

## **WOOLSTON EYES NEWSLETTER   March 2026**

It has been over a year since the last Newsletter was sent to permit holders with up-to-date information on developments and issues on the Reserve and its important wildlife. As always, it has been a busy time for the Eyes Committee with both positive and challenging matters to report. As many long-term permit holders know the numerous potholes on the Ship Canal track has been one of the negative aspects of approaching the car park, but we are pleased to report that in 2025 Peel Holdings, the landowner, employed a company to infill them, work which was done to a high standard. This is a prime example of the good relationship that WECG now has with Peel.

### Platform hide on No.4 bed

Early in 2025 the Group received a letter from Warrington Borough Council Planning Department after an individual contacted them claiming that WECG had erected the platform without planning permission. Initially, we believed that this was a matter that could be resolved quickly having been assured by a Ship Canal employee with whom we had worked for many years that the Company could act under Permitted Development Rights. Unfortunately, this was not the case and a full planning application had to be submitted, with the prospect that if it was unsuccessful the platform would have to be removed. Much work was involved in preparing the application. Amazingly, over seventy people – permit holders and other members of the public – supported our application which, according to the planners, was a record level of support that they could not recall for any planning matter. In addition, a permit holder gave us a substantial payment towards our costs, a gesture that was, and still is, very much appreciated.

Finally, last summer at a full Planning Committee hearing planning permission was granted for the platform, and it continues to provide superb viewing over both cells of the No.4 bed wetland.

### Wildlife

Despite many challenges during 2025 wildlife at the Eyes always delivers memorable records. First and foremost were the Black-necked Grebes for which Woolston is one of the most important breeding sites in the country, and has been since the grebes first bred in 1987. In 2025, however, all previous numbers were well and truly surpassed, with 24 pairs producing young and a record count of 62 adults present in the spring. To put these numbers in context the last published report of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel in 2023 assessed the United Kingdom Black-necked Grebe breeding population at 61-73 pairs. Woolston therefore holds a significant proportion of the national number, and is in fact the main site for this rare grebe.

Marsh Harriers have bred successfully at Woolston for a number of years, usually a single pair. In 2025, however, two pairs were present, one raising young at a favoured site, while the other pair, which was seen nest building, eventually abandoned it.

Woolston has always attracted large numbers of wildfowl and it was several nationally important counts of Teal and Pochard that led to the Eyes being designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1985. Important breeding populations of duck also occur. In 2025 the peak count of Pochard, which is a declining species, was 204 in March. The annual midsummer build-up of wildfowl saw 1021 Gadwall and almost 300 Shoveler on the Reserve. Concentrations of Tufted Duck usually occur in the winter, and there were 687 present in February 2025, and a similar number in January 2026. In January 2026 there was a maximum of 1086 Teal. The monthly wildfowl counts (WeBS) for the B.T.O. highlight the huge numbers of wildfowl, including geese, swans, grebes and waders that can be present on the Eyes. For example: an overall total of 3,136 birds of 35 species was counted on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025 WeBS. Rare wildfowl are seen most years, such as the drake Ferruginous Duck in March 2025, which followed a pair on the Reserve in 2024. In recent weeks a Lesser Scaup from North America has been present on the Ship Canal and No.3 bed, together with a Greater Scaup.

Egrets are regular visitors, with a peak count of 16 Little Egrets on the Loop of No.4 bed in August 2025, and all three species were present, including a Cattle Egret and two Great Egrets, on the 8<sup>th</sup> November WeBS.

Other rare bird species were a Penduline Tit on No.4 bed in February 2025, which was certainly a second bird after another had been trapped by the ringers on No.3 bed in 2022. A Golden Oriole was seen by a number of observers on No.4 bed in May 2025 and a fine Yellow-browed Warbler flew into a ringers' net on No.3 bed in October last.

Whooper Swans are seen most years, usually overflying, although in last November a flock of 18 was present for two days on No. 4 bed.

Wader numbers in 2024 included above-average counts of Wood Sandpipers, large flocks of Lapwing and there were spring and summer sightings of Little Ringed Plover, a pair of which fledged young. Little Stint was recorded, and a Grey Phalarope, only the second ever record for the Reserve, was present on No.3 bed for about a week in early October.

After the disastrous year for butterflies in the wet summer of 2024 numbers were considerably higher in 2025, with our Butterfly Recorder David Hackett and other noting important peak counts for a number of species, including welcome sightings of Small Coppers. The warm spring and summer were also good for Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies).

