



1999
BREEDING BIRDS
of
PAXTON PITS,
Little Paxton village
and surrounding area

Foreword

We are often asked why this annual report does not include all the records of birds which have occurred in Little Paxton during the year, not just those which breed. The simple answer is that it is enough for us to encourage/persuade/bully visitors, be they casual or regular, to provide information for the report. We are convinced that a great deal of valuable information about Paxton's birds resides in the notebooks and minds of birdwatchers and residents alike. Perhaps you can help us in 2000?

1999 was yet another exciting year in the development of Paxton Pits, with the completion of the draft management plan, which identifies the priorities for the nature reserve during the next decade, and which drew heavily upon information collated for this annual publication. It was also the year in which the reserve entered the electronic age, with its own website, co-sponsored by the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve (FPPNR) and St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club. As well as providing information for visitors, the website enables virtual visitors to e-mail bird sightings to us and to check out the latest birds news from the Pits complex. Visit us at www.paxton-pits.org.uk if you're online.

We should like to thank all those who took part in the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey during 1999, and those others who have contributed information to this year's report. We should also again like to thank Huntingdonshire District Council, especially Ron Elloway and his team, landowners and the Friends, without whom there would be no annual report. Thanks also to the RSPB, which has provided some of the illustrations for assisted with the production of the report.

The information contained in these reports are proving a valuable management tool for the HDC staff and volunteers on the reserve. It can become even more valuable if every reader provides their records of common breeding birds, both on the reserve and in the village, in 2000.

Thank you again for your support.

Trevor Gunton Julian Hughes
Chairman and compiler Production editor

December 1999

Please send all records of 2000 breeding birds to Trevor Gunton, 15 St James Road, Little Paxton, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE19 4QW. Tel: (01480) 473562.

Or e-mail: paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk

Or record them in the sightings book at the Visitor Centre.

Great crested grebe

Resident and winter visitor



(Rob Banbury)

The season started in January, with a pair in winter plumage displaying on Heronry North. By the 16th, some birds were in full breeding plumage, one doing a 'weed dance' with a winter plumaged bird on 21st January. By 21st February, a pair were constructing a nest platform on Heronry South.

Some nesting pairs lost out to coot, but others were double-brooded: pairs displaying again until mid August, with one nest, set in open water on Heronry South, occupied from 7th August and eventually producing two young. Overall it is estimated that 10+ pairs nested, or attempted to do so, with a successful and prolonged season producing about 15 young. As in 1998, a single chick was still being fed by its parents into October.

Little grebe

Resident in small numbers and winter visitor.

Non-breeding singles were seen and heard on a number of pits, the most regular being Heronry Lake, where up to five birds were recorded and breeding was suspected by one observer. A new breeding site was located on the New Workings, where two pairs produced two or three young. The traditional Farm Pit site held a further two pairs, each with two small young on 23rd August, with an additional 10 adults. We can only wonder from how far these additional birds, and the seven on Heronry South on 15th October, travel to Paxton at the end of the breeding season. A good year for this attractive yet elusive species.

Grey heron

Mainly resident, though some may arrive from Continental Europe from July to October.

The traditional site on Heronry South became active on 2nd February, when two pairs were repairing existing nests. By 12th February, three were in use, with one bird already sitting. Five nests were in use by 14th March, and the first young were being fed by 26th March. On 8th April, eight occupied nests were counted, all but one situated in the large willow tree beneath the cormorant colony. Some nests remained in use until early July. Eight young birds were counted in the nests, but during July and August, up to 12 youngsters were seen on nearby pits, though these may not all have been local.

Cormorant

Resident during breeding season and winter visitor. Breeding population peaked in 1996, but has since fallen.

A third year of decline: this year's best estimate was 113+ occupied nests. Some may have remained hidden, but identical counting methods were used as in 1998, (when 165+ were seen) by the same observer (TGG).

On 21st January, birds were occupying nests, with numerous individuals displaying and the roost holding around 200 birds (including one ringed at Rutland Water, per FD). With blackthorn in flower on 18th February, over 50 nests were active, rising to 80 by 4th March and the seasonal maxima of 113 on 13th March, when chicks were being fed. A week later, more than half of the nests appeared to contain young. On 21st April, the first youngsters were out of the nests, on branches around the colony. By 8th June, over 100 young birds were counted on the water, banks and in the trees, though some were still begging for food in mid July.

Given the evidence of nests viewed over the three month breeding season, productivity is judged at 2-3 young per nest, with perhaps as many as 250 young raised.

Mute swan

Resident, with a large non-breeding flock occurring in most years.

Another very successful breeding season, with seven pairs raising no fewer than 24 young. The most successful families were in residence on Hayling Pit, with five of six cygnets fledging. Two pairs on Pumphouse Pit failed to produce any young, while a new breeding

site on New Workings produced two pairs and no fewer than eight cygnets.

