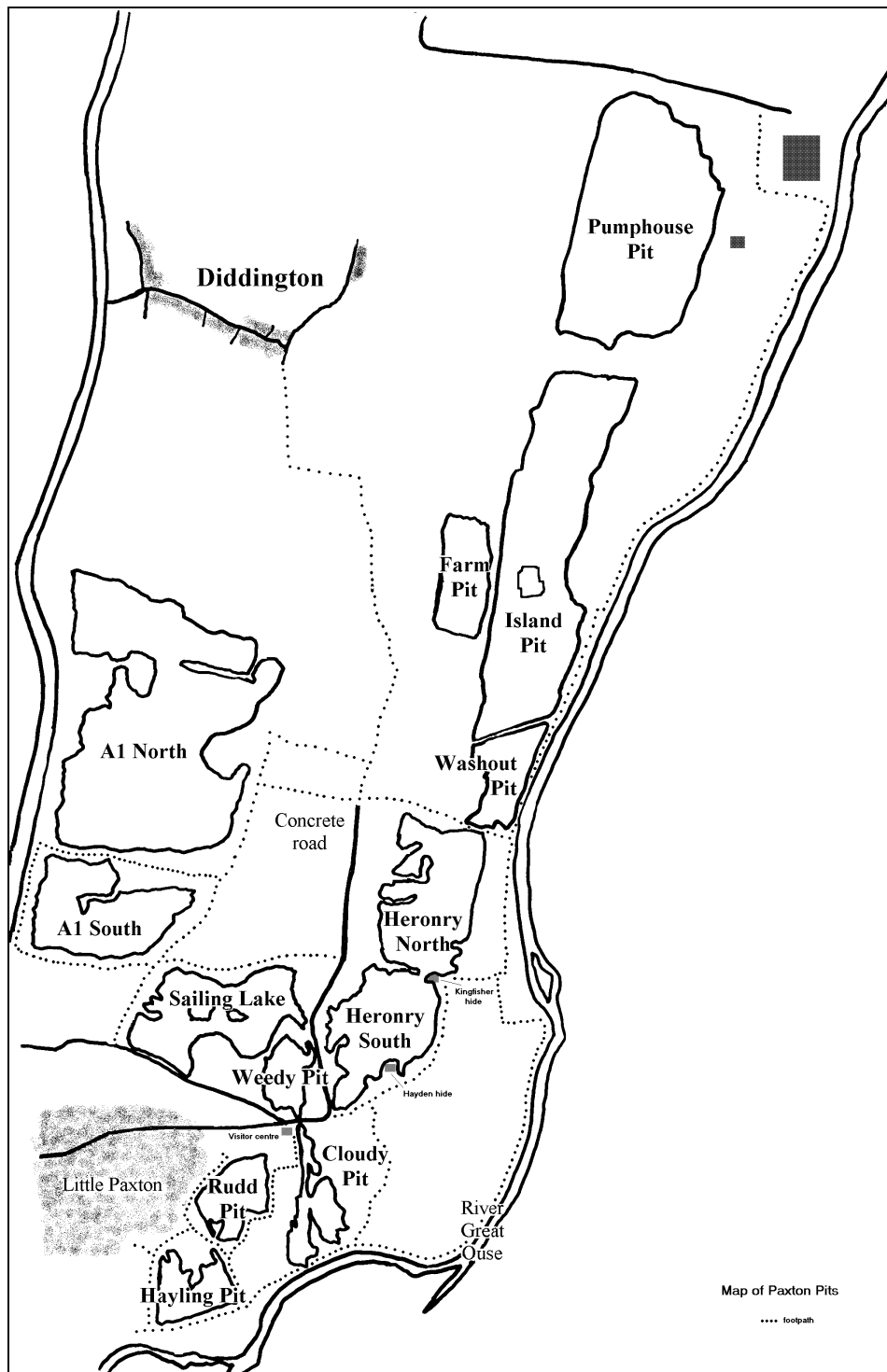




# **BIRDS of PAXTON PITS**

## **September 1999 – August 2000**

**Includes Little Paxton village and surrounding area**



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## Foreword

Two factors make Paxton Pits both wonderful and popular: the wildlife which makes its home here and the people who spend their time watching it and helping it to thrive. Information on the wildlife is essential to the management of the reserve. We need to know about changes to the vegetation, to the invertebrate populations and, in turn, to the bird populations, as they are so closely inter-related. A compilation such as *Birds of Paxton Pits 1999/2000* is useful for management, but I hope that it is also an interesting and enjoyable read.

In the foreword of last year's *Breeding Birds of Paxton*, the editors mooted the idea of producing a report which covered not only the breeding species, but all of those which occurred around the Pits during the year. Now they have demonstrated that it can be done. Perhaps the most important factor in achieving this was the launch of the reserve's own website in October 1999, co-sponsored by the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve (FPPNR) and St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club. Website visitors can check out the latest birds news from the Pits complex and e-mail their sightings to a central point. This allows, for the first time, sightings to be passed to the editors within a few hours rather than asking birdwatchers to trawl through their notebooks at the end of the year. My thanks to everyone who has contributed to this report, even if this was 'only' a list of birds seen during a one-off visit to the Pits – it is all valuable.

Organised surveys also have an important role to play. The results of three are included in this Report: the Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS, which includes all wintering ducks, geese and swans), the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS, which includes all breeding species, particularly common songbirds) and the Naturalised Goose Survey, organised by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. These surveys provide a 'snapshot', which can be compared to previous and later years – vital if we are to track the fortunes of bird populations. These surveys involve the efforts of many volunteers, but not all species can be accurately estimated from such 'snapshots'. That is why every record really counts.

I would urge every reader to provide their sightings, especially of common breeding birds, both on the reserve and in the village, to the *Report* editors in 2001.

Thank you again for your support.

Ron Elloway  
Ranger, Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

October 2000

Please send all records of birds recorded between September 2000 and August 2001 to  
Trevor Gunton, 15 St James Road, Little Paxton, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE19 4QW.  
Tel: (01480) 473562.

Or e-mail: [paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk](mailto:paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk)

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

## Little grebe

Only small numbers during the winter. The Heronry Lakes were most favoured, though 10 were seen on Island Pit on 13<sup>th</sup> October.

It was, however, the best breeding season for at least 30 years. A minimum of nine pairs bred on Farm Pit, where up to 30 birds were counted at the end of August. At least four

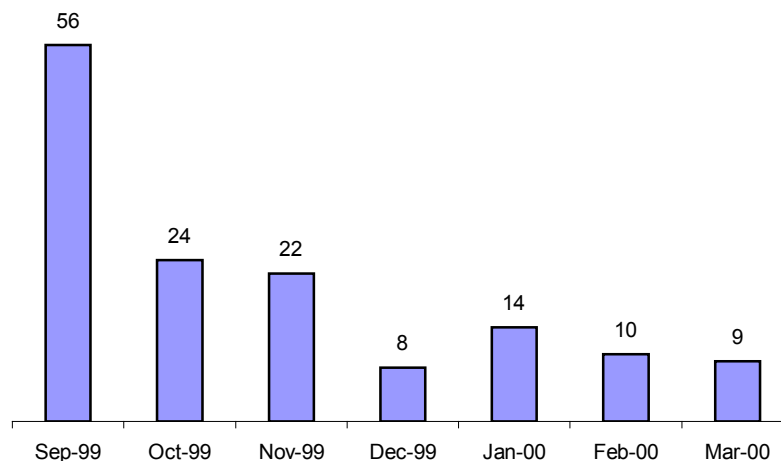
pairs (or two pairs each with two broods) bred successfully on the New Workings. Brood sizes varied between one and three young (at least three pairs had three chicks). Why does Farm Pit and New Workings prove so attractive – is it a lack of predators, abundant food or the availability of nest sites?

## Great crested grebe

One of the most attractive and well-watched species. A pair built a nest on Heronry South in early September 1999, though it came to nothing. The post-fledging peak fell during the winter, so that by the first quarter of 2000, there averaged only 11 per month.

Display was noted from 18<sup>th</sup> January but it proved to be a long and largely unsuccessful breeding season. Weed-dancing, threat displays and mating were seen from March to July and nests were occupied from mid March until early September, with successful

breeding on Sailing and Heronry Lakes, Farm and Pumphouse Pits. At least ten nests were constructed, but only four or five pairs raised young, with an estimated 10 juveniles fledging. A pair on Sailing Lake raised two broods, including one chick from the first brood which was leucistic. In mid September, a pair on Heronry South was still feeding two very small young. Numerous 'frustration' nests of floating green waterweed were constructed on various pits in September 2000, including at least one containing an egg, but were ultimately unsuccessful.



*Wintering great crested grebes at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Black necked grebe



*Black necked grebe (Paul Young)*

Although believed to breed at another gravel pit in the north of Cambridgeshire, black-necked grebes remain only scarce passage migrants at Paxton. A juvenile was on Pumphouse on 18<sup>th</sup> September, another (or perhaps the same bird) was seen on several pits during 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October. Four on Island Pit on 21<sup>st</sup> March were the only spring records.

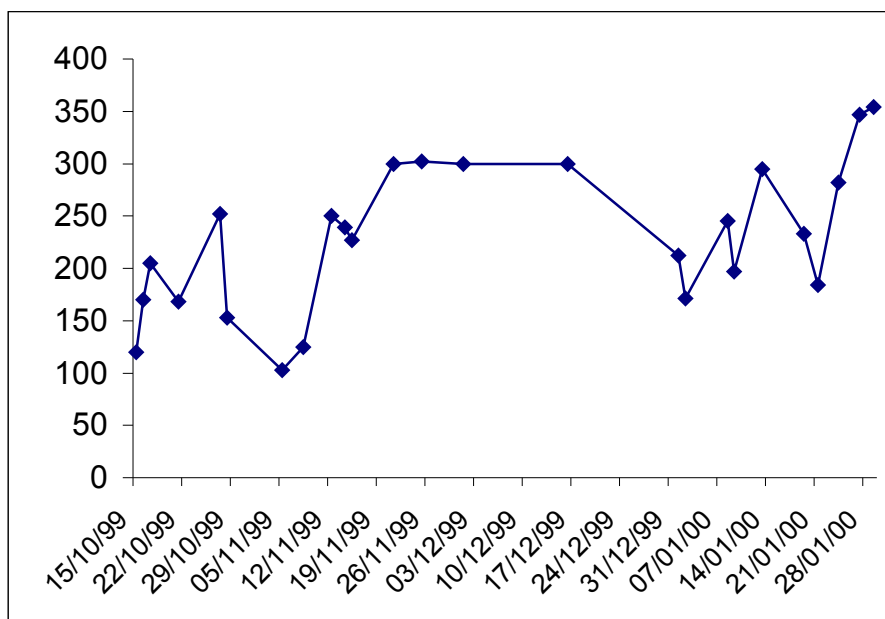
## Cormorant

Regular dusk counts saw numbers build to around 300 birds in mid November and remain fairly constant until mid December, before falling back a little over the new year. By the winter peak of 354 at the end of January, there were already 20 active nests, which started to confuse the count.

Birds were displaying from the edge of nest platforms from 2<sup>nd</sup> January and nest-building started later in the month, despite the apparent low level of competition for good nesting sites. By 20<sup>th</sup> February, at least 50 nests were either occupied or under repair; by 9<sup>th</sup> March this had risen to 70 and the colony had increased to around 90 occupied nests by the end of March. This is only half the size of that attained just four

years ago, though the reason is unknown (see page 32). Counts were maintained by various observers during April but as leaves cover various the colony, accurate counts become difficult. On 11<sup>th</sup> April, a regular observer estimated that 129 nests were in use.

The first young birds were seen in early April and as the month continued it was estimated that most nests contained two or three young. On 10<sup>th</sup> May, there were at least 71 young birds in nests. The nesting season lasted well into the summer, with the last two young fledging in late July, so concluding a seven month season. By the end of August, numbers had fallen, with only around 50 adults and young remaining in the area.



