

BIRDS of PAXTON PITS

Autumn and winter 2001

Spring and summer 2002

Includes Little Paxton village and surrounding area

**“Paxton has built a reputation for attracting good birds...
...this report probably contains more information than ever before”**

Birdwatch

Birds of Paxton Pits, Little Paxton village and surrounding area

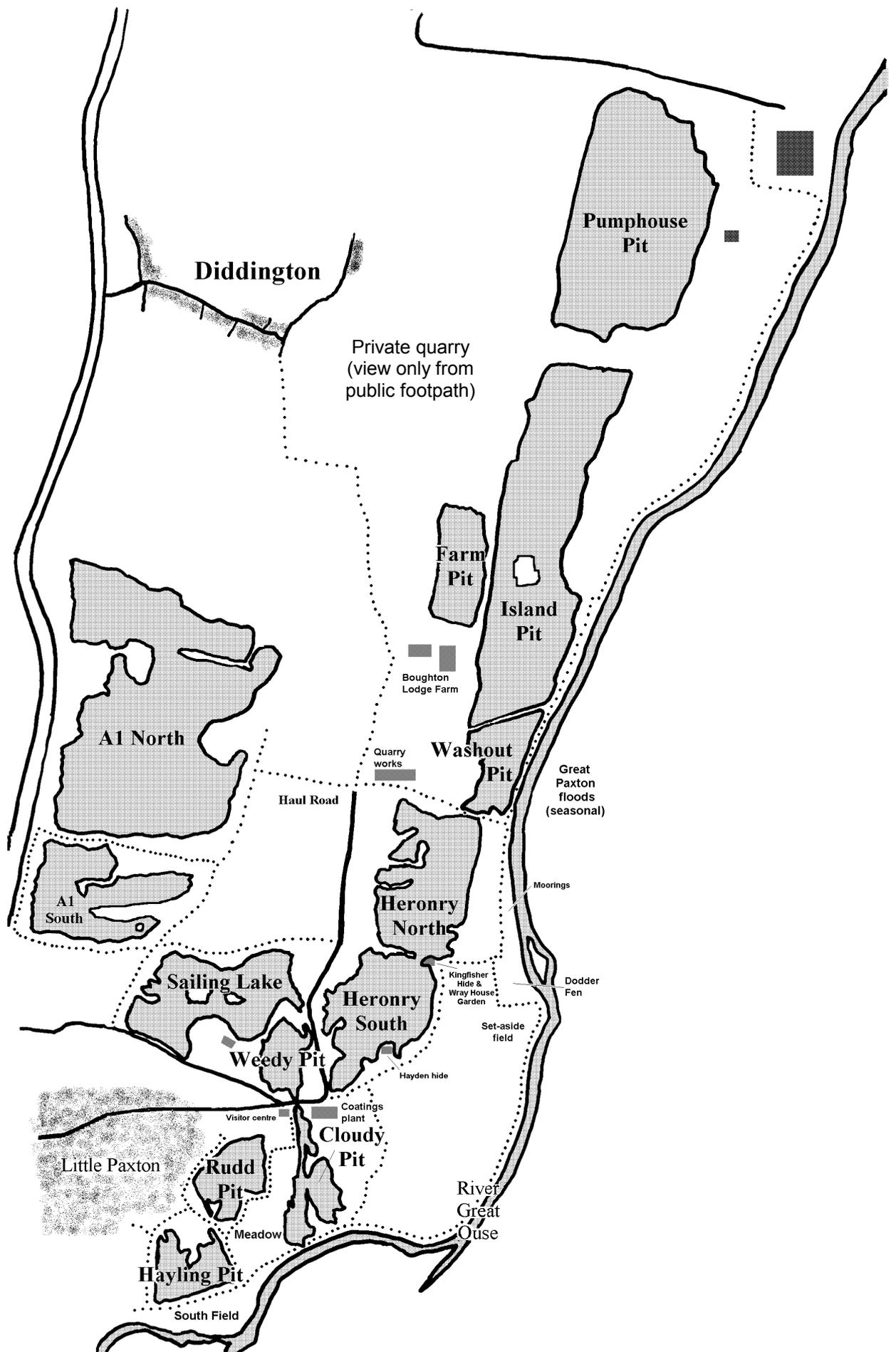
1st September 2001 to 31st August 2002

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Cover illustration: Kingfisher, by Rob Banbury



Diddington

Pumphouse Pit

Private quarry
(view only from
public footpath)

Farm Pit

Island Pit

Boughton
Lodge Farm

A1 North

Washout Pit

Quarry works

Great Paxton
floods
(seasonal)

Haul Road

A1 South

Heronry North

Moorings

Sailing Lake

Heronry South

Kingfisher
Hide &
Wray House
Garden

Dodder
Fen

Little Paxton

Weedy Pit

Set-aside
field

Hayden hide

Visitor centre

Coatings
plant
Cloudy Pit

River
Great
Ouse

Rudd Pit

Meadow

Hayling Pit

South Field

Foreword

Ron Elloway, Ranger, Huntingdonshire District Council

This has, perhaps, been the most exciting year in the development of the Paxton Pits complex since the southern area was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Local Nature Reserve in 1989. Two major events have dominated the past 12 months: the acquisition by Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) of an extension to the nature reserve and the extension of the Visitor Centre.

The extension of the nature reserve to include the farmland alongside the river allows HDC and The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve to do something new at Paxton – recreate wildlife habitats. While part of the area will become a wet meadow, ideal for flowers, insects and birds, the remainder will be managed as arable farmland, but in a non-intensive way that will create good feeding areas for species of birds that are rapidly disappearing from Huntingdonshire. It should also have a colourful streak, with flowers such as Poppies, Corn Cockle and Corn Marigold among the crop. More details are in the article by Ray Matthews on page 47.

The extension of the Visitor Centre, opened in May, is already enabling more people to appreciate and understand what the nature reserve has to offer. More than 400 people joined organised groups to listen to the reserve's nightingales in the first few weeks after the Centre opened, including 250 at an evening organised by St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club. The Friends continue to make a valuable contribution to the running of the reserve, through work parties and funding a range of projects (including a contribution to the Visitor Centre and the new land).

Birdwise, it has been an exciting year, with a record number of nightingales holding territories around the reserve, and more extensive in range than ever before. This report records 158 species seen at Paxton Pits during autumn/winter 2001 and spring/summer 2002, the same total as the previous year.

Bird surveys undertaken by volunteers and co-ordinated by St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club, continue to be of considerable value to the management of the nature reserve. Our knowledge of birds at Paxton is probably as good as it has ever been, though there remain a few gaps, especially of species that are difficult to detect, such as breeding tawny owl, goldfinch, woodpigeon and hobby.

Please keep enjoying Paxton Pits, and do your bit by sending your records for next year's Report.

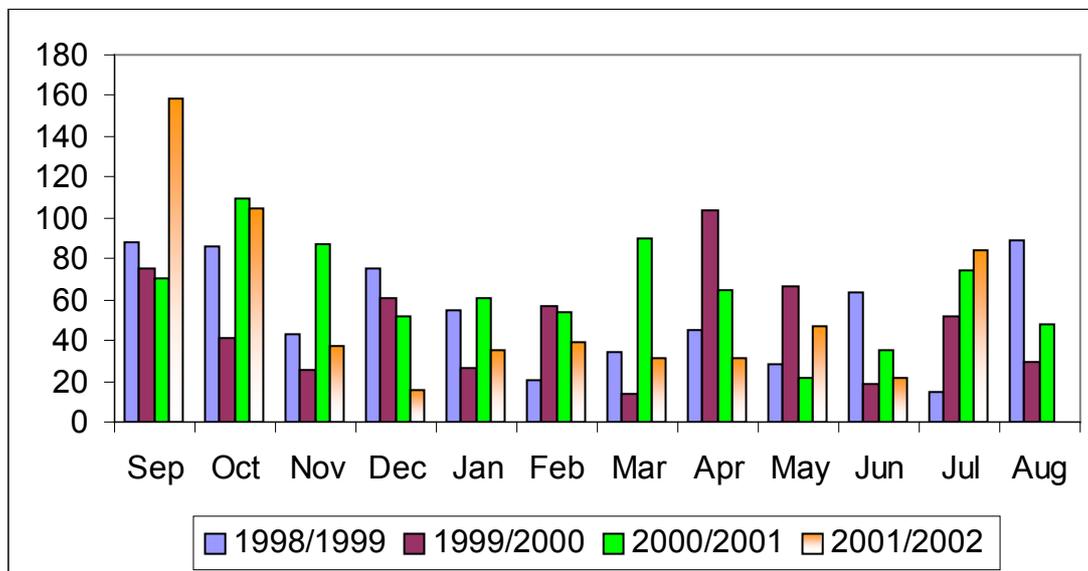
This is the last foreword from Ron as Ranger – he retires in March 2003. Having known the area since he was a boy, we have been fortunate to have his enthusiasm, knowledge and expertise to guide the nature reserve's development in recent years. St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club thanks him for all his work, and wishes him all the best for the future.

The Weather Year

The weather plays a significant role in the presence and breeding success of birds at Paxton Pits. Autumn 2001 and the subsequent winter will be remembered for the extended spell of mild weather, which has become an increasingly regular feature of British winters. September (the wettest month for more than five years) replenished the water levels around the Pits, so they were higher than has ever been known in some areas (the small island on Pumphouse Pit was submerged from January 2000 until March 2002). Leaves remained on some deciduous trees around the pits until the first week of December.

The only severe weather occurred during the first two weeks of January, when almost all of the surface water froze, except for a small patch of Island Lake and a larger area of Pumphouse Pit. Many wildfowl moved away from Paxton in search of open feeding areas, and some did not return before the end of the winter. Kingfishers, always a barometer of the effects of cold weather, became very scarce in the following months, though they recovered well by the summer.

Once the cold snap was out of the way, mild weather returned, and spring came quickly, with cormorants and herons quickly into nest-building, resident songbirds taking up territories and the first leaf burst and blossoms appearing ahead of schedule. Aside from a mini heatwave in the last week of March and the occasional warm day in April and May, it was an unexceptional spring, with temperatures on some days in May failing to exceed 10 Centigrade. However, although there was little sunshine, rainfall in April and June was low. By contrast, July was wetter than usual, but summer finally came with warm, dry and calm days through much of the remainder of the summer.



Please send all records of birds recorded between September 2002 and August 2003 to Trevor Gunton, 15 St James Road, Little Paxton, St Neots, Cambridgeshire PE19 6QW. Tel: (01480) 473562. Or e-mail: paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk

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

The systematic list

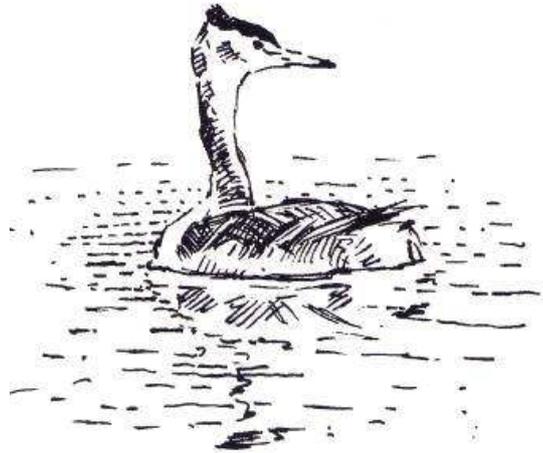
Little grebe

Small numbers remained on the Pits throughout the winter, peaking at seven in early November. Most records come from the open, northern lakes, but during early January, when most of the pits were frozen, up to four were regularly on the River Great Ouse, near the lock. In the following weeks, Heronry Lake, where they are rarely seen, hosted up to five of these diminutive grebes.

During the early part of the breeding season, little grebes were seen on several of the southern lakes, including Cloudy Lake, where one appeared to be using an old tyre as the base for a nest (FD), but this came to nothing. The species is restricted to Farm Pit during the breeding season, where four broods were seen during July and August. A minimum of eight young hatched, and several very young birds were seen on the back of parents, but perhaps only four of these fledged and were still present in early September. After several years of good productivity here, this was a poor showing. Did the red-eared terrapin seen in early July have anything to do with it?

Great crested grebe

Numbers peak at the end of the summer, as adults moult, their numbers boosted by young from that season: a large chick was still being fed in front of Hayden Hide in mid

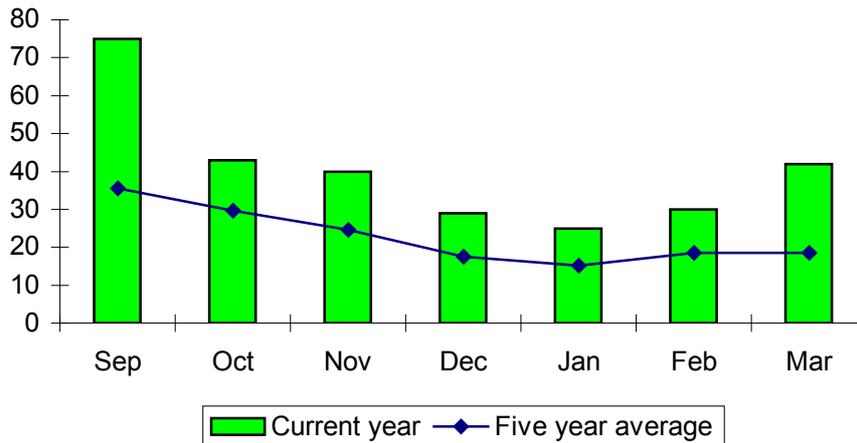


Great crested grebe (John Busby)

November! The graph from the Wetland Bird Survey illustrates a typical winter, with 20-25 individuals, though a separate count on 24th January found 60 birds (RES).

Displaying birds were observed (on A1 North) from 16th February and continued into and through March on several pits. On 24th February, a pair performed a full 'weed-dance' on Heronry South – a wonderful sight!

The Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS) noted 17 pairs, but only nine of these actually got down to nesting, with breeding proven from Hayling, Heronry South (2), Sailing (2), A1 South, Rudd, Weedy and Pumphouse Lakes. Only about 10 young were raised, the same as in 2000, but only about half the 2001 total. Predation of eggs by carrion crows was witnessed from at least two nests.



Great crested grebes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Cormorant

The 2001 breeding season finished very late, with two chicks still being fed in the nest on 2nd September, more than six weeks after the last youngsters have usually fledged. At this stage, the roost consisted of just 65 birds, and it was many weeks before this started to increase.

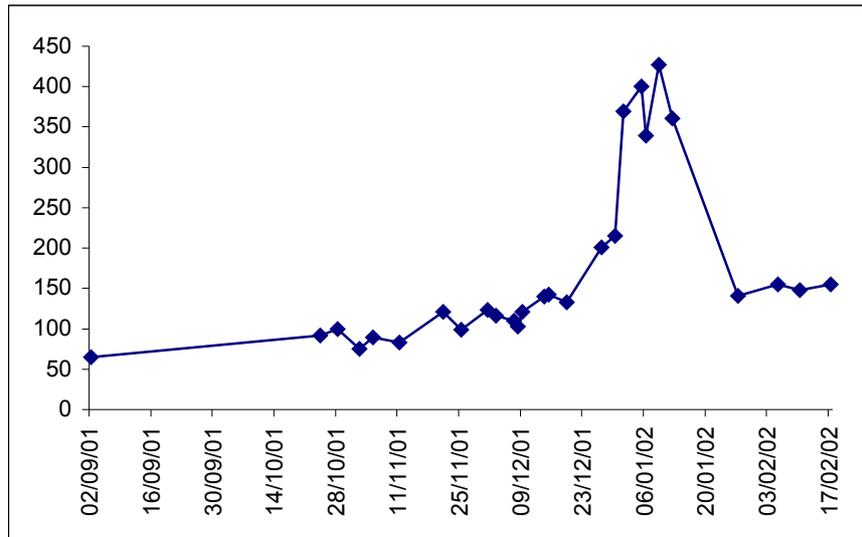
By mid-December, the roost had settled down at around 140 birds, but the breeding season was already on its way: a bird with a white thigh patch was seen on 12th (DM/JM) and three were noted displaying on 19th (TGG). The freezing weather for two weeks after Christmas saw an influx of birds, presumably from continental Europe, peaking at 427 on 9th January (TGG), which included a single arriving flock of 66. This was the highest count since February 1998.

Once the weather became milder, numbers fell rapidly and the remaining birds were soon back into spring-like mood, with nest-

building and displaying on 20th January (MD/JH/JW).

By mid February, there were more than 30 occupied nests, and this grew to 97 by 22nd April (JH), after which the colony was partly obscured by leaves. The first young were noted on 1st April (TGG), the same date as last year, though remarkably one young-looking bird was already at the water's edge on this date.

May 4th saw an explosion of young birds, with adults feeding some away from the nest, and by mid June, some 50 youngsters could be regularly seen around the colony, with only 25 nests still occupied. Sample counts suggested a good season, with a few nests fledging four young, and most at least two. On 2nd July, 14 nests remained active and some continued well into August, with the final bird flapping from its nest on 19th.



Cormorants roosting at Paxton Pits, September 2001 to February 2002

Bittern

Freezing weather in early January brought an influx of bitterns into England, with up to 60 seen on a single day. Paxton Pits shared in this movement, with one filmed clambering over the willows at the edge of a solidly-frozen Sailing Lake on 5th January (SW/JHu). Presumably the same bird was seen flying over the Meadow on 10th (RES).



Bittern (Rob Banbury)

Little egret

After the remarkable four in August 2001, one remained around the Pits until 16th September, regularly flying to roost with the cormorants (though two were seen there on the evening of 4th, TGG). One was seen on Heronry North on 31st December (DM), a record which fits with a string of sightings in the area around Christmas and New Year. Perhaps it was the same bird found in a wet field near A1 South on 27th

January (NP), which flew off southeast after an hour.

There was only one further record during the year, on Pumphouse Pit on 20th May (JW/ JLFP).

Grey heron

Present throughout the year with up to seven birds at the colony on Heronry South from January. Severe weather conditions made feeding difficult for a week, though one took advantage of a large fish dropped onto the ice by a cormorant returning to the roost at dusk on 1st January (JH). This cold weather delayed nest repairs and display, but by late January, adults were carrying nesting material and settling on the nest platform.

