

# ***BIRDS of PAXTON PITS***

**Autumn and winter 2003**

**Spring and summer 2004**

**Includes Little Paxton village and surrounding area**

*“very readable and well presented – and a bargain at £2.50”*

***Birdwatch magazine***

### **What is Paxton Pits?**

Paxton Pits is a complex of former gravel workings in the Ouse Valley, adjacent to the A1 trunk road in southwest Cambridgeshire. The flooded pits are an important refuge for waterbirds in winter, and are the primary reason that the site has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by English Nature. The lakes are important for waterbirds during the breeding season too, most notably cormorants (it has one of the original and largest inland cormorant colonies in England) and waders such as lapwing and redshank, which are now rare outside nature reserves in Cambridgeshire. The scrub that surrounds the pits, a rare habitat locally, is valuable for breeding songbirds, especially nightingales, which sing from mid April until mid June.

The southern pits are owned/leased and managed by Huntingdonshire District Council and form a designated Local Nature Reserve, with a car park on the east side of Little Paxton village and a Visitor Centre run by volunteers, where information and refreshments are available most weekends. The northern pits form Little Paxton Quarry, managed by Bardon Aggregates, and there is currently no public access as this is an active industrial area.

For up to date information, visit [www.paxton-pits.org.uk](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk), supported by The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve and St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club.

### **Cover illustration**

*A bird for each season*, by Rob Banbury, featuring:

*Autumn* (top right): yellow-browed warbler, a surprise find in October 2003, during an influx into eastern Britain. This was only the fourth ever in Cambridgeshire.

*Winter* (bottom left): bearded tit, a welcome return to Paxton for this reedbed specialist, the first since 1985

*Spring* (bottom right): sanderling, Paxton Pits hosted at least 16 passage migrants in spring 2004, by far the greatest number in a single year.

*Summer* (top left): reed bunting, an increasing breeding population at Paxton Pits, in the face of a national decline.

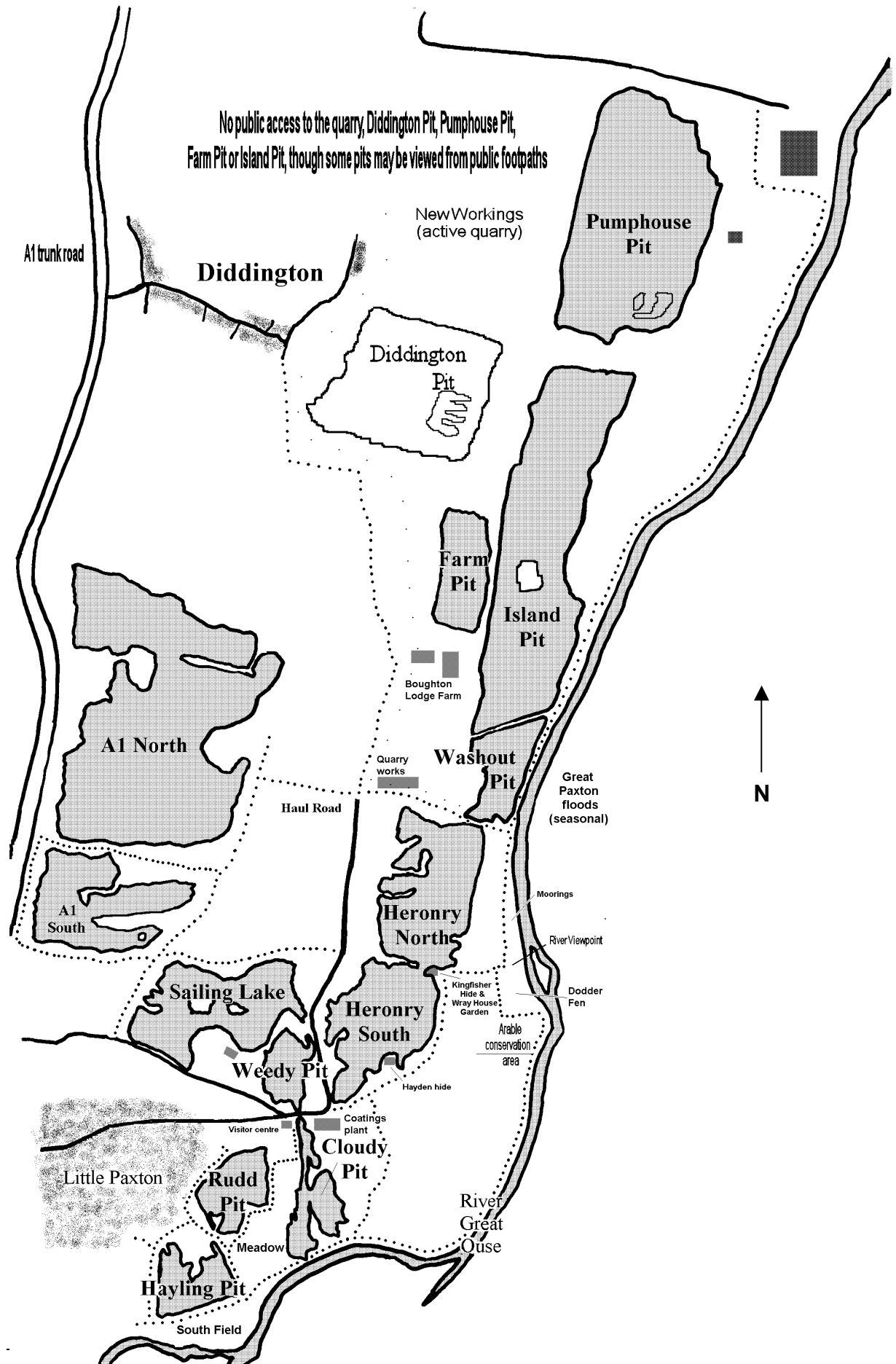
# **Birds of Paxton Pits, Little Paxton village and surrounding area**

**1<sup>st</sup> September 2003 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2004**

Published by St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club; September 2004

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## Foreword

### Ray Matthews, Chairman, Friends of Paxton Pits

We have become accustomed to the populations and breeding efforts of our birds being closely followed on a national scale, thanks largely to the efforts of staff and volunteers from the British Trust for Ornithology and the RSPB. Indeed, one of the 13 measures used in the Government's *Indicators of Sustainability* (or 'happiness index' as it is popularly called) is the 'wild bird indicator', which is essentially the average annual population change of 139 common native species.

Not surprisingly, it is difficult for us to relate national surveys to what happens 'in our own backyard'. How many times have I heard "We're told that house sparrows are in sharp decline, but I've got more than ever in my back garden!"

This is why the *Birds of Paxton Pits*, now in its fourteenth year, is so very interesting and important for us. The efforts of the many volunteers who contribute their records are building into an impressive record of the year-on-year fortunes of our local birds.

At one level, this helps to maintain our interest in, and curiosity about, our local wildlife – "Will we have a song thrush breeding in the garden this year?" "Were this year's starling flocks, gathering at dusk around the village, larger than last year's?"

But there is a more telling, scientific, outcome for all the hard work that goes into making the thousands of observations, and then collecting, analysing and presenting the data. The *Birds of Paxton Pits*, and particularly the organised surveys that form its backbone (the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey and the Wetland Bird Survey) are used as the 'front-line' monitor of the effectiveness of implementation of the Habitat Management Plan on the Reserve and habitat management in Bardon Aggregates' quarry.

If we succeed in maintaining, or hopefully enhancing, the quality and diversity of Paxton Pits' rich mosaic of habitats for birds, it is likely that all the other inhabitants (plants, fungi, lichens, insects, mammals, etc) will also benefit. This is not to say that the Nature Reserve is managed solely for birds – far from it! Birds are near the top of the food chain and so are good indicators of 'habitat health' for all the other forms of wildlife that, unfortunately, are not monitored to anything like the same extent.

The Friends of Paxton Pits is pleased to give support and encouragement to the volunteers undertaking this vital work. We congratulate all who have contributed, especially Julian Hughes and Trevor Gunton who bring this eagerly awaited account of 'our birds' to us in such a regular and timely fashion.

### 2003/04 Surveys

Two surveys form the backbone of bird monitoring at Paxton Pits. Waterfowl counts are conducted every month of the winter as part of the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), organised by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and the British Trust for Ornithology. Estimates of breeding numbers come from the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS), a co-ordinated count of the whole pits complex during May and June. In addition, winter roosts of cormorants are undertaken regularly, while nightingale territories were counted in mid May.

## The Year in View

Yet another fantastic twelve months, with three firsts for Paxton: **yellow-browed warbler** in October, **fulmar** in March and **spotted crake** in August. In addition, our second **raven** and **white stork**, second to seventh **mealy redpolls**, fourth **ferruginous duck** and third to sixth **Caspian gulls** were recorded. The first **corncrake** for more than half a century was reported, and a **white-headed duck** in September, if an escape can be ruled out, may prove to be the first for the Pits and our rarest bird of the year.

September and October 2003 were warm and dry, continuing the dry summer.

**Whitethroat**, **reed warbler**, **garganey** and **wheatear** set new records for the latest Paxton departures and numbers of passage **whinchats** and **stonechats** were good. A **nuthatch** in September, **tree pipit** in October and **hen harrier** in early November were unusual, and a **bearded tit** in December was the first for almost two decades. Two **firecrests** were seen in November, and at least one overwintered.

The winter was mild, with just two short cold snaps during January and late February, though snowfalls continued into March. **Siskin** and **lesser redpoll** were scarce, but a flock of 45 **corn buntings** in January was the largest for many years. Numbers of **mute swans**, **wigeon**, **gadwall** and **teal** were far higher than usual, but **Canada geese** and **coot** were down, and no **jack snipe** were seen. Several **scaup** were the first since 1996, while a flock of 34 **Bewick's swans** in March was the largest to grace Paxton.

Early spring was cold, with northerly winds holding up many migrants until late April. Nevertheless, **garganey**, **blackcap** and **hobby** were the earliest ever, and **sedge warbler** and **common tern** both put in earlier appearances than usual. Wader passage was superb, with **avocets**, **Temminck's stints**, **curlew sandpipers** and **spotted redshanks**, plus many **sanderlings**. Five **ospreys** and four **red kites** were the most in a year so far. Four **little terns** in May were unexpected.

A pair of **red-crested pochards** spent the spring at Paxton, but courtship display came to nothing and a pair of **ruddy ducks** in suitable breeding habitat did not linger. **Little gull**, **black tern** and **arctic tern** all passed through in small numbers, with some much later than usual, into June and July.

When spring did finally come, it was warm and wet, though a dry June ensured that many songbirds encountered good breeding success. Waders had a better breeding season than 2003, with 3-4 pairs of **oystercatchers**. **Lapwings** also did well, though few **redshanks** and **ringed plovers** fledged. **Common terns** had a good year, and our new **black-headed gull** colony boomed, while **grasshopper warblers** held territory for the first time in several years. Our **nightingales** had a record-equalling year, with 28-29 singing males, and **cormorants** and **grey herons** held their own at 115 and 6 nests respectively. **Rook** nests increased again, returning to levels not seen since the mid 1960s. **Lesser spotted woodpecker** and **spotted flycatcher** are not proven to breed, but **marsh tits** were confirmed for the first time in recent years.

August was a sharp contrast, with 175 mm of rain compared to an average of 37 mm during 1998-2003 (and just 3.2 mm in the previous year). It didn't seem to do the waterbirds much harm: **mallard**, **tufted duck** and **coot** all had record productivity, and it was a good year for **greylag geese** and **little grebes**, expanding into a new breeding area. **Gadwall**, however, had a poor year. The post-breeding flocks of gulls included up to eight **yellow-legged gulls**, the highest yet for this increasing bird.

## ***The systematic list***

This is presented in the order adopted by the British Ornithologists' Union ([www.bou.org.uk](http://www.bou.org.uk)).

Reports of species marked with an asterisk are subject to acceptance by the Cambridgeshire Rarities Committee.

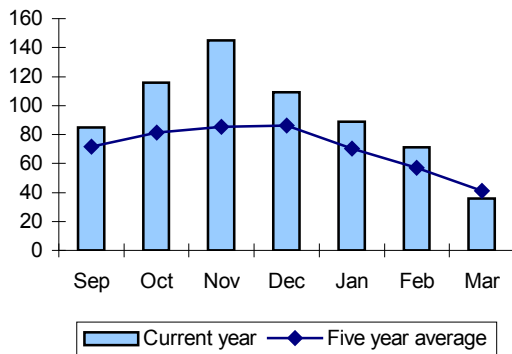
For ease of reference, birds are listed in the following order:

Wildfowl	7	Waders	18
Gamebirds	13	Gulls/terns	23
Grebes	13	Pigeons	25
Heron	15	Owls	26
Raptors	16	Woodpeckers	28
Rails	17	Passerines	29

## **Mute swan**

### **Resident**

The local importance of Paxton Pits was illustrated with a record flock for the second consecutive year. The 145 recorded on 16<sup>th</sup> November (WeBS) is the highest ever. The most favoured pit varies from year to year: in the past, Island Pit has often held the greatest numbers, but this year Heronry South held up to 63 moulting birds in September (MD), after which A1 North proved popular, peaking at 95 on 11<sup>th</sup> January (TBr).



### ***Wintering mute swans during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits***

The breeding season was poorer than in recent years, with eight nests producing six broods, from which 17 young fledged (26 young in 2003), with just one brood of five, on Hayling Pit. Just how aggressive this species can be was illustrated when a male mute swan drowned a juvenile greylag goose, a phenomenon described in detail in the 2001/02 *Report*. A non-breeding flock of 40 on Island Pit on 20<sup>th</sup> June was reminiscent of large post-breeding flocks in previous years, but the birds dispersed within weeks, presumably to moult at another site.

## **Bewick's swan**

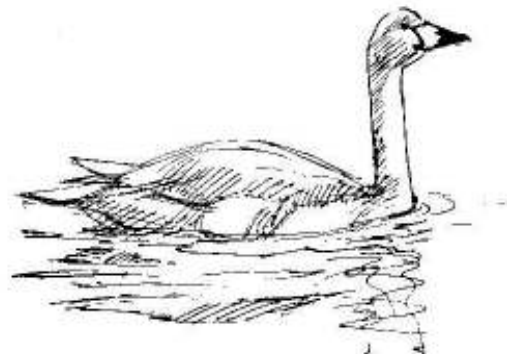
### **Scarce winter visitor**

A good series of winter records: 2 on 2<sup>nd</sup> November (MD), 11 on 8<sup>th</sup> (NP/JW), 5 on 9<sup>th</sup> (JH/JW) and 34 on 6<sup>th</sup> March (RPr).

This latter flock was the largest ever recorded at Paxton Pits: 27 flew onto Pumphouse Pit and were joined by a further seven following a hailstorm. The flock included three immature birds.

## **Whooper swan**

### **Scarce winter visitor**



Three on Heronry South on 22<sup>nd</sup> October (JS), which departed during the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup>, were unusual for the southern pits. Another group of three flew over the Moorings on 15<sup>th</sup> February (RHu).

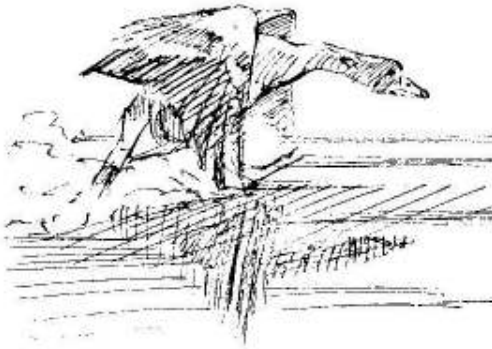
## **Pink-footed goose**

### **Rare winter visitor, but most records believed to relate to feral birds**

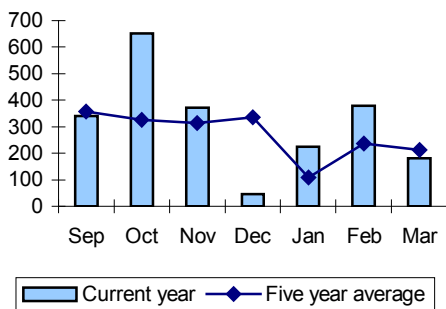
Two were reported from the Heronry Lakes on 18<sup>th</sup> January (MR) were the only records of the year.

