

WICKEN FEN (BIRD RINGING) GROUP

Report of 2017 activities

The Wicken Fen (Bird Ringing) Group has been in continuous operation for 50 years, having been founded in April 1968. By the end of the year 2017 the overall ringing total was 124178; of this total, about 700 birds have subsequently been reported away from the Fen (93 of them abroad).

The Group, at 31 December 2017, numbered 36 members and 20 registered Friends or Associates. Additionally there were, at any one moment, about a dozen would-be ringers/trainees/visitors on the Group's "books". Coverage at the Fen, measured in hours was somewhat less (about 75%) than that in the previous few years. Ringing operations with nets were conducted on 138 different days, involving 3154 member- (man- & woman-) hours. These netting sessions were held in every month, with the majority of sessions, 72, being carried out on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35) while 51 sessions were at the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53) and 34 at North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23). In the autumn there were also 5 sessions to Burwell Fen (Compartments 201-205). In addition, several hours were spent in nest-finding, and the subsequent ringing of nestling birds (291 in all) – these mostly involved both the large (Owls) and the small (Tits) nestboxes. The Nesters Report forms a separate publication. An additional project, begun the previous year, involved the colour-ringing of Chiffchaffs, whose subsequent sightings enable an assessment of their breeding behaviour.

The 2017 ringing total was 3644 birds, of 48 different species. In addition to the 3644 "new" birds in 2017, 697 "retraps" (birds already bearing rings) had been originally ringed at the Fen in years earlier than 2017, and a further 15 were "controls" (birds originally ringed away from the Fen, but captured at Wicken) – so a total of 4356 different birds were handled.

Despite the lesser overall "effort" from the ringers, several bird species had 2017 ringing totals of over 100, with the highest scores being Blackcap 378, Reed Bunting 371, Blue Tit 359, Chiffchaff 334, Reed Warbler 311, Redwing 261, Great Tit 205, Wren 155, Robin 109 and Meadow Pipit 105; the next most numerous were Sedge Warbler and House Sparrow both 92, Long-tailed Tit 91, Blackbird 90, Goldcrest 78, Cetti's Warbler 77 and Goldfinch 76. The Redwing and Cetti's Warbler totals are all-time Wicken records, the former probably due to more "targeted" ringing, while the latter reflects an increase in local breeding.

The more "unusual" species, normally ringed in small numbers, remained much the same as in recent years – Kingfisher 7, Jay 6, Sparrowhawk 5, Green Woodpecker 3, Spotted Flycatcher 2, Cuckoo 1. With only 48 species represented in the year's total, the range of species caught was the lowest since 2006 (also 48). There is (obviously) a relationship between the overall ringing total, and the number of species this total represents; the 2006 ringing total was similar, at 3566, to that for 2017 (3644). Unsurprisingly no new species was added to the Group's overall ringing list in year 2017, which thus remains at 106 species.

During 2017 we received news of the origins of some previously ringed birds (the "controls") recently trapped at Wicken Fen – a Reed Warbler from France, a Goldcrest from Yorkshire, a Garden Warbler from London, Blackcaps from Lincolnshire and Suffolk, a Robin from Northants, a Great Tit from Norfolk, a Chiffchaff from Hertfordshire and Blue Tits from

Essex and Norfolk. Although only moving shorter distances, the two Bearded Tits and two Cetti's Warblers, all from the Ely area, were interesting. The total of ringed "imports" to Wicken Fen during the lifetime of the Group so far, stands at about 355, with 27 of these coming from abroad.

A significant total (28) of Wicken-ringed birds were reported from elsewhere during 2017. The most distant traveller (and only one moving abroad) was a Blackbird to Sweden; other significant movers were Chiffchaffs to Dorset and Hertfordshire, a Lesser Whitethroat to Lincolnshire, Reed Warblers to Sussex and Hertfordshire, Reed Buntings to Suffolk and Norfolk, a Great Tit to Northamptonshire, a Blackcap to Rutland and a Greenfinch to Suffolk. Another twelve Wicken-ringed birds were reported from elsewhere in Cambridgeshire.

Recapturing our own birds showed some longevity, the oldest birds (strictly just the interval between first ringing, and last recapture) being a Blackbird at 8 years 8 months, a Great Tit at 7 years 9 months, a Blue Tit at 7 years 7 months, a Garden Warbler at 7 years 0 months, a Chaffinch at 6 years 8 months, a Long-tailed Tit at 6 years 3 months, a Dunnock at 6 years 2 months, a Reed Warbler at 6 years 1 month, a Reed Bunting at 5 years 10 months, a Bullfinch at 5 years 9 months, a Robin at 5 years 7 months, a Bearded Tit at 4 years 3 months and a Cetti's Warbler at 4 years 2 months.

Although the overall Group "effort" (measured in hours of ringing throughout the year) was less than in recent years, the important Constant Effort Sites monitoring was continued, and even expanded, in 2017. This CES ringing involves twelve 6-8 hour sessions at approximately 10-day intervals between May and August; in 2017 not only was every one of the twelve sessions (at the reedbed – REECES, operating for the seventh successive year; at St. Edmunds Fen – STECES for the third successive year) completed satisfactorily, but a third CES was pioneered, at Gallops Piece; this also was completed successfully. These CES efforts are organized, and analysed, by WFG members Michael Holdsworth, Peter Bircham/Chris Quy and Mark Peck respectively; the Group is extremely grateful to these members. The 2017 Gallops "initial CES" has yet to be analysed; but reports on the two established CES were published in a WFG Bulletin (CCLIII November 2017). Because they truly involve "constant effort", they provide the most reliable indication of the success or failure of bird species year by year at the Fen. Interpretation of the results needs care (and is best only attempted by reference to the full data), but a superficial suggestion (by the author of this report) is that Blackcap and Chiffchaffs (and Cetti's Warblers in appropriate habitats) continue to thrive, but that both Reed and Sedge Warblers, and perhaps Robins and Wrens, languish.

Neil Larner continues to act as the Group's computer officer; he and Chris Quy are now involved in implementing the BTO's new online computerisation scheme (DEMON) – a complex operation, and one for which the Group is much indebted to these two Members.

The Group remains most grateful to the National Trust for granting permission for ringing on the Reserve, and for assisting with expenses. This was particularly helpful following a break-in and theft of Group property (rings and a lap-top computer), in November/December 2017. The University of Cambridge continues to make a significant financial contribution to the National Trust to assist with scientific studies at the Fen (the Ringing Group qualifies under this heading). Group members also collaborated with Anglia Ruskin University for the fifth year by demonstrating ringing to its MSc (Animal Behaviour) students. Some Group

members assisted with bird-ringing away from the Fen where they were able both to gain more experience and to contribute expertise. Specific scientific support was also given, by Group members, to the University of Cambridge studies on Great and Blue Tits under the leadership of Drs. Hannah Rowland and Tony Fulford in Madingley Wood.

The Secretary has (just about) maintained his production of regular Bulletins (7 in year 2017), keeping Members and Friends informed, not only of ringing activities, but also of general bird observations at Wicken Fen. He also produced monthly reports of the Group's activities, which are displayed (to give an up-to-date summary of ornithological sightings as well as of bird-ringing news) in the William Thorpe Building (the Visitor Centre) at the Fen. 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, 24 January 2018