By early February, three old nests were being repaired around the willow tree that is the centre of activity. During March, 5-7 nests were active, including up to three that were deep in the cormorant colony. Intriguingly, a fledged young heron was seen around Heronry South and Sailing Lake regularly from late March, perhaps suggesting that a pair laid during the worst of the weather, and it had hatched unnoticed during February.

By early April, young from two nests were exploring the surrounding area and one nest in the cormorant colony appeared active well into June, with 3-4 'branchers' using

the willow nests to roost on most evenings. Through the remainder of the summer, 10 herons were seen regularly around the Heronry and Washout Pits.

White stork

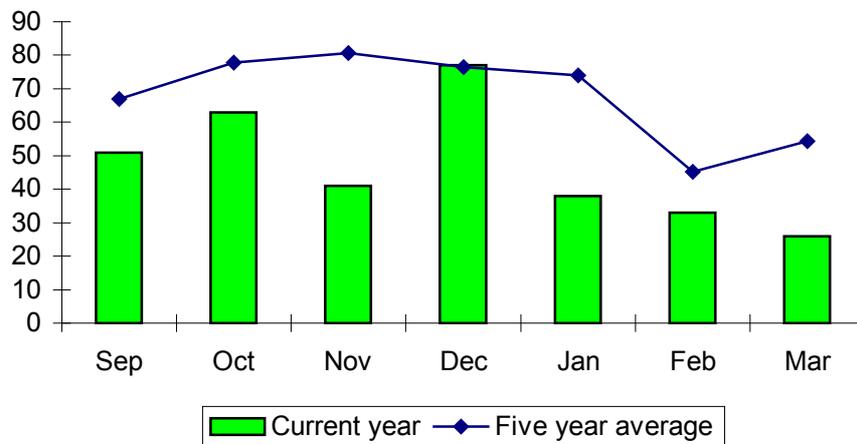
A new addition to the Paxton list, thanks to one flying north over the Visitor Centre on 6th July (JA/GDE/AP/MT). This was the final day of three in the area for this bird, which was seen by many local birders near

Graveley, and is subject to acceptance by the Cambridgeshire Records Committee.

Mute swan

The 2001 breeding season continued well into the autumn, with a pair looking after their cygnets until mid December at least.

After the highest counts ever at Paxton during winter 2000/01, this year saw numbers return to normal, though many birds were driven to unfrozen waterbodies,



Wintering mute swans during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Mute swan drowns greylag geese

While counting breeding waders on Pumphouse Pit late in the afternoon of 7th June, a flock of greylag geese swam from one of the islands into the centre of the lake. There were around 150 birds, of which almost 100 were well-grown juveniles, approximately two-thirds the size of the adults.

Around 5 pm, during constant drizzle, a male mute swan entered the water and swam directly towards the flock of geese. Agitated, the swan 'ran' on the surface of the water towards an adult feral, white goose and forced it out of the flock. The goose dived under the water to get away from the swan (as is usual behaviour for wildfowl when threatened from above) and for several minutes the swan repeatedly chased the goose, both on and beneath the surface of the water. At one point, the swan held the goose under the water, but the goose made its escape and rejoined the flock.

The male swan swam towards the flock again, this time picking out one of the juvenile greylags. This was chased out of the flock and held underwater by the swan, which used its weight to 'perch' on the back of the goose. The goose was obviously struggling to get out from beneath the swan, since the swan moved erratically across the surface of the lake. Every couple of minutes, the head of the greylag appeared on the surface of the water, as it struggled for air, but on each occasion the swan grabbed its neck and forced it back under the water. This was repeated for approximately 15 minutes, until the bedraggled head and neck of the goose appeared from underneath the swan for the final time. Again the swan forced its head under the water, and held it there for several seconds.

The swan then lifted from the water into a vertical position, flapped its wings and swam back to the island where it started to preen. I watched the lake for another half hour and am

certain that the goose did not emerge from under the water, and can only presume that the final 'dunking' was sufficient to drown the greylag. The male swan was one of a pair that was nesting on the south end of the island, but the nest was at no time threatened by the geese, which were more than 200 metres away.

Remarkably, I witnessed a repeat performance by the same male mute swan on a juvenile (but by now full-size greylag goose) on 14th July. Chris Sargeant reports that another male swan repeatedly chased a Canada goose on Hayling Lake on 30th May and ultimately occupied its nest site.

Julian Hughes



Mute swan (Paul Young)

Dr David Christie, former Assistant Editor of *British Birds*, has commented:

"Mute swans, when breeding or with cygnets, can be extremely aggressive towards other waterfowl (all kinds). There was a note in the June 1991 issue of *British Birds* (vol. 84, p. 220) about a male mute swan attacking a moulting adult Canada goose in Cheshire: the swan rushed at the goose, which was forced to dive repeatedly in order to avoid injury; finally, the goose escaped into some bulrushes. The swan had a mate and some cygnets at the other end of the mere, which was about 1 km away! Mute swans will clearly go out of their way to attack any other largish waterfowl which they see on "their" water (I suspect that the swan would have drowned the Canada goose had it not got to the bulrushes)." such as the Great Ouse and Grafham Water, in early January. The first nests

appeared on Rudd and Hayling Lakes in early March and by May, there were 11 nests on 10 lakes, though only eight were successful, raising 20-28 young. A pair on Hayling Pit again raised a large brood, with seven hatching and at least six cygnets still present in September.

During midsummer, 40 swans formed a non-breeding flock, principally using Island Lake.

Pink-footed goose

One was reported north of Farm Pit on 16th June, and was presumably of feral origin (per MH).

White-fronted goose

One, presumably also of feral origin, associated with greylag geese on Heronry Lake (MD/JW) on 23rd December and was also seen on Island Lake (DM/JM).

Greylag goose

Numbers of these feral geese were probably the highest ever recorded in autumn 2001, with a staggering count of 890 on 2nd September (JLFP). Although briefly dissipating during cold weather in early January, they returned quickly, with a flock of 448 on the farmland east of the A1 Pits on 20th January (NP).

Birds displayed from late January, with the first six nests reported on Sailing Lake by the month's end. It is estimated that around 130 goslings fledged this year, though several among the flock failed to make it to adulthood courtesy of a mad, male mute swan (see page 9)!

Canada goose

Numbers were higher than usual for much of the winter, especially in December, when they are usually scarce. By contrast barely any were recorded during the November and January WeBS counts.



Canada goslings (Paul Young)

Display was noted on Sailing Lake from late January and the first four nests were reported there on 28th March. Young were seen from late April, and by mid-May, goslings were feeding on the sailing club 'lawn'. It is estimated that 57 young fledged this season. For the third successive year, a Canada paired with a barnacle goose, though was not successful.

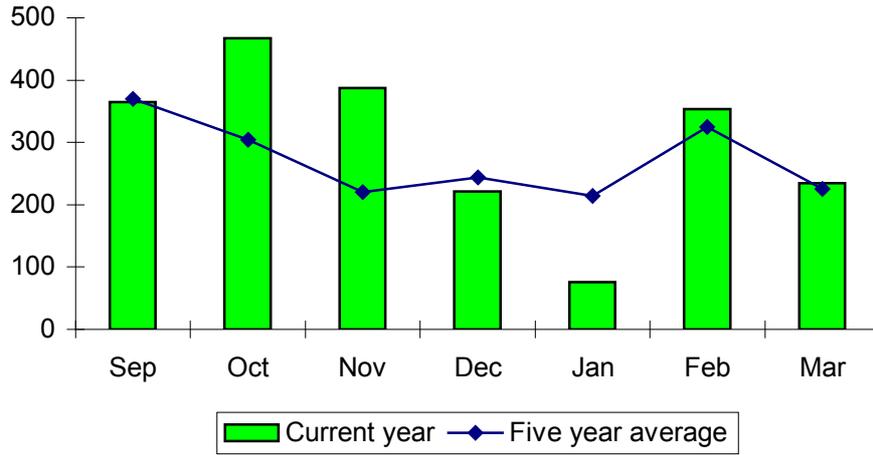
Barnacle goose

Up to four feral birds spent the year around the Pits, though only one was reported after February. This paired with a Canada goose on Sailing Lake from early March (JH), but no young were seen and it joined a moulting flock on A1 South for the remainder of the summer.

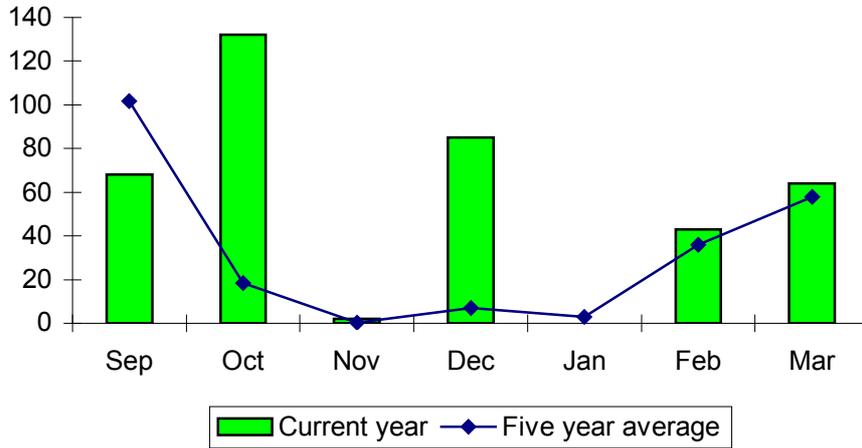
Common shelduck

One of the best ever years for numbers of shelduck at Paxton, but with no breeding. Unusually, birds were seen during the winter: three on 5th November (TGG), one on 25th November and one on 2nd December (NP). Passage birds were seen from 23rd January (MH).

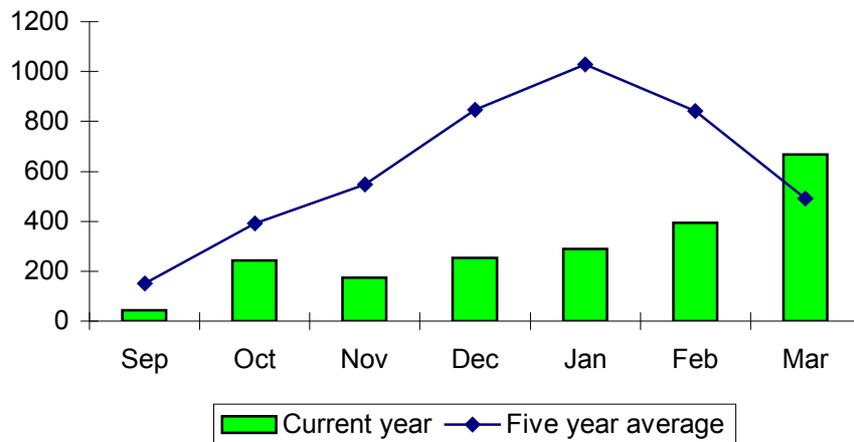
Two pairs were seen regularly during February, and more arrived during early March. Numbers peaked at 14 on 23rd March (SM/RP), then fell during early April, before rising again, to 16 on 15th May. However, unlike 2001 when they bred in the private quarry, there were no records after two birds on 16th June (NP).



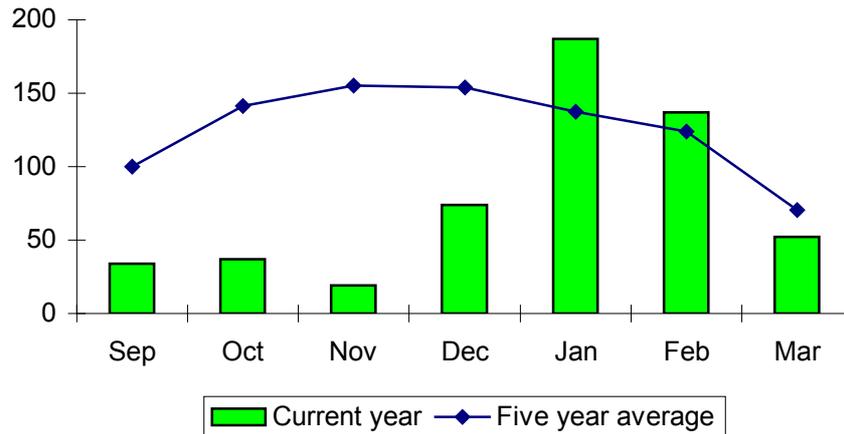
Winterring greylag geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Winterring Canada geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Winterring wigeons during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Wintering gadwalls during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Wigeon

This was one of the poorest winters for wigeons at Paxton since 1989-90, and there is no obvious explanation. It will be interesting to see whether this was a nationwide phenomenon. Unusually, the peak was at the end of the winter (668 on 3rd March), so perhaps they were farther south than usual. Over 150 were still present in late March, including a pair displaying on 12th March (TGG). Most had moved out by 1st April and the last were reported on the typical date of 20th April (SM/RP).

A single male on Heronry Lake on 25th June (CS) was very unseasonal, and a male and female seen regularly from 19th July (TGG).

19th June (TGG), attended by three other females. This family group was not reported again, but may have joined the 100+ moulting birds during July and August. From where do these birds originate?



Wigeon (Rob Banbury)

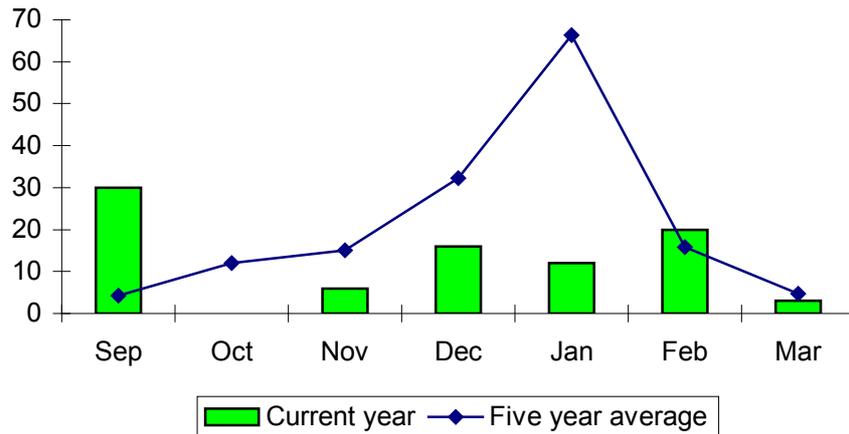
Gadwall

Wintering numbers were low during autumn 2001, with a peak of only 74 before the end of the year – though, bizarrely, two pairs were displaying during mild weather on 24th October (TGG). Numbers recovered during the first months of 2002, but many had dispersed by late February, and only a handful remained into April.

Following much displaying around Heronry South, a female with 10 young was seen on

Teal

After large numbers in 2000/01, this was a poor winter, with few teal around the Pits after passage birds had headed south in September. The peak winter count came from the private quarry, with 40 birds on 3rd February (MSh). A few birds paired up in April, but no breeding was suspected. Up to four birds summered in the private quarry from 7th June (failed breeders from farther north?). Autumn migrants arrived from early August 2002, with 20 by the month's end (JW).



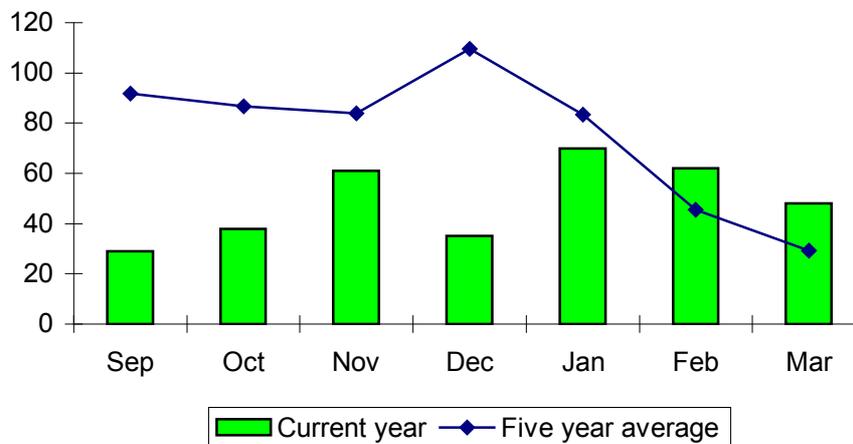
Winterring teals during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Mallard

Numbers at Paxton Pits have declined over recent years, but this was the worst yet – the lowest peak count during the WeBS counts (70 on 13th January) since records began in 1960. In part, this reflects the national picture, with a significant decline since 1985.

Birds displayed on several mild days throughout the winter, with a communal display of 32 birds on 11th November and a pair mating on 31st January (TGG).

During the summer, the number of moulting birds built up to around 70, principally on Washout Pit; the breeding estimate is that 14 successful nests raised a minimum of 24 young.



Winterring mallards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Pintail

At least 13 birds this year, down on the 17 during 2000/01. A female was present on 15th-16th September (SM), and was presumably the same on 22nd. This was followed by a single male on 16th October (SM) and records between 30th December and 31st January involving at least three males and six females.

A pair on Pumphouse Pit on 29th March (SM/RP) was the only record of the spring.

Garganey

After three records in August 2001, there were no further sightings that autumn.

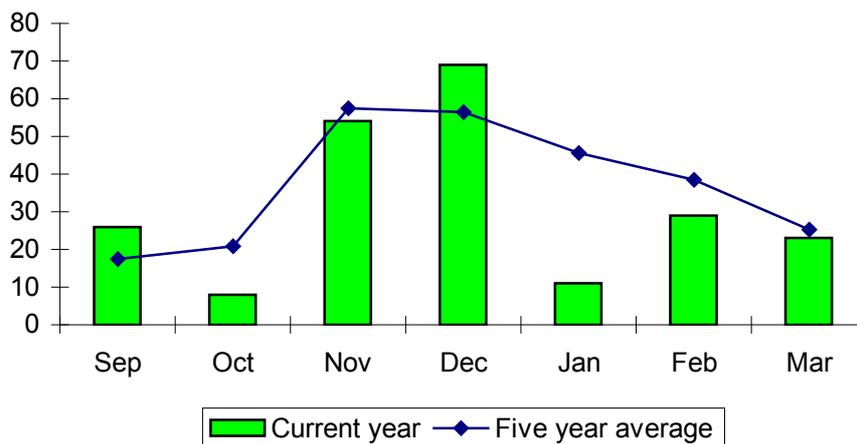
2002 was an extraordinary year for garganeys by Paxton standards, with 12-13 in total. Six were during an extended spring, all on Pumphouse Pit: two males and a female on 29th March (TGG), a male on 11-15th May (MD), a male on 2nd June (MD) and a female on 17th June (JW). The last record at least may have been a failed breeder already heading south.