Greylag goose

Resident, with some local movements up and down the Ouse Valley.

Another very successful breeding season for this expanding species, which was introduced for sporting purposes in the Ouse Valley. A maximum count of 66 goslings on Island Pit on 30th May and no fewer than 29 broods on the A1 Pits were both good indicators of breeding success.

Eight pairs are estimated to have raised 25 young on the Sailing Lake; another 20 broods were counted on Pumphouse Pit. It is estimated that 60 pairs raised young in 1999, though this is considered a minimum. Flocks of over 200 birds (adults and young) were recorded on some pits at the end of the season.

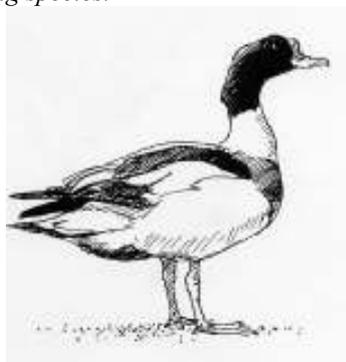
Canada goose

This introduced species is resident in the Ouse Valley, breeding in and around the gravel workings since the late 1950s.

The breeding season started in February, when up to eight pairs prospected the Sailing Lake islands. The PBBS suggested about 27 pairs bred, with birds present during the breeding season on Hayling, Rudd, Weedy, Heronry South and Pumphouse Pits. However, Sailing Lake remains the stronghold, with flocks of up to 60, including c.50 goslings, counted from late May to July, and one pair looking after 20 goslings on the Meadow in early June.

Shelduck

Spring passage (?) and summer visitor. Rare breeding species.



(RSPB)

One or two pairs were seen on numerous dates throughout the season, and up to four pairs loafed around the New Workings (12 were noted there on 16th May). Rare elsewhere and

only occasionally on Sailing Lake. No young were reported.

Gadwall

Winter visitor and rare breeding species in the Ouse Valley.

Increasingly reported on several pits during the summer, so it was no great surprise when a group of seven birds were noted on Heronry South on 7th July. The observer (TGG) was unclear whether these were adults in eclipse or young birds, however. A month later, on 7th August, the same observer recorded eight females with seven well-grown young, the first positive sign of breeding since 1996 (when a female and two young became the reserve's first confirmed breeding record). Groups of up to 20 were seen in August.

Mallard

Resident and winter visitor.

As with most familiar species, this bird is rarely recorded by most regular visitors to Paxton Pits, so it remains difficult to establish a true picture of breeding success or failure. During the breeding season, pairs were noted on seven pits, but not all these pairs bred. A female was present with 12 young on Island Pit on 25th April.

The breeding season started in late March and continued to mid August, when two very small ducklings and a female were present on Island Pit. The estimate (by TGG), of 10-12 pairs raising 38+ young, seems reasonable. The PBBS report warned not to take this species for granted. More records, please, in 2000.

Shoveler

Winter visitor, but with increasing number of summer records.

Increasingly recorded in ones and twos during the breeding season, which has raised hopes that this species may soon breed. Birds were noted displaying on Heronry South at the beginning of the season. It will be important to make a careful note even of individual birds and their location next year.

Tufted duck

Increasing resident, numerous winter visitor.

First young were recorded on the early date of 3rd June, when a female with seven ducklings appeared on Heronry South. This was again the most productive pit for breeding tufted ducks in the complex, with five pairs producing at least 42 ducklings, with young birds being noted up to 7th August, though not

all reached maturity. On other pits, a further seven pairs produced at least 18 young, and it is believed that the Cloudy Pit held additional birds. The estimate of c.60 young hatched is similar to the 1998 results.

Sparrowhawk

Resident. Some visual evidence of migration in April, September and October (Clarke).

This impressive raptor is now a familiar sight around the village as it hunts in gardens and open spaces, taking prey as large as collared doves. We should be pleased to receive any details of attacks on birds in gardens and the species being taken.

In 1999, more records were received of sparrowhawks than kestrels, a remarkable turn around in the last 25 years, when local sightings of sparrowhawks were noteworthy. It is also good to report that a pair of sparrowhawks bred, raising two young, in an area of the Pits complex outside the reserve.

Kestrel

Resident, but increasingly scarce.

Its status locally would seem to be declining, even from last year, reflecting the national picture which is believed to result from a decline in prey caused by farming changes. While by no means rare, sightings can no longer be assured around the reserve, with most records coming from the A1 flyover, the Pumphouse fields and the Meadow south of the Visitor Centre. No feeding groups or young birds have been recorded for two years. Can anyone comment?

Hobby

Summer visitor and passage migrant. May breed locally.

Generally considered to have been a poor year, with the first on northward passage on 29th April (SM). Small numbers (max. 3 together, 2nd May - PL) were reported, mainly over the mature, southern pits, during May and June. The excellent contribution from Ray Matthews (below) describes one such occasion – more contributions like this, please!