## Greylag goose

**Resident (re-established)**



Numbers peaked at 652 on 12<sup>th</sup> October (WeBS), and were typically above average through the winter. A recent study showed that 'feral' greylags from southwest England regularly travel hundreds of miles to moulting areas in Scotland, so perhaps ours are not so site-faithful as we presume?



*Wintering greylag geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

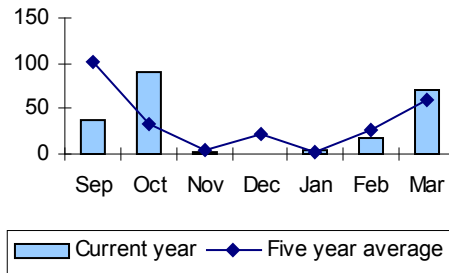
Breeding activity was noted from early February. A minimum of 24 nests fledged 173 young (cf. 22 nests raising 67 young in 2003, when a mammal is suspected of taking eggs). This was the most productive season since 1995. Counts in June and August found 300 birds on the Pits, increasing to 520 in August (JH/JW).

## Canada goose

**Resident (introduced)**

Abundant in early autumn and spring (peak of 91 on 12<sup>th</sup> October, WeBS) and scarce through the winter. The long-term decline continues – in October 1994, the WeBS count recorded 297 birds!

From early April, nests were recorded on six pits, where 17 nests produced a minimum of 54 young, markedly down on the 2003 total. Despite claims that this



*Wintering Canada geese during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

species is taking over the World, the Paxton population seems to be very stable: a peak flock count of 66 birds in August was much lower than in most previous years.

## Barnacle goose

**Resident (feral)**

Up to four spent the year around the Pits, though often only a single bird was present.

## Egyptian goose

**Scarce visitor (introduced)**

Having become more regular in recent years, we hosted just a single bird on three dates between 23<sup>rd</sup> November and 12<sup>th</sup> December (MHi/JH/IL/NP).

## Common shelduck

**Occasional breeder**

A few were seen in the winter, with singles in September and December, two on 12<sup>th</sup> October and up to four in January. More regular from 21<sup>st</sup> February, with up to eight in March and peaking at 9-11 birds on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH/JW). Although several birds were paired, but there was no evidence of breeding, the last two occurring on 12<sup>th</sup> June (JH).

Up to three fledged juveniles were seen on two dates in late July (JW), but these undoubtedly hatched elsewhere. It is now three years since shelducks bred at Paxton.

## Mandarin

**Rare visitor (introduced)**

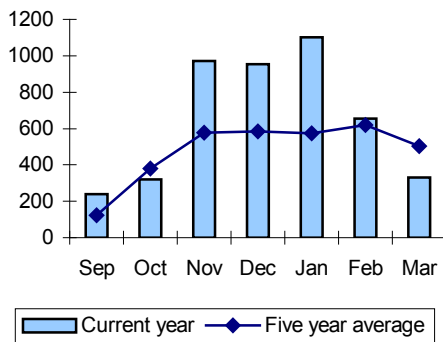
This colourful Chinese duck is much rarer than at neighbouring Grafham Water, where pairs bred in both 2003 and 2004. A pair on Heronry Lake, on 8<sup>th</sup> December (DHor), was the only record of the year.



## Wigeon

### Abundant winter visitor

A remarkable year, with record-breaking counts in January. Numbers increased rapidly from eight at the end of August to 240 on 13<sup>th</sup> September (WeBS). Monthly counts peaked at 1102 birds on 25<sup>th</sup> January. However, this was a fall on counts earlier in the month, when 2830 were seen on 11<sup>th</sup> (TBr), of which 2550 were on A1 North Pit alone.



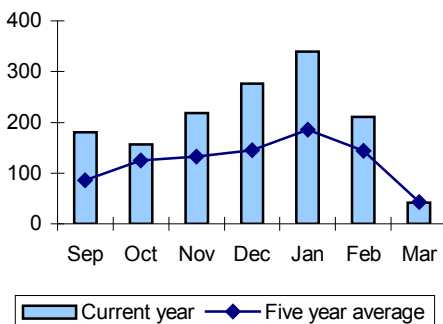
### *Wintering wigeons during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

Most had left by mid April, but a male, apparently unable to fly, was present on Diddington Pit from mid April to the end of July at least, the second consecutive year that a male has oversummered at Paxton Pits. A female joined him briefly on 13<sup>th</sup> June (CM/GAR), and the first migrant male of the autumn arrived on 11<sup>th</sup> August (JH).

## Gadwall

### Abundant in winter, occasional breeder

Often overlooked, and unknown to many visitors from other parts of Britain, wintering gadwall peaked at 339 on 25<sup>th</sup> January (WeBS), the third highest ever.



### *Wintering gadwalls during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

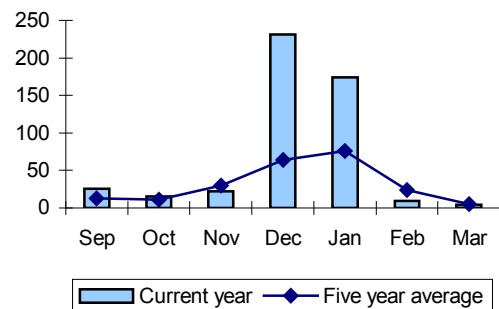
Increasingly, small numbers are reported from the southern pits, as well as Heronry South and A1 North, which held most birds.

Communal displaying was noted in September and again in May, where three pairs were present. A female was seen with a brood of five young on Heronry Pit in mid June (TGG), though at the most, only one fledged. In addition, a group of eight birds stayed through the summer, and by late July numbers had swelled to over 80 on Heronry South alone, as birds started to congregate for another winter.

## Teal

### Abundant winter visitor

Midwinter numbers were higher than the recent average, peaking at 231 on 14<sup>th</sup> December, the highest WeBS since October 1982. Most had departed by mid February, and a single male was recorded on several dates in early May. Several displayed, from 5<sup>th</sup> January (DM/JM), and up to three were present on several dates during June and July, but once again, there was no evidence of breeding – it was last confirmed in 1980. By the end of August, up to eight had returned to the Pits.



### *Wintering teals during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

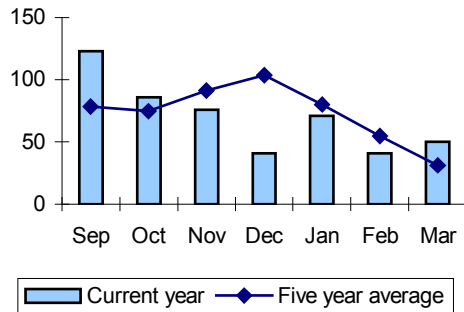
## Mallard

### Resident

Winter counts of our most familiar duck have been low since the early 1990s, and this year did nothing to improve their fortunes. Unusually, the peak WeBS count was in September, at 123 birds.

Although the number of breeding pairs has been increasing in recent years, this was reversed this year: observations suggest that 13 pairs hatched broods, compared to 17 in

2003. The first brood was seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, the first of a very productive season. Although the number of broods was down, at 52, the number of fledged young is the highest since we started detailed recording.

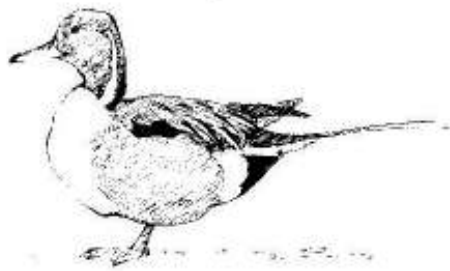


### *Wintering mallards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

As early as mid June, the first moulting males were evident on Heronry Pit, the flock increasing to 70 by 9<sup>th</sup> July (TGG).

## **Pintail**

**Annual winter visitor, in small numbers**



Fewer than last year, when a minimum of 59 were counted, but 33 is a respectable showing for recent years. It was dominated by groups of 10, on 27<sup>th</sup> January (PLa) and 9<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP). The first two of the winter were on 21<sup>st</sup> September (JH/JW) and the last on 9<sup>th</sup> March.

## **Garganey**

### **Scarce spring and autumn migrant**

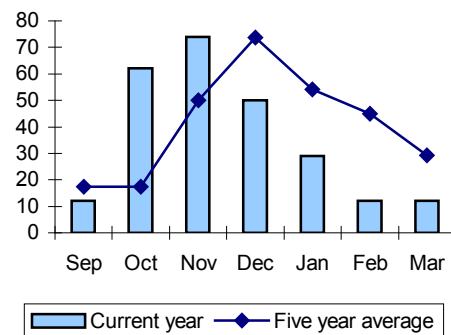
This smart little migrant is always a good find in Britain, and can brighten up a spring or autumn day at Paxton Pits. We hosted at least three garganeys during autumn 2003: two on 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> September (SE) and a male on 28<sup>th</sup> September and 5<sup>th</sup> October, presumed to be the same bird (JH/JW), and believed to be the latest ever seen at Paxton.

The first of the spring, a female on Island Pit on 16<sup>th</sup> March (MSm), was the earliest ever by four days. At least four others were seen during the spring: a pair on 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP), a male on 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> April (JH) and 2 males on 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> May (JH). One of these, or another male, remained until 22<sup>nd</sup> associating with a male shoveler. These two were together on several dates during this period at nearby Grafham Water, where the male shoveler was seen displaying to the garganey! (MH). The only southbound migrant seen before the end of August was one on 17<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP/JW).

## **Shoveler**

### **Abundant winter visitor**

Wintering numbers at Paxton have fluctuated in recent years, and this was a moderate season by recent standards, with good autumn counts peaking at 74 on 16<sup>th</sup> November. Late winter counts were much lower, although 57 clustered around the edge of a hole in the ice on Heronry South on 1<sup>st</sup> March (MHi) was notable.



### *Wintering shovellers during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

Most dispersed during mid April, but a small number of males were seen intermittently during May, and a pair on 6<sup>th</sup> June was unseasonal (JH/JW). This continues a recent trend of over-summering, though there was no sign of a repeat of breeding, a feat that last occurred in 1996. Migrants started to arrive from late July, with over 70 present by mid August.

## Red crested pochard

### Occasional visitor (introduced)

It is difficult to estimate the number of birds present this winter, owing to an influx during November. A female present on the Heronry Lakes from 12<sup>th</sup> August (CS) remained to 15<sup>th</sup> October, followed by two on A1 North on 2<sup>nd</sup> November (JW). Between 14<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November, up to six were seen on different lakes, including two males (MD). By early December, just two females remained and one was present throughout January, joined by a male on 27<sup>th</sup> (PLa).

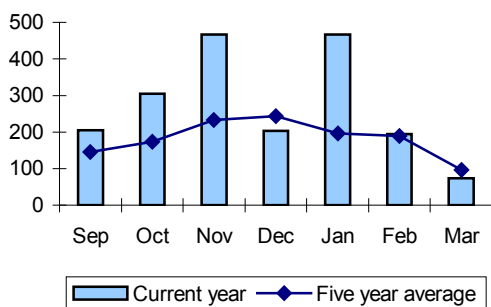
Two months later, a pair was found on Island Pit (NP), which remained through the spring, the first to do so. Initially, these commuted between Island and Heronry Lakes, the male displaying and offering a weedy gift to its mate on 16<sup>th</sup> April (TGG). However, any thoughts of the first breeding record of the species at Paxton came to nothing, and the pair was last seen together on 31<sup>st</sup> May, although a male was seen for a further week and a female up to 11<sup>th</sup> July.

Later in the summer, three females were on Heronry Lake from 12<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> August at least (JH). A female pochard x red-crested pochard was seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> March (JLFP).

## Pochard

### Abundant winter visitor

After last year's disappointing winter counts, 2003/04 saw a return to form, with 467 on 16<sup>th</sup> November the highest WeBS count since December 1997. It was almost repeated on 25<sup>th</sup> January, but pochards dispersed during February and March, although a pair was seen on several dates between 16<sup>th</sup> May and 5<sup>th</sup> June (JW).



*Wintering pochards during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

The species has never bred at Paxton Pits, although nests were regularly found along the River Great Ouse at Little Paxton in the early 1900s. Up to 30 pochards were present during July and over 60 in August.

## Ferruginous duck

### Rare winter visitor

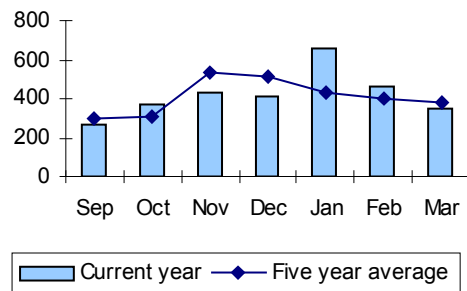
This eastern European duck is rare in Britain, so the discovery of a male on Island Pit on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2003 (BS) was welcome for many. Among a flock of recently-arrived pochards, it remained until dusk. Already accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee, it is only the fourth to be seen at Paxton, the others being two in August 1975 and one in February 1979. All were males.

A ferruginous duck x pochard hybrid associated with the pair of red-crested pochards from 28<sup>th</sup> March to 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

## Tufted duck

### Abundant in winter, breeds in small numbers

A fairly typical series of winter counts, though the trend since the mid 1970s has been one of gradual increase. The winter peak was 653 on 25<sup>th</sup> January.



*Wintering tufted ducks during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

From 19<sup>th</sup> June, broods were seen on six pits, the recently created Diddington Pit holding 8 of the 26 located. It was the best ever breeding season, with an amazing 79 birds fledging. This is double the total of 2003, which itself was double that of 2002, (for recent trends, see page 48). Like grebes, female tufted ducks can often be seen with small ducklings on their back, though broods are often subject to predation.

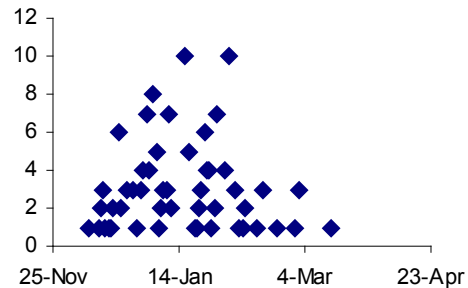
## Scaup

### Scarce winter visitor

A welcome return for this northern seaduck, with multiple records in November 2003. Remarkably, these were the first since February 1996, prior to which scaup had been almost annual at Paxton Pits.

Six first-winter birds on Heronry North on 9<sup>th</sup> November (JH/JW) included two males. This flock was followed by a single female on 14<sup>th</sup> November (MD), two on 16<sup>th</sup> (WeBS) and another single on 21<sup>st</sup> (MD). These were part of a wider movement in eastern England, shared by Grafham Water.

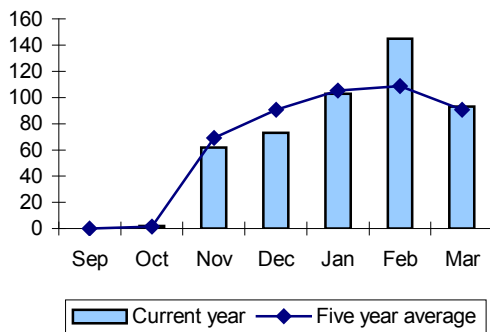
constant arrival and departure of birds, most obvious in the number of males and redheads (females and first-winter birds). The peak count of males was 5 (on 4<sup>th</sup> January, MRA/MHi/JH) and the peak count of redheads was 7 on 16<sup>th</sup> January.



## Goldeneye

### Abundant winter visitor

A typical showing for this popular winter duck. Following the first, a female, on 8<sup>th</sup> October (MD), numbers built slowly to a peak of 145 on 22<sup>nd</sup> February (WeBS). Visitors to the Heronry Lakes were able to watch birds displaying and copulating on from early January. Although there were still 112 birds at the beginning of April (MD), numbers fell rapidly; the last of the winter was seen on 27<sup>th</sup> April (JH).



*Wintering goldeneyes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

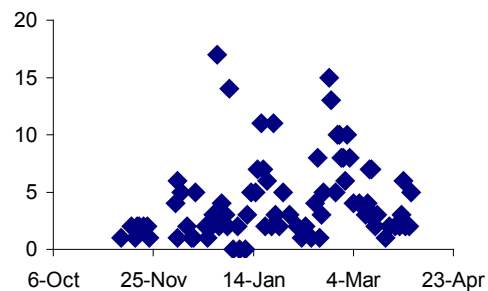
### *Smew at Paxton Pits, December 2003 to March 2004*

After 5<sup>th</sup> February, a maximum of three smew was seen, the last regular sighting of the winter being three on 2<sup>nd</sup> March (JLFP). A single male was reported on 14<sup>th</sup> March.