Autumn proper got underway on 14th July (MD/JW), followed by records on 25th July (MD/JW), 11th August (JLFP), 24th August (MD), with possibly a second bird the same day (JW), two from 26th August (JLFP), which remained into September.

Shoveler

Displaying birds were reported on several days throughout the winter, including 40 on 31st January. Numbers were fairly typical of recent years, with a peak of 91 birds on 30th December on Heronry South (GR), which tends to host the majority. Numbers here remained well over 50 into mid-March, with much displaying, before dispersing in early April, the last reported on Pumphouse on 23rd (MSh).

A pair in the private quarry on 4th and 8th June provided a burst of hope of breeding (TGG/JH), but no more were seen until a female from 14th July. Only a handful were seen before the end of August.



Wintering shovellers during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

Red crested pochard

A female of unknown origin was seen on two dates in the autumn (RE/JM/SM), and then a male on 1st January (many observers). A pair was seen on three dates in January and one in March, with several records of male or female on dates in between. The final record of the period was a female on 20th March (MD).

A female hybrid red-crested pochard x (common) pochard was reported on several dates between 2nd September and 25th October by one observer (JLFP).

Pochard

Numbers at Paxton Pits seem to cycle every eight years, peaking in 1987 and 1995, slowly falling in the intervening years. This winter saw the lowest numbers for some years, so will we witness a rapid recovery in 2003?

The peak count was during December, with just 243 on 16th (WeBS count). Unusually, six birds were on the river on 6th January (FC), escaping the ice on most of the lakes. Numbers fell rapidly during March, so that by the second week of April, there were fewer than half a dozen around the whole complex.

A male pochard x tufted duck hybrid was seen on 2nd September (JLFP).

There were a few unseasonal summer records - a male in the private quarry on 12th May (MH), two males on Pumphouse Pit on 2nd June (JH) and five there on 7th (JH) – before autumn numbers started to build from 14th July. By 4th August, 64 were moulting on the northern lakes.

Ferruginous duck

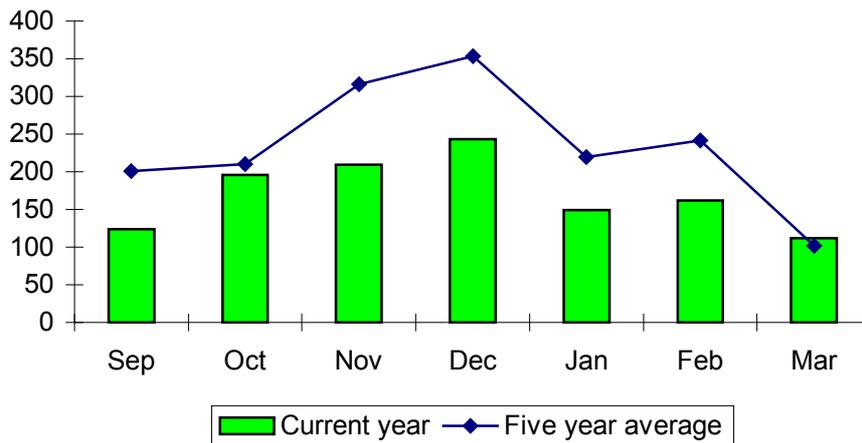
A female was reported on Heronry South on 17th February, but could not be relocated. A rare bird at Paxton, the claim coincided with the presence of a hybrid duck a few miles to the north, at Buckden Gravel Pits. This was considered to be the result of a liaison between a common

pochard and a ferruginous duck. Was it the same bird? We shall never know.

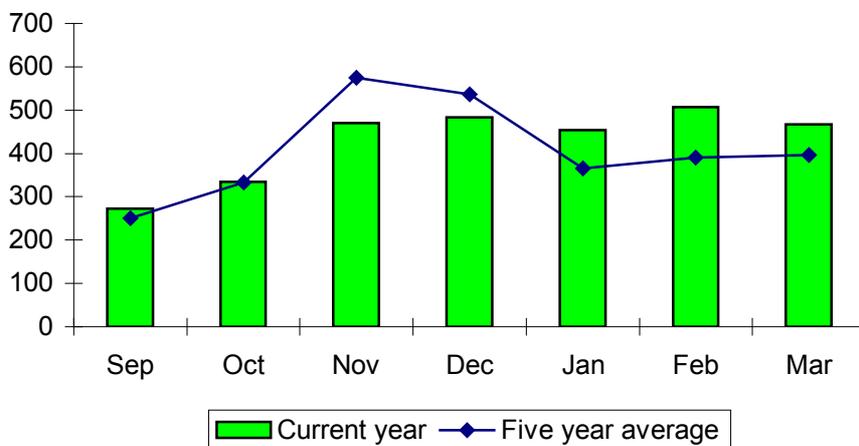
Tufted duck

Winter totals were typical of the last decade, the highest coming independently of the WeBS counts: 513 on 24th January (RES). Birds dispersed to breeding sites during March and early April.

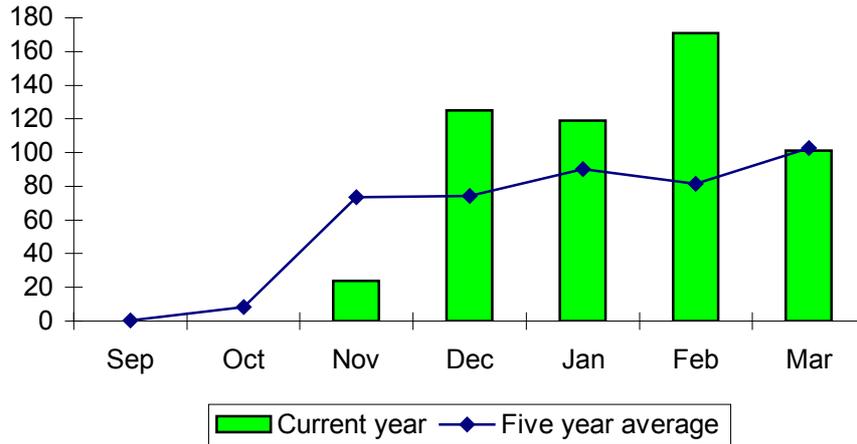
A few remained around the Pits into the summer and young were seen on at least six lakes, from 2nd July. Ten broods were counted in total, but as usual losses were high and the number of fledged birds was low, perhaps as few as three, though the picture is incomplete. During mid summer, up to 150 birds were counted on Island Pit, with smaller numbers on the Heronry lakes.



Wintering pochards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Wintering tufted ducks during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits



Wintering goldeneyes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits

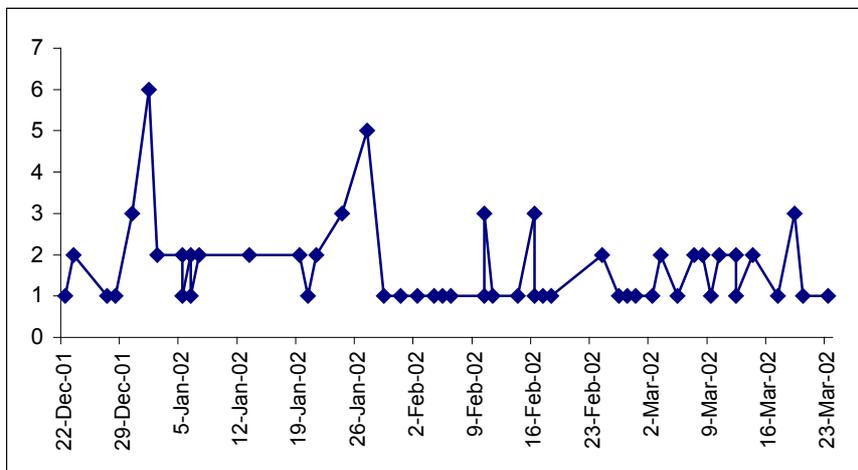
Goldeneye

The arrival of these Arctic birds is a sure sign that winter is coming. The first eight birds arrived on 22nd October (MD), building slowly, with no more than about 30 before the end of November. Things picked up in December, and numbers remained high through the winter, with a remarkable 217 on 24th January (RES), which certainly surpasses anything in 40 years of monthly wildfowl counts.

Counts dwindled to single figures during mid April, with birds displaying regularly from late March, and the last of the winter – a female on Pumphouse Pit – was seen on the relatively early date of 22nd April (MSh).

Smew

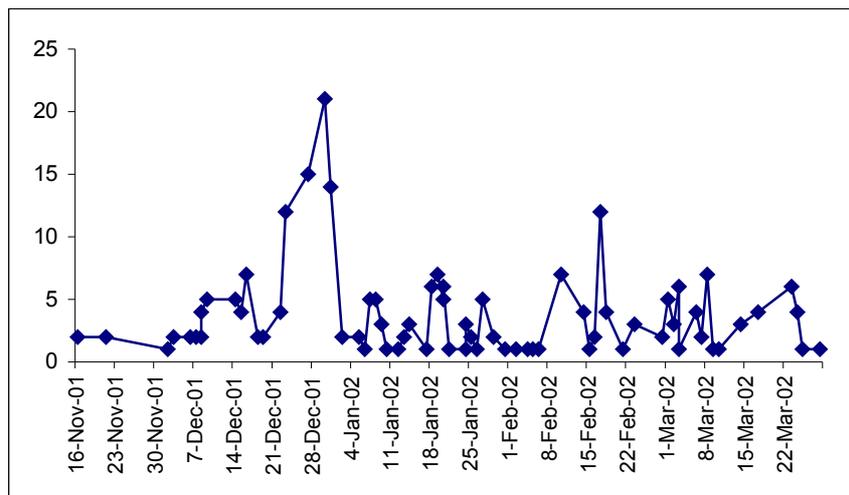
After a record year in 2000/01, with 13 birds, this was more typical. The maximum count was six (including one male) on 1st January (GR/JW), less than a fortnight after the first of the winter, a redhead, on 22nd December (MD). Through the rest of the winter, just one or two were the typical result of a morning's walk. Quite how many birds were involved is unknown, but given the changing sex ratios, there must be interchange with other waterbodies in the Ouse Valley, most likely Fen Drayton Gravel Pits. There was a maximum of two males (24th January, RES; 19th March, MD) and four redheads (27th January, TGG/JH). The last, a redhead, was seen on Pumphouse Pit on 23rd March (MD).



Smew at Paxton Pits, December 2001 to March 2002

Goosander

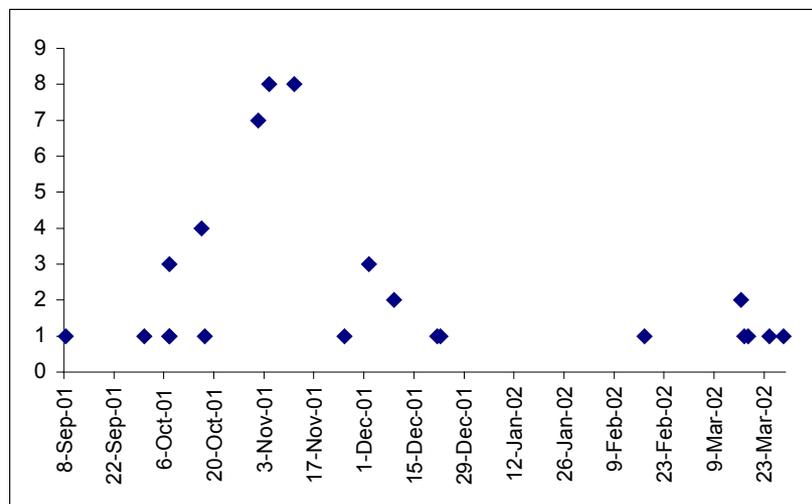
After few birds during 2000/01, this was a better winter – the exact reverse of the fortunes of smew. The first two males were seen on 16th November (MDo/MP), and numbers increased during December, though all were males until two redheads joined the flock on 16th December (DDe/DHo). Heronry Lake was, as usual, the waterbody of choice, with a peak of 13 males and eight redheads on 30th December (TGG). But the lakes froze that night for almost two weeks and most goosanders shipped out, though five were on the river below the lock on 8th January (JW). Numbers then fluctuated, with a late winter peak of eight males and four females on 17th (MSh). The last redhead departed - presumably for northern rivers - on the night of 28th March (MD).



Goosanders at Paxton Pits, November 2001 to March 2002

Ruddy duck

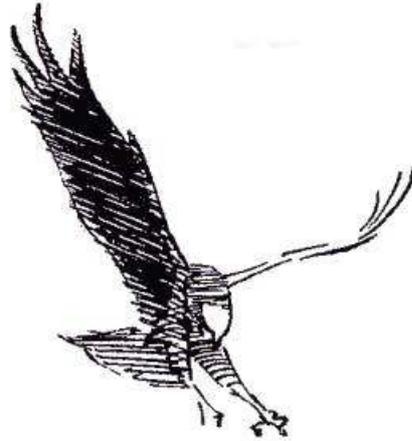
This non-native species is a regular wintering species at Paxton Pits, but having increased during the late 1990s, it was recorded on just 19 dates this winter. The first, a male, was seen on Island Lake on 8th September (SM) and up to eight were seen there in mid November. But after three on 2nd December (NP), a male and female were the most that was seen and just a single female was noted during 16th-28th March (MD/JH/JW). There was none during the breeding season; a female on 28th August (JW) was the only record of the early autumn.



Ruddy ducks at Paxton Pits, September 2001 to March 2002

Marsh harrier

This remains a surprisingly rare bird at Paxton Pits, despite the growing breeding population in Cambridgeshire (18 pairs at 7 sites in 2000). One was seen in the autumn: a female flew south over the Meadow on the late date of 3rd November (AH). In spring, a probable female was over nearby Little Paxton Wood, on 12th April (MSm), and a female was over the Pits on 3rd May (CK). These records were followed by sightings of females on 9th July (ID), 4th August (JH) and 1st September (JW). Could these all have been the same individual, at least on the last three occasions – female marsh harriers leave rearing of young to the male after the first couple of weeks, so perhaps this was taking a rest after breeding elsewhere in the county?



Marsh harrier (John Busby)

Hen harrier

An even scarcer bird at Paxton than marsh harrier, a ringtail was reported on 26th December (PD).

Goshawk

One was reported by two different observers in late March. This is a very rare bird at Paxton Pits, and most sightings in Cambridgeshire are believed to relate to escapes, since the nearest known breeding pairs are 40 miles northwest, in Thetford Forest.

Sparrowhawk

Single males and females were reported from around Heronry Pit, Island Pit and the private quarry through the winter. Of interest was a male chasing a green sandpiper across the private quarry on 3rd February (MSh), and a male bathing in shallow water at the west side of Pumphouse Pit on 13th July (JW).

A pair were thermalling high over Haul Road on 29th March, and there were regular reports of a pair over Heronry South. Confirmation of two pairs came in early June, with a male carrying prey into trees west of Heronry North (JH) and

another carrying a chaffinch into trees around Hayling Lake (DH). This may be the first time that more than one pair has been confirmed breeding at Paxton.

Fewer sightings were reported from village gardens this year – perhaps this species is now so regular that few people bother to report them.

Buzzard

It seems remarkable that the first record of buzzard at Paxton in modern times was as recently as 1996. After last year's record sightings on 17 dates, they were reported on just 13 this year: one in September, three flying south on 28th October (SHo), two in February, two in March, four in April, one in June and on two dates in August. On the second date, 31st, two adults and two juveniles were over the Meadow (SM), with the youngsters locking talons and twisting in mid-air, while one was also seen over Little Paxton village (JMc). Interestingly, a group of four were seen distantly over Great Paxton the following day (JW) – perhaps a sign of successful breeding in the expanding local population?

However, the picture was greatly confused during the first few months of 2002 by the presence of an escaped Harris' Hawk in the area, which probably accounted for several additional reports of buzzard that are not included above.

Osprey

Just two records, on successive days in September (15th and 16th), so perhaps involving the same individual (NP). There was not a single record during 2002 – the first blank 12 months for several years. Their scarcity is surprising given that we are only a few dozen miles from the reintroduction scheme at Rutland Water.

Kestrel

Three together on 16th September 2001 may have been a family group. Of interest was a juvenile over the private quarry on 28th October (MSh), and a male that flew out of the cormorant roost at dusk on 15th December (JH).

Single birds were seen at various locations around the Pits through the year, mostly around the private quarry and the Meadow. However, spring and summer records were few.

The only evidence of breeding came in late July when a pair of adults was seen and a possible young bird was heard calling near the private quarry.

Merlin

This winter migrant is a rare visitor to Paxton. Sightings have increased in the last few years, but winter 2001/02 surpassed all of these. One on 7th October (JLFP) was followed by several sightings of a female around the northern pits on 6-11th January (AD/MDo/SM/MP/RP). Remarkably, a male was seen the following day near the Sailing Lake (SM/RP).

Then, in March, there were two records of a female: over the farmland near the river on 15th (MDo/MP) and over the private quarry on 31st (NP).

Hobby

The last reported migrant of 2001 was over Pumphouse Pit on 23rd September (NP), an earlier departure than in recent years.

The same lake was the source of the first bird reported in spring 2002, on 22nd April (per FD), with several sightings by the end of the month. Overall, there were fewer than in 2001, with a peak count of seven birds, on 16th (JW), though many visitors who came to hear nightingales were afforded excellent views of up to three around the Visitor Centre.

During June, only one or two were seen at a time, including two tearing through the sand martins whirling above their breeding colony. A series of records around the northern pits suggests that a pair bred fairly close to the complex.

Peregrine

This remains a rare bird at Paxton, with only seven records prior to this recording period, so two successive years with records is notable. One was reported flying southwest over Weedy Lake on 10th February (TB).