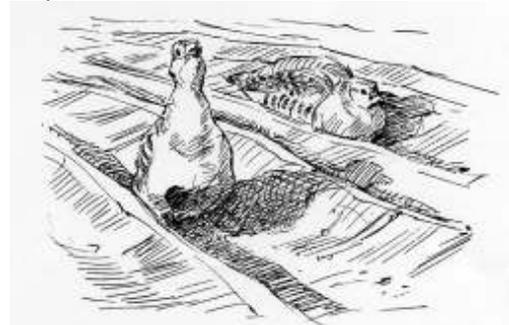
No family groups or suspicion of breeding birds were reported locally. The last record of the season was one over the Meadow, among a large movement of swallows and house martins, on 3rd October.

“The display went on for nearly an hour from about 9 pm over Little Paxton on 30th June. A massive hatch of Summer Chafer

(*Amphimallon solstitialis*) concentrated around the Wellingtonia Pine and two Scots Pines at the edge of the school playing field. As these pump, slow-flying beetles hovered around the foliage, a team of four hobbies took it in turns to flash past the trees like fighter planes, delicately picking the chafers out of the air with their talons, one at a time, and eating them on the wing. Even more delicately, they deftly separated out the soft, edible part of each beetle and discarded the hard wing casings, before turning for another attack. On several occasions, I was able to see, through binoculars, the moment that a hobby caught a chafer – the perfectly timed intersection of two different trajectories – spectacular, and all watched from my garden”.

Grey partridge

Very scarce resident.



(RSPB)

The only record was of two birds on the New Workings on 8th May (MD). If this is the true reflection of its status locally (and it probably is), this once-familiar farmland bird is on the brink of extinction at Paxton.

Red-legged partridge

Scarce breeding resident.

The dramatic decline continues, with only a scattering of records, all on the New Workings and the fields to the north and east. No records of family groups were received, so the status of this species remains unclear. Comments and further records are invited.

Pheasant

Numerous and widespread – probably?

A single male calling by the parish boundary during the PBBS was the only bird recorded away from the rearing area near Pumphouse Pit, reflecting the fact that this introduced species is of little interest to birdwatchers.

Water rail

Principally a winter visitor, but breeding confirmed for the first time in 1998.

Following the first documented breeding of water rail near the Meadow last year, the centre of interest moved to Washout Pit and its reedbed, where birds were heard calling in May and June. This was followed by a sighting of three birds together on 26th September, presumably a family party. Elsewhere, records were received from Heronry North and the Meadow Trail in late winter, but not during the spring.

Moorhen

Resident, common around most south pits and the Meadow Trail.

Moorhen remains a successful breeding species, with highest productivity from pairs on Heronry South, Sailing Lake and the New Workings. The temporal habitat in the latter area held three pairs, each producing four or five young.

Overall, a minimum of c.17 pairs raised about 50 young, compared with 10 pairs raising c.40 young in 1998. Difficulties observing Cloudy Pit resulted in no pairs being reported from here. One pair produced two young at the Mill river crossing.

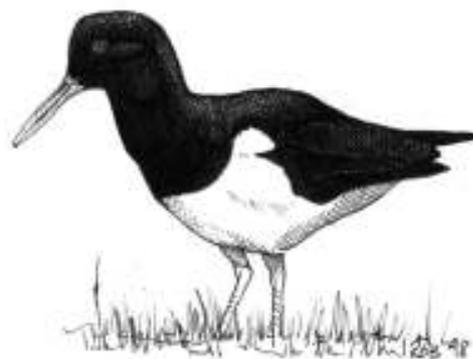
Coot

Breeding resident and common winter visitor. Yet another increase, from one of our most successful waterbirds. The season started early with nest-building noted on 12th February, though the first young were not seen until 10th May. Breeding occurred on no fewer than 10 pits, with family groups active until mid August. A1 North was not fully explored, but reasonable coverage of the other pits was achieved. The final estimate is c.36 nests producing c.70 young birds, compared with a count of 30 nests in 1998.

Oystercatcher

Summer visitor and occasional breeding species.

Up to five adults were present on various pits throughout the breeding season, and apparently 'sitting' birds were reported on the Pumphouse and Sailing Lake islands. On 7th July, an adult and three young birds (with shorter, dark bills) were feeding together on Sailing Lake island, behaving like a family group. Did they breed at Paxton, or nearby, as the Ouse Valley population grows annually?



(Rob Banbury)

In addition, an adult and a one-week old chick was seen on the New Workings in July, suggesting that they bred on the Pits complex.

Little ringed plover

Summer visitor and autumn passage.

First recorded at Washout Pit on 28th March (SM), but most later records were from the New Workings where one pair was suspected of breeding: three adults displayed in April and May, while two juveniles (without parents) were seen on 2nd August (TGG, SE). There is a chance that these birds were on passage and did not originate from Paxton. This species remains 'on the brink' around the Pits and may soon be lost as a breeding species.

