



The past few years have seen significant developments on the Reserve; most importantly the creation of a new 100 acre wetland on No.4 bed. This has trebled the amount of standing water on the Eyes, and is already attracting a great variety of wildlife, including some rare species.

The wetland is a result of a co-operative effort between WECG and our other partners, including the RSPB, Natural England and the landowner, Peel Holdings. Without Peel's permission and commitment to the project the development could not have taken place nor the large amount of funding been obtained. This was partly from the Heritage Lottery Fund and also from DEFRA. An enormous amount of time was spent at the pre-planning stage by all the partners, notably by David Bowman of WECG. Work finally began on the wetland in late 2019, and was completed in the late autumn of 2022. The earthmoving was carried out to an exceptionally high standard by our contractor Steve Fletcher and his team and in no time water levels began to rise on the west cell and wetland species moved in. In many ways it was not an auspicious time for the development as most of the work co-incided with the Covid lockdown. This presented major challenges for our contractor, who faced swingeing increases in fuel costs and a number of instances of vandalism and theft. Undeterred by all this the work progressed and the superb wetland that has resulted is a credit to all involved. As well as attracting wildlife it must be remembered that wetlands such as that on No.4 bed act as carbon sinks, storing large amounts of carbon dioxide, one of the important drivers of climate change.

Wildlife sightings on No.4 Bed.

During the spring of 2022 two rare bird species visited the west cell, the first a White-tailed Lapwing, followed by a Temminck's Stint. The Lapwing was a first record for Woolston and for Cheshire and the Stint was the first sighting at the Eyes since 1989. Equally unexpected in the autumn was a Penduline Tit, just the second record for Cheshire. Initially it found its way into a ringer's net on No.3 bed before moving to the east cell on No.4, where it was photographed and remained for at least two days. This is a species whose home range is eastern Europe and parts of the Mediterranean. It is clear that given the amount of wetland now at Woolston anything is likely to turn up.

In 2023 Black-headed Gulls bred for the first time on both cells of No.4 bed, while common species such as Coot are breeding in increasing numbers with up to 40 broods recorded across the Reserve this year. Several pairs of Shoveler have also bred, and record numbers of breeding Pochard, for which Woolston is a national stronghold, have produced an amazing 30 broods.

Woolston's wetlands are incredibly rich in insects of many species and during the recent hot spell in June amazing numbers of some Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies) have been recorded – for example one count of over 130 Black-tailed Skimmers on No.4 bed. Butterflies have thrived in the hot weather, notably Ringlets, with up to 16 seen recently.

Swifts, whose numbers have been declining across most of the U.K., have been feeding in large flocks over the new wetlands, the food obtained there helping to sustain a thriving population on a nearby

housing estate. It is pleasing to report that a pair of Marsh Harriers has successfully bred on the Reserve for the third year in succession.

Access to No.4 bed

Many permit holders will be aware that the Group recently erected more secure fencing on the access to No.4 bed. This was necessary following instances of disturbance on the wetland by people who would not accept that there is – and never has been – public access to this bed. We are aware that some permit holders have been experiencing difficulties in opening the normal padlock, which is the same sort as on the barrier at the entrance to the Reserve and the gate on to No.3 bed. There is also a round padlock on the gate on to No.4 bed but please do not attempt to use your key to open this. It is for vehicular access only. Unfortunately, on a few occasions permit holders have broken their keys in the round padlock, which we have then had to replace. The normal padlock was recessed to prevent vandalism, but the Group will review the situation if problems of access continue.

Surveys on the Reserve

Many long-term studies of the Reserve's wildlife continue to be carried out, both by WECG Wardens and others. During 2022 a group from Natural England spent the summer surveying insects, the results of which will appear in the Annual Report, which is now with the printers. One of their amazing finds was three specimens of a beetle that had never been recorded before in the U.K. or western Europe. The normal range for this species is east of a line from Finland to the Ukraine, so how could it have made its way to Woolston? There are several possibilities. The beetles could have come via a ship on the Canal, or in a shipment of timber from Scandinavia, piles of which are stacked in a yard close to the entrance to the Reserve. It may never be known for certain, but they are unlikely to have arrived without human assistance. A paper about this discovery was published in a recent edition of *The Coleopterist* – the journal of beetle studies. It is likely that more will be heard about these studies.