*Wintering cormorants at Paxton Pits, October 1999 to February 2000*

## Little egret

One was seen on Washout Pit on several dates from 13<sup>th</sup> July, and subsequently on Heronry Lake (21<sup>st</sup>) and New Workings (23<sup>rd</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July). It is only the third record for the Pits, following sightings in 1964 and 1994, and is believed to be an individual which spent early July at Cow

Lane Gravel Pits, Godmanchester. At the end of a decade when little egrets have colonised coastal southern England, one wonders if this record will prove to be the beginning of regular visiting and, ultimately, breeding on mature gravel pits such as Paxton?

## Grey heron

Present throughout the year with birds at the colony on Heronry South from January. Early activity is related to temperature – short spells of cold weather will delay the start of breeding. Six active nests were counted, though single birds were seen entering the cormorant colony during the breeding season, so another nesting attempt or two may have gone undetected.

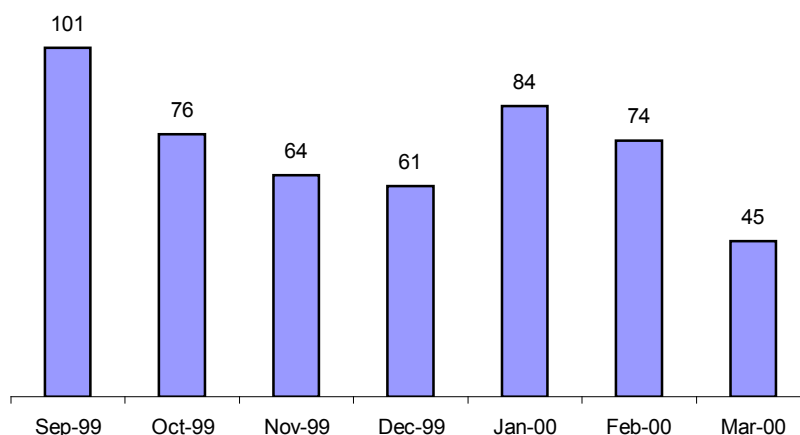
Egg-turning was seen on 9th March and young remained in the willow tree nests until early July. An estimated ten young were raised and many were seen around the Pits later in the summer, especially around the Washout Pit and New Workings. The number of herons nesting at Paxton has declined steadily over the last two decades, without a proven explanation.

## Mute swan

Mute swans are a flagship bird for visitors, some of whom have taken to feeding birds on Hayling Pit and Heronry South. Numbers slowly declined as the winter progressed, as juveniles and non-breeding adults dispersed elsewhere in the Valley. The more open Island and Pumphouse Pits tended to hold the highest numbers.

Three pairs successfully raised young, on

Hayling Lake, New Workings and Farm Pit. A remarkable seven young hatched on Hayling, though only four cygnets fledged. The other nests had six and four young. A pair on Pumphouse Pit failed and birds holding territory on A1 South, Heronry South and Cloudy Lakes came to nothing. No large post-breeding flocks were reported, with 26 on Island Pit (30<sup>th</sup> July) and 30 there on 6<sup>th</sup> August the maxima.



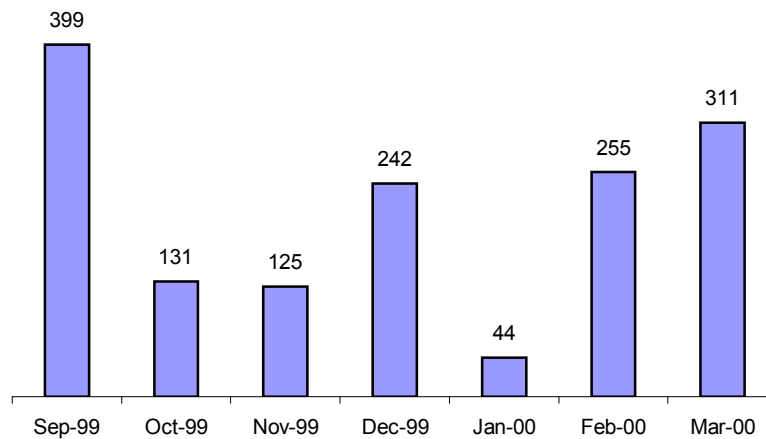
*Wintering mute swans at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Whooper swan

Two flying northeast over Heronry South on 14<sup>th</sup> November was the only record of the winter.

## Greylag goose

Monthly winter counts showed significant differences, with almost 400 in September, before family groups broke up, but only 44 in January. The PBBS recorded 29 pairs in May and June, with chicks present from late April. The WWT Naturalised Geese Survey found 344 adults and 105 goslings around the Pits.

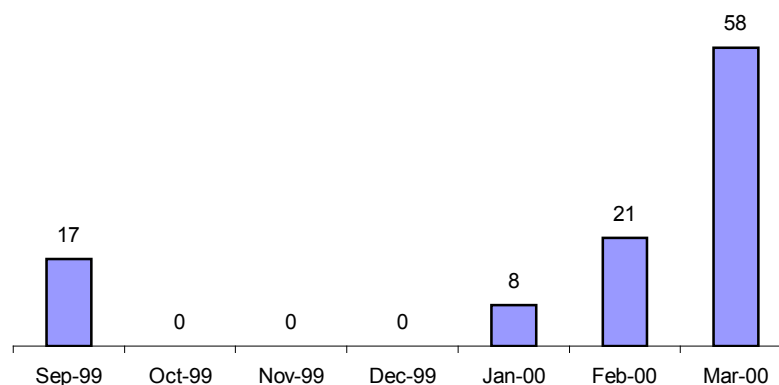


*Wintering greylag geese at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Canada goose

Wintering Canada geese were scarce: 67 over Island Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> March the highest count.

The PBBS recorded 24 pairs in May and June. The WWT Naturalised Geese survey found 115 adults and five young, though movements between the Pits and neighbouring farmland make assessment difficult: at least 220 were on Washout Pit later in August. Numbers have remained steady during the last six summers, with the number of young varying each year



*Wintering Canada geese at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Barnacle goose

Up to four feral birds spent the year around the Pits, frequenting Island Pit for the winter and Sailing Lake during the summer. Two paired with Canada geese, and at least one Barnacle x Canada goose hybrid chick was seen on Sailing Lake on 22<sup>nd</sup> May.

## Brent goose

One flew north over Washout Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> April, a very rare occurrence at Paxton Pits.

## Egyptian goose

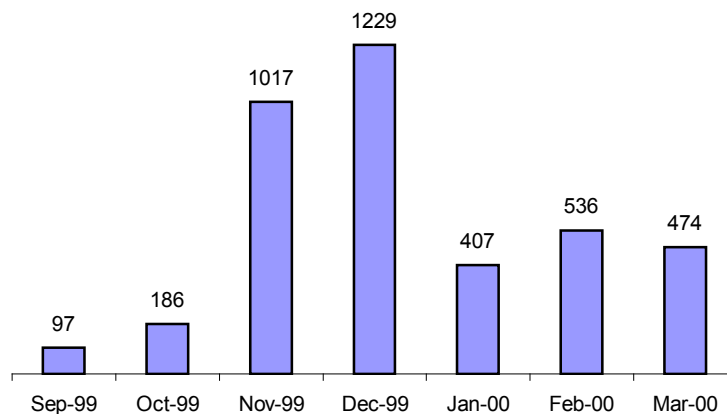
Two, found on Island Pit on 4<sup>th</sup> September, remained in the area until at least 19<sup>th</sup>. Another five flew north on a date in October. This introduced species remains scarce at Paxton and these records are presumably a result of post-breeding dispersal from other sites in East Anglia.

## Ruddy shelduck

A female on Washout Pit on 6<sup>th</sup> April was the first record for the Pits complex, though is of suspect origin.

## Wigeon

The commonest wintering duck at Paxton, though numbers exceeded 1,000 in only two months. Island and Pumphouse Pits held most birds. Many wigeon left the Pits complex in late March, though a handful were present until the third week of April. Two females returned to Heronry South on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, with more arriving birds from late August.



*Wintering wigeons at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Common shelduck

A juvenile remained on the New Workings until at least late September, but there were then no records until one on Washout Pit on 20<sup>th</sup> January and four on New Workings on 30<sup>th</sup>. These remained in the areas through the remainder of the winter.

Although shelducks have bred at Paxton in the recent past, the birds in the area during late winter moved off during April and there were no sightings until an adult and four juveniles on New Workings on 23<sup>rd</sup> July. There is no evidence that these bred at the Pits – were these from Grafham Water or do they breed on local farmland?

## Mandarin

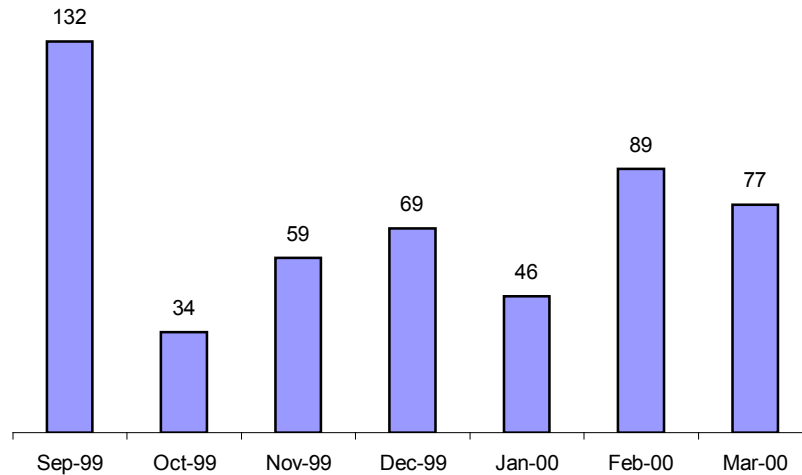
A moulting first-winter male was on Washout Pit on 1st July, while a female was seen there on 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> August. These birds are now scarce at Paxton and the pair which hatched four chicks at the Pits in 1991 are now a distant memory.



## Gadwall

Another species which peaked at the beginning of the winter as adults and young gathered on Pumphouse and Heronry Lakes before dispersing. October saw the lowest WeBS count, with numbers increasing slowly through the winter. A pair was displaying on Heronry North on 1<sup>st</sup> January;

this increased to nine by the end of the month. Three or four pairs bred: one on Island Pit (two young, 20<sup>th</sup> May), two on Heronry South (broods of two on 2<sup>nd</sup> July and eight on 8<sup>th</sup> July) and a pair were suspected of breeding on Sailing Lake, though no young were seen.

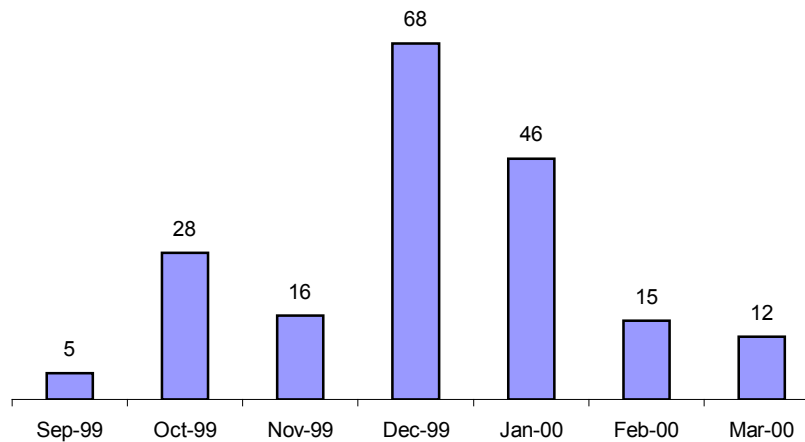


*Wintering gadwalls at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Teal

Numbers during WeBS counts peaked at 68 in December, before falling away. The Heronry Lakes consistently held the highest numbers, though other reports suggest that birds may gather on Pumphouse Pit before dispersing north to breed (there were, for

example, 21 there on 11<sup>th</sup> March). The first four of the autumn were on New Workings on 9<sup>th</sup> July, numbers increasing slightly over the following six weeks, though there were still only 10 birds by the end of August.