## Goosander

### Annual winter visitor in small numbers

The highest count in recent years was achieved, hitting 17 on 27<sup>th</sup> December (DM/JM), including nine males. Counts fluctuated considerably, with double figures on several dates. The peak count of males was 10 on 21<sup>st</sup> February (NP).



### *Goosanders at Paxton Pits, November 2003 to April 2004*

## Smew

### Annual winter visitor in small numbers

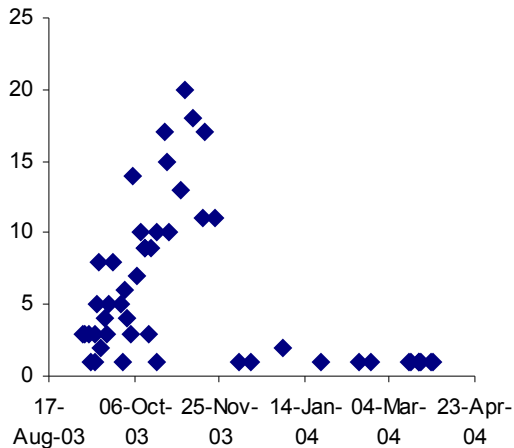
A good year for this attractive duck, for which Paxton Pits has become as well known in winter as for its nightingales in spring. The first of the year, a redhead, was seen on 9<sup>th</sup> December (DM/JM/CS), a fairly typical date. Up to six together were seen by the year end, and double figures were reached on 16<sup>th</sup> January (JP) and 3<sup>rd</sup> February (PLa). These counts disguise the

The first of the autumn (9<sup>th</sup> November, JH/JW) was earlier than average, while the last of the spring (5 on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, RHu) were the latest ever.

## Ruddy duck

### Year-round visitor in small numbers (introduced)

This non-native species is a regular wintering bird at Paxton Pits, following a similar pattern to last year, with most records during the autumn and very few after Christmas.



*Ruddy ducks at Paxton Pits, September 2003 to March 2004*

Overall, ruddy ducks were reported on more days than during the previous winter, with counts peaking at 20 on 5<sup>th</sup> November (MD). Numbers fell rapidly from later that month, with just one or two on various dates to the end of March. For the second consecutive year, there was a smattering of breeding season records, including a pair on 28<sup>th</sup> May in suitable nesting habitat on Diddington Pit, though only the male was seen subsequently. Up to three were seen in late July and a group of four preened outside the Hayden Hide on 12<sup>th</sup> August were the only other summer sightings.

## Red-legged partridge

### Scarce resident (introduced/released)

Generally restricted to the quarry - up to 24 were seen during the autumn - though singles and pairs were seen on arable fields close to the river and the A1 Pits. Several were seen feeding on the newly-constructed island on Diddington Pit during the spring. The PBBS recorded three pairs, a typical showing, with 19 on 8<sup>th</sup> August suggesting at least two coveys (or that birds had been released for shooting nearby).

## Grey partridge

### Rare resident

For the second consecutive year, a pair was seen on several occasions in the same area between late March and early July, though there was no evidence of breeding. Perhaps the management of the arable conservation area on the nature reserve will do something to help grey partridges.

## Pheasant

### Abundant resident (introduced/released)

Aside from an adult and two young seen on 27<sup>th</sup> June (NP), the only record we have comes from the PBBS, which indicates seven breeding pairs, though many more are released by nearby shoots. Seemingly only recorded when it occurs in unusual places, a fine adult male in a St James' Road garden on 20<sup>th</sup> March was a surprise.

## Black-throated diver

### Rare winter visitor

A possible individual was reported on the river, before it flew north downriver on 15<sup>th</sup> February (DO-M).

## Little grebe

### Resident in small numbers

This was a notable year for little grebes, which have traditionally been confined to the tiny and undisturbed Farm Pit. September 2003 saw regular counts of over 20 birds, including several juveniles, peaking at 27 (7<sup>th</sup>), the highest count since autumn 1994, when a remarkable 58 were recorded. Numbers fell quickly as birds dispersed (but to where?), with only single figures reported after the New Year, although eight wintered on the Heronry Lakes and, unusually, both Cloudy and Sailing Lakes held birds.

For several years, the secluded Farm Pit was the only site for these late-summer breeders, though it had produced few young in recent years. But this year saw a change, with pairs occupying territories on the newly-formed Diddington Pit from March – a pair carried nest material on 28<sup>th</sup>, a very early date.

At least eight pairs nested successfully, rearing a minimum of 14 young, the best

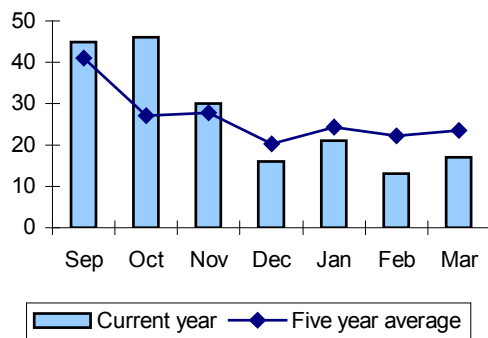


year since 2001. Just two of these broods were on Farm Pit. On the new Diddington Pit, they were able to nest in the willows growing out of the shallow water, yet the lake is presumably devoid of pike and other underwater predators.

## Great crested grebe

### Resident, numbers increasing in winter

As in most years, numbers peaked in the autumn, no doubt boosted by a successful breeding season in 2003.



*Great crested grebes during Wetland Bird Surveys at Paxton Pits*

Mild weather encouraged very early pairing, with three pairs displaying in early November and intermittently through to January. A pair was weed-dancing by mid-April (CS). Some early nests were lost to the more aggressive coots and some pairs, perhaps with little or no experience, made numerous attempts to construct nests on floating weed. Not surprisingly, all failed! Overall, 20 nests raised 16 broods with a minimum of 21 young raised, compared with 18 nests and 23 young in 2003.

## Red-necked grebe

### Rare visitor, usually in winter

After the long-stayer from November 2002 to July 2003, we received several reports, though only two were confirmed: on Sailing Lake on 24<sup>th</sup> November (CS) and on A1 North on 18<sup>th</sup> January (MB).

## Black-necked grebe

### Scarce visitor, usually on passage



A typical passage: one on A1 North on 21<sup>st</sup> November (MD) and two in summer plumage on 30<sup>th</sup> May (JH/JW).

## Fulmar\*

### Rare vagrant

Last year we cheated slightly by reporting a fulmar over Paxton Pits but seen from the dam at Grafham. So, one on Washout Pit on 1<sup>st</sup> March (TBa) is the first record proper from the Pits complex. Remarkably, it was standing on the ice for about ten minutes before flying off west.

Fulmar was also reported from Grafham Water and Wyboston the previous day, so perhaps these all relate to the same individual, part of a movement that resulted in hundreds of weak and dead fulmars and auks being washed up on the Norfolk coast.

## Cormorant

### Resident, greater numbers in winter

Cormorants continue to provide excellent viewing enjoyment for our visitors on every month of the year. The number of roosting cormorants was untypical, showing little variation through the winter, rather than building to an obvious peak in mid January. Counts upward of 200 birds were regular from October to late February, peaking at 288 on 31<sup>st</sup> January (JH).

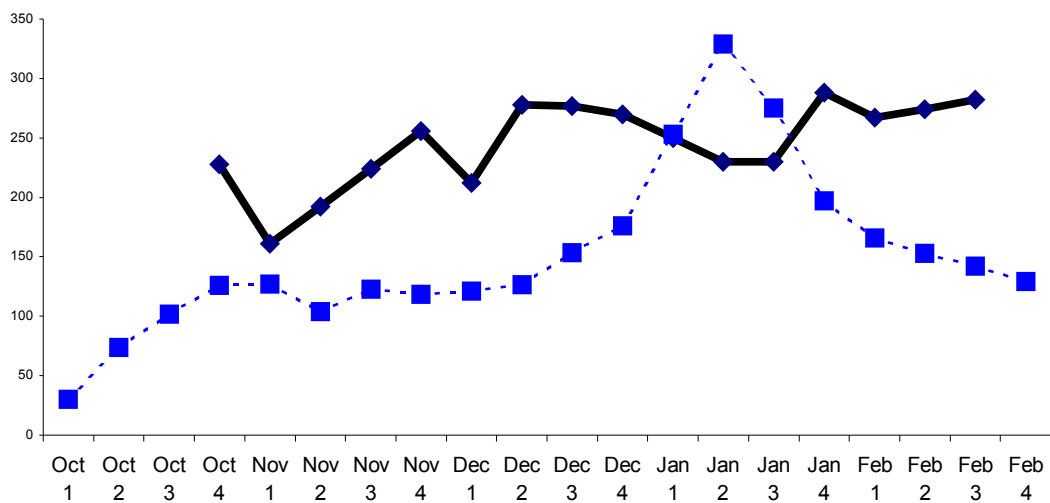
In the early autumn, cormorants were flock-feeding on Paxton's lakes. This behaviour, in which birds co-operate to push shoals of fish to the surface, is more usually seen on stocked lakes such as Grafham Water, and may indicate a very successful fish spawning season at Paxton, resulting in high densities of fish.

The breeding season seems to begin ever earlier, the first indication this year being

on 15<sup>th</sup> October, when a roosting bird had already gained a white 'face' (JH) and by 7<sup>th</sup> December a bird had a white thigh patch (DM/JM). Indeed, by the 20<sup>th</sup>, six adults were displaying intensely and by Christmas Eve, at least one was nest-building (JH). On 11<sup>th</sup> January, at least six nests were occupied (TGG) and two bouts of cold weather did little to cool their ardour, as nest counts increased successively to 56 on 7<sup>th</sup> February and 80 on 22<sup>nd</sup> (JH).

As foliage developed on the trees, counting became more difficult, but the final tally was 115 nests, slightly down on last year's 127, but well within the range of 90-130

nests that has been typical of recent years. The early nesting season was reflected in the first signs of young, audible from 9<sup>th</sup> March (DM/JM), though by mid-April some adults were still sitting tight when neighbouring nests each held several large young, only days away from fledging. Among a small sample of nests counted in mid-April, before leaves obscured viewing, the average nest contained 2.75 young. Around 100 juveniles were around the colony by late June and even by the end of July, some nests still contained large and noisy youngsters.



*Cormorants roosting at Paxton Pits, by week*  
(solid line = 2003/04, dashed line = average since 2000/01)

## Bittern

### Scarce winter visitor

For the fourth consecutive winter, Paxton Pits hosted a bittern, though it proved elusive. Spotted flying across the Meadow on 7<sup>th</sup> December (GW), it – or another? – was not seen again until 1<sup>st</sup> February, when several people watched one feeding on the edge of Weedy Pit for half an hour before it flew off northwest (JB/SJ/DM/JM).

## Little egret

### Scarce visitor, usually in late summer

After reporting the first displaying little egret at Paxton in spring 2003, this proved to be the poorest year for little egret records for some time! In fact, there was just a single record between late August

2003 and June 2004, and that only flew over the village on 22<sup>nd</sup> September (JMc). Little egrets bred in Cambridgeshire (on the Ouse Washes) for the first time this year. Perhaps that was the origin of a downy-crowned juvenile seen regularly at the Pits from 27<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP) to the end of August. Usually on the northern pits, on 30<sup>th</sup> July, it was also on the Sailing Lake and feeding with rooks on the field next to Mill Lane in the village!

## Grey heron

### Resident, breeding in small numbers

This is another early nester, with signs of breeding by mid January. Grey herons are regular over the village and occasionally at ponds in the larger gardens, though one perched on the roof of Paxton Hall on 17<sup>th</sup> February (TGG) was unusual.

By 7<sup>th</sup> March, at least six nests were active, though with some now nesting among the cormorant colony and possibly not visible from the footpaths, there may have been more; on the same day, 20 birds were counted around the Pits (LL). On 6<sup>th</sup> April, two pairs fed young and the season's minimum count of young was seven. After fledging young birds continued to roost on the nest platforms until the end of June. The relationship between herons and cormorants is not understood – will fewer cormorants mean more breeding herons?

## **White stork\***

### **Rare vagrant**

The second record for Paxton Pits, less than two years after the first. One was seen heading north over the Haul Road, at high altitude, on 12<sup>th</sup> April (NP). Two had been tracked for ten miles up the A1 from Broom in Bedfordshire to Wyboston during the previous hour.

## **Honey buzzard\***

### **Rare passage migrant**

To add to the two that got away earlier in 2003, a 'possible' was seen over Washout Pit on 1<sup>st</sup> October (JW).

## **Red kite**

### **Scarce, but increasing, visitor**

An increase in sightings during the year, finally reflecting the rapidly recovering population elsewhere in eastern Britain. Four were confirmed, spread across the year, on 5<sup>th</sup> October (JH), 21<sup>st</sup> March (AH), 26<sup>th</sup> April (DJ/JW) and 8<sup>th</sup> June (MHi), and another was reported on 18<sup>th</sup> October.

## **Marsh harrier**

### **Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

A male on 13<sup>th</sup> September (JW) brought the 2003 total to six. There have been just three in 2004 so far: two females in spring, on 13<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JW) and 2<sup>nd</sup> May (RHu), and a juvenile over Diddington Pit on 29<sup>th</sup> August (GAR).

## **Hen harrier**

### **Rare visitor, usually on passage**



The raptor most affected by illegal killing in England, perhaps explaining why there are just three records in the last decade. So, a ringtail - an immature or female - that was

flushed from long grass next to Island Pit on 5<sup>th</sup> November (MSm) was an excellent find. It flew off north, much to the annoyance of other local birders.

## **Sparrowhawk**

### **Resident**



This now familiar village species continues to enjoy an abundant supply of small birds in Little Paxton gardens, with many more noted here than on the reserve.

Singles were reported from around the Pits through the winter, with four being the peak day count, on 16<sup>th</sup> October (JW). Regularly mobbed by rooks and carrion crows, occasionally sparrowhawks take on larger raptors, such as thermalling buzzards. Pairs were seen displaying on several occasions between March and May, after which sightings were fewer as birds tight on nests. A male was seen carrying food on the early date of 12<sup>th</sup> April, but we received no records of juveniles or family groups. We presume two, perhaps three, pairs breed at the Pits, with one or two more in the village.

Interesting interactions included one chasing sand martins, in the style of a hobby, on 14<sup>th</sup> April (JH) and one taking a little ringed plover into a reedbed, which was released after the sparrowhawk was spooked (28<sup>th</sup> April, NP).



## Buzzard

### Scarce but increasing resident

The breeding recovery continues, with sightings from Paxton on 44 dates, the highest total yet, though this may be an underestimate – some birders are now so used to seeing them that they are not always reported. The highest multiple count was five birds on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (JW).

As usual, most records were outside the breeding season, though sightings of two or three birds together continued regularly until the third week of May, and it is suspected that buzzards bred in a wood within a mile of the Pits. Three on 6<sup>th</sup> August in this area (JLFP) were perhaps an indication of successful breeding.

## Osprey

### Scarce passage migrant

It seems that the best way to increase numbers of a bird is to lament its demise in the annual bird report! After none in 2002, September 2003 saw two records to add to three in August, involving probably the same bird on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> September (MD/JS). A late migrant was reported on 7<sup>th</sup> October.

Spring saw up to five ospreys, the best ever. The first, on 10<sup>th</sup> April, flew over Paxton Pits and returned from Grafham Water later, mobbed by crows and carrying a trout almost equal to its length and estimated to weigh 2-3 lb (JH/NP/JW). Others followed on 26<sup>th</sup> April (JLa), possibly two different birds on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (AD/GD/MD/JH/JW) and one on 23<sup>rd</sup> May (GFF). Sadly, none stopped to feed, all continuing on their northbound route.

## Kestrel

### Resident

Single kestrels were reported from the northern pits, around the quarry processing plant and the nature reserve arable conservation area in the winter, but just one pair was noted, on 19<sup>th</sup> April. We have no suspicion of breeding this year, which suggests that the surrounding farmland is devoid of prey for this once common bird of prey.