Ringed plover

Summer visitor, spring and autumn passage migrant.

The true picture is, as ever, confused by the large number of passage birds in spring: 19 adults were on Pumphouse Pit islands on 28th April, with four young already hatched. By 2nd May, a regular observer counted five families (c.12 young) on the large island. No young were seen after 4th July at this very productive site.

Only one pair nested on Sailing Lake islands, and at least one pair was present throughout the season on the New Workings. Our best estimate is that 10 pairs hatched c.18 young in 1999 - another successful breeding season.

Lapwing

Resident in small numbers, passage migrant and winter visitor.

Breeding was confirmed on Sailing Lake, the New Workings and Pumphouse Pit, with 10 pairs hatching eggs. The maximum chick count was 18 on Pumphouse Pit. The New Workings and the excellent management work to keep the Sailing Lake and Pumphouse

islands in prime condition mean that the Pits provide a refuge for this species, which appears to have been lost from nearby farmland.

By late summer, post-breeding flocks were building, with 138 juveniles roosting on New Workings on 4th July, a flock which had increased to 500 birds by 30th August.

Redshank

Summer visitor and spring passage migrant.



(RSPB)

A count of 12 juveniles on 4th July on New Workings was noteworthy, in an area where adults were seen displaying earlier in the breeding season. Elsewhere, up to four pairs were estimated to be on Sailing Lake and at least two more pairs on the Pumphouse islands, though eight birds were displaying on 1st April. The PBBS estimate of 'up to six pairs' may turn out to have been a minimum.

Black-headed gull

Irregular breeder; common winter visitor.

One pair nested on Sailing Lake, where four juveniles were seen on 18th August (CS). A former breeder in considerable numbers, black-headed gull is now mainly regarded as an autumn and winter visitor, roosting in large numbers at Grafham Water.

Non-breeding birds were regularly noted during the summer on most northern pits, especially Pumphouse and the New Workings.

Common tern

Summer visitor.

The first bird was seen on passage on 15th April, but by 2nd May, seven were 'in residence' on Pumphouse Pit, the same date as the first ten birds were seen on Sailing Lake. Numbers increased rapidly, to about 35 by the

end of May. The first two small chicks were noted on the shoreline of Sailing Lake island on 15th June. All breeding occurred on the Sailing Lake islands this year, with Pumphouse Pit and the New Working used solely for feeding and preening.

On 6th July, 24 young birds were counted (CS), with the total flock counted as 68 birds the following day (JH). From 9th July, fledged young were being fed by adults on the Pumphouse islands and New Workings. An interesting observation was made of a common tern attacking a hobby which flew close to the breeding colony.

The last record of birds was of 10 juveniles and adults around the Sailing Lake on 30th August. Our best estimate is that 25-30 pairs nested, perhaps a marginal increase on 1998.

Stock dove

Breeding resident and winter visitor.

This remains a thinly distributed breeding bird around the pits complex, with an estimate of fewer than 10 breeding pairs, principally around the mature, southern pits, though one or two pairs breed annually in the old Pump House. Spring roosts were smaller than in previous years, well down on the thousand birds recorded in 1998.

In the village, stock doves are regular visitors to wooded gardens and used to breed in and around Paxton Hall, though this has not been confirmed in recent years. Perhaps declining regionally?

Woodpigeon

Breeding resident and winter visitor.

Surely we haven't lost this familiar species locally? No records, other than 25 calling during the PBBS, have been received. Certainly, many hundreds of woodpigeons roost from early autumn to late spring, with flocks of c.500 foraging in the fields between the A1 Pits and Haul Road.

Woodpigeons are common in the village, with an estimated 25 pairs nesting annually. Young squabs and less-careful adults are a popular prey for sparrowhawks.

Collared dove

Resident breeder, producing young throughout the year.

The only regular collared doves around the pits are around the Visitor Centre and adjacent gravel-industry buildings. Increasing around the village, with an estimated 40-50 nesting pairs. No large flocks were reported.

Turtle dove

Summer visitor.

First record was on 13th April, a day later than in 1998. Estimating the breeding population of this attractive dove remains difficult. The PBBS suggested seven pairs (much lower than in 1998), but mid-season records of singing males suggest more. There were 10 singing in early May and seemed always to be in earshot around the pits. By 20th July, at least 20 males were calling. Do they 'sing' on passage? Birds continued to be reported up to 21st August, with one singing during the near-total solar eclipse on 11th August. No family parties were reported.

Cuckoo

Summer visitor.

The first was recorded on 18th April (SM), but there were then few records before the beginning of May. The PBBS suggested four calling males, and other records are in accord with that estimate. A very black and white juvenile was noted over the New Workings on 25th July – the last record in 1999. The species appears to have maintained its status since 1994, though anecdotal comments from other areas suggest declines.