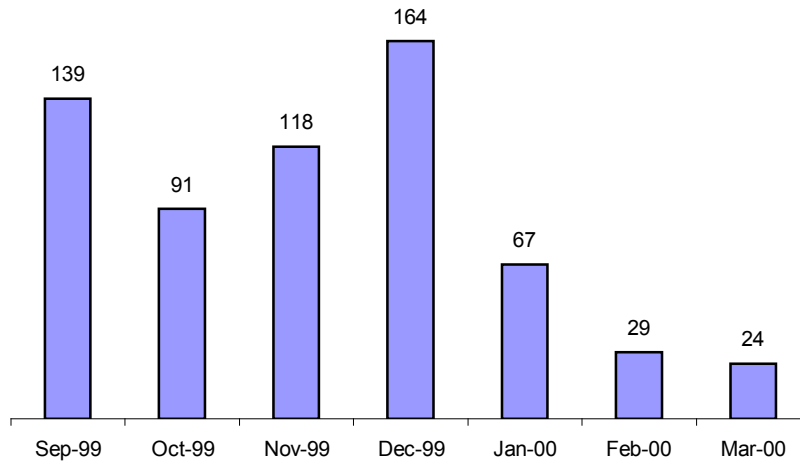
*Wintering teals at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Mallard

Numbers were high during the last four months of 1999, but fell rapidly during early 2000. The Heronry Lakes held more than half of the total during each monthly count in late 1999, though birds were more evenly spread around the complex in late winter.

Mating was seen on Heronry South on 19<sup>th</sup> January but, despite being Britain's commonest waterfowl, the number of breeding records from the Pits is small.

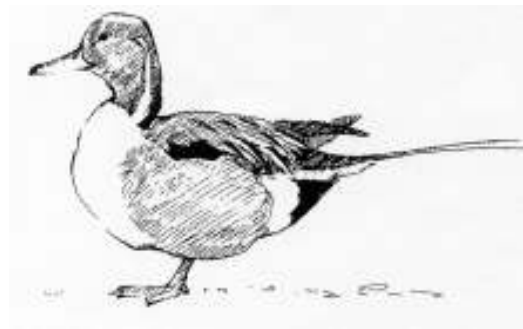
The PBBS in May and June found only 11 probable or confirmed pairs, compared to 14 in 1998 and 12 in 1999. Breeding was recorded on Hayling, Sailing and Heronry Lakes, Island and Washout Pits and the New Workings. The tally for the end of the season was eight or nine pairs confirmed as raising approximately 35 young, though predation (presumably by pike) was high and fewer than half of these ducklings reached maturity.



*Wintering mallards at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Pintail

Two females and an eclipse male on Heronry Lakes from 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> September were an unusually early record, but there were no further records until a male and female were found on Pumphouse on 27<sup>th</sup> December. Two pairs, also on Pumphouse, on 8<sup>th</sup> April were the only other records of the period.



*Pintail (John Busby)*

## Garganey

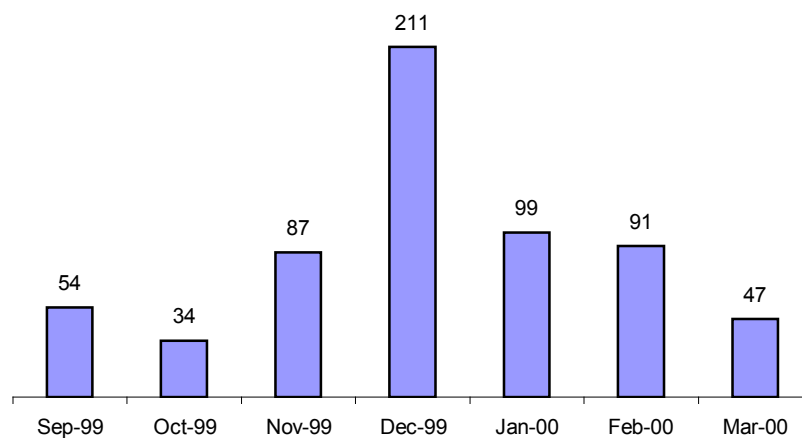
A male on Pumphouse on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April was presumably the same bird seen on the flooded fields to the east of the river on 7<sup>th</sup> and perhaps the bird that spent several weeks at Grafham Water during the spring. Another male, in summer plumage, was on Pumphouse on 13<sup>th</sup> August.

## Shoveler

The WeBS counts show the expected mid-winter peak, after a slow start in the autumn. The Heronry Lakes held the majority of birds, with a peak of 150 there in mid December. Other records suggest that there was a big increase between mid October and 5<sup>th</sup> November, when 70 were on the Heronry Lakes.

A display 'wheel' of 35 birds was seen on

Heronry South on 27<sup>th</sup> January, and display continued throughout the late winter. On 6<sup>th</sup> May, a male in full display to a female raised hopes of breeding and, although four birds were seen around the Pits during May and June (and at least one female stayed in the area throughout the summer), there was no evidence of breeding. Nevertheless, it would appear to be a good prospect for the future.



*Wintering shovellers at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Red crested pochard

A female on Heronry North on 16<sup>th</sup> January was joined by a second from 25<sup>th</sup> until 31<sup>st</sup>. A male then appeared on the same lake on 21<sup>st</sup> February and remained in the area until 19<sup>th</sup> March. A female was seen briefly on Washout Pit on 28<sup>th</sup> June.

## Pochard

In contrast to other wintering ducks, numbers peaked in February, with 418 recorded during that month's WeBS count. The Heronry Lakes held the most birds, with 233 there during the February count, though small numbers were found on most lakes.

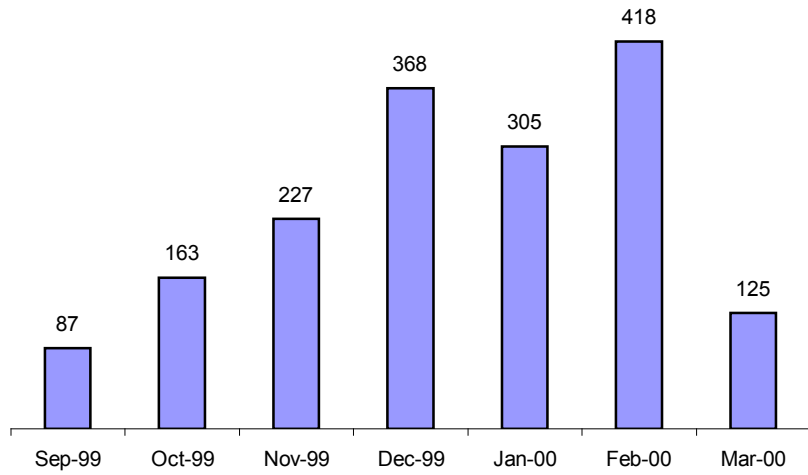
At least two males and a female spent the summer on Island and Farm Pits but there was no indication of breeding. Moulting

flocks built up from late July, with 10 on Farm Pit on 16<sup>th</sup> and 52 on Heronry North by 23<sup>rd</sup>.

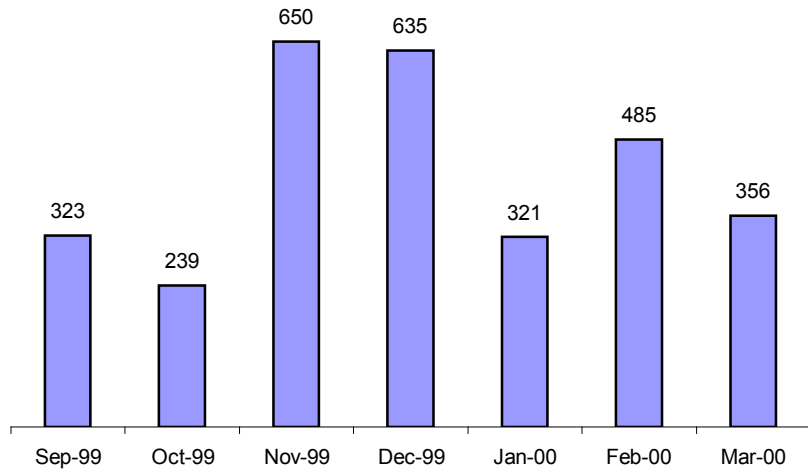
## Tufted duck

Wintering numbers peaked in late 1999, with Heronry Lakes (172 in November) and Pumphouse Pit (363 in December) holding the most during WeBS counts.

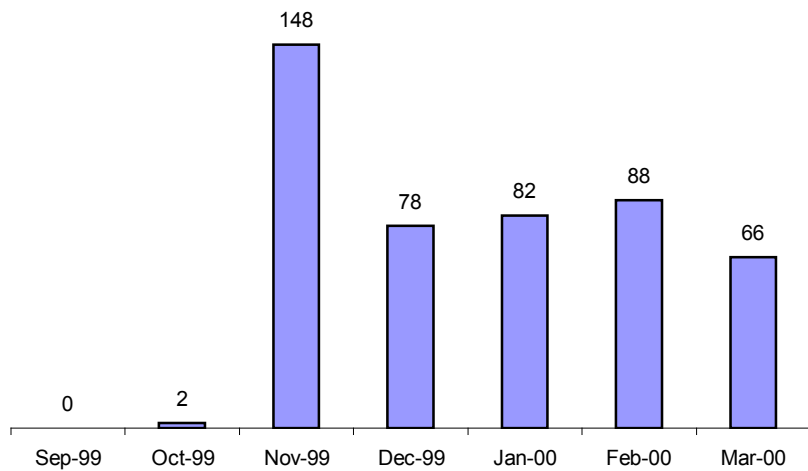
A late breeder, with the first young birds seen on Heronry South on 16<sup>th</sup> June. It is estimated that 7-10 pairs nested, with broods seen on Heronry North and South, Sailing Lake, New Workings and Farm Pit, and young hatching into August. Again, predation on some lakes was high, with a brood of nine on 18<sup>th</sup> July reduced to just one by the 25<sup>th</sup>! There were no records of breeding from the older lakes south of the Visitor Centre – is this correct?



*Wintering pochards at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*



*Wintering tufted ducks at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*



*Wintering goldeneyes at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Goldeneye

The first two birds of the winter (both females) were seen on 10<sup>th</sup> October, but it was November before most arrived: during that month's WeBS count there were 85 birds on A1 North alone. Numbers averaged 75 throughout the rest of the winter, with birds on most larger pits.

As always, display was noted from early in the new year, and birds were seen mating on Heronry North in late March. Up to 25 remained on Island Pit into mid April, but as in other years, they had left by mid May.

## Smew

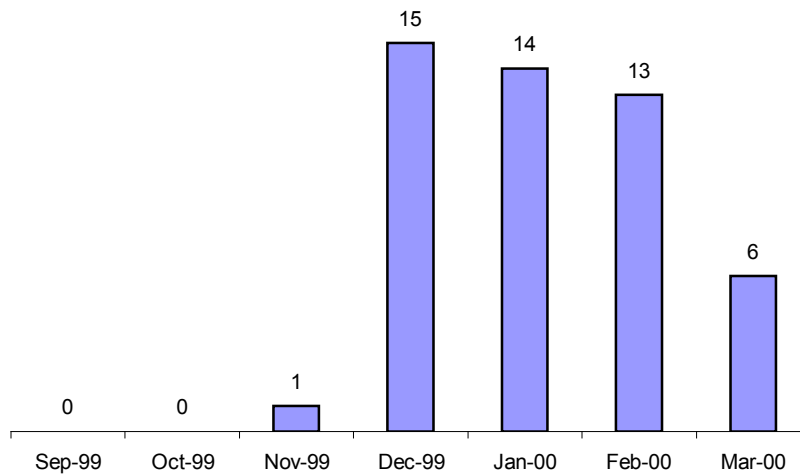
The first redhead smew was found on Pumphouse on 19<sup>th</sup> December, and by 27<sup>th</sup> there were three were on Island Pit. Numbers peaked on 25<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> January, when one male and seven redheads were present. The last bird seen was on Island Pit on 3<sup>rd</sup> March.



