 59% for 2009-11). Barn Owls, Jackdaws and Stock Doves were also ringed in the boxes designed for those species. 66 nestling birds of a further 5 species were ringed, the largest total (the 37 Reed Warblers) being the birds under study by Prof. Nick Davies and Dr. Rose Thorogood. A "nesters report" is published separately.

During 2012 we received news of the origins of some ringed birds recently trapped at Wicken Fen – two Sedge Warblers from France, two Blackcaps from Belgium, a Lesser Redpoll from Wales, two Sedge Warblers from Lancashire, Reed Warblers from Wiltshire, Sussex, Suffolk and Norfolk, a Swallow from Hertfordshire and a Goldfinch from Suffolk. Several Wicken-ringed birds also traveled far – no fewer than four Reed Warblers to France and one to Portugal, three Sedge Warblers and a Sand Martin also to France. Within Britain, a Barn Owl apparently went to Yorkshire (but it is not unknown for a motor car casualty to be carried by its killer to a site far beyond where impact occurred), a Blackcap and a Pied Wagtail to Kent, Sand Martins, Sedge Warblers, Reed Warblers, a Swallow and a Lesser Redpoll to Sussex, a Swallow to Essex and a Great Tit and a Reed Bunting to Suffolk.

Longevity records broken in 2012 were a Chaffinch at 9 years 9 months and a Tree Creeper at 5 years 9 months; a Jay came close to its record at 6 years 4 months. The oldest birds (or rather the longest intervals between ringing and recapture) of other species were a Reed Bunting at 7 years 11 months, a Long-tailed Tit and a Reed Warbler both at 7 years 1 month, a Garden Warbler at 7 years 0 months, a Great Tit at 6 years 6 months, a Bullfinch at 6 years 0 months, a Blue Tit at 5 years 10 months, a Robin at 5 years 9 months, a Blackbird and a Blackcap both at 4 years 11 months and a Wren at 4 years and 5 months.

In summer 2012 we continued (for the 43rd 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 2012, we continued, for its second year, the parallel monitoring of the “Constant Effort Sites” at the Reedbed. An analysis of the CES work in 2012 confirmed that juvenile bird numbers were less than 60% of those seen in 2011 (adult bird numbers, aside from Sedge Warblers, were less affected), and that insectivorous warblers fared the worst. Although a single day’s catching produced all of the year’s Cuckoos (5, the highest total since 2008), for perhaps the first year ever, no Cuckoo was reared at Wicken Fen in 2012.

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 2012 assisted the National Trust staff by helping to run some of the “bird walks”, and put on a few “ringing displays” for visitors to the Fen. Group members also collaborated with Anglia Ruskin University by conducting bird ringing and analysis demonstrations for its MSc (Animal Behaviour) students. Scientific support was also given, by Group members, to the Great and Blue Tit studies of Dr. Hannah Rowland, in assisting with the netting, and PIT tagging, of some 250 birds at Madingley Wood.

The Secretary has maintained his production of regular Bulletins (7 in year 2012), 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).