Red-legged partridge

After our comment in last year's report about the paucity of records, they bounced back around the private quarry, with up to eight birds during the winter, presumably last year's two broods - a group of 13 was seen on 23rd (NP).

Up to three pairs were seen in spring, with at least one of these hatching young: a brood of six noted on 29th June (MD/JW).

Grey partridge

After last year's surprising records from the south of the reserve comes a series of sightings from the private quarry. Initially, a pair was seen on 7th (JH) and 16th (SM) June, then just a single on 17th (JW). There were, however, no further sightings during the summer.

Pheasant

Apparently of little or no interest to birdwatchers, most records originate from scrub along Haul Road and east of Heronry South. Four calling males were

noted during the PBBS, but just one brood was confirmed. Certainly under-recorded.

Water rail

An individual entertained birders visiting the Hayden and Kingfisher Hides during the winter, regularly walking along the edge of Heronry South between 23rd November (MDo/MP) and 24th January (RES). The only other records during the period were one heard near Washout Pit on 15th March (MDo/MP) and an intriguing sighting of one along the west side of Heronry South on 23rd June (MD). Could they have bred, tucked away in the undergrowth?



Moorhen (Rob Hume)

Moorhen

During the winter, moorhens regularly fed on the feeding station next to Hayden Hide, and during February, up to 12 fed regularly on the set-aside east of Island Pit. The peak count during the Wetland Bird Survey was 20 on 3rd March, well below last winter's 29.

Breeding-wise, 18 pairs were estimated, up on previous years, with 26 young

raised on eight lakes – a very successful season.

Arboreal moorhen

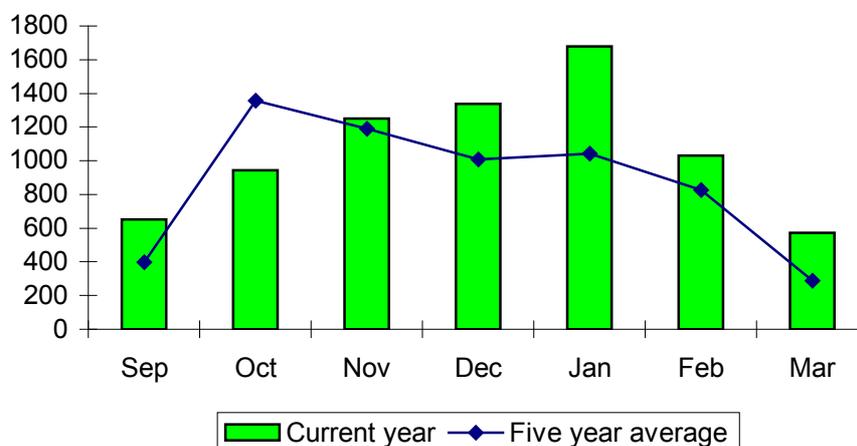
On 27th April, while walking across the field between Diddington village and Paxton private quarry, I heard a bird frantically flapping around in a hedge. Initially, I didn't pay it much attention, but after a few seconds - and much to my surprise - a moorhen flew out of the hedge and across the field, where it appeared to 'crash land' into a large conifer!

Jamie Wells

Coot

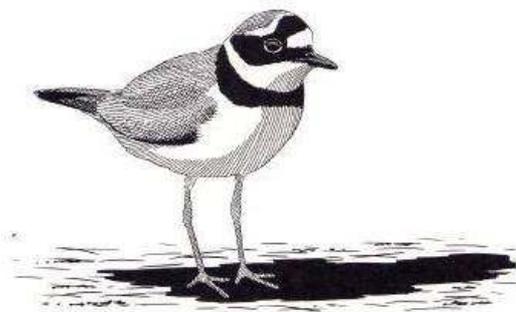
The 2001 breeding season finished late, with a youngster still being fed on Heronry South in mid September. Wintering numbers were above average, peaking at 1679 on 13th January, though nowhere near the 3064 achieved in the previous year.

The 2002 season got underway in March, and there were two broods on Rudd Pit from 5th April. Successful breeding took place on all 13 lakes, with broods of up to six. Rudd Pit was exceptionally productive, with a remarkable seven broods. Our final best estimate of breeding pairs is 49, surely the highest yet. Our guess is that 30-40 young fledged, but the long breeding season makes it difficult to be certain. Most of the first broods had joined the flock of non-breeders by July, which grew to over 550 by mid July (TGG) - typical of this time of year.



*Wintering coots during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits***Oystercatcher**

After no sightings in the autumn, the first sighting of the year was one on Sailing Lake on 10th February (DM/JM/PS), followed by two on Pumphouse Pit from 16th (MD/JH). By early March, there was a pair on both Sailing Lake and Pumphouse Pit. Despite displaying, mating and sitting on nest scrapes, no young were seen. The largest single group was six flying over Heronry North on 16th June (TGG) and several birds were seen regularly over the village in July. We hope for better things next year!



Little ringed plover (Rob Hume)

Little ringed plover

After last year's successful breeding, one or two birds remained around the private quarry into early September, with the last recorded on 20th (JLFP).

In 2002, the first was on Washout Pit on 22nd March (MDo/MP/RP). Birds displayed there and in the private quarry from 1st April, with a peak of six on 23rd April (MSh). The first young were seen on 4th June and a total of four (two broods) on 14th July (JH/SH). Young were also seen on Washout Pit and Pumphouse Pit during the summer, but are believed to be from the breeding site.

Ringed plover

Many more records than usual were received for autumn 2001, suggesting strong migration. Up to nine birds at a time were seen on dates throughout September, with the last of the year on the late date of 25th October (JLFP).

Spring passage began earlier than ever, with a bird on Sailing Lake (often the first place to host one) on 29th January (DM/JM). Birds were seen nearly every day from mid February, with double figures on ten days in March, peaking at 15 on 16th (SM/RP) and continuing until mid May (19 on 14th, MD).

Nesting attempts were made on Sailing Lake, Pumphouse Pit and the private quarry, though the former was unsuccessful. Our surveys suggest 10 successful nests, all but one on Pumphouse Pit, with three in the largest brood. Birds remained late into the summer, their numbers bolstered by passage migrants from mid July.

Golden plover

Moderate passage during mid October, with flocks of 30, 60 and 44 on 12th, 13th (SM) and 14th (MSh) respectively.

Flocks of 20 on 9th December (MD) and 25 on 30th (GR), the latter preceding a cold snap, were the only notable counts of the winter. Small numbers - maximum 10 on 6th (FC) and 13th (MD/JW) - moved with lapwings during the cold weather, but few were seen returning east. In fact, three over Pumphouse Pit on 8th February (MD) were the last of the winter.

The first records of autumn 2002 were exceptionally early: three on 29th July (JLFP).

Grey plover

A return to its usual scarce status at Paxton, after three records in 2000/01. One was on Pumphouse Pit on 5th January (MD/JW), with probably a second over the private quarry shortly afterwards.

Lapwing

The principal roost was, as usual, at the north end of the Pits complex, with a rapid build up to 500 birds on 12th October (SM). For most of the autumn, the flock was

typically 250 strong. However, a two week cold snap in early January caused numbers to increase, peaking at 952 on 27th (NP). There were still 438 on 22nd February (MD), but the flock diminished quickly in early March.

Breeding birds returned to Sailing Lake in late January, and by mid-February, 10 birds were displaying. Breeding eventually occurred on three or four areas, with Pumphouse Pit holding a maximum of nine sitting birds. In summary, 6-12 nests were successful, raising perhaps 10 young.

Post-breeding flocks were smaller than usual, peaking in early August at 225-250 birds (JH, RES), including many juveniles.

Knot

One, moulting into summer plumage, on Pumphouse Pit on 18th May (JW). It's the second consecutive year for the species following an absence of five.

Sanderling

There were 2-5 birds in a ten day period in May: 2 on 7th, 2 on 16th and 1 on 17th. The only one of the autumn was on 7th July. All these records were by the same observer (JLFP).

Little stint

After just a single the previous year, autumn 2001 proved to be a belter for this little wader, with birds on seven dates in September, including 3 on 18th (MD) and 30th (NP), and on five dates in early October, the last - a group of 3 - on 7th (MSh). By contrast, little stints were seen on just one date in 2002: two on 29th July (JLFP).

Pectoral sandpiper

The first ever Paxton record of this North American species, but unfortunately not one to stick around. An excellent find on Pumphouse Pit on 11th October, but it was seen by only the finder (JLFP). What is presumed to be the same bird was found just over the Bedfordshire border, at Willington Gravel Pits, the following day.

This record is subject to acceptance by the Cambridgeshire Records Committee.

Curlew sandpiper

Curlew sandpipers are rare in Huntingdonshire, and the two in spring/summer 2001 were unusual. So, what do we make of seven birds together on Pumphouse Pit on 5th September (JLFP)?!

Dunlin

This may be the first twelve-month period when dunlins have been recorded in every month, as the table shows. With the exception of two on Washout Pit on 22nd March (MDo/MP) and two on Sailing Lake on 9th May (NP), all were on the northern pits.

A strong autumn passage through September was followed by several winter records, including a remarkable group of 30 at the end of December (SM), which were perhaps east coast birds moving ahead of cold weather.

It seems that half a dozen birds spent February at Paxton, before spring migration kicked in, peaking in mid March with four counts of more than 20 birds.

Month	Peak	No of days
Sep 01	20+ (2 nd)	13
Oct	5 (7 th)	3
Nov	3 (11 th)	1
Dec	30+ (30 th)	4
Jan 02	4 (1 st , 5 th)	3
Feb	6 (5 dates)	5
Mar	26 (16 th)	15
Apr	11 (1 st)	18
May	10 (?)	14
Jun	1 (29 th)	1
Jul	10 (21 st)	14
Aug	5 (14 th)	6

Migration petered out in early May and there was a six week gap before a single bird was seen in late June, which may have been the same bird seen on several dates in July. Perhaps it was unwell, because it was attacked and maimed by gulls and terns on 14th July (MD/JW). A maximum of 10 was

seen during autumn passage (on 21st July), with 3-6 more typical.

Ruff

An exceptional autumn for ruffs, with records on five dates in September 2001 (including 3 on 11th, SM) and two dates in October (including a remarkable nine on 3rd, MD). These followed three earlier in the season, included in the last report.

However, spring 2002 was even better, with records on 18 dates between 24th March (MSh) and 22nd April (JH), though these could relate to as few as 9 birds and as many as 32! Peak counts were five, on 24th March and 14th April (MSh). As usual, all the records came from the northern pits.

Early autumn 2002 was more typical, with singles on 29th July (MD) and 28th August (JW) and two on 31st (SM/RP).

Jack snipe

The northern pits again held a wintering group of these diminutive waders. The first was seen on 24th November (MD/JW) and the last on 9th April (MD). Numbers varied on each visit, and was often only a single bird, though there may have been as many as six on 2nd January (MH/JL).

Snipe

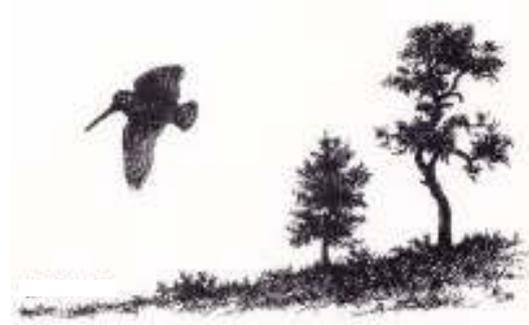
Small numbers through the winter, until 22nd April. While not achieving the heights of last year, there were still some impressive counts, including 31 on 28th September (Washout Pit, FD), 30 on 12th October (Pumphouse Pit, SM) and 20 on 5th January (Private quarry, SM/JW). After this last date, numbers were lower, reaching a maximum of eight.

In the autumn, the first snipe was seen on 24th July (MD/JH). Five on 31st July (MD) was the highest count before the end of this recording period.

Woodcock

A maximum of seven (MD/JW) of these secretive, camouflaged 'woodland waders' was seen on eight dates, between 9th December and 27th January. All were

found in damp scrub east of the Heronry Lakes and is an increase on the last couple of



Woodcock (Mike Langman)

years. One, very unseasonally, was reported in the same area on 24th May (JF/HF).

Black-tailed godwit

The last few years have seen more black-tailed godwits passing through the Pits than usual. However, 2002 was back to old form, with records on eight dates: two in spring (singles on 7th March and 21st April) and six in autumn, between 14th July and 2nd August (a maximum of four birds on two dates, JW/JLFP). It seems that low numbers at Paxton are good news for breeding birds – higher counts are usually recorded during flood conditions on the Cambridgeshire Washes; summer 2002 was their best breeding season for several years.

Bar-tailed godwit

Also down on last year, with the sole record being a superb, summer-plumage bird foraging among the daisies on the Sailing Lake lawn from 7th-10th May (CS).

Whimbrel

As in 2001, there were two spring records: one on Pumphouse Pit on 3rd May (MD) and another on Washout Pit on 16th (AMc). Autumn, however, was poor, with just one, unusually on Sailing Lake, which alighted briefly on 2nd August (JLFP).

Curlew

After four in August 2001, there were five in September, including two on 6th

(MD/JW). Two northbound migrants were reported: one flying west on 3rd April (JW) and two on Pumphouse Pit on 5th May (GR).

Midsummer records were presumably failed breeders already on their southward journey: 1-2 on 29th June (MD/JW) and singles on 7th July (JH), 29th July (MD) and 19th August (JLFP).

Spotted redshank

This very scarce passage visitor to Paxton was reported on 19th August (JLFP), the first record for several years.

Redshank

Unusually, redshanks were recorded in every month of the period, thanks to an unseasonal record on 24th November (MD/JW). Small numbers of birds were seen regularly from 22nd December, though spring passage proper did not get underway until early March, when eight were seen on 9th (JW). Passage peaked with 34 birds on 23rd March (SM/RP), though at least 10 were recorded every day from 14th. Migration slipped seamlessly into breeding.

Although displaying was seen on Sailing Lake, it was Pumphouse Pit that again held the only breeding colony, though accurate counts are difficult in the long vegetation on the islands. At least six young fledged, though this may be an underestimate for young were seen over an eight-week period.

Greenshank

Autumn 2001 migration was strong, with birds recorded around the northern pits on almost every visit during August and September. The peak count was seven on 1st September (JW), with the final four in the private quarry on 23rd (MD/MSh).

Spring migration was poorer than usual, with just four birds on 19th May (JW) and two the following day.

Autumn passage 2002 began with two on 13th July (JW) and birds occurred on a further 18 dates before the end of August. The highest count was six on 31st July (MD).

Green sandpiper

Birds were recorded in every month of the period except for November and May. As usual, up to five birds occupied the private quarry during the winter, with the last seen on 29th April (MD). The first of the 'autumn' was spotted during the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey, on the early date of 16th June (SM)!

Green sandpipers were seen on almost every visit to the northern lakes during July and August, with a maximum count of 11 (2nd August, JLFP), while two over Hayling Avenue on 3rd August (IKD/DD) were more unusual.

Wood sandpiper

The third for autumn 2001 was in the private quarry on 1st September (MD/JW). And there was none in spring. Two to three were recorded in autumn 2002: a juvenile on 30th July-3rd August (MD), an adult on 11th August (SM/RP) and a probable wood sandpiper in flight on 18th August (JW).

Common sandpiper

Small numbers passed through the Pits in September and early October. The peak count was three (JLFP) and the 'last' of the autumn was on Sailing Lake on 14th October (NP/MSh). Perhaps it didn't go as far south as its compatriots, as one was back there on 31st January, on four dates in February and regularly through March. Was this a single individual overwintering, or early passage?

A poor spring migration, with more than one recorded on only one day, and as few as five individuals between the beginning of March and the end of May.

The first two of autumn 2002 came on 7th July (JH), with birds seen regularly to the end of the recording period. The highest counts were 16 on 8th August (MD) and 14 on 21st (JH).

Mediterranean gull

A rare bird at Paxton, two adults were in the gull pre-roost on 25th July (MD/JH/JW), including a colour-ringed bird that probably hatched in France or Belgium. An adult was seen in the same area on 29th July (MD).

Little gull

A relatively poor year, with just four, all adults: on 7th (JW), 11th May (MD/JLFP) and two on 2nd June (MD).

Black-headed gull

Flocks were noted at various points during the year, including 286 on fields near the A1 Pits on 16th September (MD/JH/JW), 150 standing on the solid-frozen Heronry Lake on 12th January (JH) and 58 on Washout Pit on 14th April (MSh). Gull numbers peaked in late July, with a flock of 950 on 14th July (MD/JH).

Common gull

Few specific records were received, but small numbers were among pre-roosts of the larger gulls on the northern pits during the winter. The last of the winter was over Pumphouse Pit on 7th April (MD) and the first of the autumn on 14th July, when 40 were on Heronry Lake (JH/SH).

Lesser black backed gull

Small numbers were recorded throughout the year, including small numbers on several dates during the breeding season. Gull numbers peaked in late July, with 70 lesser black-backs on 24th July (MD/JH).

Herring gull

Small numbers pre-roosted on the larger northern pits through the winter, and few were seen during the breeding season.

Yellow-legged gull

Around the same numbers as in 2000/01, seen on 14 dates. Two in autumn: 18th September (MD) and 18th October (JLFP). Individuals were among the gull roost from 23rd June (2, JLFP), with peak counts of

three on 26th July and 6th August (JW). All were of the western *michahellis* race, which breeds in the Mediterranean.

Glaucous gull

Averaging just one per decade (1976, 1984, 1990 and 2000), this northern white-winged gull is rare at Paxton, although annual elsewhere in Cambridgeshire. A first-winter on 24th March (GR) is subject to acceptance by the Cambridgeshire Records Committee.

Great black backed gull

Small numbers were in the gull pre-roost to the west of Pumphouse Pit throughout the year, though most counts were of fewer than 20 birds.

Common tern

The last southbound stragglers were recorded on 22nd September 2001 (MD/JW), following an average breeding season at Paxton.

The first returnee from Africa flew over the Kingfisher Hide (Heronry Lake) with black-headed gulls on 11th April (FD/TGG). Although birds were seen around the two small colonies on 18th April, it was 24th before any signs of display were observed.