*Male smew (Rob Banbury)*

## Goosander

The first birds of the winter were two males flying over Heronry Lake on 19<sup>th</sup> November. The peak count was 22 on the Heronry Lakes on 19<sup>th</sup> December, with numbers falling slowly after the new year, reflected in the WeBS counts. The last bird, a male, was seen on Heronry North on 8<sup>th</sup> April.



*Wintering goosanders at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Ruddy duck

A male and female were on Island Pit from 12<sup>th</sup> September and numbers increased to 5 females and 3 males on 10<sup>th</sup> October, with a male also seen on Heronry North that day. Up to six birds were present from mid November until Christmas, but only two or three were seen during January to March.

Three males and two females were seen on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, and then two males and two females remained until 21<sup>st</sup> April.

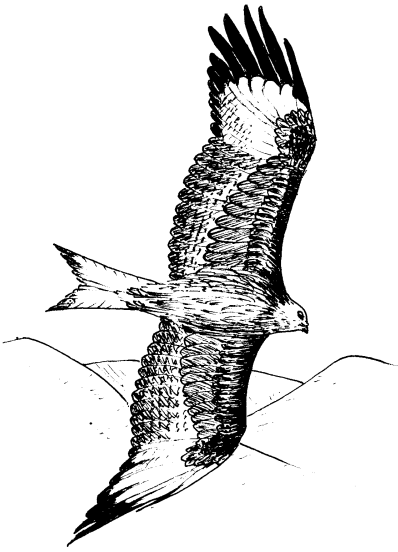
The first of the autumn was on Pumphouse Pit on 27<sup>th</sup> August, with four on Island Pit on 28<sup>th</sup>.

## Marsh harrier

The sole record was a juvenile was mobbed by corvids over New Workings on 30<sup>th</sup> August. Marsh harriers remain rare at Paxton.

## Red kite

Singles were seen over the Meadow and Visitor Centre on 12<sup>th</sup> October and 3<sup>rd</sup> May. Records will hopefully become commoner as birds from the East Midlands reintroduction scheme expand.



*Red kite (Charlie Eeles)*

## Sparrowhawk

Despite regular sightings around village gardens and the Pits, there is limited evidence of breeding in the area. We received several records of individual adults carrying food around the Sailing Lake and Haul Road and two juveniles were seen there on 16<sup>th</sup> August. A female with prey and two young were seen over Island Pit on 25<sup>th</sup> August – the same brood or another?

## Buzzard

Singles over the Meadow and Visitor Centre on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 24<sup>th</sup> April and 7<sup>th</sup> May, with another over the Heronry on 5<sup>th</sup> July. As with red kite, sightings should become more frequent as the breeding

population to the north and west gradually increases.

## Osprey

The only autumn migrant was over Rudd and Pumphouse Pits on 26<sup>th</sup> September. There was one in spring, over the village on 14<sup>th</sup> May. The only southbound migrant seen before the end of August was one over Island Pit on 28<sup>th</sup> August.

## Kestrel

Two over Redland meadow was the only record of more than a single bird during the winter. Sightings were relatively scarce during the breeding season, too, though four individuals were seen during the Breeding Bird Survey. They appear to no longer breed within our recording area, but they can surely not be too far away, given that birds hunted regularly over the Pumphouse Pit grassland in late summer.

## Hobby

The last reported migrant of 1999 was one over the Meadow on 3<sup>rd</sup> October.

The first of 2000 was on 21<sup>st</sup> April, equalling with 1997 the earliest ever date for a sighting at Paxton. Up to three at a time were seen during the last week of April, with singles or couples regularly hunting over the Pits in May. On 20<sup>th</sup>, two hunted low over Island Pit for half an hour during steady rain.

There were few records during the breeding season, suggesting that hobbies did not breed locally. August produced more sightings, with up to three birds seen – southbound migrants or locally-reared family parties? Birds continued to be seen until late September.

## Red-legged partridge

A pair was regularly seen around the New Workings throughout the year, but no young were reported. Has this attractive, introduced gamebird gone the same way as

the native grey partridge, unable to survive on the intensively farmed arable land which surrounds the Pits?

## Grey partridge

Now presumed to be locally extinct, with no records in 1999/2000. It is four years since breeding was last suspected, and even longer since it was confirmed. Research in southern England has demonstrated that agricultural intensification, particularly pesticides, has reduced the sawflies on which partridge chicks depend.

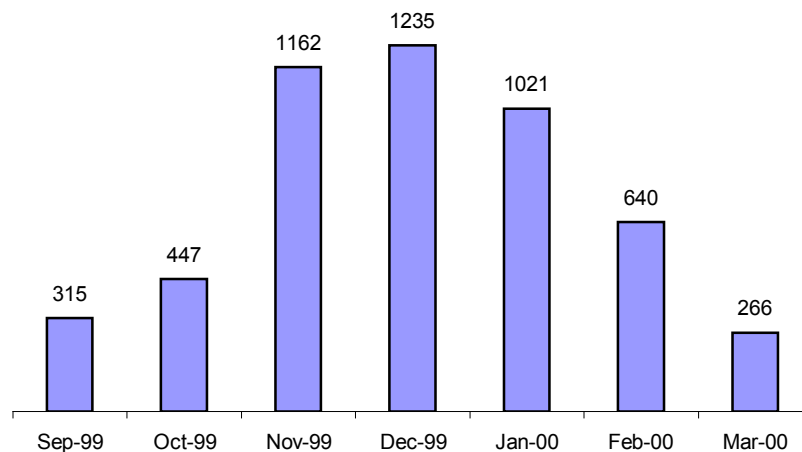
## Pheasant

Certainly under-recorded: five calling males were noted during the PBBS, mostly around Haul Road and Heronry Lake.

## Coot

A typical winter, with numbers peaking in December at slightly more than the average for the 1990s. Most lakes hold wintering coot: the December total included, for example, 110 on Rudd pit, 80 on A1 Pits and 1000 on Pumphouse Pit.

Eleven pits held breeding coots in 2000, with observers estimating that a minimum of 25 pairs hatched 60+ young, though the number of fledged young was lower, at perhaps 35. Another very good year for a dominant waterbird.



*Wintering coots at Paxton Pits, September 1999 to March 2000*

## Oystercatcher

After an absence during the winter, one returned to Pumphouse on 6<sup>th</sup> February, and was joined by a second from 26<sup>th</sup>. Up to three were seen on Sailing Lake from 14<sup>th</sup> February and through March. The highest count was seven adults over Washout Pit on 7<sup>th</sup> April. Pairs bred on both Pumphouse and Sailing Lakes. A flightless chick was seen on Sailing Lake on 11<sup>th</sup> June and a pair with two fledged young were there on 2<sup>nd</sup> August. A pair with a fledged

## Water rail

Reported from only three areas: three on Washout Pit (26<sup>th</sup> September) and singles on Heronry Lake (5<sup>th</sup> December), and in the small pond west of Washout Pit on several dates in January and March. No records during the breeding season.

## Moorhen

Bred successfully on at least seven pits, with 15 pairs rearing young. Some broods were as large as four young. Numbers appear to be increasing, with later breeding evident from June to late August.

young was on Pumphouse Pit on 23<sup>rd</sup> June. Singles were occasionally seen around the New Workings during the summer, but there was no indication of breeding here.

## Avocet

Three were reported from Pumphouse Pit on 1 April, but no confirmation was submitted.



*Avocet (Charlie Eeles)*

## Little ringed plover

The first was on 12<sup>th</sup> March, the earliest ever at the Pits and only two days later than the earliest ever in Huntingdonshire. Two pairs were display fighting around New Workings on 24<sup>th</sup> April but, besides occasional sightings on Sailing Lake and Pumphouse Pit, most records came from Washout Pit. Display was noted during late April and two juveniles were seen with adults on 21<sup>st</sup> June, and the adults remained in the area into early July. So, only one pair confirmed, but did they breed unseen on New Workings?

## Ringed plover

A small autumn passage was noted on Pumphouse Pit, with singles on several dates in September, two on 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>, and the last of 1999 on 3<sup>rd</sup> October.

Spring passage was heavy and began early, with a bird on Sailing Lake on 12<sup>th</sup> February and two on Pumphouse Pit on 13<sup>th</sup>. There were 20 on Pumphouse on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 23 on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> March, and counts of 10+ on several dates later in the month.

Seven pairs were estimated to be nesting on Pumphouse Pit during the June Breeding Bird Survey, but we received no further counts or estimates of breeding success. The first chicks were seen on 7<sup>th</sup> May. Ringed plovers were on the Sailing Lake islands during the summer and breeding is

suspected, though not confirmed. There were also regular sightings on Washout Pit and New Workings during the summer, but breeding is not suspected. We lack information on the breeding biology and success of this successful gravel pit colonist.

## Golden plover

Six flying north over Pumphouse Pit on 19<sup>th</sup> September were the only records of the autumn. It is presumed that all of the following winter records relate to the same flock, which was usually with lapwings:

- 50 next to Haul Road on 18<sup>th</sup> December
- 80 there on 27<sup>th</sup> December
- 80 on New Workings on 2<sup>nd</sup> January
- 50 east of Island Pit on 13<sup>th</sup> February
- up to 200 there on 5<sup>th</sup> March
- one on Pumphouse Pit on 26<sup>th</sup> February
- 6 there on 11<sup>th</sup> March.

The first of autumn 2000 was a single bird over New Workings on 20<sup>th</sup> August.

## Lapwing

The principal roost was on the New Workings or adjacent to the A1 Pits: 300-400 birds regularly from September to November; 200-500 in December and January; 800 in February. The flock then diminished rapidly, with fewer than 50 by mid March.

Fewer breeding this year, but no counts were made during the peak hatching period. Five pairs were confirmed on Pumphouse Pit and one pair from Sailing Lake Meadow, but none on the islands. Birds displayed over New Workings in early spring, but there were no breeding records. Lapwings are almost extinct on neighbouring farmland, so Paxton provides an important refuge. The rapid growth of vegetation on the islands following high spring rainfall may have reduced the suitability of the islands.



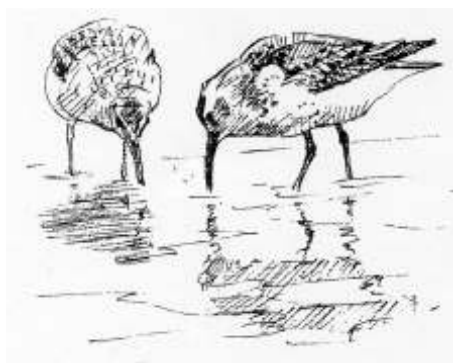
The autumn flock built up from early July, with 300 on New Workings on 16<sup>th</sup>, though 50-75 was more usual through August. These flocks included many juveniles, presumably from more successful breeding habitat in the northern uplands.

### **Little stint**

Singles on Pumphouse on 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> September and 24<sup>th</sup> April and 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May were the only records during this period.

### **Dunlin**

January and June were the only months when dunlins were not seen on Pumphouse Pit. During autumn, birds were regular between September and December (the peak count was five on 3<sup>rd</sup> October).



*Dunlins (John Busby)*

Spring passage began on 12<sup>th</sup> February, with numbers increasing in March: 11 on Washout Pit on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 21 on Pumphouse Pit on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>. In April, there were two to six on five dates, and good numbers continued into May, with six on three dates and 12 on 7<sup>th</sup>. The only other records were singles on the flooded field opposite Washout Pit on 26<sup>th</sup> February and on Washout Pit on 16<sup>th</sup> May.

A small number were recorded on early autumn passage 2000, with four on Pumphouse on 9<sup>th</sup> July and 6<sup>th</sup> August.

### **Ruff**

There were only three records during the period, singles on Pumphouse Pit 18<sup>th</sup> September and 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> April and one on New Workings on 13<sup>th</sup> August.

### **Jack snipe**

Three reports during the period, though perhaps only two birds: one on the A1 Pits on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, and singles on Pumphouse on the late dates of 16<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> April.

