

WICKEN FEN GROUP



Report for 2018

Administration

After nearly fifty years as the leader of the Group Chris Thorne stepped down in April. At a meeting the senior members of the Group agreed that Chris Quy should take over leadership, that Neil Lerner would be Ringing Secretary and that a Steering Group would be drawn up to consider such issues as subscriptions, training, equipment replacement etc.

Ringing

The main focus of the Group has always been to assess changes in the populations of the Fen's avifauna. From an initial in-house scheme the Group has graduated to the National scheme run by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) which means that as well as collecting data on the Fen's bird populations we also contribute to the National scheme. The Constant Effort Scheme (CES) requires twelve visits using the same net sites and net lengths for a set period of time. The Group now operates three CES sites and these are on St. Edmund's Fen (Compartments 30-35), the Reedbed (Compartments 51-53) and North Field/Gallops (Compartments 20-23) making a total of thirty-six visits. Given the habitat types (wet woodland, reedbed and dry scrub) these three sites might be considered to be representative of the Fen as a whole.

CES Results 2018

Inevitably this methodology allows us to consider 'winners' and 'losers'. Each year is different and defined mostly by the weather conditions. Hot and dry is good for insectivores, mostly warblers, and wet and cool is good for ground feeders such as thrushes. The table below shows the accumulated results from the three sites for all species in 2018 for which there were significant numbers caught. Note that the Gallop's sessions were short of session 10.

Species

	Reedbed		St Edmunds		Gallop's		Total AD	Total Juv
	Ad	Juv	Ad	Juv	Ad	Juv		
Wren	11	15	13	32	10	14	33	61
Dunnock	6	8	10	6	12	6	28	20
Robin	2	4	13	21	11	15	26	40
Blackbird	3	4	14	5	11	5	28	14
Cetti	4	16	4	9	3	1	11	26
Sedge	3	3	1	1	6	4	10	8

Reed	29	29	11	26	11	16	51	71
Blackcap	20	21	30	35	15	20	65	76
Chiffchaff	8	14	7	37	12	25	27	76
Blue Tit	4	12	7	36	2	17	13	65
Great Tit	5	4	6	17	5	11	16	32

Clearly not a good year for Sedge Warblers but Cetti's Warblers continue to increase - note the number of juveniles, particularly from the reedbed. On St Edmunds Fen the overall numbers were high, on the Reedbed no more than average. The importance of the survey on Gallop's has been made more significant by the detailed management being undertaken there and the Group is in a good position to monitor future changes in the avifauna with a good baseline from 2017. One factor, most noticeable on Gallop's is the site fidelity of the breeding birds. Many of the captures of adults there were repeats, the same individuals being captured several times, perhaps more so than at the other two sites.

CES results suggest that given year on year fluctuations at Wicken, the recent trends are fairly stable. Sub-Saharan migrants vary most; those species that winter around the Mediterranean (Blackcap and Chiffchaff) appear to be increasing overall and the resident species seem to be fluctuating within given limitations.

Chiffchaff study by Ann Beeby

This was the third year of our project on the breeding biology of Chiffchaffs on St Edmunds Fen, using colour-rings to identify and follow individual adults during the breeding season.

Arrival was delayed by cold northerly winds in March, and males were not singing regularly until late March. (This noting of song or first capture is the best we can do for arrival dates, since we cannot visit every day to note new arrivals).

Five colour-ringed birds returned this year, including a pair back together on the same territory as 2017, the male is at least 4 years old and the female at least 2 years old, so this is an experienced pair, the first to start nesting. Another male of at least 3 years old also returned, but no sign of his mate of the previous 2 years. A third male returned to last year's territory, so all three of these males showed site fidelity. Six new males were regularly seen after colour-ringing this year, three of these paired and nested, and three appeared to be unpaired. Unfortunately, there was only one colour-ringed female regularly seen, the other males had unringed mates, so I cannot comment on mate fidelity through the season.

So, from this group, there were 9 occupied territories. It was interesting that although the females arrived late, their laying dates were not as late as in 2016. The overall predation rate seemed to be lower this year. Five of the six first nests were successful, one predated and not replaced, most had 6 eggs. Two of three second brood nests were successful, with 4 eggs, and one predated.