Generally, terns were scarcer this year, with a slow build up at the Sailing Lake colony. A maximum of 25 adults were seen in the air, and the first chicks were seen on the shoreline in mid June. Counting young is difficult until they emerge from the vegetation, but a minimum of 18 young (from c.10 pairs) fledged from Sailing Lake, while a further five pairs raised 10 young from Pumphouse Pit. The number of pairs is down by almost 50% on 2001, though productivity was better.

The breeding terns left the area quickly, with no reports after one on 10th August (TGG).

Arctic tern

Ten birds were seen on five dates in spring. The first three were over Heronry Lake on

21st April (EP/PP), the last along the river on 18th May (FS/JLa).

Little tern

A very rare bird at Paxton, there were two 'possibles' this year: two on 23rd September and one on 7th May.

Black tern

A very poor year for this continental migrant, with singles on 28th April (NP/JW) and 11th May and 2nd June (MD), and 14 on 14th May (JLFP).

Feral pigeon

Small numbers were seen regularly around the village and over the Pits, presumably commuting from St Neots. Small flocks, including some racing pigeons, feed on exposed soil around the northern lakes.

Stock dove

The winter roost on Heronry Lake again failed to live up to recent expectations, with a peak count of 160 birds, on 5th February (JH), though a mixed flock of stock doves and woodpigeons on 10th February reached 280 (JH). They also used to be seen – and perhaps breed – around Paxton Hall, regularly feeding in village gardens, but no more. What has happened?

We know little about the status of this attractive bird during the breeding season, though clearly there are pairs in the mature trees along the parish boundary. Groups of 3-5 birds feeding in the Meadow during late June could have been family parties. Our best estimate is 2-3 pairs, but as few birders report this species, this could be an underestimate.

Woodpigeon

A common garden bird in the more mature village gardens, with young often falling prey to domestic cats. Although we have no estimate, it must be as common in the village as around the Pits complex.

As with stock dove, wintering numbers are much lower than in the past, and flocks of

1000+ woodpigeons feeding on nearby farmland seem to be a thing of the past.



Woodpigeon (Rob Banbury)

During the breeding season, birds were seen mainly around the mature, southern lakes. The Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS) estimated 30 pairs.

Collared dove

A numerous resident around the village and a frequent visitor to many bird tables. Birds were seen displaying, mating and carrying nest material in almost every month of the year, though were rarely recorded around the Pits, at least away from the car park. One or two fed on exposed gravel near Diddington during the spring and summer.

Turtle dove

The first of the year was calling in Wray House Garden on 20th April (JP), a typical date for Paxton. Early birds were in good song through the remainder of the month and into May.

Despite the illegal attentions of hunters in southern Europe, which may have contributed to the sharp national decline, Paxton's population has been fairly stable in recent years, with an estimate of 10 calling males this year.

Birds were still constructing nests into early July, though as usual, we received no reports of any juveniles. Of interest was

one in a Hayling Avenue garden on 2nd July (IKD/DD), the first record there for more than two years.



Swifts (Rob Hume)

Cuckoo

The first, heard on 9th April near Boughton Lodge Farm (JE), predated a flurry of records from 19th. Unusually, a bird was heard calling in the village, on 28th April (JW).

Few records were received, with a male and female over Pumphouse Pit on 12th May (RE/JP) the only indication of possible breeding. The national decline seems to be mirrored at Paxton and few were heard after mid June, one on 23rd being the last of the summer (JH).

Barn owl

An escaped bird, with jesses, was found ill around the Moorings on 27th February and subsequently died. The only record of a wild bird was one feeding across the river, east of the Pumping Station, on 29th May (ID). Hopefully, there may be a breeding pair not too far from our recording area.

Little owl

Just a single report this year, at a former nest site on 21st April just outside our recording area (MD), but it was not seen on subsequent visits. It is presumed that the presence of several nesting jackdaws were again too much for this declining, non-native species.

Tawny owl

There is a tendency towards early autumn records at Paxton, with more records than usual from the village and Sailing Lake during September to November 2001. A Bird Club walk on 1st November recorded one at the north end of Heronry Lake and another around the Lafarge Redland coatings plant.

One was seen and heard regularly during the day around Sailing Lake during January and February, but more surprising were breeding season records, along Haul Road on 14th May (VG), near Heronry Lake on 16th May (JW) and 9th June (NP) and near Sailing Lake on 9th July (NP). Perhaps there are two territories around the nature reserve?

The first calling bird of autumn 2002 was heard from the south end of the High Street on 21st August.

Swift

The first of the year was on 25th April (MD), a day earlier than in 2001. During mid to late May, hundreds of swifts moved north each evening.

Up to 10 birds were regularly seen screaming around the church and village pub from June to mid July. The last breeding site in the village, at the end of Gordon Road, was not used in 2002, so these evening feeders are presumed to have come from St Neots. Another breeding species lost?

Kingfisher

A successful breeding season, surprising after the local population had appeared to have been badly hit by the freezing of all the pits in January, with only a few sightings during February and March.

The first displaying birds were seen on 3rd March (GR) and by 23rd birds were inspecting a hole on the west side of Heronry South. Certainly four, and perhaps five, nests were recorded, including one on Farm Pit, which may be a new breeding area.

An interesting report was of two juveniles perched over the River Great Ouse adjacent to Island Pit on 5th August (per TGG). We rarely receive reports of riverside nests, but surely there must be some?

Green woodpecker

The trend of 2001, with more sightings from village gardens, was maintained, no doubt visitors from the nearby Pits. Very noisy and mobile, this species represents a real challenge to survey teams attempting to establish its breeding status.

The PBBS suggests that five pairs bred, in line with 2001. Most records come from around Heronry Lake, but breeding season reports came from throughout the complex. Apart from family groups on 13th and 18th July, we received no records of young birds. Of interest was one going to roost among the cormorant colony, at dusk on 10th February.

Great spotted woodpecker

So many birds are seen on garden feeders these days that one pair must surely nest somewhere in the village? During June, a juvenile regularly fed on peanuts in a St James' Road garden, so perhaps they did.

Birds were regularly on the feeder outside Hayden Hide during the winter, and even occasionally during the summer (7th June, MO), and a family group of three was seen in nearby dead trees on 14th (TGG). The first drumming was heard on 27th March and the PBBS estimated six pairs, double the 2001 total.

Lesser spotted woodpecker

This is one of our most elusive species and, against a backdrop of severe national decline (it was 'red-listed' earlier this year), it is becoming even more elusive. Just four records this year, all in the breeding season, but with no particular pattern: the Moorings on 31st March (JW), near Hayden Hide on 18th May (FS/JLa), along Haul Road on 16th June (JW) and reportedly with a tit flock near Hayden Hide on 17th June.

Skylark

A small movement, involving 25 birds over the private quarry, on 1st December (MD) was the only record of note during the winter. It appears that the large winter flocks that the rough grasslands used to host are no more.

The first singing birds were an impressive 13 around the northern pits on 10th February (MD/JH/JW). The PBBS found 14 singing males around the Pits during the spring, and at least some of these bred successfully, with young birds seen on the wing in August.

Sand martin

Autumn 2001 concluded with a southward passage of sand martins through September and the last eight on 7th October (SM).

The first two birds of the spring were over Washout Pit on 10th March (DM/JM), but subsequent passage was tortuously slow, with fewer than 20 more birds by 30th. Movements increased during April, with the largest numbers (a few hundred at a time) in the middle of the month. By this time, our local birds had settled into their breeding quarters around the private quarry.

On 2nd June, 320 active holes were counted in the private quarry, and a further 19 were noted on the bank of Pumphouse Pit, though breeding was not confirmed here. For the first time, birds from the colony were ringed: 114 were caught on 29th June, including 64 juveniles. One of the adults already bore a ring, and details of its origin are awaited from the British Trust for Ornithology.

As early as 21st June, around 150 birds were seen flying south over Heronry Lake – perhaps failed breeders from farther north? By late August, only small numbers remained in the area, though private quarry staff reported birds still using nest holes in early September, perhaps for overnight roosting?

Swallow

A small passage south, with sand and house martins, continued through September and into October 2001. The last were seen over Heronry Lake on 2nd October (NP).

The first of the spring was over the A1 Lakes on 4th April (MD), but it was late April before any number went north. Early May saw more than a hundred birds head north on a couple of evenings. Birds were seen collecting mud around the private quarry and Washout Pit during the breeding season - perhaps birds seen regularly in Diddington during the summer. There was, however, no confirmed nesting around either Boughton Lodge Farm or Paxton Lock.

How sad that this once familiar symbol of summer may have been lost as a local breeding species.

House martin

A small passage south continued into October 2001. The last recorded flock, of more than 100 birds, was reported on 7th (NP).

The first of 2002 was a single bird over the village on the comparatively late date of 20th April. Subsequent passage was very limited and it was mid May before any were prospecting possible breeding sites in the village. During June, up to a dozen were regularly collecting mud from Washout Pit and flying east, perhaps to build nests in Great Paxton?

The annual survey of the village estimated that around 17 nests were active at some stage, but not all produced young. Some nests fell from uPVC soffit boards and at least one nest was destroyed by a householder.

Three, perhaps four, nests were on Mill House and one was on the remaining Samuel Jones building, adjacent to Paxton Lock. Sadly, the principal nesting area was lost when the old Mill was demolished early in 2002. By the end of August, young birds were still being fed in some nests and

feeding flocks of house martins wheeled above the village on most evenings.

Meadow pipit

Numbers built up during late September 2001, peaking at 170 on 7th October (JLFP). Flocks of up to 30 were seen throughout the winter, mostly around the northern lakes. Most had departed by early April, so one on the Private quarry on 5th May was unusual (MD/JH/SH/JW).

Rock pipit

The only record of the year was one on the edge of Pumphouse Pit on 29th March, which may have been of the Scandinavian *littoralis* race (MH/JL).

Yellow wagtail

Autumn 2001 passage continued through September, the last seen on 16th (JH).

The first of 2002 were on the relatively early date of 4th April (RH), preceding a stronger passage than in some recent years: more than 20 were recorded on six dates between 18th April and 11th May, with a peak of 40 birds on 3rd May (MD). As usual, most birds were around the newer, northern pits. The latter part of migration included 2-3 birds of the nominate ('blue-headed') race: a male on 3rd May and females on 8th and 11th (all MD).

During the breeding season, adults carried food towards the river and from mid June at least one juvenile accompanied an adult on several dates. In late July, three juveniles were seen around Pumphouse Pit on several dates, which may have been locally raised. This once numerous breeding bird of damp riverside meadows seems just to hang on.

Early autumn records were fewer, with two on 2nd August (RES) and singles on 18th (SM/RP) and 24th (MD), though passage improved during early September.

Grey wagtail

Recorded in every month of the year around the Pits, Paxton Lock and occasionally in the village. One or two

were seen around southern lakes from September to March, with occasional sightings around Pumphouse Pit.

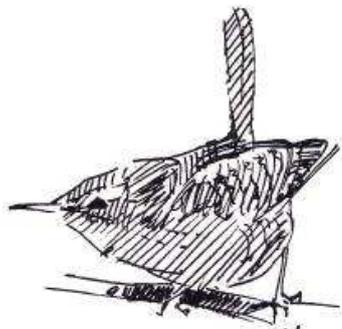
Proof of breeding was established on 9th May with an adult with food entering a nest hole beneath the Mill Bridge (DP), though we received no reports of juveniles.

Pied wagtail

This familiar species is seen regularly in village gardens and along roadsides. Winter flocks of up to 30 fed around the private quarry, with evidence of local movement in early spring: 60 birds on 2nd April (JW).

Young or adults carrying food were noted around Heronry and Sailing Lakes, Pumphouse Pit and the private quarry, with the largest family group of four young. So, we estimate four pairs around the Pits, with perhaps two in the village, so frequently are pied wagtails seen in Little Paxton.

Birds of the nominate race ('white' wagtail) were on Pumphouse Pit on 24th March (MD/JW), 29th March (RH), 4th May (SM/RP) and 6th-8th May (JLFP/JW).



Wren (John Busby)

Wren

A common resident, that has thrived during mild winters, in scrub around the Pits and in more mature village gardens.

The PBBS recorded just 51 breeding pairs around the Pits, well down on the 74 in 2001. This is difficult to explain given the relatively mild winter, so the 2003 survey results will be awaited with interest.

Dunnock

A common, but shy, ground-feeding species, that is common in most parts of the village and around the Pits. The PBBS recorded 27 pairs around the lakes complex, maintaining the upward trend of recent years.

During late August, a young bird with a long, down-curved bill fed regularly around the Hayden Hide feeding station (TGG).

Robin

This remains a common and much-loved village resident, augmented by visitors from Europe. Fledged young were recorded around the southern lakes, from the Moorings and Island Pit, but the only guide to its breeding status comes from the PBBS, which recorded 56 pairs, slightly up on the 51 in 2001. We know little about the village population, however.

Nightingale

The best year ever for nightingales at Paxton Pits, with 28-29 singing males and the widest distribution yet, as birds respond to positive scrub management.

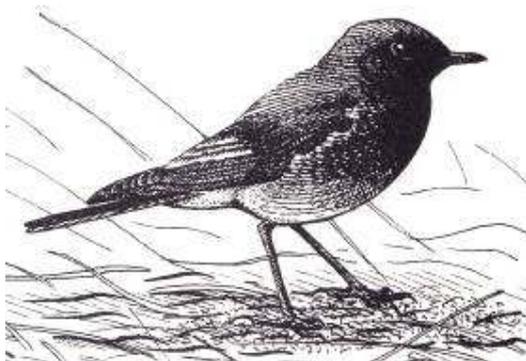
Nightingales attract hundreds of visitors to Paxton Pits each spring –over 1000 people joined guided walks to hear the world's greatest singer during May 2002.

The first singing male was at the south end of Haul Road on the morning of 4th April (JH), with another two the same evening in Wray House Garden (RH). These equal the earliest ever at Paxton (and the county), in 1999.

The build up was, typically for a year with a few early arrivals, slow. Given the poor weather conditions in southern Europe, this was no surprise. Only four birds were singing by 16th, and it was another four days before the total entered double figures. However, by 24th, there were 19 males in song.

The last singing male reported was in the Sanctuary on 29th June (GDE).

A study by Robert Thomas from Bristol University, published recently in *Animal Behaviour*, found that the heaviest male nightingales sang the most and lost the most weight overnight. A long song informed females that its potential mate was strong enough and clever enough to find food during the day and brave enough to risk revealing himself to predators. Given the number of daytime singers at Paxton, our males must be particularly healthy!



Black redstart (Rob Hume)

Black redstart

A single record: a juvenile seen in Hawthorn Close and Grove Road during the afternoon of 20th July (JW).

Redstart

This brightly-coloured songbird is a scarce passage migrant at Paxton (and there is an average of only 12 each year in Cambridgeshire). One reported on 1st August (JLFP) was the first for several years.

Whinchat

One was at the north end of the Pits complex on 5th and 6th October 2001 (JLFP, MG), almost exactly a year since the previous record, on 7th October 2000.

A multiple sighting, of three males, on 25th August (MD/SM/RP) was a prelude to a notable movement of the species through Cambridgeshire during September 2002.

Stonechat

One around the northern pits on 6th October (per RBA) and a male and female there on 7th (SM/MSh) occurred 364 days after the last record, and in almost exactly the same place! Further records, from the same area, were on 28th October (female, MSh) and two on 24th November (male and female, MD/JW).

Wheatear

Two on 3rd October 2001 (MD) were fairly late records, though wheatears are frequently seen into November in Cambridgeshire.

Spring 2002 was almost as poor as 2001 (when just three birds were seen on two dates). This year there were eight birds on six dates, starting with a male and female on 19th March (MD) and finishing with one on 8th May (RH). Aside from the latter, which was - unusually - on Sailing Lake, all the records were from the private quarry.

Early autumn records were also scarce, with six birds on three dates: two each on 18th (SM/RP), 25th (SM/RP) and 28th August (JW).

Blackbird

A strong resident breeding population exists around the village – the playing field is a favoured area throughout the year, and on mid-summer evenings, up to 20 adults and juveniles fed there alongside starlings. The resident population is, no doubt, augmented by wintering birds from the near-continent. The PBBS noted 51 breeding pairs around the Pits complex, marginally up on 2001.

Fieldfare

An average recent winter for this visitor from Scandinavia and the near-continent. The first dozen were seen flying southwest over the village on 14th October (IKD), though it was mid November before larger numbers (up to 80 at a time) were reported. A small number (up to 10) remained around

the Pits during December and into January, before being joined by birds returning east following cold weather. The largest flock was 57 flying west on 10th February (MD/JH/JW). Small flocks were seen through the remainder of the winter, the last two on 7th April (MSh/SHo).

Song thrush

Observers in the village suggest that the local increase of 2001 was maintained this year and, although we received few individual records from the Pits system, the PBBS recorded 16 breeding pairs, significantly up on last year's 10.

Redwing

Redwings arrived slightly earlier than their blue-mantled cousin, with 10 on 2nd October (NP). Overall, however, there were fewer records through the winter and flock sizes were smaller, with the exception of 100 (with many blackbirds and song thrushes) over Heronry Lake on 22nd October (SM). The grassland around the northern pits, pasture around Boughton Lodge Farm and the set-aside adjacent to Island Lake were the favoured feeding areas for all the thrushes during the winter.

The second half of the winter provided relatively few records, with small numbers passing through in late March, preceding the last record of the winter, three on 1st April (JH/SM/JW).

Mistle thrush

As the scarcest resident thrush, this species is well recorded around the Pits throughout the year, with three together near Hayden Hide on 23rd February the only winter record of more than a single.

Birds were in song from March and seen carrying nesting material and food to a nest near Haul Road on several dates in April. The PBBS estimates three breeding pairs, and a family party of 7+ near Heronry South on 3rd June (JD) suggests that at least one nest was very productive.

We have no records during the year from the village –does this indicate a decline?

Grasshopper warbler

The first of the year, although in song, is presumed to have been a migrant, and was reeling near Pumphouse Pit on 21st April (SM/RP). After three years without any possible breeding, 2002 saw an increase in records, though they probably relate to just two 'reeling' males. One sang in the Moorings/ Dodder Fen area from 21st April to 16th May at least (SM/RP) and was reported again on 9th June (per TGG). One also sang from dense bushes adjacent to Pumphouse Pit on several dates in early June (JH). Was this the same bird, or could two birds have held territory and then kept quiet during breeding?