### **Snipe**

Small numbers throughout the winter, but notable counts included 13 on New Workings (27<sup>th</sup> September), nine on Pumphouse Pit (26<sup>th</sup> February) and 16 on Washout Pit (6<sup>th</sup> March). Birds were also on Island and A1 Pits, including two on 7<sup>th</sup> May on A1 North. The first three of the autumn were on New Workings on 13<sup>th</sup> August, after which small numbers were seen on most visits.

### **Woodcock**

Singles were seen flying over scrub east of the Heronry Lakes on several dates from December to February.

### **Black-tailed godwit**

Perhaps the best ever spring passage at Paxton Pits, no doubt assisted by the flooding of the Ouse and Nene Washes. 30-40 flew over Heronry South (3<sup>rd</sup> March), while a remarkable 283 were on flooded fields to the east of Island Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> April. There were singles on Pumphouse on 3<sup>rd</sup> May and on Washout Pit on 27<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Bar-tailed godwit**

A single was reported on Pumphouse Pit on 19<sup>th</sup> March, though no record was submitted.

### **Whimbrel**

One was reported on Pumphouse on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, though no record was submitted. Another flew over Heronry North (16<sup>th</sup> July) and a third was heard over Pumphouse Pit on 28<sup>th</sup> August.

## Curlew

One on Pumphouse Pit on 19<sup>th</sup> December was an unseasonal record; the only other sightings were over Heronry Lake on 16<sup>th</sup> July and Pumphouse Pit on 28<sup>th</sup> August.

## Spotted redshank

Two on New Workings on 19<sup>th</sup> August were the only records during the period of this scarce passage migrant.

## Redshank

Most winter records were singles, though six counts involved eight or more birds, on New Workings, Pumphouse Pit and the flooded field opposite Washout Pit. The peak count was a remarkable 50 birds on this field on 5<sup>th</sup> April.

Birds were seen on A1 South, New Workings and the island on Island Pit in early spring, but breeding was confirmed only from Pumphouse and Sailing Lake islands. Numbers started to increase on Pumphouse from early March, with 10 by mid-month. Six pairs were on Pumphouse Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> June with another two pairs on Sailing Lake. No counts were taken on Pumphouse during late June, so breeding success is not known, though one juvenile was still present on 24<sup>th</sup> July. Two young were on the Sailing Lake islands on 24<sup>th</sup> July.

## Greenshank

Small passages in autumn and spring: singles on Washout Pit (26<sup>th</sup> September) and Pumphouse (19<sup>th</sup> September, 18<sup>th</sup> October), with two birds on New Workings (12<sup>th</sup> September) and Pumphouse (10<sup>th</sup> October).

Peak count during spring migration was three or four on the flooded field across the River Ouse from Washout (29<sup>th</sup> April), with two birds on Pumphouse (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May), singles on New Workings (23<sup>rd</sup> April) and Pumphouse (21<sup>st</sup> May). Greenshanks were regular on Pumphouse and New Workings in autumn 2000, with at least one present

on most days from 23<sup>rd</sup> July until late August. Four on New Workings on 19<sup>th</sup> August was the peak count.

## Green sandpiper

Several birds present throughout the winter, mostly on New Workings and Pumphouse Pit, but also on Heronry North (3<sup>rd</sup> October), the flooded field opposite Washout Pit (two, 16<sup>th</sup> January) and A1 North (5<sup>th</sup> March). The peak count was five on 3<sup>rd</sup> October on Pumphouse Pit. None was seen from late April to early July, but there was a strong autumn passage, with birds on most days, peaking at nine on 20<sup>th</sup> August.

## Wood sandpiper

One on New Workings on 23<sup>rd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> July increased to two by 30<sup>th</sup> and were present until 5<sup>th</sup> August.

## Common sandpiper

Birds passed through the Pits in September and early October (three together on 26<sup>th</sup> September), most on Pumphouse and New Workings, but also on Heronry South (3<sup>rd</sup> October) and A1 North (10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> October). One, first seen on Pumphouse on 19<sup>th</sup> December, overwintered on Sailing Lake. Spring passage started slowly (one on Pumphouse on 22<sup>nd</sup> March), but birds were seen regularly in May (six together on 7<sup>th</sup>).



*Common sandpiper (John Busby)*

Autumn 2000 passage started with two on New Workings on 16<sup>th</sup> July; small numbers were seen on most days, peaking with five

on Pumphouse Pit on 27<sup>th</sup> July and 6<sup>th</sup> August. A large number passed through by the end of August, with regular sightings on New Workings and Pumphouse and several on Washout and Island Pit.

## Turnstone

Four on Sailing Lake island on 2<sup>nd</sup> May and one on Pumphouse on 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> May were the only records.

## Little gull

A first-winter little gull found on 25<sup>th</sup> September remained on Heronry South until 18<sup>th</sup> December, though was missing on several days. By November, it was coming to bread! In addition, an adult was on Island Pit on 29<sup>th</sup> April and a first-summer on Hayling Lake on 7<sup>th</sup> May.

## Black-headed gull

Seen regularly over the more open Pits, though no specific counts taken. Several hundred roosted regularly during autumn and winter to the west of Pumphouse Pit. This was formerly a common breeder, but only one pair was confirmed in 2000, on the larger Sailing Lake island.



*Black headed gull (John Busby)*

## Common gull

Regularly up to 100 during the winter among the gull roost to the north of New Workings, though 68 on Washout Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> February was notable.

## Lesser black backed gull

Small numbers were seen on Pumphouse Pit and among the gull roost to the west in autumn and winter.

## Herring gull

Small numbers were seen on Pumphouse Pit and among the gull roost to the west throughout the autumn and winter.

## Glaucous gull

An adult flew south over Heronry South on 23<sup>rd</sup> April but was not relocated.

## Great black backed gull

Small numbers were in the gull roost to the west of Pumphouse Pit throughout the year; the highest count reported was of 14 on Pumphouse Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> August.

## Yellow-legged gull

A first-winter bird on Pumphouse Pit on 27<sup>th</sup> December was the only record.

## Sandwich tern

One was reported over Heronry North on 11<sup>th</sup> June, but was not confirmed.

## Common tern

The first migrants were over Pumphouse Pit on 9<sup>th</sup> April, the earliest ever seen at Paxton. It was late April before birds settled on the Sailing Lake nesting islands; by early May an estimated 30 adults were resident, though this increased to 80 by mid June. The first chick was seen on 9<sup>th</sup> June. The number of nesting pairs is estimated at fifteen, with a minimum of 17 young by 14<sup>th</sup> July – a marked reduction on 1999. Nesting was also suspected, but not confirmed, on Pumphouse Pit. The last juvenile birds in the area were two over Sailing Lake on 1<sup>st</sup> August.

## Black tern

Spring passage was poor, with two over Pumphouse Pit on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, and four over Hayling Lake, two over Sailing Lake and nine over Pumphouse Pit on 7<sup>th</sup> May.

## Little auk

One on Island Pit during the afternoon of 20<sup>th</sup> November was only the second record for the complex.

## Feral pigeon

Small numbers seen regularly around the village and over the Pits, presumably commuting from St Neots. Small flocks, including some racing pigeons, feed on the New Workings.

## Stock dove

Despite winter counts of only 200-300 birds during the winter (November-December 1999), stock doves remain a regular, though thinly distributed, resident from Pumphouse Pit to Heronry South. Few are ever recorded as nesting – it is so difficult to prove once they fly into the canopy of mature trees. Stock doves almost certainly breed around the cormorant colony and near Kingfisher Hide. Last year's estimate of ten pairs remains sound, though fewer birds were seen around the village this year. The New Workings remain a favourite loafing area, with groups of up to 10 regular in the late autumn.



*Woodpigeon (Rob Banbury)*

## Woodpigeon

Thirty pairs estimated by the Breeding Bird Survey is the only measure of breeding around the Pits. Display and mating was recorded throughout the year, but numbers are rarely noted by birders even though it is common around the Pits, Paxton Hall and established gardens in the village.

## Collared dove

No change in status compared with 1999, with all records from the Pits coming from around the Visitor Centre, where it is a regular visitor to the feeding station. None is believed to breed around the Pits, but collared doves are numerous in the village, with mating and nest-building seen throughout the year. Collared doves seem to be a common victim of local cats and collisions with windows.

## Turtle dove

Two around Heronry South on 18<sup>th</sup> September were comparatively late records and the last of autumn 1999. The first returning birds were around Sailing Lake on 24<sup>th</sup> April, but numbers appear to have been lower than in recent years. The Breeding Bird Survey found six calling males in June, with breeding restricted to the area around Heronry South and Haul Road. As the breeding season advanced, more birds were heard but no family groups were reported. It is presumed that the increased number during August is a result of passage birds moving through: the New Workings seems to be a favoured feeding area. The last record received was of two birds on 26<sup>th</sup> August.

## Cuckoo

The first 'sound of spring' was heard on 20<sup>th</sup> April, to the east of Cloudy Pit. The Breeding Bird Survey suggested seven calling males, though it is difficult to accurately estimate numbers of this highly mobile bird. We lack information on numbers during the summer, though the feeling is that cuckoos were scarcer this

year. Neither do we know which is the most important 'host' species, though reed warbler would be a strong favourite.

## Barn owl

Barn owls are scarce around Paxton Pits, but a handful of records in the last year give us some hope. One hunted near Pumphouse Pit on 31<sup>st</sup> October, one flew between the Washout and Island Pits at dusk on 7<sup>th</sup> April, and there was a third sighting near the Moorings on 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Few birders are at the north end of the Pits as it goes dark, so could it be commoner than we realise?

## Little owl

One was at last year's nest site in mid May, but it is believed that jackdaws usurped the nest hole in 2000. No birds were reported from the area during the summer.

## Tawny owl

A male was heard around Paxton Hall in late summer but none was reported from the Pits or riverbank this year. After last year's failed breeding attempt on the reserve, the species has become scarce. All records are appreciated – we imagine that anglers may have the best idea of where tawny owls are.

## Swift

A poor year, even by recent low standards. The first of 2000 was over Heronry North on 21<sup>st</sup> April, just two days later than the earliest ever for the reserve (1996). Small numbers moved north during late April and early May, but several hundred over Heronry Lake on 23<sup>rd</sup> May was the only large movement reported. Few were seen around the Pits or the village during summer 2000 and, although five were seen close to a 1999 nest site in mid July, there was no evidence of local breeding. The last in the area was over the village on 12<sup>th</sup> August.

## Kingfisher

Seen regularly, with most winter records from New Workings, Pumphouse Pit and Sailing Lake, but occasionally elsewhere, such as along the river moorings. A pair



*Kingfisher (Rob Banbury)*

almost certainly bred at the south end of Heronry South, and it is presumed that this was the source of four juveniles reported to the Ranger on 26<sup>th</sup> June. Singles were recorded on Washout Pit, Sailing Lake, Pumphouse Pit and Island Pit throughout the summer months and could account for at least two other pairs, though no breeding was confirmed.

## Green woodpecker

'Yaffling' birds are a common sound throughout the year, but estimating the number of pairs present is challenging! Singles were seen regularly in winter, though one feeding on the Sailing Lake 'tern island' on 9<sup>th</sup> February was notable. The PBBS estimated there were a probable four breeding pairs. There were no confirmed sightings of juveniles this year, though a group of four near Hayden Hide on 26<sup>th</sup> July was surely a family party.

## Great spotted woodpecker

Seen regularly around the Pits and village gardens and occasionally on nut feeders outside Hayden Hide. Signs of territory defence were seen from early in the year, with three in a chase close to Heronry South on 6<sup>th</sup> January. Numbers recorded during the PBBS and anecdotal reports from visitors were down on 1999. The Breeding Survey confirmed a pair on the

edge of Rudd Pit, and there was almost certainly another pair at the north end of the Sanctuary (close to the river), where a male called regularly during May and June.

### **Lesser spotted woodpecker**

Scarcer in 2000 than in the last couple of years, but these records tell us little about this naturally secretive and enigmatic bird. Only six sightings during winter and spring: over the Meadow (3<sup>rd</sup> October), a female on the edge of Sailing Pit (12<sup>th</sup> March) and along the Haul Road (21<sup>st</sup> November, 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 23<sup>rd</sup> April and 1<sup>st</sup> May). But no sightings during the summer.