## Merlin

### Scarce winter visitor

Reports of this rare winter visitor have become more regular in recent years, with three this year: one reported around the Heronry Lakes on 19<sup>th</sup> October, a female chasing a brambling on the edge of the arable conservation area on 24<sup>th</sup> November (JS) and a first-year male in the quarry 10<sup>th</sup> April (JH/NP), the latest ever spring date.

## Hobby

### Common summer visitor, but breeding never proven

Singles filtered south through September, the last seen on the 26<sup>th</sup> (JLFP).

The first two of spring 2003 were over The Meadow and Pumphouse Pit on 17<sup>th</sup> April (RHu/JW), the earliest ever at Paxton Pits by three days (1997 and 2000). The peak spring counts were ten on 10<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> May (DM/JM, JS), enabling many visitors to enjoy this exciting raptor during Nightingale Walks.

Summer sightings were up on last year: six flying over Rudd Pit in the same thermal as a glider was memorable! A pair exchanging food in suitable habitat close to our recording area is the first indication of local breeding for some years. In contrast to the kestrel, it is expanding its breeding range in the UK.

## Peregrine

### Scarce winter visitor

The increasing trend of peregrine records at Paxton continues, with three this year: a female west over Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> October (MD), an immature over the village playing field on 30<sup>th</sup> November and one over the A1 Pits on 12<sup>th</sup> April (PL/AP/DP), the latest ever winter record.

## Water rail

### Winter visitor, occasionally breeds

Although one or two were reported around the Pits from 24<sup>th</sup> October to 15<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JS), the distribution of these records suggests at least six birds present: Hayling, Cloudy, Heronry, A1 South and the quarry all held squealing birds, though Washout Pit remains the most regular site.

## Spotted crane\*

### Rare passage migrant

Breeding elsewhere in the county and a scarce passage migrant on the coast, it's perhaps surprising that it's taken so long for one to be found at Paxton. Diddington Pit hosted the first, an adult, on 14<sup>th</sup> August (JH).

## Corncrake\*

### Former breeder, now very rare



We received an interesting report, second-hand, of a corncrake calling from long grass east of the river, opposite the Moorings, on 7<sup>th</sup> May. With EN/RSPB attempts to reintroduce corncrakes to the Cambridgeshire Washes, one wonders whether this was one that lost its way?

Once a common breeder in the area, the last known record is from May 1949.

## Moorhen

### Resident

Monthly Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) counts through the winter peaked at 35 on 12<sup>th</sup> October, the highest since records began, and presumably boosted by a good 2003 breeding season.

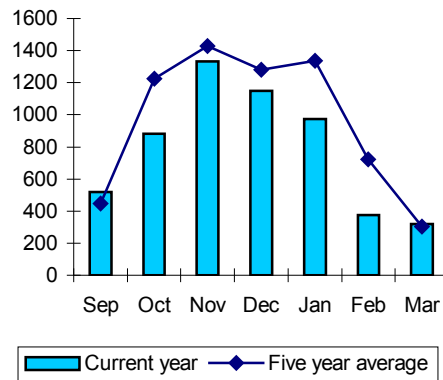
Twenty nests fledged at least 23 young (29 from 20 nests in 2003). Breeding occurred on 10 lakes, with five broods from just two pairs on Sailing Lake.

## Coot

### Resident, numbers increase in winter

A poor winter by recent standards, but a strong summer showing. The WeBS peak was just 1334 on 16<sup>th</sup> November, numbers

falling rapidly in the New Year as cold weather iced up many lakes.



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

The breeding season started early, with a pair nest building on 12<sup>th</sup> February (DM/JM), with several pairs aggressively taking over nests of great crested grebes, though the effect on their productivity is not known.

Last year, 66 nests produced at least 62 young, well up on the 49 nests in 2002. This season, the total increased to no fewer than 83 nests, with 71 broods and a remarkable 111 young fledged. Can this increase continue? Already we have noted regular fighting between nesting adults as the nests get closer together.

Boosted by the productive season, numbers increased late in the summer, with a flock of 146 on Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> August.

## Oystercatcher

### Summer visitor, small number breed

Just a few years ago, even a single oystercatcher at Paxton was an exciting find. How times, and their numbers, have changed. Today, they are a familiar part of Paxton's breeding bird population, and our most easily identified – and noisy – breeding wader, with birds regularly over the village.

Sailing Lake hosted the first bird of spring on 12<sup>th</sup> February (RPr). It was joined by a second in early March and by two others mid-month, though they soon settled into Pumphouse Pit. By the month's end, a

third pair had settled on the new Diddington Pit, supplemented by passage birds in April and May. At peak, there were 11 birds, from which three pairs were nesting, and a fourth was suggested, on Island Pit. There may be considerable scope for expanding numbers, but breeding success here is low. At most, only two young fledged. The last of the summer was seen on 3<sup>rd</sup> August (JW).

## Avocet

### Scarce passage migrant

Two on Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> May are the first for four years. Sadly, their presence probably resulted from spring flooding of the Ouse Washes, which destroyed nesting attempts of avocets, black-tailed godwits and other waders.

## Little ringed plover

### Summer visitor, increasingly scarce

The first two were seen in the quarry on 17<sup>th</sup> March (MD), and within ten days one of a pair was scraping a nest on the new Diddington Pit island. By late April, a second pair had taken up territory in the quarry, and it is thought that at least one other bird was in the area.

Two pairs were noted on flooded fields at Stirtloe, to the north, which might explain why the early activity around the quarry resulted in very little proven breeding. At most, just two pairs attempted to breed and one bird fledged. Several well-grown juveniles were seen late in the summer, the last on 24<sup>th</sup> August (JW), but are believed to have been raised elsewhere. The future of this attractive African migrant seems to hang in the balance as a Paxton breeder.

## Ringed plover

### Summer visitor, small numbers breed

Autumn migration faltered at the end of August 2003, with just a single record in September, on 1<sup>st</sup> (MD).

Spring passage began on the same date as last year, with eight on Pumphouse Pit on 8<sup>th</sup> February (NP). Small numbers were seen throughout February and March, peaking at 18 on 22<sup>nd</sup> March including breeding birds.

Mating was noted from 20<sup>th</sup> March, on Pumphouse Pit, the principal nesting site for this species. The well watched pair on the Sailing Lake islands produced two broods, but we know of only a single youngster fledging. Overall, nine nests had five broods, from which a disappointing four chicks fledged.

A passage of *tundrae* race birds, smaller and darker than breeders, was notable, with flocks of 4, 8 and 12 between 19<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May (JH/JL/JW). Autumn passage was in full swing from mid August, when 14 were counted on Pumphouse Pit.

## Golden plover

### Winter visitor, numbers vary

A very poor winter for golden plovers, with a peak of just 46 birds on 10<sup>th</sup> October (MD). All of the other flocks numbered fewer than 30 birds, between 20<sup>th</sup> September and 16<sup>th</sup> March (MD/JW).

A small number were seen in late summer, with singles on three dates from 24<sup>th</sup> July, and a dozen on 3<sup>rd</sup> August (JW).

## Grey plover

### Scarce visitor, usually on passage

A scarce wader at Paxton Pits, with an average of just one each year during the last decade and none since January 2002. So two different birds in three days, on 28<sup>th</sup> April (NP) and 1<sup>st</sup> May (PL/MSh) almost amounts to an invasion!

## Lapwing

### Resident, numbers increase in winter



A typical winter, with flocks of 200-500 regularly loafing around the quarry and

Diddington Pit as it filled with water. Numbers increased after Christmas, presumably as cold weather pushed continental birds west, with a count of 2000 on 11<sup>th</sup> January (DM/JM) and 6<sup>th</sup> March (MD) and 2500 on 15<sup>th</sup> February (CM/GAR). By mid-March, however, most had left the area, though small numbers of non-breeders continued to trickle through to mid April.

Formerly a common nesting bird of local farmland, this attractive and popular bird is now restricted to breeding on gravel pits and nature reserves in our region. Some passage was noted during April, and evidence of failed early breeding came on 12<sup>th</sup> April when an egg, predated by a crow, was found on Pumphouse Pit. Successful breeding occurred on three pits, where 13 nests raised 13 young – a big improvement on 2003.

July saw autumn movements of lapwings, with up to 1000 birds present around the northern pits by mid August.

## Sanderling

### Scarce passage migrant

A remarkable year for passage sanderlings! In the years 2000-2003, Paxton hosted 0, 3, 4 and 2 respectively. In spring 2004, we had a minimum of 16, and another on 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> August.

One on 28<sup>th</sup> March (MD/NP/JW) was the earliest ever Paxton record, but was quickly followed by a second on 5<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP). After a single on 29<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JH), there were three on 8<sup>th</sup> May (MD/JH/JW), two on 12<sup>th</sup> May (JW), a different bird on 13<sup>th</sup> May (JL/MSm) which was presumed to be the same one seen on 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, a single on 26<sup>th</sup> (MSh), three on 30<sup>th</sup> (JH/JW) and two on 2<sup>nd</sup> June (JH). A single on 12<sup>th</sup> June (JH) was the latest ever spring record at Paxton.

## Little stint

### Scarce passage migrant

In keeping with recent times, just two records (both JLFP): on 15<sup>th</sup> March (the earliest ever at Paxton Pits) and 17<sup>th</sup> June. As recently as 2001, we recorded over 20 in a year!

## Temminck's stint\*

### Scarce passage migrant



You can wait years for a species to be seen at Paxton, and then they become almost common! In May 2003, we hosted our first two Temminck's stints since 1981. In May 2004, we had another four! Three were present in the quarry on 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> May (JW) and a fourth on Pumphouse Pit on 20<sup>th</sup> (MSm). These were part of a record-breaking passage of over 225 birds across Britain, many at inland sites.

## Curlew sandpiper

### Scarce passage migrant

Two on 18-19<sup>th</sup> May (JW), one almost in full summer-plumage, was the first spring record since 2001.

## Dunlin

### Regular passage migrant

Fewer than in the last three years, with the first blank months since December 2000. The paucity of dunlins during the winter is more typical of the 1990s.

Seen almost daily in May, the peak count of 26 on 8<sup>th</sup> (JW) is also typical, with 20+ on 29<sup>th</sup> April and 23 on 18-19<sup>th</sup> May the only other large counts.

Month	Peak	No of days
Sep 03	1	1
Oct	1	1
Nov	1	1
Dec	0	0
Jan 04	1	2
Feb	0	0
Mar	12	12
Apr	20	20
May	26	25
Jun	4	2
Jul	8	9
Aug	3	13

## Ruff

### Regular passage migrant

By contrast with 2003, this was a poor year for ruffs, with a minimum of just three birds in spring and two in autumn: singles on 29<sup>th</sup> April-2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH), 23<sup>rd</sup> May (MH/JL/NP), 5<sup>th</sup> July (JL) and 14<sup>th</sup> August (NP). A male - in full summer regalia - displaying to a female on 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> May (PL).

## Jack snipe

### Scarce winter visitor

The flooding of Diddington Pit may have brought to an end a run of years with these stripy little waders. This was the first winter since 1991/92 without a single record being received.

## Snipe

### Winter visitor in small numbers

Up to eight were seen regularly around the northern pits during the autumn, increasing to a November peak of 21 (on 16<sup>th</sup>), but few in December and January. Spring passage was apparent in late February and early March, with a peak of 25 on 6<sup>th</sup> March (MD). Although Washout Pit, Sailing Lake and the A1 Pits occasionally held small numbers, most were around Diddington Pit and the quarry. Last of the regular wintering birds was one on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH/JW), so one on Sailing Lake on 18<sup>th</sup> (CS) is a surprise and a reminder of the days in the 1980s when snipe bred on the marshy land where the quarry access road now lies.

The first two of the autumn were on 19<sup>th</sup> July (JW), with up to seven by the end of August (NP).

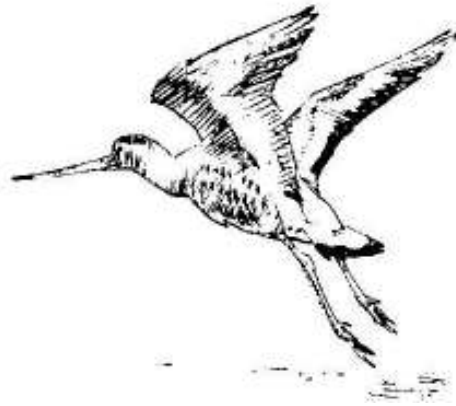
## Woodcock

### Scarce winter visitor

The poorest year on record for this camouflaged wintering wader, with just two sightings: one reported along the Ouse Valley Way on 18<sup>th</sup> November and one off the Heron Trail on 28<sup>th</sup> December (JH). Until a couple of years ago, several would winter in scrub around the Heronry Lakes.

## Black-tailed godwit

### Passage migrant, especially in spring



A good year (the best since 2000), with 142 birds on six dates in spring, including several moderate-size flocks. Seventeen on 16<sup>th</sup> March (MD) kicked off the spring and were followed by a single on 5<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP), 86 Icelandic birds on 8<sup>th</sup> (JLFP), 13 on 9<sup>th</sup> (MSh), 24 on 12<sup>th</sup> (JM/JW) and a single colour-ringed bird on 24<sup>th</sup> (JH/JW). With the exception of the *islandica* race birds, it is possible that all of the April records were a result of flood conditions on the Ouse Washes, which resulted in no breeding birds this year.

## Bar-tailed godwit

### Scarce passage migrant, usually spring

Always much scarcer than their black-tailed cousins, the 24<sup>th</sup> April-2<sup>nd</sup> May saw a notable passage through Paxton, reflected elsewhere in Cambridgeshire. Four on 1<sup>st</sup> May (JW) was the peak count, but it is difficult to determine the total number – there could have been as many as 15. The best year since 2001.

## Whimbrel

### Scarce passage migrant

Seven migrating over Pumphouse Pit on 5<sup>th</sup> September (MD) brought to 12 the number in autumn 2003.

Spring 2004 was the best ever for northbound passage, with up to 17 birds between 23<sup>rd</sup> April (3, JW) and 15<sup>th</sup> May (2, JH/MSh). The peak count was five on 24<sup>th</sup> April (JH/NP/MSh/JW).

## **Curlew**

### **Scarce passage migrant**

One on 2<sup>nd</sup> September (MSh/JW) brought the 2003 total to six.

The first two of spring flew over Pumphouse Pit on 21<sup>st</sup> March (JH/NP/JW), followed by another three up to 8<sup>th</sup> April (JLFP). Return passage took the total to 13, with two on 27<sup>th</sup> June (NP), singles on 18<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> July (RPr, JH/JW), three on 15<sup>th</sup> August (SM/RPr) and one on 24<sup>th</sup> August (JW).

## **Spotted redshank**

### **Rare passage migrant**

After only five records in the last decade, April 2004 saw a remarkable three: 5<sup>th</sup> (JLFP), 13<sup>th</sup> (JH) and 17<sup>th</sup> (JW), the first spring records since 1993.

## **Redshank**

### **Year-round visitor, small numbers breed**

Birds were again recorded in every month of the year. A light autumn passage peaked at 10 on 5<sup>th</sup> November (MD), with 1-5 birds seen throughout the winter. Counts increased during March, though in lower numbers than usual, with counts of 15-20 regular until mid April.

Adults were active on three pits during the breeding season, and although birds were present throughout the summer, only four pairs hatched young and just one brood of three fledged, from Sailing Lake. However, since 2003 produced few waders at Paxton, this must represent some modest success.

## **Greenshank**

### **Regular passage migrant in small numbers, mostly in autumn**

Autumn passage continued to trickle through until 22<sup>nd</sup> September (JS), peaking at seven on 7<sup>th</sup> (JH). Spring passage was typically light, with seven birds between 23<sup>rd</sup> March - the earliest since 1981 - and 21<sup>st</sup> May (MSm).

Southbound birds were seen on 16 dates between 19<sup>th</sup> July and 24<sup>th</sup> August, with a peak of four on 11<sup>th</sup> (JW).

## **Green sandpiper**

### **Winter visitor in small numbers**

A poor year by recent standards. Regular until late November, with up to six in September (12<sup>th</sup>, JH/JW), sightings were then sporadic through midwinter. One or two were seen throughout March and April, the last on 23<sup>rd</sup> (JW). The flooding of Diddington Pit, reducing the number of temporary shallow pools in the quarry undoubtedly contributed to this change on recent times.

Small numbers were seen almost daily from 20<sup>th</sup> June, with peaks of 10 on 31<sup>st</sup> July (JW) and nine on 21<sup>st</sup> August (MSh).