Tawny Owl

Resident.

Anglers reported several birds calling during early spring, as usual. Breeding was attempted in a specially constructed nestbox on the reserve, but a single egg was found to have been deserted following a period of very heavy rain. The status of this truly nocturnal species remain unknown.

Little Owl

Resident.

Breeding was proven for the first time in recent years, with a pair raising one young to the west of the New Workings. The highlight of the summer for many local birdwatchers, these birds were last seen in the breeding area on 11th August.

Swift

Summer visitor and passage migrant.

Unless breeding occurred in Diddington village, the entire confirmed breeding

population of this mainly African species consists of just one pair seen entering the eaves of a large Victorian house near Little Paxton church at dusk on 12th June – the same location as in 1998.

This year's first record was on 2nd May (PL), followed by a light movement throughout the 4th. On 8th and 9th May, thousands of swifts moved north with swallows and martins, and three hobbies. There was no comparable southward movement in late summer, with no records received after 18 July, when 20 birds were feeding over Little Paxton church.

Kingfisher

Resident.



(Rob Banbury)

Despite being one of the most well-watched species around the pits, there were no records of family parties this year. The most frequent sightings were from Heronry South which almost certainly held two pairs (two young, but no adults, were seen here on 15th June).

A pair was confirmed nesting on the edge of Hayling Lake (TH), and another pair was seen around the New Workings (SE, JH). There is strong evidence that another pair were in residence at the northern end of Pumphouse Pit. Our best estimate is 4-5 pairs, with birds seen on almost every pit in the complex and regularly viewable from the Visitor Centre during the spring. Quite a recovery from no breeding pairs (indeed, no birds!) in 1997 following harsh winter weather.

Green woodpecker

Resident.

The status of this vocal species would appear not to have changed during the last six years. Records span the entire Pits system and Diddington village. We estimate that three to five pairs were present, though two juveniles at the south end of New Workings were the only youngsters reported (SE). The Hayden Hide is

proving a regular spot to view these brightly-coloured birds.

Great spotted woodpecker

Resident.

Regular sightings from the village indicate that great spotted woodpeckers are now regular visitors to garden feeders. The PBBS suggested that as many as six pairs may breed around the pits complex, but were there others in the village? More work is needed to clarify the status of this apparently increasing bird.

Lesser spotted woodpecker

Resident.

Individuals were seen near the Moorings, Haul Road, in the woodland to the north of Sailing Lake and around Heronry Lake: at least one pair is presumed to have bred within the reserve. One observer reports regular sightings around Paxton Hall, Bydand Lane and Hawthorn Close in Little Paxton – the same or another bird? On one occasion, a lesser spotted woodpecker was seen carrying food in the village. Perhaps there were two pairs. All records of this difficult-to-see bird are requested.

Skylark

Resident and winter visitor. Passage migrant?

No breeding records or family groups.

Recorded around Pumphouse Pit and over the fields between the Haul Road and A1 during the PBBS. The skylark's status is unknown, and no winter flocks were reported. Numbers of this once-familiar bird have fallen dramatically nationally, yet we know little about its status locally.

Sand martin

Passage migrant and summer breeding species.

The first record, over Heronry South on 13th March, was 13 days earlier than in 1998, and by 3rd April, birds had occupied the New Workings and were prospecting a sand tip near Bardon's processing factory. By 2nd May, at least 50 nesting holes were active and, up to 10th May, passage birds continued to move north (with swallows).



The main breeding colony on New Workings held birds until at least 7th August, when a minimum of 70 sites

were in use. Counts in late July and August totalled 100-200 birds, with at least 100 juveniles counted in late summer (SE). A post-season visit to the colony found c.120 nesting holes showing signs of recent occupation (TGG). One pair nested in a drain hole near the Mill river crossing. The last south-bound birds were seen on 8th October. (*illustration by Rob Banbury*)

Swallow

Passage migrant and summer visitor.

First of the year was over Pumphouse Pit on 30th March (4th April in 1998). Swallows seem to hang on as a local breeder, with a single pair at Boughton Lodge Farm, 4-5 pairs at SJ Paper Mill and at least six pairs in Diddington. Some nests were still active until 27th August, with a flock of 80 birds over Diddington village.

From 30th August, very large movements of swallows were noted for a week, with a minimum of 1,000 birds attempting to roost in the patches of reed on New Workings on 2nd September – a remarkable sight! The last record, on 12th October, was of two birds flying south.

House martin

Passage migrant and declining summer visitor.

Unlike the other hirundines, the first record was later than in 1998, by four days, on 9th April. The most productive breeding area was the unused buildings behind the old paper mill, with eight occupied nests. A further 13 nest sites were active in Little Paxton village, a similar tally to the 1998 survey.

Those birds that do nest are arriving later at their favoured sites each year and maximum counts are not possible until early July, though pairs regularly have second broods. Birds remained around these village nests until at least 25th September, with the last record of the year over Heronry South on 12th October.