### **Skylark**

Sadly, the local decline continues to reflect the national trend. The PBBS recorded only three over the farmland to the west of Haul Road (six in 1999). However, leaving the grass around Pumphouse Pit uncut until mid August resulted in regular sightings of between two and six birds during May to July, including one pale, short-tailed bird on 9<sup>th</sup> July, believed to be a juvenile. It is quite possible that they bred in this area, if not on the surrounding farmland.



*Skylark (Charlie Eeles)*

### **Sand martin**

Autumn concluded with a small southward passage of sand martins through September. The last seen was among a flock of several hundred hirundines on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1999.

Sand martins were late arriving in spring, the first seen on 21<sup>st</sup> March (the only later

arrival date during the 1990s was 25<sup>th</sup> March 1998). Northward migration continued for two months, with strong passage during the third week in May. Breeding was more fragmented than usual, the New Workings colony being smaller than in recent years, with around 40-50 active nests. However, new, smaller colonies sprang up around Pumphouse Pit (12 pairs on the east bank, 18 pairs on the west bank) and in the sand mounds on Washout Pit (a minimum of 13 active nests in mid June). Feeding groups were more disparate than usual, perhaps because of inclement weather in June and July, but 150 fed over A1 North Pit on 9<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Swallow**

A small passage south, with sand and house martins, continued through September and into October 1999. The last two were seen heading south on 12<sup>th</sup> October with two house martins.

The first arrival of 2000 was on the relatively early date of 28<sup>th</sup> March, though it was several weeks before large numbers were seen passing through. Small numbers remained in the area throughout the summer, but we received no reports from either Boughton Lodge Farm or Samuel Jones Paper Mill, so breeding numbers are not known. At least one pair nested in a drain hole beneath the Paxton lock bridge.

### **House martin**

A small passage south, with sand martins and swallows, continued into October 1999. The last two southbound birds were seen on 12<sup>th</sup>, with two swallows.

The first of the Millennium, on 12<sup>th</sup> March, was the earliest ever recorded in Huntingdonshire (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> April is the usual arrival date). However, it was nearly three weeks before more birds arrived, and passage continued during May.

The nest count looks ever more bleak, with only eight nests around the village and three or four on Samuel Jones Mill. How

many more years will house martins hang on? By contrast, some other local villages – such as Croxton – maintain large numbers of nesting birds.

## Meadow pipit

Numbers peaked at 20 around Pumphouse Pit on 13<sup>th</sup> October, but were sporadic later in the year. A loose flock of 13 on 16<sup>th</sup> January was the highest subsequent count. None was seen after mid April.

## Rock pipit

A bird of the Scandinavian race (*littoralis*) was on Pumphouse islands on 30<sup>th</sup> March.

## Yellow wagtail

Passage migration continued late into the autumn, with six on Pumphouse and New Workings on 19<sup>th</sup> September, two on 10<sup>th</sup> October and the last on 13<sup>th</sup> October.



*Yellow wagtail (John Busby)*

The first of the year was on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2000. Small numbers were seen over the next few weeks, but a lack of reports in June suggest that they failed to breed this year, though two around Pumphouse on 9<sup>th</sup> July and singles there on 16<sup>th</sup> July and 13<sup>th</sup> August could have been from a nearby nest. A family part of two adults and three juveniles on New Workings on 20<sup>th</sup> August, six there on 28<sup>th</sup> August and two on 30<sup>th</sup> August are more likely to have been passage migrants.

## Grey wagtail

Once again, a pair nested near the lock, with adults seen regularly during May, though no juveniles were reported. There were only a handful of reports from the

Pits, most from Cloudy Pit in spring and around the Hayden Hide feeding station during the winter, and one from the village on 9<sup>th</sup> October. One on New Workings on 16<sup>th</sup> January was presumably from the pair which nest behind the Anglian Water pumping station.

## Pied wagtail

Small numbers were seen throughout the winter, though 65 around Sailing Lake on 2<sup>nd</sup> January and 50 on 26<sup>th</sup> January were notable; 10 were bathing there on 17<sup>th</sup> January. A group of 11 was seen in the village on 11<sup>th</sup> September. A white wagtail (the nominate continental race) was seen on New Workings on 24<sup>th</sup> April.

At least three pairs bred: a juvenile was seen around the Lafarge coatings plant, a pair carried food across Pumphouse Pit in early June and an adult carried food across New Workings in early July, where a fledged juvenile was seen on 6<sup>th</sup> August. None was reported breeding around the village, but several pairs probably do.

## Wren

The PBBS is the only source of information on the wrens around the Pits, with an estimate of 53 probable pairs. Numbers encountered during the survey fell by 29% on 1999, causing wren to lose its place as the Pits' commonest breeding species. The scrub around Haul Road and Cloudy Pit saw the biggest reduction, but numbers fell across the reserve. What happened? It certainly can't be explained by cold winter weather, to which wrens are susceptible. Wrens also breed in mature gardens in the village, but the numbers are not known.

## Dunnock

The PBBS showed a big increase in numbers of dunnocks, up 52% on 1999: one confirmed pair and 28 probable pairs. The scrub around Hayling, Rudd and Cloudy Pits held the highest density.

## Robin

The PBBS is the only source of information, and showed a slight fall in numbers for the second consecutive year, with one confirmed pair and 43 probable pairs. There were noticeably fewer in the scrub around Heronry South.

## Nightingale

The arrival of the first nightingale at Paxton is a much awaited and celebrated day. After the exceptionally early date (4<sup>th</sup> April) in 1999, the first of 2000 did not appear until 16<sup>th</sup>, the latest first arrival since 1992.



*Nightingale (John Clarke)*

Following several counts, the final tally rested at 25 singing males, the same as in 1999. The scrub along Haul Road and the Sanctuary remained the stronghold, with a reduction in numbers around Hayling Lake balanced by an expansion of their range to the north, with three between the Washout Pit and river. Three broods were seen being fed during the PBBS in mid June, a juvenile was ringed in the Sanctuary in early July (see page 35) and another brood of two was seen east of the Hayden Hide in mid July, suggesting a good level of breeding success.

## Whinchat

One was on the edge of A1 North on 7<sup>th</sup> May, perhaps the same seen just to the north of our recording area the previous day?

## Wheatear

A male on the New Workings on 3<sup>rd</sup> October was the last reported for 1999.

A less than spectacular spring migration, with the first five on the relatively late date of 2<sup>nd</sup> April and two over the village on 7<sup>th</sup>. Small numbers were seen regularly until mid May, all on the New Workings. One on New Workings on 13<sup>th</sup> August was the only autumn migrant seen before the end of August.

## Blackbird

The PBBS confirmed three pairs and reported another 31 probable pairs, a return to 1998 levels, after an increase in 1999. Pairs were found in scrub across the southern part of the Pits, with only two pairs north of Heronry Lake. Blackbirds remain common in village gardens.

## Fieldfare

There was a moderate autumn influx as birds moved west. The first two were east of Island Pit on 10<sup>th</sup> October, with larger flocks seen during the following weeks (100-150 over Heronry North on 15<sup>th</sup> October). A flock of 200 remained in the hedgerows east of Island Pit from late November to February. Groups of 48 flying east on 11<sup>th</sup> March and 20 on 19<sup>th</sup> over Pumphouse Pit were a sign of eastward return passage.

## Song thrush

The PBBS found eight probable breeding pairs, fewer than in 1999, but more than in 1998. It is also considered to have made a partial recovery in village gardens. Song thrushes should have benefited from a wet winter and spring, which makes it easier to probe the soil for invertebrates.

## Redwing

The first 10 of the autumn were in the copse behind the Hayden Hide on 4<sup>th</sup> October, and most flocks seen through the winter were no bigger than this. Flocks of



19 over Island Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> March and six over Pumphouse Pit on 19<sup>th</sup> were the only spring records before the last report of a single along the Haul Road on 8<sup>th</sup> April.

### **Mistle thrush**

Seen throughout the year, but a pair with three young east of Heronry South in late June and early July was the only confirmed breeding. Single birds seen around Cloudy Lake, Pumphouse Pit and Haul Road during the breeding season may take the total to four pairs.

### **Grasshopper warbler**

Two records, both adjacent to Pumphouse Pit, on 30<sup>th</sup> April and 9<sup>th</sup> May, are believed to be different individuals and are presumed to have been passage migrants, with no reports later in the breeding season.

### **Sedge warbler**

The first of 2000 was on 16<sup>th</sup> April, slightly later than average and the same day as the first nightingale and whitethroat. Numbers increased quickly during late April, so that by the first Breeding Bird Survey in early May, almost 70 territorial males were present, making it the commonest species around the Pits.



*Sedge warbler (John Busby)*

Six pairs were confirmed, with young being fed around Hayling Lake and Rudd Pit. Lower numbers along the river may be explained by flooding in late spring which removed much of the reed fringe. However, eleven males sang along the edges of Washout, Island and Pumphouse

Pits, where there were only three in 1999. In addition, an adult was seen carrying food to a nest on the edge of Farm Pit on 17<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Reed warbler**

The first of the year was on 20<sup>th</sup> April, the earliest ever for the Pits. Numbers increased quickly and in early May, the PBBS counted 36 singing males (ten around the A1 Pits alone). There were, however, fewer around the southern part of the nature reserve: nine in 2000, compared with 14 in 1999 and 16 in 1998. Is the increased scrub around the reedy edges making Hayling, Rudd and Cloudy Lakes less suitable? In addition, the most mature part of the New Workings held an estimated 10 pairs, with at least half a dozen young birds remaining in the reeds until late August.

### **Lesser whitethroat**

The first of the year, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, was the earliest ever seen at the Pits by three days. The PBBS found fewer than in 1999, with an estimated six pairs, including one pair feeding young in The Sanctuary. Scrub around Heronry Lake continues to hold most of the lesser whitethroats, though one singing along the edge of Island Pit was more unusual.

### **Whitethroat**

The first arrival in the village, on 16<sup>th</sup> April, was on a typical date, though it was several more days before the first was seen on the reserve. Numbers crashed compared to last year, with the PBBS confirming two pairs and identifying another 16 probable breeding pairs. This was half the number that were found in 1999. The scrub east of Heronry Lake continues to be the stronghold, but the density was much lower this year. The whitethroat population is greatly affected by weather conditions on its migration and wintering grounds – was this responsible for these sudden changes?

## Garden warbler

The first garden warbler has been as early as 4<sup>th</sup> April and as late as 26<sup>th</sup> April during the 1990s, so this year's first – on 21<sup>st</sup> April – is about average. In contrast to whitethroats, numbers of garden warblers recorded during the PBBS increased for the second consecutive year, with three pairs confirmed and another 22 probable pairs, compared to one confirmed and 17 probable in 1999. The scrub around the Heronry Lake and south of the Visitor Centre are the best places to see this plainest of warblers.

## Blackcap

The first two of 2000 were on the edge of the Meadow and Heronry South on 24<sup>th</sup> March, the earliest ever at Paxton Pits, though the picture is sometimes confused by overwintering birds. By mid April, there are estimated to have been over 80 singing males, but numbers settled down at 53 pairs in early May, a little lower than 1999, according to PBBS estimates. The main area of decline was around A1 Pits and Sailing Lake, but on the other hand, two pairs were alongside Island Pit, extending the blackcap's distribution northwards to the newer pits.

## Chiffchaff

Several records into late September and October on the Meadow and Haul Road, the latest on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1999. At least one may have overwintered, though a bird in the Meadow on 2<sup>nd</sup> January was not seen again, unless it was the same bird there on 4<sup>th</sup> March? By late March, there were over 50 males singing around the Pits, though many of these were presumably passing migrants. One seen along Haul Road on 8<sup>th</sup> April bore a blue ring on its left leg, though we have not yet been able to determine where it had been ringed.

The PBBS recorded a slight increase on last year, with 35 pairs, of which four were confirmed. The distribution is comparable

with previous years, with most in scrub and trees around Heronry Lake.