Sedge warbler

One on the edge of Pumphouse Pit on 2nd September (JH/SM/RP) was the last record for 2001.

Three were reported around Heronry Lake on the exceptionally early date of 25th March (BD), but the first confirmed sighting was one on Sailing Lake on 1st April (MSh), still an early date – equalling the earliest ever, in 2001.

There was very little passage during April, no doubt due to poor weather in southern Europe. The fluctuating fortunes of this trans-Saharan migrant are illustrated by the PBBS results: 70 singing males in 2000, 53 in 2001 and 85 in 2002. We suspect that sedge warblers are benefiting from scrub management for nightingales around the southern lakes, and will continue to monitor this with interest.

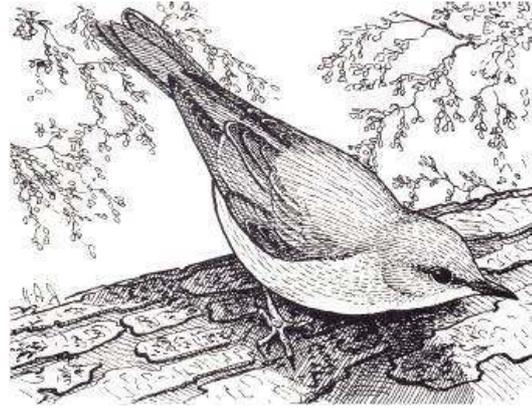
Reed warbler

Birds on 24th April (Washout Pit, JH; quarry, NP) were typical arrivals – unlike the exceptionally early record in 2001 (7th April).

With increasing pockets of reeds around many pits, it is not surprising that our breeding population is increasing, with singing males around nearly all the lakes. Two territories even hang on in the 'Little Chef' pits (west of Sailing Lake), habitat that was largely destroyed in the early

1990s. The PBBS recorded 45 singing males, the highest count since the survey began in 1998, yet even this may be an underestimate as some males seem to establish territories quite late in the spring.

A reed warbler heard in the northeast corner of Weedy Pit from 11th July sparked debate among local birders, having been initially identified as a marsh warbler (see page 41 for an article by Stuart Elsom which explains all).



Garden warbler (Rob Hume)

Lesser whitethroat

A small number continued to pass through the Pits complex in September 2001, with the last two reported on 20th (DM/JM).

The first spring arrival on 21st April (MSh) was followed by a higher number of records during late April and early May than we have seen for some years.

This is an unusual species in that it normally has two clear 'song' periods – one following its return from Africa and then a second later in the season, perhaps once it has reared its first brood?

The PBBS recorded 7 territories, but there were few records later in the summer.

Whitethroat

The last of 2001 was on 16th September (SM), and the first of 2002 on 3rd April (TGG), the earliest ever at Paxton by eight days (in 1997). The (presumed) same individual was seen on several occasions during the following week, and it was 16th before more birds started to arrive.

The PBBS estimated 24 pairs (cf. 26 in 2001), and birds sang late into July, especially around the southern lakes.

Garden warbler

The last of 2001 was reported on 16th September, and the first of spring 2002 on 14th April around the Moorings (MSh), two weeks earlier than the previous year. April passage was slow, though increased numbers were seen in mid May.

The PBBS recorded 39 breeding pairs, compared with 24 in 2001. The only juveniles noted were a brood being fed near the Hayden Hide on 15th July (TGG) and one with two adults on 14th September (GR).

Blackcap

Light passage continued through September 2001 and into October, the last reported around Weedy Pit on 20th (RP). Unlike 2000/01, there were no reports of overwintering birds (around the Pits or in village gardens), so the first of 2002, around the Moorings on 24th March (MD/SM/JW) is presumed to have been a returning migrant, which was followed by several more before the month's end.

For the first time, the PBBS recorded fewer blackcaps than garden warblers around the Pits, just 35 territories (44 in 2001, 53 in 2000). We wonder why?

Of interest were a female in a village garden on 13th April and a bird with a BTO ring seen at the Pits on 16th (MD).

Chiffchaff

Several records in late September and October around Heronry Lake, the last

migrants seen on 7th October, when several sang around the southern lakes (SM).

Two were seen in the Meadow on 8th December and at least one was heard there on several dates in February and March, so presumably overwintered (WK/SM/NP). Another was just north of the Pits complex around Christmas, in a flock of 1000 finches feeding on sunflower seeds (MD/JW)!

The main arrivals were from 12th March, with double-figures recorded from 17th (JW), more than a week earlier than in 2001. An interesting sighting was a colour-ringed bird in Wray House Garden on 13th April (SM), which was ringed near St Austell, Cornwall, 98 days earlier on 5th January.

Birds remained in song well into July and joined blackcaps and tits in roving flocks in August. The PBBS recorded 41 territories, a 25% increase in four years.

Willow warbler

A handful was seen in the first fortnight of September 2001, but none after 23rd (SM).

The tuneful cadence of a willow warbler was first heard on 18th March, from a bird hopping in the bushes outside the Hayden Hide (CS), but it was late in the month before more arrived.

Of interest was a *Phylloscopus* warbler near the Moorings on 25th April which displayed song characteristics of both chiffchaff and willow warbler (JW). It has been suggested by Peter Herkenrath from BirdLife International that this may have been an individual that had grown up among birds of the other species and so picked up their song along with its own.

The PBBS reported 35 pairs, down on the 45 in 2001 and 25% lower than in 1998, reflecting a national decline reported by the BTO. The first juveniles were recorded on 15th June, four being fed by a parent near Hayden Hide. Several birds were reported from village gardens during August.

Goldcrest

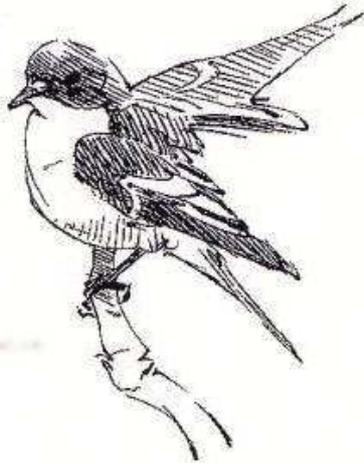
Autumn 2001 saw an influx of goldcrests into Paxton, with several small groups roving the willows with tits from the beginning of November, peaking at 15 on 16th (MDo/MP). For the rest of the winter, one or two were more typical, usually in the conifers near Kingfisher Hide where they bred in 2001. Four were seen there on 22nd February (MDo/MP) – perhaps last year's adults and surviving young?

A single bird was seen on several dates up to 23rd March (MSh) and, intriguingly, a juvenile was seen near Kingfisher Hide on 28th August. Perhaps a pair bred somewhere on the reserve, though we don't know where. We believe goldcrests to breed in mature gardens in the village, though received no specific reports this year.

Spotted flycatcher

A juvenile around Heronry Lake on 11th September (SM) was the last record for 2001. There were no records in spring until singles were seen in a garden on Bydand Lane on 2nd June (JW), after which a pair was seen regularly there until 10th July. It's not known if they bred.

At the Pits, a single bird was seen close to Heronry Lake on 2nd June (West Herts RSPB) and on Haul Road on 22nd (MD). Sightings in August suggest successful local breeding: two birds – including a juvenile – were on Haul Road on 4th (JH/TS), one (possibly a juvenile) fed on blackberries near Hayden Hide on 30th (TGG), and an adult and juvenile were near Kingfisher Hide on 31st (TS). This is a better result for the species than over the last couple of years, but nevertheless, spotted flycatchers seem only just to hang on as a breeding species at Paxton Pits.



Pied flycatcher (John Busby)

Pied flycatcher

A male of this rare passage migrant, averaging only four a year in Cambridgeshire, was reported in Wray House Garden on 4th May (per TGG).

Long-tailed tit

Flocks of long-tailed tits were a noisy distraction around the Pits during the winter, probably with high survival rates thanks to the mild weather. A flock of 30 during the cold snap on 5th January was the largest reported (MSh).

Its presence in village gardens during the winter also seems to be on the increase, though we have not yet had evidence of breeding here. More information on this would be valuable.

Around the Pits, the PBBS recorded eight pairs, surprisingly lower than the 14 in 2001. Several nests and young were noted independently, from mid May.

Marsh tit

Although there were few reports of marsh tits at the Hayden Hide feeders during the winter, there were occasional sightings elsewhere, with the Moorings a favoured haunt in early spring. The only summer record was a juvenile caught by ringers on 29th June (JA/GDE/MT), indicating that these glossy-headed tits bred close by.

Coal tit

A small number of coal tits were reported at feeders in village gardens during the winter, but they remain scarce around the nature reserve. However, singles were seen on the feeder outside the Visitor Centre on several dates during the spring and, intriguingly, there were sightings on 8th and 23rd June around Heronry Lake (MD/JH/JW). Could there have been a nest hidden away?

Blue tit

This familiar garden bird would appear to be maintaining its considerable numbers, with 46 breeding pairs around the Pits (PBBS) and plenty in village gardens, judging by the number of fledglings seen during the summer.

Great tit

A successful garden bird throughout the village, with a large population here and around the nature reserve. The PBBS recorded 29 breeding pairs, compared with 35 pairs in 2001.

Nuthatch

Although the UK nuthatch population has expanded in range in recent years, it remains very rare at Paxton (waxwing is more common!). Remarkably, there were several sightings this year: around Heronry and Island Lakes on 1st and 2nd April (per TGG/ BP) and on 25th August (FD/SM), when one perched briefly on a telegraph wire outside the Visitor Centre! Could these indicate that the nuthatch is at last going to colonise our recording area? Let's hope so! We'd be delighted to hear about any records in village gardens.

Treecreeper



Treecreeper (John Busby)

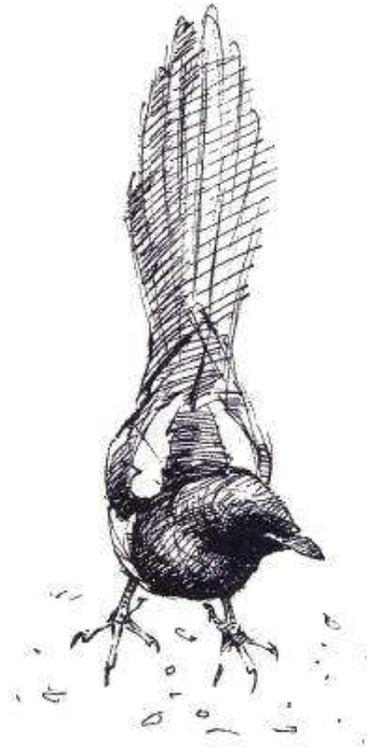
Singles, and occasionally two together, were reported occasionally during the winter, most frequently in the wooded 'triangle' on Haul Road.

The PBBS recorded four breeding pairs, and at least two were successful, with an adult and 2-3 juveniles in trees east of Heronry South on 16th June (GF/RM) and young being fed on Haul Road on 4th August (JH).

Treecreepers are scarce in the village, so one during the spring in Hall Close (per TGG) was unusual.

Jay

As reported last year, an increasingly numerous resident around the Pits and occasional visitor to village gardens. Jays were heard 'squawking' around the Heronry Lakes throughout the year. Last year, we estimated two pairs, perhaps we might raise that to three this year.



Magpie (John Busby)

Magpie

Thirty years ago, magpies were virtually unknown around Little Paxton, probably due to vigorous local gamekeepers. Now they are seen regularly around the Pits and on garden bird tables.

There were no counts of the roost behind the Lafarge Redland coating plant during the winter, so the only gauge we have is the PBBS that estimated 9 pairs around the Pits.

Jackdaw

A mixed roost of jackdaws, rooks and carrion crows are a regular and noisy spectacle at dusk around the trees on the west side of Heronry Lake. The roost built up quickly in late October, from 1200 birds on 24th (JH) to over 3000 on 28th (JH/SH). It increased further in early December, from 5000 on 3rd (JH) to c.8000 on 14th (TGG), though many more flew straight over. This was the highest count of the winter, and numbers had fallen back to around 4000 by early February (JH).

We have no evidence that jackdaws breed around the Pits complex and know only of a

few nests around Paxton Hall, though family groups disperse to feed in village gardens and surrounding arable land.

Rook

Rooks were the dominant species in the corvid roost on Heronry South throughout the winter (see Jackdaw for details).

By late January, the rookery adjacent to Sailing Lake was noisy and active, with nests being rebuilt. Some 70 nests were occupied by 1st April (JH), when leaf growth obscured the colony. During mid-summer, flocks of up to 150 birds fed around the private quarry and, on 4th August, some 300 rooks followed the plough in the fields west of Haul Road (TGG), perhaps indicating a successful breeding season.

Carrion crow

Carrion crows are in the area throughout the year, regularly roosting with rooks, jackdaws, woodpigeons and stock doves on Heronry South (see Jackdaw, above, for details). Otherwise, only small flocks of up to 20 were seen around the Pits complex during the winter, before they broke into breeding pairs for the summer

On summer evenings, up to 25 were regularly around the Lafarge Redland coatings plant near the Visitor Centre, perhaps taking grit to aid their digestion. With many non-breeders around, it is difficult to estimate the breeding population, but we suggest a slight increase this year, perhaps to four pairs.

Carrion crows are the main predators of eggs and chicks of ground-nesting birds around the Pits and a couple of examples were witnessed during the breeding season: one taking a young greylag gosling in mid-May (GR) and one taking a wader chick (probably a redshank) on 4th June (JH), both on Pumphouse Pit.

An interesting record was a carrion crow that attacked a magpie on 4th March near Heronry Lake (DM/JM), while a group of other magpies looked on.

Starling

This familiar species has, this year, joined the UK Red List of birds of high conservation concern, having declined by over 60% in the last 25 years. The reasons are not fully understood, given that starlings are still one of the commonest garden birds.

The PBBS recorded four pairs around the Pits, though many more are seen foraging around the buildings and farmland between the lakes. We have no information about the numbers in the village, but a feature of late summer evenings are flocks of juveniles wheeling around the village (and the sewage works across the river). We wonder where they all roost?

House sparrow

The decline of the urban population, especially in central London, has been well publicised this year and it now joins the starling on the Red List.

However, house sparrows remain numerous around many bird tables and seed feeders in the village throughout the year. The provision of food in gardens may be critical for youngsters leaving the nest. During late August, flocks of over 20 were seen around the village, though this is certainly only a small proportion of the population.

As Little Paxton village expands towards the Pits, more house sparrows are seen around the southern lakes, and the PBBS suggests four pairs, including one in the vicinity of the quarry plant, judging by several records of foraging adults around Heronry North and Island Pit.

Chaffinch

Once Britain's commonest bird and still a familiar species in and around the village, chaffinches feature strongly on garden feeding tables and the feeders on the nature reserve.

The PBBS recorded 53 breeding pairs this year, up from 42 in 2001, so the local population seems to be doing well.

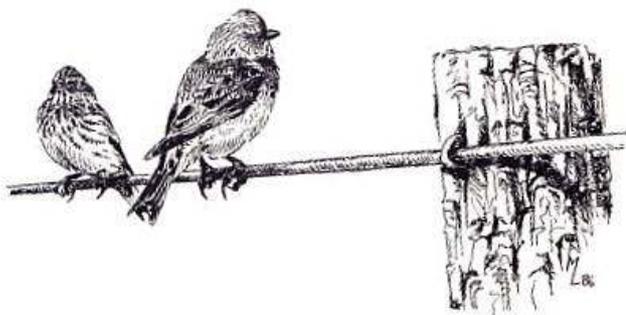
Brambling

Brambling records at Paxton seem to get ever scarcer – perhaps with milder winters in Europe, fewer make it this far west? Just two records this year, both on Haul Road on consecutive weekends: two on 1st April (per JW) and a summer-plumage male on 7th (SHo). Just outside the recording area were five on 11th November (PL) and one on 23rd December (MD/JW), feeding with 1000 finches on sunflower heads near Stirtloe.

Greenfinch

An aggressive visitor to garden feeding stations in the village, where it breeds commonly in larger deciduous trees and *Leylandii*. Young birds in small family groups were seen frequently in late August, especially on the feeders in front of the Hayden Hide.

Despite its strong status around the village, there seem to be fewer around the Pits, and the PBBS recorded just 10 pairs. In nearby Stirtloe, just outside our recording area, a

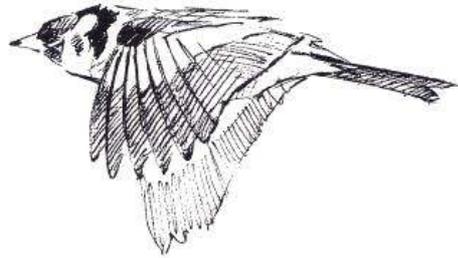


Siskin

The alders along the western edge of Sailing Lake have been a favoured feeding ground for siskins in recent winters, often with goldfinches and redpolls. This was a good year for the birds, with the first five seen on 11th November (SM). Groups of 6-20 were seen regularly, peaking with 30 on 16th February (MD/JH/JW). This included a bird with no dark pigments, so that it appeared all yellow above, and rather canary-like!

flock of 150-200 greenfinches fed on a field of sunflowers in November 2001.

Goldfinch



Goldfinch (John Busby)

Reports of wintering goldfinches have increased in recent years, with flocks of up to 30 reported regularly around the Sailing Lake and private quarry.

This attractive visitor is also an irregular visitor to village gardens, easily identified in flight by its distinctive ‘tinkling’ call. Around the Pits, the PBBS recorded three pairs, our best yet, with small groups of juveniles feeding on seeds of wild flowers near the Visitor Centre and along the bunds of the private quarry in late summer.

Linnets (Mike Langman)

The last flock, of 12 birds, found here was on 2nd March (DM/JM), though six were seen in the copse north of Boughton Lodge Farm on 3rd (MSh) and one in Little Paxton village on 24th (MD/JW).

Linnet

A resident, in fluctuating numbers, with flocks of 10 to 50 regularly around the Pits complex where wild flower seeds are abundant. These peaked in late winter, with several counts of around 80 birds in a flock around the private quarry in April (NP), and up to 10 remaining into May.