## **Wood sandpiper**

### **Annual passage migrant**

A good year for this spangly-plumaged wader. Two in spring, on 28<sup>th</sup> April (NP) and 21<sup>st</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> May (PL) were a precursor to autumn records on seven dates between 6<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> August, involving at least three individuals. The first of the year was the first April record at Paxton.

## **Common sandpiper**

### **Passage migrant, has overwintered**

Small numbers passed through during September (max 6 on 1<sup>st</sup>, MD), the last on 29<sup>th</sup> (MD/JW). For the third successive year, one wintered around Sailing Lake (and occasionally A1 South Lake), with sightings from 2<sup>nd</sup> November (JW) to 31<sup>st</sup> March. This individual must surely be the same bird, which has discovered overwinter survival in Cambridgeshire is less hazardous than flying to the Mediterranean or west Africa! Two were reported there on 22<sup>nd</sup> December (CS).

Spring passage got underway early in April, with 1-2 birds on eight dates that month and 1-3 birds on 14 dates in May, a better showing than 2003. The last of the spring were two on 22<sup>nd</sup> May (MSh).

Autumn passage tends to be stronger, and so it proved, with birds almost daily from 26<sup>th</sup> June (JW). Numbers hit double figures on several dates, with 12 on 12<sup>th</sup> August (NP/JW) being the highest count.

## Turnstone

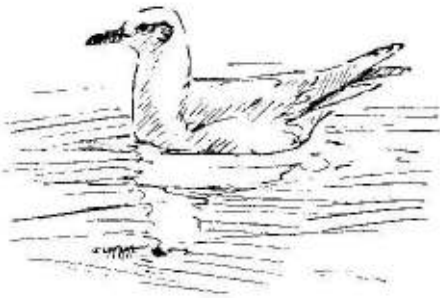
### **Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

Another wader with an exceptional spring passage, recorded on 13 dates between 1<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> May, and involving a minimum of 11 individuals. Most were singles, but five on 21<sup>st</sup> (PL/MSm) was notable, especially since the average this decade is four birds per year.

Autumn also proved good, with birds on 23<sup>rd</sup> July (JLFP), 6-8<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP/JW) and 11-12<sup>th</sup> August (JW).

## Mediterranean gull

### **Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**



The continued expansion of the English coastal breeding population is reflected at Paxton, where six records during the whole of the 1990s has increased to four and three in the last two years.

An adult on 20<sup>th</sup> September (JW) is a rare winter record for Paxton and the first for that month. A first-summer bird joined the black-headed gull colony on Pumphouse Pit for a few days in May (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>, JW), briefly raising hopes that it might stay for the summer.

A moulting adult was present on 31<sup>st</sup> July and 1<sup>st</sup> August (NP/JW) and a second bird, a juvenile, on 2<sup>nd</sup> August (JLFP).

## Little gull

### **Passage migrant in small numbers**

A reasonable showing for this annual spring migrant, with birds on eight dates between 26<sup>th</sup> April (JH) and 19<sup>th</sup> June (JW), totalling a minimum of 26 birds.

The largest single count was 14 on 1<sup>st</sup> May (JH) among hundreds of black-headed gulls, though flocks of 10 and 4 seen later

in the day (PL/MSh) may have been different birds. A first-summer on 19<sup>th</sup> June (JW) is the latest ever spring record at Paxton. It ought to have been on its Baltic or Dutch breeding grounds by then.

A moulting adult on 28<sup>th</sup> July (JH/JW) was also unseasonal, and the first ever Paxton record for that month.

## Black-headed gull

### **Abundant throughout the year, and increasing once again as a breeder.**

This was once a major birdwatching attraction in the early years of Island Pit, when they nested in a mixed colony with common terns. The gulls are now back!

Small numbers fed and loafed around the Pits throughout the year. A flock of c.1000 on Diddington Pit on 11<sup>th</sup> January (DM/JM) was unseasonal, such gatherings normally being restricted to midsummer, and over 350 remained there into April.

Signs of summer-plumage were first noted before the year had even turned, with two in partial state on 28<sup>th</sup> December (JH) and several complete by 8<sup>th</sup> January (DM/JM).

By late March, up to 180 had assembled on Pumphouse Pit, and by mid April the islands were alive with noisy courtship activity. Mating was noted and it was clear that we were set for a productive breeding season. The total number of nests is unknown, but it is estimated that around 200 young fledged from Pumphouse Pit. Adults were also noted around Sailing Lake through the summer, but there was no evidence of breeding. It's great to have this smart bird back breeding in such good numbers.

## Common gull

### **Regular in small numbers in winter**

Few specific records were received, though one on Hayling Pit on 1<sup>st</sup> January (GB/MB) was unusual for the southern pits. Up to 60 were counted among black-headed gulls on Diddington Pit during January, but they dispersed for their northern breeding areas during the spring. A first-summer bird was present on Pumphouse Pit for several days in early

May, an unusually late record, though it may have been injured.



Even more unseasonal was one over the Meadow on 8<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP), with further sightings of immature birds that month, and adults seen from mid July.

### **Lesser black backed gull**

#### **Year round visitor, with post-breeding flocks increasing**

Small numbers were recorded throughout the year, including up to 12 subadults during the breeding season. At least 250 lesser black-backs joined the pre-roost in the quarry over the summer, including a ringed bird (red PAV) that was ringed as a chick on Orford Ness, Suffolk, in July 2001. It is believed that many of Cambridgeshire's LBBGs originate from this breeding colony.

### **Herring gull**

#### **Year round visitor in small numbers**

As usual, small numbers pre-roosted on the larger northern pits through the winter, and a handful was seen during the breeding season.

### **Yellow-legged gull**

#### **Scarce but increasing visitor**

Recorded on 24 dates (27 in 2002/03), a remarkable run of records considering it was only identified at Paxton for the first time in December 1999.

Western race *melanoleuca*: one each in September, October, December and March, two in mid-April, one in June, up to eight together in July (NP) and four in August. The post-breeding gathering presumably originates from burgeoning colonies in northern and western France, with an increasing number of adults amid the records.

Eastern race *cathartus*: an adult on 18<sup>th</sup> October (JW), a second-summer (moulting

to third winter) on 28<sup>th</sup> July-1<sup>st</sup> August (JH/JW, CH/PL) and a second winter on 30<sup>th</sup> August (SM) doubles the Paxton total from three to six records.

### **Great black backed gull**

#### **Non-breeding visitor in small numbers**

Small numbers were in the pre-roost west of Pumphouse Pit throughout the autumn and winter, up to late April, though most counts were of fewer than 10 birds.

### **Sandwich tern**

#### **Rare passage migrant**

With just a handful of previous records, birds in spring and autumn for the second successive year suggest an increasing trend. Three headed north on 11<sup>th</sup> September (MD), the first Paxton record for that month, and one was reported flying south over Heronry Lake on 16<sup>th</sup> April.

### **Common tern**

#### **Common passage migrant and colonial breeder**

The first birds back from Africa were seen on 4<sup>th</sup> April (JH/SL/MSh/JW), just a day later than the earliest ever, in 1999. Birds trickled in only slowly over the next fortnight, though by mid month a few had settled on the Sailing Lake island, preparing for the coming breeding season. No especially large flocks were reported.

Following last year's trend, colonies were established on Pumphouse and Sailing Lakes, where up to 40 birds were counted on 6<sup>th</sup> May. However, Pumphouse proved to be the most productive. From the two sites, 28 nests fledged 42 young, a return to form after last year's higher counts. Adults were, however, still carrying food into early September, though no dependent young were seen.

Clearly, Pumphouse Pit's larger area and lack of human disturbance gives room for future expansion, though the expanding black-headed gull colony may restrict this growth. With the construction of a dedicated island for ground-nesting birds on Diddington Pit, perhaps we can look forward to future expansion here?



## Arctic tern

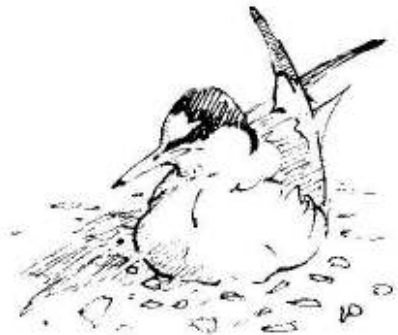
### Annual on passage in small numbers

After a poor spring in 2003, this was a better showing, with over 20 seen. Arctic terns were seen on six dates between 17<sup>th</sup> April (observer unknown) and 26<sup>th</sup> May (JL/JW), the latter being the latest ever spring record at Paxton Pits – by then, most are sitting on nests farther north! At least 10 birds on 27<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JW) was the highest count since 1998.

Like little gull, we then received an unseasonal summer record: a first-summer bird (a plumage rarely seen in Britain, as they normally spend this period off West Africa) on 17-20<sup>th</sup> June (JLFP) and two adults on 24<sup>th</sup> August (JW).

## Little tern

### Scarce passage visitor



Having been just two records so far this decade, little tern is hardly regular at Paxton Pits. So, four birds on three dates in the first two weeks of May makes it a notable spring for this graceful seabird, sadly declining as a breeding bird in Britain. Singles on Diddington Pit on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH/JW) and on Pumphouse Pit on 12<sup>th</sup> May (MP/JW) were a precursor to two there on 16<sup>th</sup> May (PLu). Remarkable!

## Black tern

### Annual on passage in small numbers

An improvement on spring 2003, though still poor compared to previous years. There were 9-10 birds between 30<sup>th</sup> April (CS/JS) and 23<sup>rd</sup> May (4, MH/JL). All were singles other than the final group of four. As usual, most were on the northern pits, but two singles on the Heronry Lakes are the first on the reserve for many years.

Spring and autumn passage merged, with singles on 6<sup>th</sup> June (GAR), 28-30<sup>th</sup> July (JH/JW), 6<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August (JLFP/JW). At least 14 over four months.

## Feral pigeon

### Year-round visitor in small numbers

Seen regularly in 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

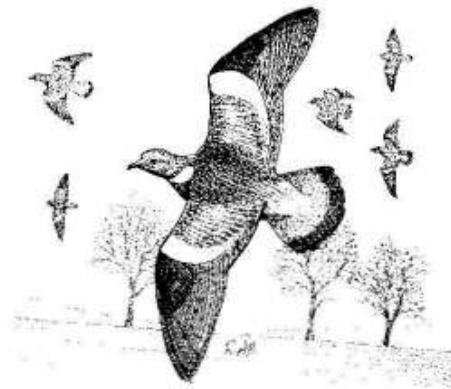
### Declining winter roost, also breeds.

Yet another winter passes with our stock dove roost just a shadow of its former self. Where once hundreds of birds used to gather in the trees above the cormorant roost, now there are a few dozen on most evenings. The peak count this winter was 200 birds (16<sup>th</sup> January, TGG), an increase on the previous winter. The only other records of note were 18 stock doves on the arable conservation area on 9<sup>th</sup> April (GB/MB) and small numbers seen regularly on the newly created Diddington Pit island.

Often overlooked (or ignored, as a woodpigeon), it is believed that just one pair bred, possibly among the cormorants. More records, please!

## Woodpigeon

### Abundant resident



National surveys indicate that this is now Britain's commonest bird, undoubtedly aided by modern choice of crops. It's abundant at Paxton too, with roost counts exceeding 300 throughout the winter. Numbers were highest in January, peaking

at 600 on 7<sup>th</sup> (TGG). These flocks tend to disperse to adjacent farmland during the day, but 420 woodpigeons on the germinating oil seed rape west of the Haul Road was notable.

There were an estimated 45 breeding pairs at the Pits in spring (PBBS), a small increase on 2003. In addition, Little Paxton village also holds a large breeding population, with mating and courtship taking place at virtually all times of year.

## **Collared dove**

### **Abundant resident in village**

It is hard to imagine a time when collared doves were not a part of the fabric of village life in Little Paxton and Diddington, but on the cusp of their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a British breeding bird, we can report that they are thriving.

Only just featuring on the reserve list, with one breeding pair, during the autumn small numbers fed on the weed seeds around the quarry (max 15 on 4<sup>th</sup> October, MSh). Groups of up to 30 are common around the village, where the species breeds commonly in the more mature gardens and large hedgerows. *Leylandii* seem to be the preferred nesting habitat, at just about any time of year. Villagers report that youngsters often fall victim to cat predation.

## **Turtle dove**

### **Summer visitor**

Sad to say, the purring sound of summer - the turtle dove - is now scarce in much of rural Cambridgeshire, but the Paxton Pits population is holding up well.

Small numbers passed through the Pits complex in early September 2003, fuelling up before dodging the bullets of southern European hunters. The last of the year was on 23<sup>rd</sup> September (JW).

The first of 2004 was on the edge of the Pits complex, in Diddington, on 17<sup>th</sup> April, but even by early May, a maximum of just three were present. The estimate for the summer was 15 calling males (PBBS), of which many were paired up. Displaying birds were recorded well into July,

especially around the Heronry Lakes, where most pairs occurred. As usual, there was little evidence of juveniles other than a fledged youngster near Diddington on 22<sup>nd</sup> August (JH/JW).

## **Cuckoo**

### **Declining summer visitor**

The traditional harbinger of spring made its first appearance on 12<sup>th</sup> April, the same date as in 2003 (JH/NP/JW). But it is becoming a scarcer visitor, with the PBBS suggesting that numbers continue to decline, reflecting changes across the country. Perish the thought that one spring we might not hear the disyllabic call of the male or the bubbling sound of its mate. Surely it can't be a lack of host nesters (primarily reed warblers at Paxton)? We received no records from the village this year.

Males were heard around the Pits daily until mid June, though none was heard after 15<sup>th</sup> (TGG). Its mobility makes this species very difficult to survey: six males on 25<sup>th</sup> May (MB) was the highest count. Just a handful of females were reported, with a peak count of two during one visit to the Pits (10<sup>th</sup> June, MB). A juvenile was seen on three dates (the same bird?) between 12<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> August. By the end of the month, all had gone – there has yet to be a September record at Paxton.

## **Barn owl**

### **Scarce visitor, occasionally breeds**

The death of a barn owl, rare at Paxton in recent years, on the A1 southbound carriageway last year seems to have put paid to our hopes of recolonisation of the Pits. There were several sightings around the northern pits during autumn 2003 and in March 2004, and an intriguing report of one over Field Close in Little Paxton village on 19<sup>th</sup> October (per JW).

Our hopes hang on in the form of pellets found at a possible roost site, following which local birder Martin Davis built and erected a nesting box. We'll be keeping an eye on it over the coming months – let's hope we have more to report next year!

## Little owl

### Possibly extinct at Paxton

It is five years since a pair nested on the edge of the Pits, and sightings have been scarce since. That nesting tree blew down during the summer. There were no sightings around the Pits or the village this year, though a pair may have nested half a mile to the west (JW).

## Tawny owl

### Resident in small numbers

We received reports of tawny owls during the winter and early spring from several parts of the village, including Gordon Road/the allotments and Paxton Hall. There were fewer from the Pits, though one calling in the daytime in late May was surprising. Our best estimate is that we have a minimum of two pairs: a sedentary and stable population. We remain keen to receive any owl records from the village, Pits and surrounding farmland.

## Short-eared owl

### Occasional winter and passage visitor

Back in 1923, seven short-eared owls were seen in a single day at Little Paxton by local landowner John Ramply. It's taken the last three calendar years to match that!

Occasional passage visitors, shorties rarely hang around the Pits, but the set-aside field adjacent to Island Pit was used by a roosting bird at least twice during the winter, seen on 4<sup>th</sup> January and 22<sup>nd</sup> March (JH). The only other record was around Pumphouse Pit on 5<sup>th</sup> October (JW).

## Swift

### Summer visitor, occasionally breeds

This is usually one of the last migrants to arrive in spring, and this year was no exception. The first was seen on 22<sup>nd</sup> April (KSm), but it was another week before swifts arrived in any number. The peak count during migration was just 100 birds, but on May evenings there were regularly 30 feeding high over the Heronry Lakes, accompanied by the song of nightingales. Flocks of 200 during rain on 12<sup>th</sup> June (JH) and 12<sup>th</sup> August (NP/JW) was presumably a movement ahead of a

weather system – swifts will sometimes move hundreds of miles in order to avoid bad weather.