Yellow wagtail

Passage migrant and declining breeding species of wet meadows.

The first four birds were noted on New Workings on 3rd April, a site which proved to be a successful breeding area, with probably four pairs producing young and seven juveniles seen on 14th August (though some may have been on passage). They are also presumed to have bred on the Pumphouse islands, where a male was seen carrying food on several occasions. Autumn passage continued very

late this year, with the last bird recorded on Pumphouse Pit on 13th October.

Grey wagtail

Irregular breeder and winter visitor.

Once again, presumed to have bred somewhere around the disused Mill by Paxton Lock, with adults seen carrying food. Birds were also seen around the Sailing Lake islands, the Meadow and Cloudy Pit during the breeding season – presumably the Mill birds, since they will forage widely.

At Stirtloe Pumping Station, a pair is reported to have raised three young. Are grey wagtails under-recorded, or really increasing locally?

Pied wagtail

Resident and passage migrant, with some flocking during the winter.

The PBBS recorded two pairs within the pits complex, but this is an under-recorded species and it is suspected that several pairs must breed in Paxton village, where it is a familiar bird in larger gardens and open spaces. No pronounced passage was reported, but autumn and winter roosts around the Sailing Lake and playing fields are estimated at 50-100 birds.

Wren

Resident.

The PBBS confirms the continued spectacular increase in wrens around the pits, with 70-80 pairs. Many (several hundred?) must nest in village gardens. The run of mild winters have undoubtedly helped this little songster. No unusual roosts were reported.

Dunnock

Resident.

An apparent reduction in breeding numbers to 20 pairs around the pits (PBBS) would seem insignificant given that the under-recorded village population is so large. Here, it seems as numerous as ever.

Robin

Resident and winter visitor.

With around 50 breeding pairs recorded during the PBBS, one of our most popular birds maintains its status. Given the success of countless pairs of garden-bred robins this year, an overall increase in numbers is possible. Indeed, many visitors to the reserve commented on the substantial number of robins to the east of Heronry South during late August and September. There was a large influx of, presumably, continental robins in late September and early October.

Nightingale

Summer visitor.



(Rob Banbury)

The summer saw the first national BTO nightingale survey since 1980, and it is pleasing to report that Paxton Pits is the most important site in Cambridgeshire for this wonderful African visitor. The first bird of the year was by the Haul Road on 4th April (AP), the earliest ever record in Huntingdonshire. While the number of breeding pairs remains unknown, the best estimate of singing males was 25 pairs, almost identical to 1998, but with a markedly different distribution.

The success of this scrub-loving species is entirely linked to habitat management on the reserve. A reduction in numbers along the Haul Road suggests that the growth of vegetation in this former stronghold is rendering the area less suitable. Similar contractions were noticed from around Hayling and Rudd Pits. Nightingales did not breed here during the last survey 20 years ago. We should not take them for granted.

The last nightingale was in song on 13th June, so visitors should remember to visit in May or the first weekend of June to hear the birds.

Blackbird

Resident and winter visitor.

Against the national trend, blackbirds appear to be increasing locally, with a minimum of 60 pairs around the pits and in local gardens. An increase in numbers in the autumn may have reflected movement of European birds (see also Robin).

Song thrush

Resident.

A most welcome trend, against a backdrop of long-term decline, is the increasing number of song thrushes, with three times the number of pairs recorded during the PBBS (12-15 pairs in

1999). Numbers in village gardens may also have increased – though no counts were undertaken, singing males certainly appeared to be more abundant this year.

Mistle thrush

Resident.



(Rob Banbury)

Seven birds to the east of Island Pit in late May was the only family group recorded, but others were seen or heard around Heronry South, the Meadow, Cloudy Pit, Hayling Pit and within the village. A lack of information makes it impossible to make an accurate estimate of this species' population.

Sedge warbler

Summer visitor.

For this, as for most warbler species, the PBBS provides the most accurate estimate of breeding numbers. The first bird was in song on 10th April, the same date as in 1998. With c.60 singing males noted overall, the status of this summer visitor would seem virtually unchanged.

Grasshopper warbler

Summer visitor in most years, though breeding sporadic.

A male sang on the edge of the Island Pit from at least 21st April to mid May, but nothing is known of breeding. Other males were briefly heard reeling from the north of the playing field and Sailing Lake (perhaps the same bird?).

Reed warbler

Summer visitor.

No first dates received, but by 30th April, there were at least 20 singing males performing well in the reeds in Washout Pit. The survey counted 37 singing males, but as reed warblers

can breed later than the last PBBS date, true numbers are probably higher. For example, an estimated 40 males were singing around A1 South on 13th June. Quick to take advantage of expanding habitat such as that created on the New Workings, where three pairs probably bred, with young present late into August. The 1998 estimate of 100+ breeding pairs may still be accurate.