## Willow warbler

The first, on 25<sup>th</sup> March, was typical, though the first has been as late as 8<sup>th</sup> April during the 1990s. Most arrived during mid April, but the final breeding population estimate was significantly lower than during the Breeding Bird Surveys of the last two years. It has fallen from being the third commonest species of bird at the Pits in 1998 (56 pairs) to the sixth in 2000 (41 pairs). None was recorded around Hayling, Sailing and the A1 Lakes.

## Goldcrest

Several on 15<sup>th</sup> October were part of a major fall across eastern England, but other records from the Pits were sporadic:

- two in the Meadow on 2<sup>nd</sup> January
- singles on the north edge of Sailing Lake on 20<sup>th</sup> January and 4<sup>th</sup> March
- singles in the conifers near to Kingfisher Hide on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> June and two there on 20<sup>th</sup> August.

Birds were heard regularly in mature gardens and around Paxton church throughout spring and summer – surely they do breed there.

## Spotted flycatcher

No records from the Pits complex this year. One bird returned to a previous nest area in the village in May but none was seen again until early July. Just outside our recording area, a family party of seven was in Diddington village on 22<sup>nd</sup> August.

## Long-tailed tit

Small parties were around the reserve in winter and spring. The PBBS confirmed two pairs and identified a further seven probable pairs, slightly down on 1999. A part-built nest was found west of Sailing Lake in mid March. A nest in a Bydand Lane garden fledged at least nine, though there must have been other garden nests.

## Marsh tit

One was seen regularly from the Heron Trail during the winter, occasionally frequenting the Hayden Hide feeders. Surely under-recorded, especially in winter.

## Coal tit

Singles on 13<sup>th</sup> November along Hayling Lake and in conifers behind the Kingfisher Hide on 15<sup>th</sup> March and 18<sup>th</sup> June. How close to the Pits do coal tits breed? They are certainly regular throughout the year in mature village gardens.

## Blue tit

Common in woodland and scrub throughout the year. The PBBS recorded 38 pairs around the Pits, maintaining the increased numbers seen last year. Of these, 14 pairs were confirmed, mostly around the Heronry Lake and Haul Road.

## Great tit

Seen regularly throughout the year, the PBBS found 32 pairs, of which six were confirmed, a slight increase on 1999. Their distribution is almost identical to that of blue tit.

## Treecreeper

One or two birds were seen regularly in the Spinney to the east of Heronry South during the winter. A pair with young at the south end of Haul Road was the only confirmed breeding pair, though adults were seen on South Field, A1 South, near the Kingfisher Hide and one was ringed in the Sanctuary in spring, so the total may well be higher.

## Jay

Pairs were seen regularly around Washout/Island Pit and the Haul Road, though breeding was not confirmed at either.



*Magpie (Rob Banbury)*

## Magpie

Magpies are seen regularly around the Pits throughout the year, though a roost of up to 100 birds behind the Lafarge coating plant is noteworthy (a full report appears on page 31). The PBBS confirmed two family parties (in the Sanctuary and Haul Road) and found another eight probable pairs.

## Jackdaw

The mixed roost of corvids and pigeons peaked at an estimated 10,000 birds on 5<sup>th</sup> December, including many jackdaws. Birds feeding in village gardens are presumably those which breed around Paxton Hall. Around ten remained around the Pits well into the spring, most around the Rookery behind Sailing Lake.

## Rook

The mixed roost of corvids and pigeons peaked at an estimated 10,000 birds on 5<sup>th</sup> December, including many jackdaws. Approximately 100 birds were seen around the rookery on 27<sup>th</sup> January and 35-40 apparently occupied nests were counted before the canopy closed in mid April.

## Carrion crow

Carrion crows remain in the area throughout the year, though the PBBS identified only one probable breeding pair. Family parties of four and five were seen around the southern Pits in late July and early August.

## Starling

No reports of breeding pairs on the reserve, though they bred in the roof of the Sailing Clubhouse. Four family parties were present around the A1 Lakes during the Breeding Bird Survey, but it is not known where they nested. Others nested in the village, though no full counts were taken.



*Greenfinch (Charlie Eeles)*

## House sparrow

House sparrows are not known to breed around the Pits, though they are relatively common in the village. For example, one garden in Bydand Lane had six to 10 nests in ivy on one wall – including a pair in a tit nestbox. Many were double brooded.

## Chaffinch

The PBBS recorded 46 probable breeding pairs around the Pits, a slight decline on the estimate of 50 pairs in 1999. Most were around the older Pits, particularly in scrub around the Heronry Lakes and Haul Road.

## Brambling

Very scarce during winter 1999/2000, with six in a finch flock adjacent to the Island Pit on 18<sup>th</sup> October and one near Pumphouse Pit on 3<sup>rd</sup> January the only records.

## Greenfinch

Greenfinches have become commoner locally in recent years, no doubt helped by their expertise on garden feeders. The PBBS estimated 15 probable breeding pairs around the Pits, most around Hayling and Rudd. A juvenile close to Heronry South was the only confirmation of breeding on the reserve, however. There is also a large, but uncounted, population in the village.

## Goldfinch

The weeds and thistles around New Workings, Heronry South and the set-aside fields may be responsible for the increased sightings of goldfinches around the Pits, especially in summer. During the winter, flocks of up to 20 were regularly around the alders on Sailing Lake. At least six remained on rough ground near the Visitor Centre through June and July, with numbers increasing during August as family parties from elsewhere (including the village?) descended on the food sources.

## Siskin

Five flying over the New Workings on 26<sup>th</sup> September was the only autumn 1999 record. A handful was seen around the Sailing Lake, Island Pit and Washout Pit during December and January, but it was late winter before numbers increased. The alders around Sailing Lake held 40-60, with redpolls, from 6<sup>th</sup> February, with 25 still present on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> March.

## Linnet

The PBBS recorded five pairs around the Pits, including a brood of two around the Lafarge coatings plant. Pairs also hang on around the northern pits, benefiting from the seeds on the grassland and nearby crops, and a pair was seen regularly in the village. Dare we cross our fingers in the hope that the decline has ended and we are into the early stages of recovery?

## Redpoll

Seen sporadically around Heronry South during the early winter, with one at the Hayden Hide feeding station on 9<sup>th</sup> November, 12 over on 14<sup>th</sup> November and six on 11<sup>th</sup> December. From the New Year, small numbers, associating with siskins, were around the Sailing Lake: five on 27<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December, six on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, two on 6<sup>th</sup> February and 10+ on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> March.

## Bullfinch

The Pits population of this nationally-declining species was lower this year than last, with the PBBS recording eight pairs (ten pairs in 1999). A juvenile being fed by parents along Haul Road in mid June was the only confirmation of breeding.

## Yellowhammer

The national decline in this once-common farmland bird has been sadly reflected at Paxton. However, there was better news in 2000, with five singing males compared with three in 1999. The PBBS noted two singing males next to Island Pit, two between A1 Lakes and Haul Road, and a single on the set-aside farmland near the river. An additional singing male was regularly heard on the southern edge of New Workings and two were seen close to Pumphouse Pit in mid March. No breeding was confirmed, however.

## Reed bunting

The edge of the A1 Lakes and Pumphouse Pits are the stronghold for reed buntings, but the PBBS recorded 20% fewer than in 1999. The survey estimated 16 pairs, of

which two were confirmed near the A1 Lakes, while a visit to Pumphouse in mid July found four calling males, including one carrying food. Another was seen carrying food into the reeds west of Washout Pit on 25<sup>th</sup> May.

## Corn bunting

Corn bunting is close to extinction in many parts of Britain, and there are now few in the farmed countryside surrounding Paxton. But the Pits complex retains a small population, with two males holding territory and at least one female on the farmland between A1 Lakes and Haul Road. At the north end, two adults and a juvenile were seen on wires close to the New Workings in late July.

## Other species

The following records do not relate to birds of wild origin, but are included here for the sake of completeness.

### Black swan

A single, escaped bird, was on Pumphouse Pit on 18<sup>th</sup> October.

### Red-breasted goose

Five flew over Island and Pumphouse Pits on 14<sup>th</sup> October. While certainly not of wild origin, it also seem unlikely that five red-breasted geese would have escaped from a wildfowl collection at the same time. It is suggested by local ornithologist John Parslow that these birds may be from a feral population in mainland Europe.



REDWING

ROB BANBURY

*Redwing – not a bumper winter at Paxton for this Scandinavian breeding species, but they are usually present in small numbers from October to March (Rob Banbury)*

## First summer migrants in Little Paxton and Paxton Pits

**Julian Hughes**

The arrival of the first summer migrants is long-awaited, and it's always a special moment to hear your first chiffchaff or see your first swallow. To see the first migrants at Paxton Pits is even more special for regular visitors, however, and it becomes something of a race to find the first of each species, especially the first nightingale.

Now, for the first time, we have compiled what we believe to be a complete list of the earliest dates for summer migrants at Paxton Pits and Huntingdonshire. This means that it will be easy to check whether you have found something on an earlier date – if you have, please let us know!

As the table shows, 2000 saw record earliest dates for chiffchaff (breaking a record that had stood since 1950), house martin, little ringed plover, blackcap, common tern, reed warbler, hobby and lesser whitethroat – a truly remarkable spring. Indeed, the house martin is believed to be the earliest ever for the county.

	<b>Paxton 2000</b>	<b>Paxton earliest</b>	<b>Hunts earliest</b>
<b>Chiffchaff</b>	4 March	4 Mar 2000	4 Mar 2000
<b>House martin</b>	12 March	12 Mar 2000	12 Mar 2000
<b>Little ringed plover</b>	12 March	12 Mar 2000	10 Mar 1991
<b>Sand martin</b>	21 March	2 Mar 1997	2 Mar 1997
<b>Blackcap</b>	24 March	24 Mar 2000	14 Mar 1989
<b>Willow warbler</b>	25 March	9 Mar 1997	9 Mar 1997
<b>Swallow</b>	28 March	24 Mar 1996	21 Mar 1977
<b>Wheatear</b>	2 April	11 Mar 1996	5 Jan 1978
<b>Yellow wagtail</b>	8 April	3 Apr 1999	24 Mar 73/90
<b>Common tern</b>	9 April	9 Apr 2000	20 Mar 1997
<b>Nightingale</b>	16 April	4 Apr 1999	4 Apr 1999
<b>Sedge warbler</b>	16 April	7 Apr 1997	27 Mar 1989
<b>Whitethroat</b>	16 April	11 Apr 1997	4 Apr 1990
<b>Cuckoo</b>	20 April	13 Apr 1991	28 Feb 1997
<b>Garden warbler</b>	21 April	4 Apr 1997	4 Apr 1997
<b>Reed warbler</b>	20 April	20 Apr 2000	13 Apr 79/80
<b>Hobby</b>	21 April	21 Apr 1997/2000	15 Apr 1983
<b>Swift</b>	21 April	19 Apr 1996	14 Apr 1980
<b>Lesser whitethroat</b>	23 April	23 Apr 2000	6 Apr 1990
<b>Turtle dove</b>	24 April	12 April 1998	4 Apr 1982

## Magpie roost at Paxton Pits

Paul Lippett

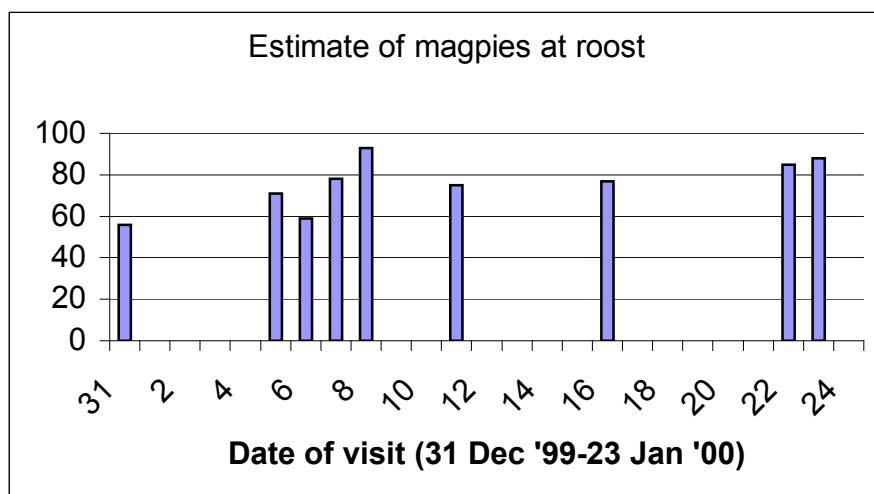
About two years ago, I became aware of a magpie roost in the trees behind the Lafarge Aggregates coating plant, to the east of the Visitor Centre. In my few previous visits, I had estimated that there were around 35 birds using the roost, but when I visited on 31 December 1999, I counted considerably more birds and so I paid regular dusk visits to the site throughout the next month.