Up to six birds regularly fed over the village, the church area being especially favoured, and during July and early August birds were seen around the nest site used in 2003 though none was seen to enter this year. Small numbers filtered south to the end of August at least.



## Kingfisher

### Resident, but numbers fluctuate

Never name a hide after a bird! Many sit in the Kingfisher Hide and leave disappointed. One of the most popular birds at Paxton Pits, patience or luck are the usual pre-requisites for getting a good view. Kingfishers were seen regularly throughout the winter, present on most of the lakes. Cold weather often results in high mortality of kingfishers, but the two brief cold spells seem to have made little difference, with birds seen regularly and widely into March. So, it's rather difficult to explain why kingfishers became so difficult to see during the spring.

Several records from the Mill Bridge on the River Great Ouse suggest nesting on the island below Paxton Lock. On the Pits, there was a nest close to the Kingfisher Hide, and we think there were pairs on Cloudy Lake, and perhaps on Pumphouse Pit. So, 3-4 pairs but not one family party was seen. Kingfishers occasionally visit garden ponds.

Tragically, a kingfisher was found seriously injured, believed shot, close to one of the pits adjacent to the village. How could anyone do anything so pointless and destructive to such a colourful and popular wetland bird?

## **Green woodpecker**

### **Increasing (and noisy!) resident**

This is now a regular visitor to garden lawns on the fringes of Little Paxton, most active early in the morning. In contrast to the last species, there is no shortage of records involving family groups around the Pits during July and August, so it was clearly a productive season. The PBBS estimates six pairs around the complex, though this could be a considerable underestimate.

## **Great spotted woodpecker**

### **Common resident**



Now so regular in gardens that few people think it worthy of reporting. At least one family party was noted, however, with one young bird visiting regularly through August, and we are almost certain that a pair nested in large trees near Paxton Hall.

The mature trees and dead wood around the nature reserve provide the best feeding and nesting areas for this pied 'pecker, but we increasingly receive reports from around the northern pits and the quarry. Birds visited the feeder outside the Visitor Centre regularly through the winter, and even into the spring, delighting visitors.

Drumming was heard from around Heronry South on Christmas Eve and was regular thereafter, with several such displaying birds heard by the end of February. Multiple sightings were frequent as males scrapped over mates and territories, and on 4<sup>th</sup> May, a walk around the Pits produced 10 different birds (MRA/MHi). Our best estimate, based on the PBBS, is six pairs, identical to the last two years. Perhaps they have reached capacity – at least until more trees in the north mature?

## **Lesser spotted woodpecker**

### **Declining, locally almost extinct**

After regular sightings in 2003, our hoped-revival failed to materialise. There were no records from the village and only a handful from the Pits, all between November and March. Disappointingly, we may now have lost this little woodpecker as a breeding species here? This reflects the national decline – it is now one of the most 'wanted' species requested by visiting birdwatchers.

## **Skylark**

### **Resident, numbers increase in winter**

This icon of the campaign to revitalise wildlife populations on arable farms, the skylark continues to hold its own around the Pits. Welcome news is that, as well as several pairs occupying the restored grassland around the quarry, a male sang over the arable conservation area on the nature reserve, the first for several years. No young were reported, but a second bird (a female?) was there during June. Across the Pits, the PBBS estimated 13 pairs, slightly down on the last couple of years, but with a weedy part of the quarry being restored to wetland, not surprising.

The only other notable record was a flock of 120 skylarks on the bare fields west of Haul Road on 29<sup>th</sup> January (NP), during cold weather from the east.

## **Sand martin**

### **Summer visitor**

Autumn 2003 concluded with a light passage of southbound migrants, the last two seen on the relatively early date of 28<sup>th</sup> September (JH/JW). Most years, birds are seen into October.

By mid March, they were back, one on 15<sup>th</sup> (JLFP) being the precursor to several hundred birds a day to the end of the month. Poor weather in early April meant that it never reached the 'rush' that sometimes occurs. The peak, on 21<sup>st</sup> April, was only 180 birds. Sand martins were slow to adopt breeding sites, ignoring several apparently suitable areas. There were no obvious colonies, with small numbers spread around the quarry.

A search in early July revealed 64 nesting holes, though it is unlikely that all were occupied. After several years of three-figure nest totals, this feels disappointing, but recent history shows that numbers have fluctuated between 30 and 300 nests. Let's hope for more next year!

## Swallow

### **Common on passage, now only an occasional breeder**

Following heavy passage in early September (250 on 5<sup>th</sup>, MD), migration trickled into October, the last two seen on 22<sup>nd</sup> (JH/JW), a typical date.

First arrival of 2004 was on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, slightly ahead of average, but the old adage about single swallows and summer was borne out as, despite ones and twos each day to the end of the month, cold winds in early April halted the flow and, remarkably, it was 18<sup>th</sup> April before double figures were seen. No large movements were noted, and few were seen around the Pits, such is the scarcity of swallow as a local breeding species these days, though 20 on 12<sup>th</sup> June was notable – a late movement north, perhaps, since they weren't breeding locally.

But good news did come later in the month when a swallow was seen feeding over Little Paxton's High Street on several occasions, and by 17<sup>th</sup> July three juveniles were perched on telephone wires, confirming the rare occurrence of a nesting pair, the first since 2001.

## House martin

### **Common on passage, small numbers breed**

Autumn migration was late in 2003, with only very small numbers heading south in September, but many small flocks of 20+ birds in early October. The last, a group of 17 house martins, was seen over the village on the 8<sup>th</sup> (MSm/JW).

The first white-rumped flash was spotted on 26<sup>th</sup> March (JH), about a week earlier than average, with several more in the following days. But as with the swallow, northerly winds held up the surge and it wasn't until a few days in mid April that

flocks exceeding 100 birds were seen regularly heading north.

This is another species struggling to maintain a breeding population around the village. Up to 10 nests were on houses around Paxton Hall, and Mill Cottage hosted three nests. Groups of up to 20 feeding birds were regularly over the playing fields in early July, perhaps indicating that young birds had fledged, although at least one High Street nest still contained young into mid September.

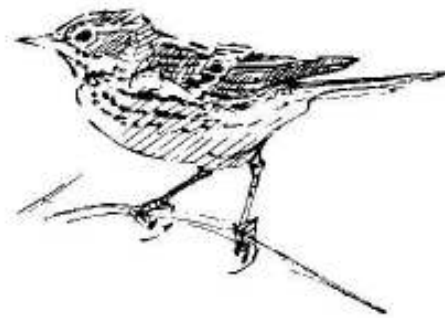
## Tree pipit

### **Scarce passage migrant, former breeder**

A new entry for the *Paxton Bird Report*, though it is hard to believe that they are not overlooked during migration. One heading south, calling, on 12<sup>th</sup> October was a nice surprise for the WeBS count volunteers (NP/JW) and the first record here since 1996. Apparently declining across their UK breeding range, especially in southern England, it seems impossible to imagine a time when tree pipits bred at Paxton, but as recently as 1981 a pair was thought to have bred.

## Meadow pipit

### **Abundant in winter, may have bred**



September passage was light this year, with peaks of just 25-30 birds on several dates, as meadow pipits move from their upland summer residences to milder abodes. The only other record of note was a cold weather movement of 100 birds on 29<sup>th</sup> January (NP, cf Skylark). Birds remained later than average into April, the last seen on 25<sup>th</sup> (JH), and the first of the autumn was back on the very early date of 3<sup>rd</sup> August (JW).

## Rock pipit

### **Scarce on passage from Scandinavia**

Two records during the period, presumably both of the Scandinavian race (*littoralis*), during the autumn: on 18<sup>th</sup> October (MH) and 1<sup>st</sup> November (JW), the latter unusually being seen on the Sailing Lake islands.

## Yellow wagtail

### **Passage migrant; now scarce breeder**

Following a prolonged passage through September, the last of 2003 (five over the village on 8<sup>th</sup> October, MSm/JW) was later than usual. After the first sighting on 4<sup>th</sup> April (GAR), spring 2004 migration was nothing spectacular, with a peak movement of 15 (on 11th April, JW), but all other counts under 10 birds.

There has been a marked change in yellow wagtail passage at Paxton in recent years. As well as numbers being lower (presumably reflecting their decline as a breeding species in northern England), their passage is more spread out across the month. Up to 1998, the average first arrival was 12<sup>th</sup> April, but since 1999 it has moved to 3<sup>rd</sup>!

However, migration had petered out by mid May and, aside from three on 30<sup>th</sup> (including a pair in suitable habitat), there was no indication of local breeding for only the second time in the last decade. Gone are the days when the yellow wagtail was common in water meadows alongside the Great Ouse.

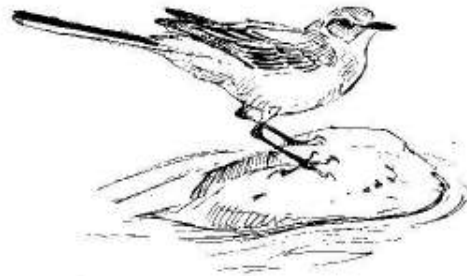
From the end of July, a sprinkling of juveniles were reported, as birds moved south. The highest count for a single day in August was 23 on 18<sup>th</sup>.

Unusually, there were no records of the nominate 'blue headed' race, but one of the 'grey-headed' (*thunbergi*) was reported independently from the same place by two experienced local birders. This would constitute only the fifth Cambridgeshire record if accepted by the County Rarities Committee. This is the subspecies of yellow wagtail that breeds in northern Scandinavia and Russia.

## Grey wagtail

### **Localised resident, usually along river**

We received records of grey wagtail from across the Pits complex during the winter, mostly singles, but up to five on one occasion (on the Meadow, 7<sup>th</sup> December, JW). They do seem to be more common at Paxton than a few years ago, with reports from within the village increasing.



Many wintering reports came from around Paxton Lock, a traditional breeding site, and activity stepped up here as spring approached. For the first time, two pairs took up residence in Paxton: one occupying each of the bridges by the former mill (MB/GB). At least one of these successfully reared young (3-4 juveniles on 19<sup>th</sup> May, MB), after which they presumably dispersed away from the Pits as there were few reports until late August. A surprising find was one perched on a washing line in a Hayling Avenue garden! (DD/IKD).

## Pied wagtail

### **Abundant resident**

A common resident in the village, but again there was no evidence of breeding. Around the Pits, pied wagtails were abundant in winter, peaking with over 30 in the quarry on 21<sup>st</sup> March (JH/NP/JW). One wonders how far these birds travel following these pre-movement gatherings?

Birds can usually be found feeding around the Sailing Lake and the quarry sorting plant. In 2003, the PBBS located seven pairs, but this year it reported only four pairs, though given the numerous family groups seen during the summer, this may be an underestimate. Indeed, there were nine fledged juveniles around the quarry on 9<sup>th</sup> July, while an adult busily carried food to a late (or second?) brood of youngsters.

Birds of the nominate race ('white' wagtail) were seen on 9 dates between 5<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April (various observers), involving a minimum of eight birds. All were on the northern pits, with the new Diddington Pit island particularly favoured. The peak count was four birds on 11<sup>th</sup> (JW).

## **Wren**

### **Abundant resident**

One of the most abundant birds in the parish, common in mature village gardens and around the Pits. The 62 counted in the Paxton Breeding Bird Survey is the only indicator of numbers, as the population recovers from a dip earlier in the decade. Again a pair built a nest in Kingfisher Hide, but as in 2003, no family was raised. Perhaps they rebuilt nearby, as anyone sitting in the Hide in spring could usually hear the loud song of the male. Recent mild winters have helped to maintain wren numbers, with a large – but unquantified – population in the village.

## **Dunnock**

### **Abundant resident**

It would seem that almost every village garden holds a pair of dunnocks, adding up to a very large population. Occurring commonly around the southern pits, this ground feeder is seen regularly at the two feeding stations. The PBBS suggests that the dunnock breeding population around the Pits remains stable, at 28 pairs this year (interestingly, very similar to the only other count that we received, of 30 singing birds on 7<sup>th</sup> March, LL).

## **Robin**

### **Abundant resident**

More robins breed in the village than on the Pits, for during mid summer, gardens seemed alive with young robins, which clearly enjoyed a successful breeding season.

A count of 50 from the Pits on 7<sup>th</sup> March (LL) was the only count, besides the PBBS, which recorded 47 breeding pairs, indicating a largely stable population.

## **Nightingale**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

Paxton's flagship bird continues to draw coachloads of visitors from all over England, which suggests that we have some of the best habitat for this species anywhere outside its Kent stronghold. Some evenings in springtime, it is almost impossible to hear anything other than nightingales.

The first sound came on 9<sup>th</sup> April, when one sang briefly along the edge of Washout Pit (MSh), a slightly later date than in recent years and away from the core area on the nature reserve. Numbers started to increase from 15<sup>th</sup>, with 23 singing males present ten days later.

An oft-asked question from visitors is "how many pairs of nightingales actually breed?" The answer is that we just don't know. The only guide that we have is to carefully count the singing males, undertaken annually by a team of experienced local birdwatchers.

This year, a record-equalling 28-29 singing males, the same as in 2002. Of these, 16 were in the nature reserve, but the northern range has extended once again, with some birds proving to be mobile. The most surprising record was one along the north edge of A1 North. The last singing male was heard on 29<sup>th</sup> June (MB), but adults and juveniles were seen on several dates during July. The latest record was on 4<sup>th</sup> August (SM).

A tip to visitors: if you want to hear nightingales, visit Paxton before the end of the first week of June. By the end of the month, they will all be quiet.

For a full history of the Nightingale at Paxton, see page 49 of the 2002/03 *Report*.

## Redstart

### **Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

Following one in April 2003, remarkably a further two were seen in the autumn, on successive days (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> September, JO/JLFP and JH) around the northern pits.

Spring 2004 saw a further two records within a week, both females in scrub east of Heronry South: 26<sup>th</sup> April (RMP) and 2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH/JW, original observers unknown). A third for the year was an adult male on 22<sup>nd</sup> August on the edge of Diddington Pit (JH/JW).

This sub-Saharan migrant is increasingly rare as a breeding species in eastern England (last in Cambridgeshire in 1987), so it is remarkable that redstarts have been seen at Paxton in nine of the last ten years – all were present for less than one day.

## Whinchat

### **Scarce, but annual, passage migrant**

After the remarkable 18 in autumn 2002, it seemed impossible to repeat the performance in 2003, but at least five occurred in August and another three in September (2 on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1 on 6<sup>th</sup>, MSh/JW). Added to this were three just off the pits complex at Stirtloe on 13<sup>th</sup> (JH/SH). Quite a haul!

Spring whinchats are much scarcer at Paxton, but birds were recorded for the second consecutive year: two on 25<sup>th</sup> April (per PL) and one on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (GAR) in the crops west of the Haul Road.

## Stonechat

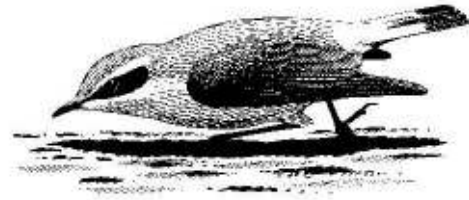
### **Scarce autumn passage migrant**

Another good autumn for stonechats at Paxton, after years as a scarce bird. Perhaps this reflects their recent national increase?

At least seven were seen between 29<sup>th</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> October (MD/DOM/MSm/JW), with a further two males in spring 2004: 13<sup>th</sup> March (CM/GAR) and 4<sup>th</sup> April (NP). As usual, most were seen in restored grassland around the northern pits.

## Wheatear

### **Declining passage migrant**



Autumn 2003 passage was poor, with just two in August and one on 18<sup>th</sup> October (JW), the latest ever at Paxton Pits by more than a fortnight.

After several poor years for spring wheatear passage, 2004 saw a marked improvement. After two on 17<sup>th</sup> March (MD, the second earliest date ever), birds were recorded on 19 dates, culminating with three on 24<sup>th</sup> April, probably of the Greenland-nesting race (*leucorrhoa*) (JH/JW). Most were singles, with a peak count of seven on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (JW).

A first-winter type bird on 18<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> August was the sole autumn record prior to the end of our recording period (JH/MSh/JW).

## Blackbird

### **Abundant resident, with winter influx**

This is a familiar garden bird around the village and the Pits. A count in early March found 40 birds in scrub around the lakes, which may have included a mix of winter visitors and residents.