Lesser whitethroat

Summer visitor.

The first bird, on 27th April, was a day later than in 1998, but there were at least six present by 30th. The PBBS estimate of nine pairs would seem to be in line with the views of regular observers and the trend of recent years. The distribution of lesser whitethroats around the pits is very much linked to overgrown thorn scrub and large hedgerows.

Whitethroat

Summer visitor.

First recorded in Wray House Garden on 23rd April (the same date as in 1998, but 12 days later than in 1997). The PBBS recorded “an outstandingly successful breeding season” with perhaps 30 breeding pairs, 63% of which were in scrub to the east of Heronry Lake.

More than most other species, the whitethroat would seem to be greatly affected by weather conditions in its wintering grounds, and especially on migration.

Garden warbler

Summer visitor.

Another species to have been first recorded on the same date as in 1998 (26th April), the garden warbler continues to challenge the song-identification skills of even the most experienced observers. The southern pits remain the stronghold, with most of the estimated 20 pairs occurring around the Heronry Lake, especially Wray House Garden.

Blackcap

Summer breeding bird, which overwinters in very small numbers.

No early singing birds were reported this year, suggesting an absence of over-wintering individuals. Little Paxton, with its varied habitat, would seem to be ideal for breeding blackcaps. The PBBS estimated 60 birds holding territory around the Pits; there were probably a further 20 pairs in pockets around the village, such as around the playing field,

along the river, in the allotments and adjacent to the A1, a similar total population to 1998.

Chiffchaff

Summer visitor, passage migrant and increasingly a regular winter visitor.

The first singing bird was heard on 13th March and by the end of the month, chiffchaffs were widely distributed in most wooded areas, especially along the Haul Road, where six males were singing. Care is needed with these early birds, however, since birds sing on passage, but the PBBS counts in May and June are more accurate, with this year's total of c.30 possible/probable pairs very much in line with recent years.

Willow warbler

Summer visitor and presumed passage migrant.

The first records were five birds on 3rd April (again, the same date as in 1998), but the following arrival was notably slow, with many observers reporting nightingale before willow warbler! The PBBS recorded 50 pairs, down somewhat on recent years, when as many as 80 pairs have been estimated, though no particular reason for this fall has been suggested.

Goldcrest

Occasional breeding suspected in suitable habitat; winter visitor to gardens and reserve.

Remains a regular visitor to village gardens in winter and to the coniferous triangle in Wray House Garden, where they were occasionally seen during the breeding season. On 1st July, a juvenile (lacking a crown stripe) was seen regularly in a garden in St James' Road. Does this confirm breeding for the first time?

Spotted flycatcher

Occasional breeder and scarce passage migrant.

Although present, this now scarce summer visitor failed to breed successfully at its 1998 site in Bydand Lane, though a greater number of records were received from the recording area. On 15th May, one was seen by the reserve entrance at the lower end of Heronry South, while pairs were recorded during the breeding season in the playing field area, the wood to the south of New Workings, the southeast corner of Hayling Pit and a garden in Hawthorn Close. On 13th August, two adults and four juveniles were seen adjacent to Heronry South. Passage migrants or local breeders?

Long tailed tit

Resident.

The PBBS recorded 10 probable breeding pairs, though sightings from mid summer to early autumn suggest that the total may have been higher. Flocks of 20 birds were seen regularly from Hayden Hide, with a flock of 60-70 birds seen there on 11 August. Feeding flocks were noted along the footpaths and river bank in early autumn, and long-tailed tits have become a regular visitor to gardens in the village, supporting the view that the local population is increasing.

Coal tit

Mainly winter visitor to gardens and occasionally noted in the Pits complex.

Although no records were received for the reserve, numbers in the village seem to be increasing, with birds noted during the breeding season, though no family parties were reported. Is this true? All records are required for this apparently increasing species.

Blue tit

Resident.



The PBBS recorded a huge increase in blue tits compared to 1998, with about 30 pairs around the pits. Numbers in the village must be even greater, since, on the face of it, there would appear to be a pair in each garden!

(illustration by Charlie Eeles)

Great tit

Resident.

Another species doing well locally, both within the village and around the pits. The three lakes to the south of the Visitor Centre held 18 pairs, with a further 11 pairs in scrub to the east of Heronry Lake. The number inhabiting nestboxes in gardens cannot easily be calculated, but must be large.

Treecreeper

Resident.

A greater number of reports than in 1998, with birds seen carrying nesting material and food in the woodland close to the parish boundary. Treecreepers were also recorded around Hayling Pit. It is estimated that 2-3 pairs nested on the reserve, but we have never

received records of treecreepers visiting village gardens. Is this correct?

Jay

Resident and winter visitor.

The breeding status of jay is unclear, but there are some indications that they are increasing locally. Birds are frequently seen from Hayden and Kingfisher Hides, with regular sightings from the Meadow Trail. The best estimate is three pairs; breeding is suspected, but not confirmed. Numbers increased in autumn, with up to three birds together, presumably these were continental migrants.