### Starling Murmuration

During 2025 a large roost on No.4 bed built to a peak of 20,000 in December, which attracted many observers. In January the roost moved to No.3 bed and at the time of writing (late February) upwards of 25,000 Starlings have been performing their amazing aerial acrobatics

over the bed in the late afternoon. This can be seen from the Morgan Hide, but an even closer view can be obtained from the track on the west bank of No.2 bed, just south of Woolston Weir.

### Invertebrate Study

In the August 2024 Newsletter I reported that a number of invertebrate experts were about to begin surveying Nos.3 and 4 beds as part of a wider study across north-west England. The results of this were recently received, and over 360 species have been recorded. The highlights include a nationally scarce spider *Robertus neglectus* that is in long-term decline and is a first record for the 10km square that covers the Eyes, a Woodlouse Fly *Payullia maculata* which is widespread although localised in Britain with few records from the north-west of England, and a plant bug *Sticktopleurus punctonervus* that has spread from the south-east in recent years. This is the second record for Cheshire, the first being found near Crewe in 2023.

### Willow Tits

Willow Tits remain one of the Reserve's key species, though they are experiencing a worrying decline, as is the national population. There are a number of reasons for the recent population crash, including the transition from scrub to woodland habitat, competition from other tit species and predation by Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Four years ago, working with the RSPB, we obtained £95,000 from the Natural England Species Recovery Programme to try to reverse this decline. The money was used to employ a contractor to work alongside our wardening team. Employing a variety of coppicing techniques they have reversed the habitat decline in a number of areas across all four beds. Recently, we reached an agreement with an MMU student, Ben Secker, who will undertake a three-year research project, helping us more accurately to assess the size of our Willow Tit population and further understand the factors which have been contributing to the decline. This research will feed into other similar research which is taking place nationally, and we will have further updates in future Newsletters.

Thanks are due to David Bowman for this report on Willow Tits.

### Reserve Security

2025 was a bad year for anti-social behaviour on the Eyes. In the dry spring damaging fires, some of which were almost certainly started deliberately, caused much habitat loss, particularly on No.2 bed, the Ship Canal track and parts of No.4 bed. In addition, illegal incursions on to No.3 bed resulted in our storage units being broken into and some items stolen. All the incidents were reported to the Police, whose response was limited although they did advise the erection of a security camera. One was placed near to the storage units, only to be stolen the following day! Fortunately, where the offenders were gaining access to the bed was discovered, and since the erection of razor wire at the relevant places by our contractor Steve Fletcher, no further problems have been reported.

During 2025 all the scaffold hides on No.3 bed were examined by the company that erected them and any identified safety issues were resolved. Some timbers on the Morgan Hide have also been replaced.

### 2024 Annual Report

The publication of the 2024 Annual Report has been delayed for reasons beyond WEGC's control, and we apologise to permit holders who ordered a copy. It has now been completed and both hard copies and the email version as currently being sent out.

### 'Woolston Eyes – From Wasteland to Wetland'

This is a 212 page book that I published in 2023, with a revised edition the following year. It is a history of WECG and how the Eyes has developed since 1980 into one of the most important wetlands in the United Kingdom. The book is still selling well, and there are not many copies left. If anyone would like to purchase a copy please visit our website [www.woolstoneeyes.com](http://www.woolstoneeyes.com), where full details can be found on the home page.

### Eva Pyrah

For the past year Eva has been one of the two RSPB Wardens who have been working for WECG on habitat management on the Eyes. This has been carried out to an exceptionally high standard, as many of you will have seen. Sadly, Eva has found another position with the RSPB in Wales, which is a great opportunity for her. She will be greatly missed, but her commitment to the Reserve will live on in all the work that she and her colleague Jasmine Smith have carried out. Our loss is RSPB in Wales gain! Among Eva's many achievements has been the recruitment and organising of volunteers that has enabled so much more work to be carried out. If any permit holders have time to offer their services and would like to become a volunteer please send an email to our website at [info@woolstoneeyes.com](mailto:info@woolstoneeyes.com). I can assure you that your contribution will be greatly appreciated and make a real difference on the Reserve.

### Last but by no means least!

Finally, we should like to thank all of our permit holders - 740 at the last count - for all your support, and we hope you continue to enjoy your visits to the Reserve in 2026. The first Black-necked Grebe returned on 27<sup>th</sup> February, and others are arriving most days. At the time of writing (14<sup>th</sup> March) at least 30 were present on No.4 bed.

### Brian Martin