Dominant and aggressive to other garden species, the village population looks unstoppable, with uncounted numbers and plenty of youngsters suggesting high productivity in 2004. The only other indication of numbers is the 46 breeding pairs found by the PBBS, a continued stable trend. The Pits appears to have as many pairs as the habitat can support.

## Fieldfare

### **Abundant winter visitor**

The first of the winter, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, was the earliest record at Paxton Pits by two days (JLFP). It proved to be a reasonably good winter for our largest migrant thrush, with flocks of double figures from mid October, peaking at 200 on 1<sup>st</sup> November.



After no records during the rest of November or December, flocks of two dozen or so were regular in January, and numbers increased again during February. There was a moderate passage during late March and early April, the last five birds seen on 4<sup>th</sup> (JH/JW).

## **Song thrush**

### **Increasing resident**

The village population of this popular songbird continues to recover, with local residents noticing the mainstay of the dawn chorus in increasing numbers. Some 'early birds' were singing as early as January.

The only winter reports received were of multiple counts of olive-coloured birds from the Pits in early October and early March, thought to be continental migrants.

The PBBS identified 12 breeding pairs around the Pits, a fall on the increases seen in the last couple of years. Nevertheless, the breeding population here is no lower than in the late 1990s, whereas that for eastern England has fallen by almost one-fifth since 1994. But perhaps the mature village gardens now provide a richer habitat than the Pits?

The only other summer report that we received was of three young that fledged from a garden in Wantage Road (per CS).

## **Redwing**

### **Abundant winter visitor**

As ever, this eye-striped migrant beat its bigger Scandinavian cousin to Paxton. The first on 24<sup>th</sup> September (MD) beat the previous Paxton earliest by three days – a record that dated back to 1962!



Redwings were recorded on fewer dates than fieldfares, with several hundred seen on 15<sup>th</sup> November and 6<sup>th</sup> December. Few were seen after this latter date, though its whistling was heard at over the village on several nights in mid March. The last two were seen on 16<sup>th</sup> April (TGG/PL), the latest date ever at Paxton.

## **Mistle thrush**

### **Localised resident**

Compared to the song thrush, this chunkier species seems to have lost ground in the village. Never abundant around the Pits, mistle thrushes can be very elusive, with several weeks between reports. Counts of up to four were reported through the winter, but they became harder to find once spring arrived. We believe that only one pair bred around the Pits (PBBS), and at least one bred in the village (around Sweeting Avenue, MSh). An unusual count of 10 birds together on 7<sup>th</sup> June (GFF) may be a couple of family parties or some failed breeders from elsewhere.

## **Grasshopper warbler**

### **Declining passage migrant; former breeder**

Last year we mourned the apparent loss of this 'Red List' bird, with no records in 2003. This year we had two singing males in suitable breeding habitat adjacent to Island Pit from 20<sup>th</sup> April (MD/JL/JW). On some calm evenings, the 'reeling' sound carried for hundreds of metres, adding to the melody of the nightingales. At least one continued to sing until 19<sup>th</sup> May, but the lack of subsequent reports probably relates to the lack of visitors after dark to this part of the Pits. Breeding can thus not be ruled out.

## **Sedge warbler**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

Several around the Pits on 13<sup>th</sup> September (JW) were the last of summer 2003, the latest records for a decade.

We received reports from different observers of singles on March 28<sup>th</sup> (GAR) and 29<sup>th</sup> (per MD), which constitute the earliest ever at Paxton. Remarkably, the

average first arrival date during 1994-99 was 11<sup>th</sup> April, but during 2000-04 is 5<sup>th</sup> April. Is this climate change in action? The main passage arrived in the third week of April.

Our breeding warblers are subject to considerable fluctuation between years. The PBBS counted an amazing 86 singing males, occupying almost every patch of reeds and scrub around water's edge. This makes it the commonest breeding songbird at Paxton, with levels similar to 2002.

## **Reed warbler**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

A handful remained around the Pits into September, the last seen on 28<sup>th</sup> (JW).

Later than most other warblers, the first were back from Africa on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (JW), but the species was scarce until well into May. A late nester, because they are so dependent on the reeds emerging, when they did get going, they did it in style, with 82 singing males (PBBS). Numbers have trebled since 1998 (and increased by more than 50% since last summer!) making it the second commonest breeding songbird at the Pits. It makes the 32% decline elsewhere in eastern England since 1994, at a time when the amount of reedbed is increasing at a record rate, all the more surprising.

## **Lesser whitethroat**

### **Localised summer visitor**

With its rattling 'machine gun' call, this is one of the easiest bird songs to recognise. The first two of the year, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (JW) was a precursor to several males seen around the Pits and the village in early May. As last year, most of the 10 breeding pairs recorded (PBBS) seem to have been around the southern, mature Pits. Nevertheless, this is the highest total since the Survey began, against a backdrop of national and regional declines during the last decade.

## **Whitethroat**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

The last of 2003, a juvenile seen on 16<sup>th</sup> September (JLFP), is the latest ever recorded at Paxton Pits.

The first two back arrived on 19<sup>th</sup> April (JH), a couple of days later than usual. Numbers built quickly, with many patches of scrub and hedgerow occupied by the male's scratchy song by mid May. As with most warblers, it was a good year with our breeding population increasing to 36 pairs (PBBS), the first increase since the survey began in 1998.

## **Garden warbler**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

After an abundance of garden warblers (57 pairs) around the Pits in summer 2003, none was seen after 6<sup>th</sup> September (JW), much earlier than normal.

The first (two) had returned by 9<sup>th</sup> April (DM/JM), earlier than average. Our breeding population was a more modest 42 pairs (PBBS), still well up on most recent years. The continued success is aided by a carefully planned management regime of the vitally important scrub.

## **Blackcap**

### **Abundant summer visitor**

As usual, there's little to distinguish departing summer blackcaps and arriving wintering birds. Birds around until 26<sup>th</sup> September (GFF/JH/JW) are presumed to have been summer visitors, while those from 23<sup>rd</sup> November (NP) are winter arrivals. Three singing quietly along Haul Road on 26<sup>th</sup> October (JH/JW) could have been either. Blackcaps were reported from several village gardens during the winter and into March, in Lakefield Avenue, Gordon Road and Church Close.

At least three blackcaps were heard singing around the Pits during March, the first on 17<sup>th</sup> (MD), but there was no obvious 'peak' over the 7+ noted on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, which perhaps came from wintering areas as close as Spain. Our population seems stable, with 48 pairs, compared with 50 in 2003 (PBBS).

## Yellow-browed warbler

### Rare autumn vagrant

This stripy 'sprite' is a scarce autumn vagrant that breeds in Siberia. Although annual on the east coast, this was a first for Paxton Pits, and only the fourth for Cambridgeshire. It was found on 26<sup>th</sup>

October (JH/JW) along a track south of the quarry, and remained until 28<sup>th</sup> at least. It occurred during a marked influx across Britain, with some birds making it as far west as Ireland. It was suggested, by two different observers, that there may have been a second bird present on the 27<sup>th</sup>, though this was not confirmed.

### Yellow-browed warbler: a first for Paxton Pits

Having twitched a Yellow-browed Warbler in the centre of Cambridge early on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> October, we decided to go in search of our own scarce passerine at Paxton Pits (JH joking as we arrived "it'll be just our luck to find a YBW today!"). We set off north, walking slowly along Haul Road, stopping occasionally to look through small flocks of Tits. There were a few Blackcaps singing quietly as we walked, but little else. Rounding a bend in the track, we were both immediately stopped in our tracks by a rather loud "pseeooooewe" Warbler-like call. JW quickly suggested that it sounded very much like a Yellow-browed Warbler, although having just seen and heard one in Cambridge, this seemed rather hard to believe! After a few anxious moments of silence, it called again and JW got a brief glimpse of a Warbler flicking around, above eye-level in a Hawthorn. Hastily raising his binoculars, he just managed to get on the bird before it disappeared behind some leaves, but was sure that the bird showed two bright wing-bars. JH also saw the bird briefly and noticed a rather broad and bright supercilium - surely we were on to another Yellow-browed!

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long to confirm what we suspected, as the bird moved into the open to reveal the rest of its striking plumage - it was indeed another Yellow-browed Warbler! In the next 30 minutes or so, other birders arrived and with the bird calling frequently it was always easy to locate and all were rewarded with some fantastic views - occasionally down to a few metres! The bird was present the following day (27<sup>th</sup>) and was successfully trapped and ringed by Mark Thomas early on Tuesday (28<sup>th</sup>). The bird was a male, weighed 6.5 g and had a wing length of 58 mm. The bird was ringed (ANW407) and released in the area of scrub to the south of the quarry plant.

*Julian Hughes/Jamie Wells*

## Chiffchaff

### Abundant summer visitor

We now receive regular reports of overwintering chiffchaffs, but most around the Pits rather than in village gardens. Singles were seen in every month of the winter. We think that up to three overwintered.

Individuals sang from early March, though we think that the first wave of migrants arrived from 17<sup>th</sup> (MD). Within days, the chatty song of at least 20 could be heard around the Pits. Many of the early visitors probably passed through, to be replaced by breeding birds during April. Again, an encouraging and stable PBBS gave us an estimated 48 pairs (49 last year). During August, a number of willow/chiffs joined feeding flocks of other species around the Pits and in mature village gardens.



## Willow warbler

### Abundant summer visitor

The last of autumn was on 14<sup>th</sup> September (PS/SM) and the first of spring on 30<sup>th</sup> March (RF), although one was reported on the exceptionally early date of 21<sup>st</sup> March. Nest-building was seen within two weeks, and fledged young as early as 16<sup>th</sup> May (GB/MB). The PBBS provides us with the only real indication of the breeding population, with an estimated 40 pairs, a slight reduction on the previous two years.

## Goldcrest

### Winter visitor and localised breeder

Winter numbers (from the continent?) were higher than usual: a peak of 20 on 4<sup>th</sup> January (MRA/MHi). Mild weather in January and February resulted in a pair displaying and a singing male at different locations around the Pits.

A male sang and carried nest material on the reserve during March and April, but we received no further reports until early August, when up to three young were seen on several dates in the same location (DM/JM/SM). We presume that a pair had two nesting attempts, rearing at least one brood, though this may underestimate its status.

By the village reports, goldcrests are now resident in many gardens containing conifers, and we presume that several pairs may breed. Clearly an increasingly numerous species.

## Firecrest

### Scarce winter visitor

Previously rare at Paxton, this fiery-headed gem is now almost annual, though this winter proved among the best.

Two along Haul Road on 1<sup>st</sup> November (MD/RPr/JW), the first of 13 dates between until 29<sup>th</sup> January on which birds were seen from Wray House Garden and the reserve car park that may have been two individuals, perhaps the two found on 1<sup>st</sup>, but we'll never know for sure.

## Spotted flycatcher

### Scarce on passage; former breeder

Once again, most records came from Wray House Garden, with a single migrant on 2<sup>nd</sup> May (MD/JH/JW), two there on 3<sup>rd</sup> (NP) and one reported on 14<sup>th</sup>.



We believe that spotted flycatchers no longer breed around the Pits or the village. But perhaps they are not too far away. Family parties of six on 25<sup>th</sup> July (NP), six on 10<sup>th</sup> August (MSm/JW) and four on 11-14<sup>th</sup> (MHi/DM/JM) all included juveniles being fed by parent birds. A single flycatcher was in a St James Road garden on 17<sup>th</sup> August and birds were seen on three further dates into early September. Who knows how far these birds have travelled, perhaps from just across the river or maybe several miles?

## Bearded tit

### Scarce winter visitor

A long-awaited return for a bird that has not been recorded at Paxton Pits since 1985. First heard in the small reedbed in A1 South Lake on 14<sup>th</sup> December (TBr/JH), it was reported again on 27<sup>th</sup> (DB). After several days of patient watching, it finally revealed itself as a female on 30<sup>th</sup> (MD/CH/JH/PL/JW) and was seen well, albeit briefly, several times on that and the following day. And then never again!

Having been seen every few winters during the 1970s and early 1980s, records dried up, in line with the declining national population. But as reedbeds make a recovery, surely we should hear that delightful 'ping' more frequently?

## Long-tailed tit

### Abundant resident

Flocks of 'flying lollipops' bounded through the willows hunting for insects throughout the winter, the most notable being a flock of 40 in Little Paxton High Street (13<sup>th</sup> October, BP) and 100 on the reserve (7<sup>th</sup> March, LL). Groups are now seen in the village at all times of the year, with post-fledging families typically seen in late summer.

The breeding population was estimated at 17 pairs (PBBS), a small increase on 2003. No breeding records originated from the village, but with so many sightings, successful nesting seems almost certain.

## Marsh tit

### Localised resident

A welcome increase in records, which we think is genuine, and not just a product of its 'Red Listing' rarity being more widely known by birdwatchers. Records were sporadic in the winter, but increased in the spring, most resulting from a pair that became adept at taking peanuts from the feeders outside the Visitor Centre.

In mid May, a pair carried food to a nest close to the river viewpoint (AD/GD) and at the end of the month, two fledged juveniles were being fed by their parents (CM/GAR). This is the first proven breeding at the Pits since our records began a decade ago. Sightings increased again in August, with birds back on the Visitor Centre feeders early in September.

Of interest, a willow tit was seen just half a mile north of the Pits complex on 13<sup>th</sup> September (NB/SB). The last record in our recording area was in 1998.

## Coal tit

### Localised resident

We received regular reports from garden watchers, with coal tits coming to feeders mostly in early and late winter, though one in St James Road in June makes us wonder whether they may have bred nearby.

There were only four records from the nature reserve in the winter and none during the breeding season, though one on the edge of Diddington in August was unusual. A family of youngsters in the village in 2001 remains the sole breeding record of this scarce species. Amazingly, we know of one local birdwatcher who has still not seen this species on the reserve in over 35 years!

## Blue tit

### Abundant resident

Without question, the blue tit remains one of our most familiar garden birds, but it is overlooked when it comes to recording. In the village, the population must surely run into hundreds of pairs, with nestboxes investigated from early February. The only counts were 70 around the nature

reserve on 7<sup>th</sup> March (LL) and the PBBS estimate of 59 breeding pairs, a slight increase on 2003.

## Great tit

### Abundant resident

An aggressive and dominant species on peanut feeders, but as with the previous species, no accurate estimate has ever been made of the village population. The only estimate of population size comes from the 38 breeding pairs counted by PBBS volunteers, on a par with 2003.



## Nuthatch

### Scarce visitor

In some places, just a few miles away from Little Paxton, this is a common bird throughout the year. But it flatly refuses to be common here, and remains a sought-after sighting for Paxton regulars.

But the few records are becoming more frequent. Since the first in 1991, four of the six records have been in the last three years. The latest was one near Washout Pit on 14<sup>th</sup> September (SM/PS).

## Treecreeper

### Localised resident

Unreported during the autumn, records picked up after Christmas, and pairs held territories in three locations around the Pits during the spring. One pair fed at least two young for several days in late May by the River Viewpoint, to the delight of visitors (GFF/AY/JY). A most remarkable 'flock' of 10 birds with a group of tits was recorded on the reserve in August. Once again, we received no specific reports from the village this year, though believe they are still present.

## Jay

### Localised resident

Strangely, with some people telling us that this colourful crow is 'increasingly numerous' (as we described it in last year's *Bird Report*), jays seem to have become scarcer this year. Aside from a count of eight around the reserve on 11<sup>th</sup> April (GAR), most reports were singles or pairs. Jays were regular on the Visitor Centre bird table, providing great entertainment for visitors. The PBBS could locate only one pair around the Pits, though during the winter birds are heard regularly around the Heronry Lakes.

## Magpie

### Abundant resident

Some people complain about magpies, but no-one ever seems to count them, so how can anyone know that there are "too many"! The only count received was a group of nine in the recently ploughed arable conservation field. We have no idea whether the winter magpie roost remains, and we would like to hear from anyone with information about it. Regular and familiar at most garden bird tables, often competing with jackdaws for scraps. The PBBS counted 12 breeding pairs, on a par with 2003.

## Jackdaw

### Principally winter resident

This remains one of the most regular garden birds, with family groups of up to eight visiting some gardens. A flock of 187 loafing in trees around Boughton Lodge Farm on 4<sup>th</sup> January (JH) is the only specific count that we have, but jackdaw was considered to be the second commonest species in flocks crows that flew in to roost on the reserve (see Rook).