Magpie

Resident.



(Rob Banbury)

Magpies are increasingly visiting larger gardens in the village, but around the pits, the PBBS suggests perhaps five or six pairs, mostly around the southern pits, though birds were regularly seen around Pumphouse Pit and in Diddington. In late summer, up to five magpies fed at the feeding station adjacent to Hayden Hide. We repeat last year's request for residents of Little Paxton to report any magpie nests in the village.

Jackdaw

Resident, and the predominant species in the winter roost on Heronry South.

Better known as a village breeding bird than around the pits, but probably nested in trees around Heronry South. A pair raised three young in St James Road, regularly feeding as a family on nearby bird tables.

From October, jackdaws formed the bulk of the corvid roost around Heronry South. The wildlife spectacle can exceed 10,000 corvids!

Rook

Resident and roosting winter visitor.

On 24th February, with the rookery adjacent to Sailing Lake unoccupied, around 250 rooks were feeding in the arable field immediately to the north of the woodland. By 10th March, around 30 nests were active in the rookery, and the maximum number of occupied nests was estimated at 45 pairs in early April – the standard size for the colony.

Carrion crow

Resident.

This is rapidly becoming a familiar garden bird, with frequent visits to bird tables. Pairs bred among the cormorant colony, around the New Workings and Pumphouse Pit. The PBBS total of 20 birds supports the view that last year's estimate of 6+ pairs is accurate.

Starling

Resident and numerous winter visitor.

Pairs bred in the sailing clubhouse (double-brooded) and in the trees along the parish boundary, west of Haul Road, but there must have been others; breeding is suspected around the quarry processing buildings and in dead timber in woodlands. Large numbers commute between the village and the sewage works. Flocks of young birds dominate garden bird tables in late summer, and one observer commented that only juveniles, never adults, bathe in the garden fountain!

House sparrow

Resident and wandering winter visitor in small flocks.

Few records from the pits during the breeding season, with house sparrows only becoming noticed when young are being fed by adults in gardens. In the absence of records, no assessment can be made of how this species is faring locally, since the few birds seen during the PBBS were on the village edge. No large flocks were reported, even outside the breeding season.

Chaffinch

Resident.

The PBBS recorded 50 pairs around the pits, an increase over 1998. Increased numbers were also noted at the Hayden Hide feeding station, and chaffinches continue to be common at garden bird tables. It is good to report at least one seed-eating bird increasing in number.

Greenfinch

Resident and common throughout the year at garden feeders.

The PBBS estimated 12 pairs, mostly around the southern pits, though additional pairs were confirmed around Pumphouse Pit. Numbers were apparently unchanged from 1998. A large population exists in the village, though this goes unrecorded.

Goldfinch

Resident.

A scattering of records of small groups, pairs and individuals during the breeding season, mostly around the village, playing field, school grounds, though they are scarce around the pits (just one pair during the PBBS). In August and early September, a group of 30 birds, mostly youngsters, fed on thistles near the Visitor Centre. These records suggest a small local population.

Linnet

Resident (and winter visitor?)

After years of decline, there is a sign of a small increase. Birds were noted during the breeding season on the playing field and hedgerows towards the Sailing Lake, Visitor Centre and in the scrub around the car park. Family groups were seen around Pumphouse Pit and the New Workings, suggesting local breeding.

Bullfinch

Resident.

The PBBS recorded 10 pairs, but this is higher than anecdotal records during the year would suggest. They were most frequently seen along the Meadow Trail, Haul Road, in the scrub to the east of Heronry Lake and around the Sailing Lake. With only scattered observations, it is difficult to be more accurate. More records, please!

Yellowhammer

Resident.

We have no breeding confirmation, but the PBBS suggested there were probably three pairs, though none was confirmed. A sad reflection of the status of this once-common farmland bird. In addition, a male held territory at Diddington, outside the PBBS area. The hedgerows to the north and west of Pumphouse Pit and the New Workings are the last remaining yellowhammer strongholds in the recording area.

Reed bunting

Resident.

The hedgerow between the A1 Pits and those around Pumphouse Pit and New Workings appear to be the stronghold for reed buntings.

Birds were also recorded in the Washout Pit reedbed and alongside the river. The 1998 estimate of c.20 breeding pairs was confirmed by the extension of the PBBS to include the entire pits complex.

Corn bunting

Resident.

The PBBS recorded a single bird (northeast of A1 North) in an area where singing birds have been recorded in previous years. Corn buntings were also recorded near the New Workings, suggesting that the “fat bird of the barley” is hanging on with perhaps two breeding pairs.



(RSPB)

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Find out more about the wildlife of Paxton Pits, including details of the latest sightings and of St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club by visiting our website: www.paxton-pits.org.uk