The birds generally congregate on the edge of the wood about half an hour before dark. Groups descend onto the open ground in Redlands meadow and the ditch alongside the sand bank perimeter prior to disappearing into the trees adjacent to the southern end of the Redlands meadow. The wood is quite dense, though most of the trees are not very high. The magpies must roost at a low level, perhaps 10 to 12 feet above the ground, for no bird is visible in the higher part of the tree canopy.

It is very difficult to be sure that any count is really accurate. The birds are very mobile when assembling and not all come out into the open. Though the magpies arrive from all directions, they predominantly come from the south, with many crossing the Meadow to the south of the Visitor Centre. My initial vantage point was to the east of the wood, where it was not possible to establish whether birds flew directly into the roost from the western side. However, from 5 January, I changed my vantage point and realised that bushes had hampered my views of birds arriving – as a result, my count was more accurate, and was revised upwards to nearer 80 birds.

There appeared to be some order to the birds' arrival. The first come from the south with later birds arriving from the north. The same woods are also used as a roost by woodpigeons and I noticed a small number of jays in the area at roosting time, though whether they actually roost with the magpies is a matter of speculation.

By the end of January, having visited the roost site on nine occasions over 24 days and presuming that I was unable to see around 10% of the magpies coming into the roost, I concluded that it is probably around 90 birds, but perhaps as high as 100.





# **The rise and fall of Paxton's cormorants**

**Julian Hughes and Trevor Gunton**

Cormorants have been the subject of considerable interest at Paxton Pits since the early 1980s, when numbers started to increase, the species benefiting from the increased availability of food at Grafham Water reservoir and former gravel pits in the Ouse Valley. For birdwatchers, they have been a source of fascination – the return to the fenland basin of a species which had been rendered extinct as an inland breeding species with the arrival of Vermuyden's drainage team in the seventeenth century. For anglers, the return of these birds has been viewed with greater suspicion – while the cormorants have been away, leisure angling has developed and with it the practice of stocking lakes and reservoirs with fish. Grafham Water and Paxton Pits have brought these conflicts into sharp relief. The purpose of this paper is to record the changing status of cormorants at Paxton Pits and to report on the results of a ringing programme conducted here during the 1990s.

## **The historical perspective**

Since the recording of birds began, cormorants have been rare in Cambridgeshire. Indeed, Clark (1996) could find only two records in Huntingdonshire during the nineteenth century, with a further six recorded in the county by 1923. Simon Holloway (1996) reports that the cormorant's distribution changed little between 1875 and 1980, with most inland breeding colonies already extirpated from the UK by 1800, though a colony of 50-60 pairs lasted near Herringfleet in Suffolk until 1825. There are, however, records of cormorant bones from the Cambridgeshire Fens, presumably from the days before the Washes were created and the marshes drained.

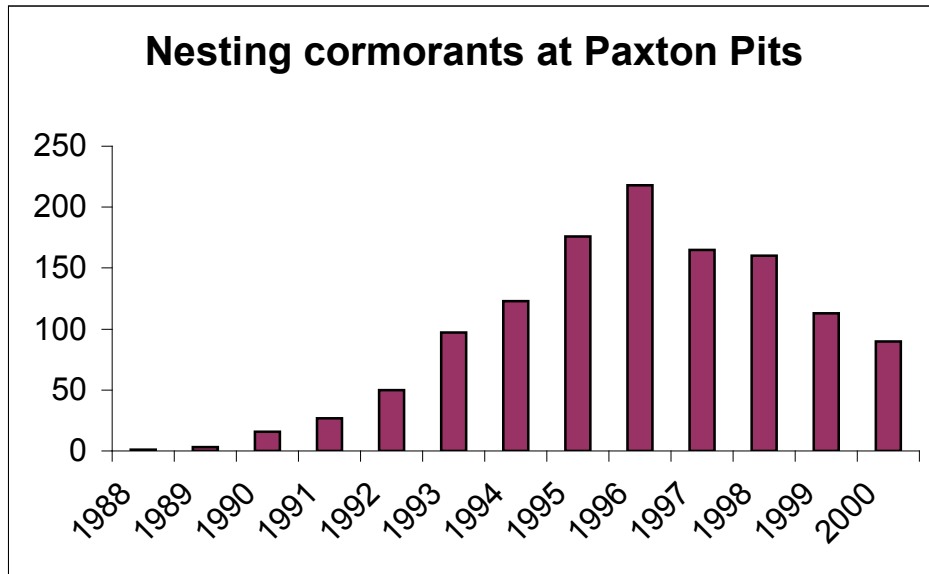
As gravel was extracted on a major scale in the Ouse Valley from the 1930s, so a new source of food became available for wintering cormorants. The creation of Grafham Water in the 1960s accelerated the trend, with maximum counts increasing from three in 1966, 45 in 1983, 240 in 1987 to 670-675 in 1992/94 (Clark 1996). The increase was reflected at several other sites in England.

## **Breeding cormorants at Paxton Pits**

Although cormorants had been recorded at Paxton during winters in the 1980s, it was 1988 before a pair bred at the Pits, when a pair established a nest in the heronry. They possibly laid eggs, but this is not confirmed because the nest disappeared soon afterwards. In 1989, three nests were built, from which the first young were raised in Huntingdonshire for several hundred years.

The breeding population increased rapidly, as shown in the graph below. Numbers peaked in 1996, at 218 nests, but have since fallen to fewer than 100 nests. This has put the colony back to its pre-1993 level. The reasons for this are unknown, though various suggestions have been put forward, including:

- reduced availability of food (partly through changes in fish stocking regimes at Grafham Water in response to predation by cormorants)
- reduced availability of nesting sites as older trees within the colony have died
- illegal shooting of cormorants as birds fly between Paxton and Grafham



The trend in number of breeding birds at Paxton is reflected in the wintering counts. For example, in winter 1987-88, counts varied between six and 80, but by 1992-93, counts were 60 to 253, with peak counts usually in January or February. The all-time peak count at Paxton was 880 birds in January 1994, but winter counts have fallen in the six years since, with a high of 354 in January 2000.

### Cormorant movements from Paxton

During the mid 1990s, a major ringing programme was undertaken to better understand the movements of cormorants from inland colonies at Abberton Water (Essex), Besthorpe Gravel-Pits (Nottinghamshire), Rutland Water (Leicestershire) and Paxton Pits. Colour-ringing at Paxton began in 1995, though operational constraints prevented it proceeding beyond 1996, by which time 37 juvenile birds had been ringed.

Of the 37 young cormorants ringed during 1995 and 1996, 43% were resighted (16 birds on 59 separate occasions) by the end of 1998. Birds from Paxton were seen at 20 different sites, including Paxton itself (responsible for 10 of the 59 resightings – a much lower resighting rate than the other four colonies). However, there were also sightings at Paxton of 23 cormorants from Abberton, Besthorpe and Rutland.

All of the birds ringed in the Paxton colony were resighted in England, birds travelling as far as Yorkshire, Shropshire, Suffolk and Berkshire. Young birds from other colonies were seen as far away as Spain and Tunisia, though none of Paxton's birds were found abroad. Birds were found an average of 90-120 km away from their natal colony, with first-year birds leaving their breeding colonies within two months of fledging and being found farthest away. Adult birds, by contrast, were generally found much closer to the breeding colony.

It would appear from the ringing data that the birds which breed at Paxton Pits and those which winter there are almost entirely different populations. Breeding birds return to the colony from January, which may well explain the fact that 'wintering' numbers appear to peak in late January or early February. Indeed, in some years, the first nests are already under construction by the end of January.

There are two races of cormorants in Europe: *Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*, which breeds in Britain and Ireland, and *P.c.sinensis*, which has traditionally been considered a continental subspecies. Birds at Paxton are mostly the *carbo* race, though only two birds ringed elsewhere have been found breeding at Paxton – one from St Margaret’s Island in 1994 and one from Grune Point (Cumbria) in 1995.

One of the key conclusions of the ringing studies is that the continental subspecies *sinensis* may be commoner at inland colonies in England than had been realised. This may partly be a result of improved identification techniques – it is only in the last few years that accurate identification features have been described. Based on the shape of the gular patch (the orange skin at the base of the bill) and microsatellite DNA studies, birds of the *sinensis* race breed at Paxton (check Newson in prep). Further scrutiny of the breeding birds would be worthwhile, to get a more up to date estimate of the proportion of breeders at Paxton.

## The future of the Paxton colony

Without knowing why the colony grew from nothing in eight years, but has declined since 1996, it is impossible to foretell the future of the colony. Monitoring in Denmark suggests that colonies reach a certain level and then numbers plateau as new satellite colonies develop nearby. However, our research to date has failed to find any obvious new colonies in the Ouse Valley. Although wintering birds continue to feed and roost at Grafham Water, Fen Drayton Gravel-Pits, Marsh Lane Gravel-Pits and as far north as the Nene Washes, only small numbers have bred sporadically.

It may well be that cormorants benefited unduly from artificially high numbers of fish in stocked lakes and reservoirs during the 1990s, but that changes in stocking practices have now reduced the availability of ‘easy food’. If this is the case, then there is not too much to worry about – numbers may wax and wane according to the natural fluctuations in well-managed fish populations. On the other hand, cormorants may be a barometer of the environmental quality of local waterbodies, so a decline might be an indicator of more serious problems.

In the meantime, it is crucial that we continue to count the numbers of cormorants in the colony. All birders are encouraged to take the time to count numbers, in both winter and spring. And we can continue to watch the changing fortunes of Paxton’s cormorants with interest.

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## Bird ringing at Paxton Pits

Guy Thompson

Although there have been occasional bird-ringing sessions at Paxton Pits, there has not been any attempt to undertake regular monitoring of breeding birds by this method. In 2000, English Nature granted permission for me to run a trial Constant Effort Site (CES) in the Sanctuary area of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve during the Summer of 2000.

The CES Scheme is run by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to gather information which will help to explain bird population changes, through a programme of mist-netting at sites in specific habitats during each summer. The methodology requires a series of constant net-sites worked during twelve standard visits from the end of April to the end of August. The data gathered from over 100 sites across the UK contribute to the BTO's Integrated Population Monitoring Programme.

Three mist-netting sessions were run at Paxton Pits during late June and early July – these demonstrated that the habitat is ideally suited for an annual CES site. A good variety of species was caught, including a number of species of *Sylvia* and *Phylloscopus* warblers. Most importantly, one breeding adult female nightingale was caught on two successive visits and one newly fledged juvenile was also ringed - very few breeding nightingales are caught nationwide. Other records of interest included a treecreeper and a 'control' chiffchaff ringed elsewhere (details of its origin have still to be obtained from the BTO).

A table of the species of particular interest is given below:

Species	18/6	25/6	2/7	Total
Nightingale	1	-	1	2
Sedge warbler	-	3	1	4
Reed warbler	1	-	1	2
Lesser whitethroat	-	1	-	1
Whitethroat	1	-	-	1
Garden warbler	1	4	1	6
Blackcap	1	9	2	12
Chiffchaff	3	3	2	8
Willow warbler	1	6	-	7

My thanks to Ron Elloway for agreeing to the proposal and for liaising with English Nature on my behalf.

(It is hoped that, if Paxton Pits is used as a Constant Effort Site, the information gathered will be reported annually in this Report – Editors)

### **Acknowledgments**

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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](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk)**