Small groups of, presumably, non-breeding linnets remained through the summer, with up to six pairs (PBBS), though no confirmed breeding.

Lesser redpoll

Two on 3rd November, in alders around Sailing Lake, their favourite feeding area, were the first of the winter (JW). A few were seen in the area through the winter, with a peak of only five birds on 2nd March (DM/JM). Three in a garden on Hayling Avenue on 25th November (IKD/DD) was a rare village garden record. The last of the winter were a pair on 28th March (MD), of which the male was in full song.

Bullfinch

A quiet whistle or a flash of a white rump is often all you see of a bullfinch as you walk around the Pits. Five or six were regularly recorded by visitors during the winter, though 13 in a morning on 15th December (GR) was exceptional. During the cold snap in January, small numbers ventured into nearby gardens to feed, and five in Hayling Avenue was a good report (IKD/DD).

Around the Pits, bullfinches appear to be holding their own, with an estimated 10 pairs this spring (PBBS), the same as 2001, and several sightings of family parties in late summer.

Yellowhammer

One of the few species to move from UK Green to Red List status during the year, and one which we hope will benefit from the extension of the nature reserve to include 35 acres of arable land this year.

The PBBS recorded five territories, but proven breeding tends to come late in the season, so recently fledged broods on the edge of the private quarry in early September 2001 and 2002 are typical.

A bunting roost near Washout Pit again contained yellowhammers, but the peak count was lower than the previous winter, at 12 birds on 9th and 16th December (NP). A similar size flock fed in grassland around

the northern pits on several dates in February (MD/JH/SM).

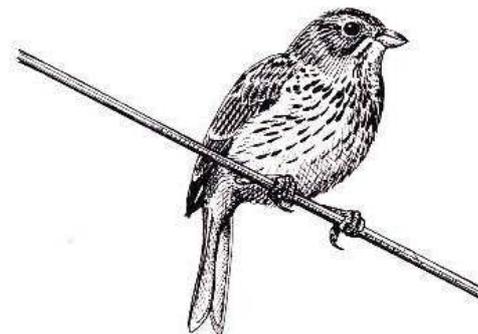
Reed bunting

An influx in mid September was notable, peaking with a group of 70 birds on 22nd (JLFP). Smaller, but equally impressive numbers of this nationally-declining bird, were seen throughout the winter, with counts of 40 on 1st December (MD) and 32 on 16th February (MSh), all on the weedy grassland around the newer gravel pits.

The PBBS suggested 35 pairs this year, compared with 19 pairs in 2001. This is an excellent result against a backdrop of a UK decline of over 50% in the last 25 years.

Corn bunting

The first, and only, singing male was first heard issuing its rattling song on the edge of the private quarry on 4th April (MD) and on most subsequent visits until early September. We have no idea whether this single bird had a partner (or more than one, as can happen). Last year, we reported that corn buntings were on the brink of extinction at Paxton Pits, and nothing has changed that view. Will we have any in 2003?



Corn bunting (Mike Langman)

Other species

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

Black swan

This Australasian swan is common in wildfowl collections and many live a feral existence on park lakes. One flew west over Island Pit on 25th August (SM/JW) and was seen on Heronry Lake on 31st (TGG).

Harris' hawk

A falconer's bird was seen frequently around the southern lakes from early January, and is believed to be from an aviary in Wyboston. It escaped during 2001, and spent much of the previous summer around gardens in Eaton Ford and Eaton Socon. At Paxton Pits, it favoured the edge of the River Great Ouse, though was also seen perched in several gardens. It was seen to take a Moorhen on at least two occasions, but was not reported after the end of March. During its stay, it provided a challenge for birdwatchers at Paxton, as it looked similar to common buzzard from a distance, especially in flight.

First summer migrants in Little Paxton and Paxton Pits

Julian Hughes

The arrival of the first summer migrants is long-awaited. 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. The table below, which is updated annually, enables readers to check their own 'firsts' during 2002 – if you have, please let us know!

As the table shows, 2002 saw the earliest ever dates at Paxton for sedge warbler (for the second successive year), whitethroat, nightingale and cuckoo. However, this is fewer than the remarkable eight species in 2001 and the five species in 2000. Cool, north-easterly winds held back the earliest migrants – the couple of sand martins on 10th March were comparatively early and it was several weeks before others arrived. Apart from a brief respite in late March, which probably account for the flurry of first arrivals in the first week of April, the weather conditions were against migrants from the south, especially those which feed on aerial insects.

	Paxton 2002	Paxton earliest	Cambs earliest
Chiffchaff	overwintered	4 Mar 2000	*
Sand martin	10 March	2 Mar 1997	27 February 1994
Willow warbler	18 March	9 Mar 1997	9 Mar 1997
Wheatear	19 March	11 Mar 1996	7 March 1977/1989
Little ringed plover	22 March	11 Mar 2000	7 Mar 1991
Blackcap	24 March	19 Mar 2001	*
Sedge warbler	1 April	1 April 2001/02	27 March 1989
Whitethroat	3 April	3 Apr 2002	29 Mar 1998
Swallow	4 April	14 Mar 2001	7 Mar 1983
Nightingale	4 April	4 Apr 1999/2002	4 Apr 1999/2002
Yellow wagtail	4 April	1 April 2001	16 Mar 1992
Cuckoo	9 April	9 Apr 2002	8 Mar 1989
Common tern	11 April	8 Apr 2001	20 Mar 1997
Garden warbler	14 April	4 Apr 1997	28 March 1999
House martin	18 April	4 Mar 2001	4 Mar 2001
Turtle dove	20 April	12 Apr 1998	4 Apr 1982/1985
Lesser whitethroat	21 April	15 Apr 2001	31 March 1987
Hobby	22 April	19 Apr 1996	17 March 2000
Reed warbler	24 April	7 Apr 2001	7 Apr 2001
Swift	25 April	19 Apr 1996	14 Apr 1980

* The first dates for Paxton Pits relate to the first singing birds; these may be migrants, but could be overwintering individuals. No date is given for the county since so many now overwinter here.

Marsh warbler or reed warbler? – a lesson learned

Stuart Elsom

On Thursday 11th July, an *Acrocephalus* warbler was heard by birders visiting Paxton Pits, singing from bushes between the Haul Road and Weedy Pit. The bird was reported to the county recorder as a **marsh warbler** and a local birder was asked to check the “report” out. On arrival, he heard a song consisting mainly of expert mimicry of species including redshank, oystercatcher, common tern and blackbird. After consulting another local birder (who listened to the mimicry down a mobile phone!), the news of a marsh warbler was released through *Cambirds* (the county e-mail group) and was quickly picked up by the pager services.

Over the next two days, more than 100 birdwatchers came to see (or at least to hear) the bird and several audio recordings were made. Many left convinced of the correct identification as marsh warbler, though the bird was elusive and most had just brief glimpses. The few observers who did see the bird well reported features supporting the marsh warbler identification, including pale claws, bright orange gape, and general pallid colouration. However these features alone do not rule out **reed warbler**, of which there were several more typical examples holding territory nearby.

Cambridgeshire Bird Recorder, John Oates, visited the site on Saturday 13th July and had serious doubts that this bird was a marsh warbler, though most other birdwatchers continued to argue in favour. On Sunday 14th July, I visited the site with Richard Patient and we immediately heard the song of Reed Warbler but didn't see any *Acrocephalus* warblers. Richard and I waited for the marsh warbler to sing when another birdwatcher arrived and confirmed that the bird singing was the ‘marsh warbler’, which had by now been present for three days.

Richard and I noted that the structure of the song was that of a conventional reed warbler, interspersed with mimicry of redshank, blackbird and common tern, but none of the other species one would typically associate with marsh warbler song (e.g. goldfinch, swallow, chaffinch and great tit). The song did not seem varied enough for marsh warbler and the distinctive wheezes and tongue clicking notes were lacking (the latter a distinctive characteristic I have noted from birds in Poland). Most significantly, the song always reverted to that of a conventional reed warbler after periods of mimicry.

We did not see this ‘warbler’ well, so could not honestly comment on identity by sight alone. However in one brief view the wings were clearly seen and the bird did not look long-winged enough for marsh warbler. The primaries were very worn and the exact position of the primary projection was difficult to ascertain although, on this brief view, did seem to suggest reed warbler. Based in part on my experience of marsh warblers during trips to eastern Poland since 1996, where the species is common and widespread, we concluded that this bird was an odd reed warbler. It was present at least to 15th July, but was not heard when the area was revisited on 20th.

Over the weekend, an animated discussion was pursued on the *Cambirds* e-mail server, with various views put forward, including a suggestion of hybridisation, but ultimately there was agreement about the bird's identity as a **reed warbler**. So, how can this mimicry, usually associated with marsh warbler, be explained.

Richard Patient's research provided the following reasoning:

Eric Simms in *British Warblers* (1985) states that reed warblers "tend to be more strongly mimetic when they are late arrivals and not in their usual habitat. They then appear to need a more complex song to set up territory and attract a mate" (as cited by Peter Dunn in 'The putative Caspian Reed Warbler in North Yorkshire' (*Birding World*, 14: 329-332).

To add weight to the theory, a paper on 'Eurasian Reed Warbler: the characters and variation associated with the Asian form *fuscus*' (in *British Birds* 95: 42-61), David Pearson, Brian Small and Peter Kennerley comment that "It has long been appreciated that Eurasian reed warbler can, and does, include mimicry within its song. Atkin *et al.* (1965) discussed the ability of Eurasian reed warblers, especially unmated males, to mimic the song of marsh warbler, plus an extensive repertoire of calls, including those of common redshank and common tern" (citing K. Atkin *et al.* in *British Birds* 58: 181-188).

Based on the above information and our own experiences, the Paxton bird was a reed warbler that had probably arrived later than its congeners at this site. If nothing else, this situation illustrates that communication is a very precious tool and that, through much lively and informed debate and discussion, the *Cambirds* e-mail group was used to good effect.

Acknowledgements

Richard Patient traced several highly relevant references. I should like to thank the following observers who discussed the identification of this bird including Richard Bayldon, Martin Davis, Mark Hawkes, Julian Hughes, Bruce Martin, John Oates and Mark Ward.

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If you have access to e-mail and want to subscribe to *Cambirds* (to exchange sightings, news and views), visit <http://www.scoffin.co.uk/cambirds/> and follow the instructions.

Wildlife at Paxton Pits 2002

Faith Darlow, Ian Dawson, Ron Elloway, Julian Hughes and David Hoccom

This paper describes some of the more significant records received during 2002, rather than the status of the higher profile animal families (see 2001 report). There have been fewer surveys than in 2001, and the breadth of records presented here reflects this. We do not pretend that this is the complete picture, so if you can add more detail, please send your records to Ron Elloway at the Visitor Centre or email paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk

Mammals

Rabbits remain the most frequently seen species, and are common throughout the reserve. Cases of myxomatosis – a contagious disease that is fatal to rabbits – rise and fall between years, limiting the size of the population; many individuals showed symptoms of the disease this summer. **Brown hares** were a frequent sight around the quarry. **Foxes** were seen regularly, occasionally sunbathing on the banks of the Heronry Lakes. **Badger** sightings remain scarce, but these nocturnal foragers are thought to use the whole of the reserve.

Otters were reported on the Heronry Lakes on several occasions during the winter, following the pattern of recent years. Confirmation of their presence came in July, in the shape of spraints (droppings) near the Kingfisher Hide. It seems unlikely that they are on the reserve throughout the year – more likely that they move in and out of the reserve from the Great Ouse.

Short-tailed field voles were observed frequently, and **water shrews** were seen occasionally on the shores of the lakes. Of the introduced mammals, **muntjac deer** and **grey squirrels** were seen regularly, with most **mink** sightings coming from the shores of the Heronry Lakes.

Reptiles

Reports of **grass snakes** were sporadic – as they were in 2001. An interesting, and slightly worrying, record was that of a **terrapin (red-eared?)** in Farm Pit – these have established colonies at several wetland sites around the country, often having outgrown their welcome as household pets. They are known to have quite an appetite for young waterbirds.

Amphibians

Common newts (or smooth newts) were easy to find, in the shallow ponds dotted throughout the reserve, or on dry land during their hibernation. The larger **great-crested newt** was present at the same location as in previous years. **Common frogs** were recorded from around the shores of Cloudy Lake, and may breed in the shallow backwaters.

Moths

A moth trapping evening on 27th July proved successful, with over 100 species identified. The highlights were a **wormwood**, a species not previously recorded on the reserve, and a **coast dart**, which is not only a first for the reserve, but also for Huntingdonshire! Some of the well-named species also recorded during July were: **ruby tiger**, **smoky wainscot**, **the drinker**, **buff arches**, **flame shoulder**, **water veneer**, **shuttle shaped dart**, **silver y** and **lime speck pug**.

Butterflies

The first **brimstone** signalled the start of spring on 12th March, followed by records of **peacock** and **small tortoiseshell** on the 16th. **Commas** and **speckled woods** were seen from 28th March; **small white** and **holly blue** from 29th. Large numbers of the latter were recorded

around the Moorings on 20th April. **Green-veined whites** and **orange tips** were on the wing from 7th April, with **small copper** along the Haul Road on 21st April. The first day of June



Left to right: *Comma*, *orange tip*, *brimstone*, *small copper*, *small tortoiseshell*, *red admiral*, *peacock*
(Rob Banbury)

saw the first records of **common blue** and **red admiral**, followed by a **painted lady** two days later. We received nine records of this continental migrant, though no particular influx was evident; the last was on the 28th September. The first **small skipper** was seen on 18th June, with the first **ringlets** appearing from 29th. Several **purple hairstreaks** were reported along the Haul Road, the first on 28th July. Two **clouded yellows** were reported: one in August and one on 8th September, following a no show in 2001.

Dragonflies

Dull, cool weather in May delayed the start of the season, with the first reports late in the month: **banded demoiselle**, **azure**, **common blue**, **blue-tailed** and **red-eyed damselflies**, **scarce**, **four-spotted** and **broad-bodied chasers** and **hairy hawkers** in the last week of May and the first week of June. **Black-tailed skimmer** and **emperor dragonflies** were on the wing from mid June. The warm and sunny autumn extended the season for some species, with **common darters** and **migrant hawkers** still flying in the second week of October.

Spiders

The list for the Pits complex increased to 156 species, despite relatively little survey work this year. Good numbers of our heaviest spider – the **orb weaver** *Araneus quadratus* – strung their webs across tall grasses and stiff plants along the Haul Road in late 2001, with juveniles present the following summer. The **scaffold-web spider** *Enoplognatha latimana*, new to science only 20 years ago, occurs in the UK only in the southeast of England and coastal areas in the south and west. During two weeks in July, the first for Huntingdonshire was found at Hinchingbrooke Country Park, followed by a female at Paxton Pits, between Sailing Lake and Weedy Pit. These are the farthest inland records to date.

Other interesting species recorded were a female *Larinioides patagiatus*, a very localised orb-weaver (recorded from only 32 10-km squares in Britain since 1980) found along Haul Road.

Plants

Work is underway to manage our records of wild flowers at the Pits and make them available on the website. No major discoveries were made this year, but the mild winter meant that colourful flowers were around the reserve almost throughout the year. **Snowdrops** were in flower from 24th January, with **primroses** and **coltsfoot** in flower on 3rd and 6th February respectively. At the back end of the season, **evening primroses** bathed the reserve in yellow until well into October, while berries were abundant, especially **bramble** (blackberries) and **wild rose hips**.

Bird ringing at Paxton Pits

Graham Elliott

For a third year, English Nature has given a group of licensed ringers permission to ring birds in the Sanctuary area of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. Nine ringing visits were made between May and August 2002, as part of the Constant Effort Site (CES) scheme, organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The CES gathers information that can help to explain bird population changes, through a programme of mist-netting in specific habitats each summer. The data gathered from over 100 sites across the UK contributes to the BTO's Integrated Population Monitoring Programme.

This year, 252 birds of 24 species were caught and ringed, in addition to birds that were re-trapped, having been ringed here or elsewhere. This was a marked reduction in the numbers caught in 2001 (390), though only one fewer species. Visits were also made during April in 2001. Sparrowhawk and treecreeper (a remarkable nine!) were caught for the first time.

The ringing site is mainly dry scrub, which explains the high numbers of woodland species such as nightingale, blackcap, garden warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff. Although it is adjacent to the river and flooded pits, few reed and sedge warblers used the area.

The table below summarises the numbers of 'new' birds of each species ringed during 2002.

Species	Juvenile	Adult	Total
Sparrowhawk	0	1	1
Turtle dove	0	1	1
Wren	10	1	11
Dunnock	4	6	10
Robin	8	2	10
Nightingale	2	2	4
Blackbird	1	4	5
Song thrush	0	2	2
Sedge warbler	1	5	6
Reed warbler	3	3	6
Lesser whitethroat	2	9	11
Whitethroat	7	3	10
Garden warbler	1	8	9
Blackcap	4	12	16
Chiffchaff	6	9	15
Willow warbler	5	8	13
Long-tailed tit	8	9	17
Blue tit	41	4	45
Great tit	18	3	21
Treecreeper	5	4	9
Chaffinch	0	4	4
Greenfinch	0	5	5
Bullfinch	6	13	19
Reed bunting	0	2	2
Total	132	120	252



Sparrowhawk (Rob Banbury)

The ringing has provided useful additional information by which to assess the populations of some species. Even though the ringing site occupies only a small area of the Pits complex, the number of lesser whitethroats and bullfinches caught was again much higher than predicted solely from field observations.

The numbers indicate that a few species had a good breeding season, notably blue tit (41 juveniles, compared to just five in 2001), whitethroat (7 compared to 3) and treecreeper (5 in 2002, none last year). However, fewer juvenile dunnocks (4, compared to 13 in 2001), blackcaps (4, compared to 24) and garden warblers (1, compared to 11) were caught compared to last year, suggesting that they may have had a poor breeding season. Two juvenile nightingales were ringed, which is one more than last year, though they are notoriously difficult to catch.