Black-necked Grebes and Willow Tits

These two iconic Woolston specialities have had differing fortunes during the past few years. The breeding populations of Black-necked Grebes had averaged about ten pairs up to 2021, but there was a remarkable breeding season in 2022 when at least 38 adults returned in the spring and 19 pairs bred. No. 3 bed was full of growing young during May and June, and for example on 26th May one experienced observer reported 64 grebes - 37 adults and 27 young on the bed - with another birdwatcher finding 32 growing young there on the same day. This is almost certainly the most successful breeding season ever in the U.K. since the species first bred in the very early years of the twentieth century. This year slightly fewer adults have returned but at the time of writing 13 broods have been seen with many growing young, including Woolston's first brood of four young.

Willow Tits, on the other hand, have declined in recent years from up to 30 breeding pairs to currently little more than five successful nests found during the painstaking surveys carried out each year by Alan Rustell and Mike Lloyd. This is a species that is facing a major decline nationally, and which is now absent from many parts of the country. The reasons for the rapid fall in the population at Woolston is not entirely clear, although undoubtedly some long-established territories on No.4 bed were lost during the construction of the new wetland. Even allowing for this, many breeding pairs have been lost from other parts of the Eyes where the habitat has changed little. To try and reverse

the decline WECG has applied for a Species Recovery Grant to improve habitat in a large woodland on No.4 bed. We have just heard that the bid has been successful, and the money received will be spent on extensive coppicing and other improvements that will make the woodland more attractive to Willow Tits. Work on this major project should commence later in the year.

My book about Woolston Eyes

Some years ago it became apparent to me that with an ageing Committee the remarkable achievements of WECG in developing and managing Woolston Eyes could easily become forgotten if not written down. The book, entitled “Woolston Eyes, from Wasteland to Wetland” has taken a number of years of research and writing, but has now been completed, and hopefully will be published in the very near future. As I have said in the Preface it is a story that needs to be told, of how a group of volunteers has created over the past 43 years, with the help of partners and the support of our permit holders, a nationally important wildlife haven. When the book is available to purchase full details will be posted on the Eyes website: www.woolstoneyes.com

Habitat management of the Reserve

As many of you will know we have two full-time Wardens who have a range of responsibilities to keep the Eyes in prime condition.

The new wetlands on No.4 bed have added new challenges for them and without the help from a number of volunteers much less work would be possible. Lizzie Hill, one of our RSPB Wardens, writes “At Woolston Eyes we have a dedicated group of valued volunteers who assist with a range of habitat management and maintenance which are integral to the upkeep of the Reserve. These include Himalayan Balsam removal, pathway maintenance, building rafts for nesting birds and a variety of other tasks.” If you have the time and would be interested in becoming a volunteer that would allow a lot more important work to be carried out, thereby improving the Reserve both for wildlife and visitors. For further information please contact Lizzie on elizabeth.hill@rspb.org.uk

More good news

One of the benefits of WECG’s close relationship with the landowner, Peel Holdings, has been that the Group now has leasehold status on No.3 bed and a large part of No.4 bed. This followed several years of meetings and discussions and has given us a level of security on the land for the first time. Our thanks go to all those who made this possible and their hard work in achieving it.

Finally for those of you have ordered a copy of our 2022 Annual Report, either as a hard copy or the electronic version, it is now with the printers and hopefully will be sent out in the next few weeks.

A copy of this Newsletter will be placed in the John Morgan hide, and will also be put on the WECG website.

Thank you for all your support; we look forward to meeting many of you on the Eyes during the year. Don’t forget to carry your permit!

Brian Martin