These 9 territories were very spread-out, presumably enlarging to use the available space provided by fewer overall. The larger areas made detection and watching more difficult than usual. It was curious that 3 previously 'favourite' (? quality) territories were not occupied at all. No males were seen to carry food this year, one can speculate that a larger territory needs more time spent on 'defence'.

The study will continue in 2019.

Nest recording.

Strange/extreme weather conditions before and during this year's breeding season led the Group to wonder how the birds on the Fen would respond, and so as usual several members monitored nests as part of their demographic research at the Fen, also ringing pulli when possible.

Nests at the Fen comprise three distinct categories -

- a) Large boxes - Neil Larner and Chris Quy check these, also the tern raft (which seems to be a mixture of hard work and excitement).
- b) Small boxes – these are mostly used by tits, and are distributed around three areas of the Fen – St Edmunds Fen, the Reedbed, and Gallops. Sophie Mowles, Neil Larner, Chris Quy, Jo Jones, Gareth Davies, and Mark Peck have undertaken the monitoring and ringing, and it seems that timing and distribution have been interesting this year.
- c) Open nests – these are the concealed unenclosed nests that many birds build, and they are well worth the effort needed to find and monitor them. Ann Beeby and Carl Barimore have done most of this, with help from the ringers when pulli could be ringed.

We are hoping to link or compare CES results with known fledging rates. This is probably more applicable to nest-boxes than open nests.

Records of all nests monitored have been submitted to the BTO nest record scheme.

Recorded movements

Although much more detailed monitoring of bird movements is now taking place using modern technology, the movements from ringed birds continue to add to our knowledge. Most of the birds reported back to the Group in 2018 show relatively local movement within East Anglia. A number of exchanges with Kingfishers Bridge suggest birds using both reserve sites. As is often the case with birds from the north heading south the Swallow roost yielded a bird ringed in East Yorkshire on August 9th at Wicken Fen on September 2nd. A Blackcap ringed at Wraysbury on September 29th was recaptured at Wicken Fen on October 8th a distance of 112 km over 9 days but most interestingly going NNE and thus most likely to be a winter immigrant. A Cetti's warbler, ringed August 19th at Wicken was recaptured at Holme on October 22nd, a WFG record for this species at a distance of 77km.

Foreign movements were a Reed Warbler ringed age 4 at Wicken Fen on June 3rd 2015 caught at Charente FRANCE on May 2nd 2018 and Reed Warbler BE29213 ringed on August 2nd 2011 at Lot-et-Garonne, France caught on July 31st 2013 WF (880km N) a late return from the "other" French scheme (briefly mentioned in last year's report). Chiffchaff HYY506, ringed on July 15th 2017, was recaptured on October 10th 2017 (but not reported back to us until 16th January 2018).

Outreach

The Group took part in the Bioblitz and entertained Chris Packham and later, in October, there was a session to give prospective ringers an introduction to what might be involved. Finally in early November the Group offered a session for members of the Cambridgeshire Bird Club's Migration Conference to see bird ringing.

Statistics

The ringing total was 3025 of 51 species were ringed in over 4,900 'encounters', including the first Mallard in over 10 years and the first Pied Wagtail pulli in over 9.

Blue tit topped the list for numbers ringed (352), followed closely by Blackcap (343), then Reed Warbler (288). Great Tit topped the retrap numbers (436), followed closely by Blue Tit (401), both more than double Long tailed Tit (149) in 3rd place.

Common Tern, Kingfisher, Jay, Tawny Owl and Mallard were the only species to register just one new capture each.

134 sessions were run, with 50 people attending, totalling 2454 man-hours (or person-hours), with Mark Peck contributing over 300 hours, and Chris Thorne and Chris Quy contributing over 200 each, a further 5 contributed over 100 hours each. These hours don't include all net setting sessions prior to CES days, or nest box checking/repairing sessions, which would add at least another 200+ hours to the total.

Over 47,500 foot on net was open for 731 hours (a month!). as follows: Piggeries approx. 17,300 foot for 330 hours, Gallop's approx. 15,200 foot for 250 hours and Reedbed approx. 14,300 foot for 135 hours.

Acknowledgements

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