There are several possible reasons for the lower numbers. We have noticed that the ringing area dries out quickly after winter rain and, while water levels at Paxton remained high well into summer 2001, they were much lower this year. As a result, plants were succulent for a shorter period and soil invertebrates would bury deeper from the surface. The area would thus be less attractive to birds, forcing insect-eaters to forage farther afield during the summer.

Photographs of some of the birds ringed at Paxton are published on www.paxton-pits.org.uk

Extending the vision: Nature Reserve gets bigger!

Ray Matthews

A major extension to the Nature Reserve was announced in October 2001, with the acquisition of 38 acres (15 ha) of farmland and fen by Huntingdonshire District Council, supported by The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. The Council and the Friends are now working to develop exciting plans for the management of the three separate habitats.

The extension recognises the need to cater for greater visitor numbers in this rapidly expanding area of Huntingdonshire, and, for the first time, riverside habitat of high conservation value has been incorporated into the Reserve. In addition, the marsh known as **Dodder Fen** (because of the nationally rare Great Dodder *Cuscuta europaea*) has been safeguarded for the future. Dodder Fen had been managed as part of the Reserve through the kind cooperation of the previous owner, and is designated as a County Wildlife Site.

HDC staff and advisors are working on plans to maximise the wildlife potential of the other two habitats. The low-lying, frequently flooded field beside the River Great Ouse will be returned to the wet meadow of former times - indeed its pre-1800 name of **Great Meadow** has been resurrected. It will be flower-filled in spring and early summer, to be replaced in autumn and winter by wet pasture for feeding wetland birds. Re-creation of Great Meadow will be an important contribution to the Cambridgeshire Biodiversity Action Plan, which identifies this wetland habitat, once so characteristic of the Ouse Valley, as Highest Priority for conservation.

The higher ground to the west of Great Meadow and Dodder Fen was under arable cultivation for many years, though has been managed as 'set-aside' for the last few years. This will return to arable cultivation, using traditional cropping regimes which are friendly to farmland wildlife, *i.e.* no pesticides, spring rather than autumn sowing, and leaving uncropped 'beetle banks', which will provide food for birds and mammals. The area closest to the Heron Trail has been dedicated to Peter Lewis, vicar of Little Paxton and keen supporter of the nature reserve.

Farmland birds are in crisis, with numbers of once-common birds, such as skylark, yellowhammer and turtle dove, plummeting; research shows that these catastrophic declines have coincided with loss of winter stubbles and elimination of weeds (and hence the seeds and insects which they support) - the implication is that this reduction in winter food supply is lowering survival rates for overwintering birds.

By reverting to traditional arable farming, we hope to make the area suitable for autumn and winter flocks of yellowhammer, finches and house sparrow, and in spring, maybe corn bunting and rare wildflowers of arable land - Poppy, Corn Marigold, Corn Cockle. There is also an opportunity to sacrifice a small area of standing wheat for educational use, so that visiting schoolchildren will be able to help with sowing and harvesting, walk in the wheat, enjoy a 'corn maze', use the crop for crafts and projects - the ideas come thick and fast!

The extension is a ringing endorsement of the Council's vision in creating the Reserve, and of the progress made since 1989. By any measure, Paxton Pits Nature Reserve has been an outstanding success; it has gained a national reputation, is enjoyed by upwards of 70,000 visitors each year, and HDC's staff are supported by over 3000 volunteer hours each year. In addition, the 550-strong membership of The Friends provides support for the Reserve through a wide range of activities.

The new part of the Reserve can easily be viewed from the River Trail, the Ouse Valley Way and the Heron Trail, so watch this space develop as wildlife-packed habitats over the next few years – even better, come and help us to create them!

UK Birds of Conservation Concern at Paxton Pits

Julian Hughes

In September 2002, the latest assessment of the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern was published by government and non-statutory conservation organisations. It places birds into red (40 species), amber (121) and green (86) lists, according to their conservation status, updating a similar list published in 1996.

The principal changes are the addition of yellowhammer, lesser spotted woodpecker, ring ouzel, house sparrow, starling, marsh tit and willow tit to the red list because of declines in their population (of more than 50% in the last 25 years). Red kite, marsh harrier, osprey, merlin and Dartford warbler have been moved from the red to the amber list as a result of population increases, thanks to dedicated conservation efforts during the last few decades.

The table below sets out the 18 species on the UK Red list that have bred at Paxton Pits, with an assessment of their recent status. Of these, one (willow tit) was only ever an occasional breeder, but another three have been lost as breeding species: corncrake in the 1940s, grey partridge in the 1980s and tree sparrow in the 1990s. Another two, lesser spotted woodpecker and grasshopper warbler may just be hanging on, though breeding has not been confirmed in recent years. A further three species - spotted flycatcher, yellowhammer and corn bunting - no longer breed annually and their future looks uncertain.

The good news, however, is that several species that are in significant decline across the UK are bucking that trend at Paxton Pits, most notably turtle dove, linnets, bullfinch (all stable) and skylark, song thrush and reed bunting (all increasing). For all the species that are typical of arable farmland, major government policy changes will be critical in turning around these national declines, but oases of good habitat such as Paxton Pits will be vital in kick-starting these recoveries.

Grey partridge	Formerly abundant resident; on the brink of local extinction
Corncrake	Formerly common summer visitor, but extinct since 1940s
Turtle dove	Summer visitor – currently stable (10 singing males in 2002)
L spotted woodpecker	Elusive resident; perhaps one pair remaining
Skylark	Increasing resident: 14 singing males in 2002
Song thrush	Increasing resident: 16 territories in 2002
Grasshopper warbler	Scarce summer visitor: 1-2 territories in 2002, lower than in 1980s
Spotted flycatcher	Scarce summer visitor: 1 pair in 2002, lower than in 1980/90s
Marsh tit	Scarce resident, but probably never abundant: 1 pair in 2002
Willow tit	Rare visitor. Bred in 1989, but probably never abundant
Starling	Abundant resident, but scarce breeder: 4 pairs in 2002
House sparrow	Scarce resident, though common in village: 4 pairs in 2002
Tree sparrow	Never abundant, but now rare winter visitor. Last bred in 1991
Linnets	Abundant in winter, never common in summer, but numbers stable
Bullfinch	Resident at low densities. Stable in recent years: 10 pairs in 2002
Yellowhammer	Declining resident: 6 pairs in mid 1990s; 1-2 pairs in 2002
Reed bunting	Increasing resident: 35 pairs in 2002
Corn bunting	Declining resident: 1 singing male in 2002

For more details about the new listings, visit www.rspb.org.uk or see

Gregory, R.D., Wilkinson, N.I., Noble, D.G., Robinson, J.A., Brown, A.F., Hughes, J., Procter, D.A., Gibbons, D.W., and Galbraith, C.A. 2002. The population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and the Isle of Man: an analysis of conservation concern 2002-07. *British Birds* 95: 410-450.

25 years of birdwatching in Little Paxton

Trevor Gunton

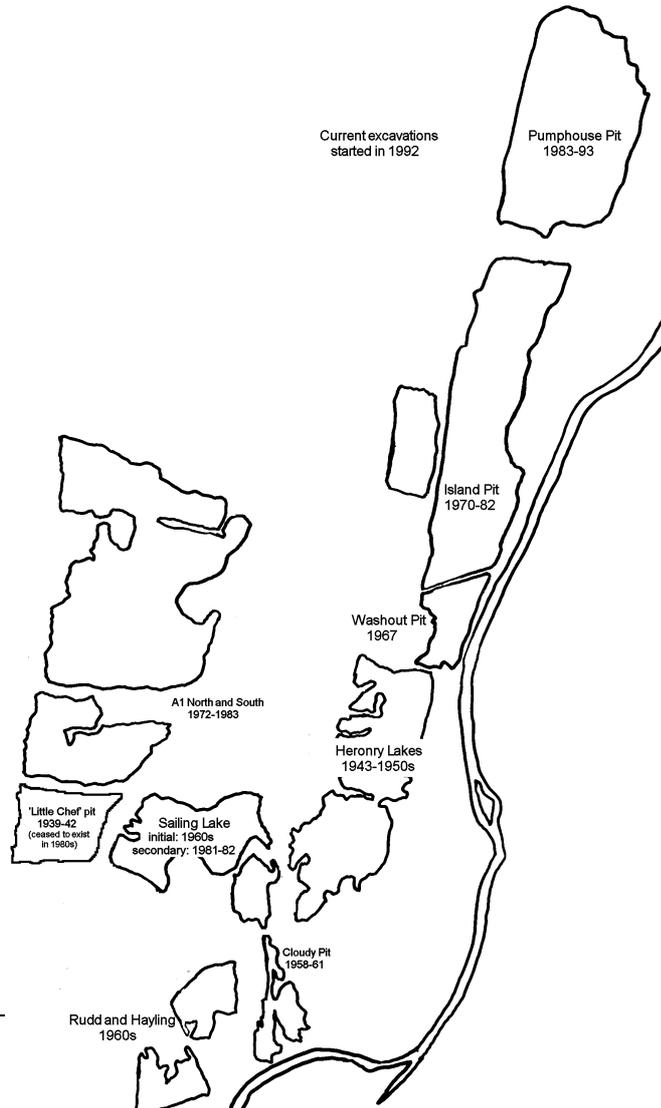
Until April 1968, I had never heard of St Neots or Little Paxton, having lived in Leeds since I was young. Moving to Gordon Road in Little Paxton - a half-completed housing estate - was brought about by my appointment as RSPB regional officer. At this stage, I had no idea that the gravel pits existed, nor that they were about to change my life forever! In my 25th year of birdwatching here, this is a potted history of the birds and the birdwatching at Paxton.

When my wife, Veronica, and I moved in, Gordon Road was only half built, and I can well remember one evening when a grasshopper warbler was ‘reeling’ where the primary school now is. How things have changed – I can’t even hear its high pitched song any more! My first few years of birdwatching around the Pits was casual and unstructured. Few people visited the place, and I regularly took the car well into the pits system, through a wide track where ‘the Sanctuary’ now is, north of the Kingfisher Hide.

The most northerly pit was Washout Pit: Island and Pumphouse Pits had yet to be created. However, older pits (some of which have since been in-filled and had houses built on them) had held birds since the 1930s, with CF Tebbutt watching and recording from the 1940s. His early records can be found in *The Birds of Huntingdonshire*, which he published privately in 1967. He left the county the previous year, and I greatly regret never having met him.

Digging had begun in the 1930s in response to the demand for sand and gravel: local wartime airfields were constructed with Paxton’s stone, and many local roads and houses contain gravel from the pits. One of the earliest was the ‘Little Chef’ pit (because it’s behind the roadside diner). Here bred badgers, foxes and a wide range of breeding birds. Regretfully, this was destroyed in the 1980s, though a few birds – and almost certainly foxes – still occur. Tebbutt recorded gadwall here as early as 1942, with shovelers breeding the same year. Snipe also bred regularly until 1965, but the loss of wet grassland means they are now only passage and winter visitors. On the other hand, collared doves were rare: the first breeding in Britain was in Norfolk in 1955, in Cambridgeshire in 1961 and in Huntingdonshire in 1965.

The creation of larger, deeper pits from the 1950s gave breeding



opportunities to species such as the tufted duck, and today we take them for granted as one of our most familiar waterbirds. The fortunes of little ringed plovers were tracked each year by Tebbutt, and it was the development of gravel pits at Paxton and elsewhere that stimulated their spread as breeding birds in central and lowland England. They first bred at Paxton in 1956, only the second occurrence in Huntingdonshire, and by 1968, I was able to count no fewer than 11 pairs, which has fallen back to just one or two pairs today. The arrival of the larger ringed plover as an inland breeder in the 1970s was considered by some to have been a factor in the demise of the migrant LRP.

Paxton must have been a dull place before the arrival of the herons, terns and cormorants? Well, no, not really – we had large flocks of buntings, skylarks and tree sparrows in the mid 1970s. Yellowhammers bred commonly, while breeding grey partridges, skylarks and lapwings populated the surrounding fields. How things have changed!

Common terns came to Paxton the year following my own arrival, and have bred at several locations, initially around the islands on what is now the Sailing Lake. They moved to Island Lake, among a colony of 300 pairs of black headed gulls between the late 1970s and 1987, when the colony was abandoned for no obvious reason, though human interference was suspected.



Cormorant (Rob Banbury)

Grey herons have been well documented over the years, having bred at Priory Park and the Hemingfords (near Godmanchester). They came to Paxton in the early 1970s, and peaked in 1989 with around 25 nests.

The cormorants have been a feature at Paxton Pits since the 1980s, initially as winter visitors, roosting in the trees around Heronry South, and breeding since 1988.

Over the years, Paxton Pits has become famous for its nightingales. It's not certain when nightingales first bred around the Pits, but it was certainly a very scarce breeder when I first started visiting in 1968, and even by the late 1970s, there were only a handful of territories. The growth came in the 1990s, with 2002 proving to be the best year yet.

My early notebooks are full of interesting records of once common species, but also list spoonbills, avocets, Caspian tern, red-footed falcons, singing wood sandpipers, black terns and summer-plumage little gulls. Only a handful of species on Paxton's bird list evade me – the commonest are probably nuthatch and coal tit, the rarest undoubtedly a North American killdeer. It's unlikely ever to repeat its March 1959 appearance.

It is, however, for our wealth of breeding species that we are best known today, though the chance of something rare and unusual never goes amiss! In 1989, the southern pits were designated a Local Nature Reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and we were finally on the conservation map.

Looking back (always very dangerous!), we owe a great debt of thanks to so many people who have worked together to ensure the Pits were saved for wildlife and not in-filled (though it is reported that a worked pit close to the reserve entrance gates was filled with the discarded uniforms of American servicemen after the war!). The owners, understanding staff at the quarry companies, staff and members of Huntingdonshire District Council, and, of course, the hard working volunteers who help to make the place 'tick' today.

With new land, new plans, new ideas and unbounded enthusiasm for Paxton Pits, the future looks exciting, and the possibilities there to restore the wildlife that has been lost from the area over recent decades. The best years are yet to come!

For more about the archaeology and history around Paxton Pits, visit www.paxton-pits.org.uk

Guidelines for garden bird recording

Alison Pearson

Recording garden birds is a useful and pleasurable pastime, but it does produce an overwhelming number of individual records when done on a daily basis! In order to make best use of these, we have produced some guidance for readers who wish to contribute their records to either the Paxton Bird Report or St Neots Bird Report. The following guidelines have been produced to help you and the volunteers maintaining the record database.

Please keep as many records for your own pleasure as you want. However, St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club only need a monthly summary of your garden visitors, i.e. one record for each species seen. The exceptions are when a rare bird visits or an unusually large number of a species is seen. In these last two cases, we'd like the individual records.

Your monthly summary should consist of the following:

The species - please be certain of your bird identification. If you have any doubts, please contact the area bird recorders (Trevor Gunton for Paxton, Alison Pearson for St Neots) who will try to help you. Please do not give separate records for the male and female of the same species. You can mention this in the 'Comments' section.

Number seen - during the month, record the maximum seen at any one time. At the end of the month, you should be able to summarise this to a range e.g. 2 - 6. If there was one record of special importance e.g. a particularly large number of a bird or an unusual bird for your garden, give the exact number.

Date - give the month only unless you have a special bird record as mentioned above, when you should give the exact date.

Comments - this is where you can record the frequency of sightings e.g. daily or once a week, or 3 - 4 times a week. You may like to give brief details of an unusual sighting or mention number of juveniles, males and females included in your record.

The monthly summary should look something like the example below.

Name and address

Species	No. seen	Date	Comment
Blackbird	2-4	June	Daily
Blue Tit	1-2	June	1-2 times a week
Blackcap	1	25/06/02	Male seen in back garden
Wren	1	June	Nesting in ivy. Seen daily
Robin	5	June	2 adults and 3 juveniles. Daily for first two weeks, then 1-2 a week.
Dunnock	2-3	June	Daily
Song Thrush	1	June	Once a week
Starling	2-3	June	Daily
Starling	20	20/07/02	Bread out on lawn attracted a large flock

Records for St Neots should be sent to Alison Pearson, 4 Kipling Place, Eaton Ford, St Neots, PE19 7RG. Tel: 01480 374792. E-mail: ali.pearson@ntlworld.com.

Records for Paxton Pits and Little Paxton can be provided by any of the ways listed on page 5.

St Neots Bird Report

St Neots Bird and Wildlife Club also produces an annual Bird Report, covering St Neots, Eaton Ford, Eaton Socon and Eynesbury. If you have some sightings - whether birds in your garden (see the article opposite for guidance), breeding records or the unusual – please send them to Alison Pearson, 4 Kipling Place, Eaton Ford, St Neots PE19 7RG.

E-mail: ali.pearson@ntlworld.com.

Copies of the 2001 report are available from meetings of the Bird & Wildlife Club or from Alison Pearson, price £1 (please make cheques payable to St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club). The 2002 report should be available in early spring 2003.

St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club

The Club was formed in 1993 in response to increasing local interest in wildlife in southwest Cambridgeshire. We have grown steadily and have around 150 members and local supporters. As well as indoor meetings each month throughout the winter and outdoor walks and surveys, we run a Conservation Fund that supports local projects. Membership, from as little as £5 for the year, gets you:

For you and your family...

- Eight informal, relaxed indoor meetings in St Neots annually.
- Outdoor events, visiting local nature reserves, including a special Evening with Nightingales every May.
- *The Bugle* – our quarterly members' newsletter.
- Free car sticker and key fob (while stocks last).

For wildlife...

- Our wildlife conservation fund assists wildlife groups, such as Cambridgeshire Wildlife Trust and the Friends of Paxton Pits, community organisations, local schools, sheltered accommodation and local nature reserves.
- We organise and support wildlife surveys, featuring species such as Herons, Cormorants, winter wildfowl and Nightingales.
- We produce annual reports about the *Birds of Paxton Pits* and the *Birds of St Neots*.
- We co-sponsor the Paxton Pits website, www.paxton-pits.org.uk
- With Landscape 2000, we have produced a guide to wildlife in Riverside Park, St Neots

Join the Club - for you, your family and to make St Neots a better place for wildlife.

For more information about St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club, please contact Sandra Hughes, 23 Edward Road, Eynesbury, St Neots, Cambridgeshire PE19 2QF. Tel: 01480 391775. E-mail: sandra.hughes@ntlworld.com

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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