We have virtually no information about breeding jackdaws, but successful nesting was reported from Paxton Hall and the PBBS could locate only three pairs around the Pits this year.

## Rook

### Abundant resident

The chattering sound of a mixed roost of jackdaws, rooks and carrion crows is one of the characteristic sounds of a calm, wintry dusk at Paxton. Rooks tend to be the predominant species, peaking at 3000 birds on 14<sup>th</sup> December (JH). It seems that our roost is no longer on the scale of just three years ago, when up to 8000 were present.

There were several counts of flocks exceeding 100 rooks early in the year, and nest-building got underway in late February. The total nest count of 113 comprised 97 on the edge of Sailing Lake and, for the second year, 15 in a copse north of Boughton Lodge Farm. Only in the last two seasons have numbers returned to their former levels at Paxton, of over 100 nests in 1965.

## Carrion crow

### Abundant resident

Although some carrion crows roost with rooks and jackdaws around the heronry, a new feature was several hundred crows pre-roosting in the willows above Cloudy Pit, though no specific counts were received. In the evenings, when all is still at the coatings plant, the crows – and a few young rooks – would leave the trees and descend to the piles of untreated fine gravel. Do they take in small amounts to aid digestion?

Elsewhere, nests were under construction from mid April, with several well placed to take eggs and chicks of ground-nesting waders from the islands. The PBBS count of seven pairs is on a par with 2003.

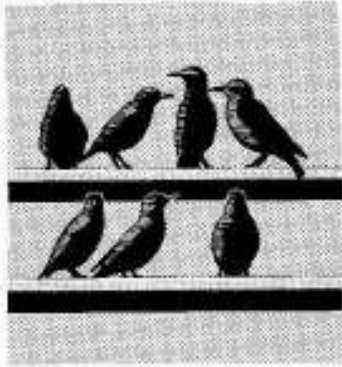
## Raven\*

### Rare visitor

Almost exactly one year after Paxton's first raven sighting, there came a second in almost exactly the same place, over Haul Road and the A1 Lakes. It flew west, mobbed by carrion crows on 11<sup>th</sup> July (JH/JW). Perhaps they will now become an annual entry in the Paxton Bird Report – a pair built a nest in forestry just a dozen miles to the south in Bedfordshire in spring 2004.

## Starling

### Abundant resident



Little Paxton witnessed a remarkable gathering of starlings during autumn 2003. Numbering only 300 on 15<sup>th</sup> October, four days later an estimated 2000 gathered on village rooftops and roosted in the Hayling reedbed on 19<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> (MB/CS). The following evening, the flock increased to 8000 birds, wheeling around in a spectacle, odd birds taken by deft-flying sparrowhawks (JH). But the flock dispersed and moved on, with no repeat performance until after the 2004 breeding season. Over 2000 starlings roosted in Hayling Pit on several evenings in June and July (MB).

Few starlings nest around the Pits, the PBBS estimating eight pairs. Juveniles were seen from mid May onwards and, judging by the ratio of juveniles to adults in summer flocks, it was another very productive season. The village population remains strong with many small groups of young birds being fed in late summer.

## House sparrow

### Abundant in village; scarce around Pits

House sparrows remain rare around the Pits, there being an estimated three pairs (PBBS). Interestingly, in early June, three pairs were watched repeatedly carrying food from bushes around Island Pit to nest sites on the Great Paxton side of the river. But it remains a common breeding bird in the village, with a flock of over 60 feeding on mixed seed in a Bydand Lane garden in late August (RM). Elsewhere in the village, flocks of young birds begging for food numbered up to 30.

## Tree sparrow

### Scarce winter visitor

Now rare at Paxton, two among a mixed finch and bunting flock on fields east of Island Pit on 4<sup>th</sup> January (MRA/MHI) were the only records of the year.

## Chaffinch

### Abundant resident

Remaining a familiar garden bird, even if no longer Britain's commonest, with flocks of up to 15 in the village. A small finch flock fed regularly around the arable conservation area late in the winter, dominated by chaffinches. At least two were seen to repeatedly 'fly-catch', flying up from a perch to take insects from the air. The PBBS recorded 63 breeding pairs, the highest since the survey began.

## Brambling

### Sporadic winter visitor

One of the best winter for this black and orange finch for some years, involving a minimum of 14 birds. Up to five (MD) were seen during 2<sup>nd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> November, when one was caught by a female merlin (JS).

Two were reported on the Visitor Centre feeders on 22<sup>nd</sup> February and a single around Pumphouse Pit on 11-15<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP). During 30<sup>th</sup> March-14<sup>th</sup> April, up to six – including three males – were around the nature reserve, initially in the arable conservation area and later along the Haul Road (many observers).

## Greenfinch

### Abundant resident

Claimed by some villagers to be our most numerous garden bird, with feeders hosting up to 20 birds. Youngsters were seen in several gardens in August, suggesting successful local breeding.

No very large flocks were reported at the Pits, the highest total being 98 at Boughton Lodge Farm on 24<sup>th</sup> September (MD). The increasing number of summering birds was maintained, with 22 breeding pairs around the Pits (PBBS), and we hope that it will benefit from increased food supply in the arable conservation area.

## Goldfinch

### Localised resident

Seemingly increasingly noted in gardens, especially where nyjer seed is served, with 15 noted on a Bydand Lane feeder during February. A flock of 40 birds was regularly seen, ranging widely around the pits during the autumn, foraging on thistles and other seed-rich plants, though they dispersed into smaller groups later in the winter including some on the Visitor Centre feeder. One found dead in January is believed to have been shot – outrageous!

A small number have bred around the Pits for the last five years, but although fledged young were seen in August along Haul Road, none were seen at the Pits during the breeding season besides two on 2<sup>nd</sup> June (MSh).

## Siskin

### Localised winter visitor

Despite some early arrivals (the first two, on 13<sup>th</sup> September, were the earliest on record, SE/JW), it was a poor winter for this smart-looking finch. The peak count before Christmas was just six birds, with higher counts not occurring until the end of the winter, presumably as migrants moved north. A flock of 25 on 7<sup>th</sup> March was the best count that we received (LL).

## Linnet

### Localised breeder; abundant in winter

Present around the pits, particularly the seed-rich quarry, throughout the year, once again numbers peaked in September (70 on 7<sup>th</sup>, JH) and late winter (90 on 21<sup>st</sup> February, DM/JM). Linnets are seen regularly on and around the village playing field throughout the year, but we received no records from gardens.

The PBBS recorded five breeding pairs, split between the quarry and the A1 arable fields, though we know nothing of their success. Winter flocking began earlier than usual, with 40 on 31<sup>st</sup> July (JW), presumably birds from hedgerows on neighbouring farms?

## Lesser redpoll

### Localised winter visitor

Marginally more numerous than during the previous winter, the peak was just eight birds (around Hayling carr on 1<sup>st</sup> January, GB/MB). Most of the other records comprised 1-3 birds, between 5<sup>th</sup> October (JW) and 29<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP).

## Mealy redpoll

### Scarce winter visitor

The northern cousin of our resident lesser redpoll is paler, with whiter rump and wingbars. Until its recent 'split' from lesser redpoll, these were probably under-recorded (one in 1998 is our sole record!). Two on 15<sup>th</sup> and four on 29<sup>th</sup> March (JLFP) are the first records since. Check those redpoll flocks carefully this winter!

## Bullfinch

### Common, but overlooked, resident

The quiet whistle of bullfinches was heard throughout the year, with birds especially evident in January, when birders reported 24 on 4<sup>th</sup> (MRA/MHi), 19 in six groups on 18<sup>th</sup> (PL) and flocks of 12 and 14 on 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> respectively (SM/MHi). By contrast, bullfinches seemed very scarce in village gardens this year.

The PBBS count of 7 breeding pairs was well down on 2003 (did some succumb to the short bouts of cold weather?).

## Yellowhammer

### Localised resident

The new year brought the discovery of a mixed flock of buntings in a set-aside field near Island Pit. At its peak, at least 40 yellowhammers were present (18<sup>th</sup>, JH/NP), with some remaining into March. This is a species that we hope will be greatly assisted by the winter food on the reserve's new arable conservation area.

The spring revealed territorial males in several places around the Pits, including one briefly in the arable conservation area. The PBBS counted five breeding pairs, a slight decrease on 2003, and further observations confirmed nests on the edge of Island and Diddington Pits.





## Reed bunting

### Abundant resident

The bunting flock at the north end of the Pits (see Yellowhammer) contained at least 60 reed buntings (18<sup>th</sup> January, JH/NP) at its peak, though more may have been present. Reed bunting was also a regular visitor to the feeders outside the Visitor Centre throughout the winter, offering identification challenges for beginner birdwatchers. The peak was eight on 24<sup>th</sup> February (DM/JM). A regular visitor to some village gardens, a maximum of five were seen on one Hayling Avenue feeder (DD/IKD).

Facing a long-term decline across the UK, and a short-term decrease in eastern England, this is a Paxton success story, with 35 breeding pairs in 2004 (PBBS). In contrast to the yellowhammer, which requires tall, thick hedgerows, the reed bunting takes advantage of both willows and scrub for nesting.

## Corn bunting

### Declining breeder; commoner in winter

In each *Report* in the last few years, we have expressed our fears about the 'fat bird of the barley'. Small numbers were seen around the northern pits during the autumn, but we were not prepared for the new year bunting flock that contained 45 corn buntings on 1<sup>st</sup> January (MD/NP/MSh/JW). Up to 30 continued to feed in the set-aside field until early March.

A male sang on the edge of Diddington Pit from 9<sup>th</sup> April until the end of May. There was no proof of breeding, but this is often the way with this secretive bird. So, probably a single breeding pair for the third successive year. We're going to stop making predictions...

## Other species

Records believed not to be of wild origin, but included here for completeness.

### Black swan

This Australasian swan is common in wildfowl collections and many live a feral existence on park lakes. Two flying over the Pits on 12<sup>th</sup> May (MAP) constitutes the only record of the period.

### Bar-headed goose

One from 18<sup>th</sup> October (DOM) until 21<sup>st</sup> March, with a second on 17<sup>th</sup> December (TGG). Displaying to Canada and greylag geese in early March, it evidently found no suitors and went elsewhere.

### Wood duck

A pair on Heronry South on 10<sup>th</sup> August (MSm/JW) are the first for several years.

### White-headed duck

A moulting male found on 13<sup>th</sup> September (JW) remained until 22<sup>nd</sup> (JS). Although not yet accepted onto the British List, this was one of several to appear around the UK in late summer, a pattern repeated in several recent years. With the globally-endangered Spanish population recovering, thanks to habitat improvement, a ban on hunting and control of ruddy ducks, perhaps one day this will be recognised as a wild bird. It would be one of the rarest birds ever seen at Paxton!

### Harris' hawk

The bird that escaped from Wyboston in 2001 continues to make its living locally. Having spent the autumn catching grey squirrels in Buckden gardens, it returned to Paxton for the winter, from 15<sup>th</sup> November to 5<sup>th</sup> February.

### Cirl bunting

One was reported on the bird table outside the Visitor Centre on 8<sup>th</sup> February. They are rarely kept in captivity, so we wonder where this came from. Famously sedentary, the nearest population is in south Devon!

## First and last summer migrants

Check your own 'firsts' and 'lasts' against those that were reported to us. If you have a later record for 2003 or an earlier one for 2004, please let us know!

	<b>Paxton 2004</b>	<b>Paxton earliest</b>	<b>Cambs earliest</b>
<b>Sand martin</b>	15 March	2 Mar 1997	27 February 1994
<b>Chiffchaff*</b>	16 March	2 Mar 2003	overwinters
<b>House martin</b>	26 March	4 Mar 2001	4 Mar 2001
<b>Willow warbler</b>	30 March	9 Mar 1997	9 Mar 1997
<b>Wheatear</b>	17 March	11 Mar 1996	7 March 1977/1989
<b>Little ringed plover</b>	17 March	12 Mar 2000	7 Mar 1991
<b>Swallow</b>	24 March	14 Mar 2001	7 Mar 1983
<b>Blackcap*</b>	17 March	17 Mar 2004	overwinters
<b>Yellow wagtail</b>	4 April	31 March 2003	16 Mar 1992
<b>Sedge warbler</b>	29 March	1 April 2004	27 March 1989
<b>Whitethroat</b>	19 April	3 Apr 2002	29 Mar 1998/2003
<b>Garden warbler</b>	9 April	4 Apr 1997	28 March 1999
<b>Nightingale</b>	9 April	4 Apr 1999/2002	4 Apr 1999/2002
<b>Reed warbler</b>	23 April	7 Apr 2001	7 Apr 2001
<b>Common tern</b>	4 April	3 Apr 1999	20 Mar 1997
<b>Cuckoo</b>	12 April	9 Apr 2002	8 Mar 1989
<b>Turtle dove</b>	17 April	12 Apr 1998	4 Apr 1982/1985
<b>Lesser whitethroat</b>	23 April	15 Apr 2001	31 March 1987
<b>Hobby</b>	17 April	17 Apr 2004	31 March 1985
<b>Swift</b>	22 April	19 Apr 1996	3 April 2002

\* 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.

	<b>Paxton 2003</b>	<b>Paxton latest</b>	<b>Cambs latest</b>
<b>Nightingale</b>	3 August	25 Aug 2001	6 Sep 1996
<b>Cuckoo</b>	31 August	31 Aug 2003	4 Nov 1957/1974
<b>Reed warbler</b>	28 September	28 Sep 2002/2003	8 Nov 1986
<b>Whitethroat</b>	16 September	16 Sep 2001/2003	22 Nov 2002
<b>Sedge warbler</b>	13 September	19 Sep 1993	28 Oct 1979
<b>Lesser whitethroat</b>	13 September	20 Sep 2001	8 Nov 1956
<b>Common tern</b>	6 September	22 Sep 2001	6 Dec 1953
<b>Little ringed plover</b>	26 August	23 Sep 2002	29 Oct 1973
<b>Willow warbler</b>	14 September	23 Sep 2001	24 Oct 2000
<b>Turtle dove</b>	23 September	25 Sep 1980	16 Nov 1957
<b>Garden warbler</b>	6 September	28 Sep 2002	22 Oct 2002
<b>Wheatear</b>	18 October	18 October 2003	24 Nov 1957
<b>Hobby</b>	26 September	28 October 2002	2 Nov 1992/2001/02
<b>Chiffchaff</b>	5 October	17 Oct 2002	overwinters
<b>House martin</b>	8 October	20 October 2002	17 Dec 1977
<b>Yellow wagtail</b>	8 October	13 Oct 1999	5 Dec 1982
<b>Swift</b>	5 September	15 Oct 1961	8 Nov 2001
<b>Sand martin</b>	28 September	20 Oct 2000	17 Nov 1968
<b>Blackcap</b>	28 September	20 Oct 2001	overwinters
<b>Swallow</b>	22 October	27 Oct 1961	3 Dec 1953

## Occurrence of birds at Paxton Pits in 2003/04

These tables show when the birds in the systematic list occurred. It's not a guarantee they will occur in these months in the future, but it provides a rough guide of when to expect them.

During this recording period, 172 species were recorded (compared to 170 in 2002/03), with five subspecies specifically recorded in each year: yellow-legged and Caspian gull, blue-headed and white wagtail and Greenland wheatear.

Species	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Red-necked Grebe												
Great Crested Grebe												
Little Grebe												
Black-necked grebe												
Fulmar												
Cormorant												
Bittern												
Little Egret												
Grey Heron												
White stork												
Mute Swan												
Bewick's Swan												
Whooper Swan												
Pink-footed Goose												
Greylag Goose												
Canada Goose												
Barnacle Goose												
Egyptian Goose												
Shelduck												
Wigeon												
Gadwall												
Teal												
Mallard												
Pintail												
Garganey												
Shoveler												
Red-crested Pochard												
Pochard												
Ferruginous duck												
Tufted duck												
Scaup												
Goldeneye												
Smew												
Goosander												
Ruddy duck												
White-headed duck												
Mandarin												
Red Kite												
Marsh Harrier												
Hen Harrier												
Sparrowhawk												
Common Buzzard												
Osprey												
Kestrel												
Merlin												
Hobby												
Peregrine Falcon												
Red-legged Partridge												
Grey Partridge												
Pheasant												
Water Rail												
Moorhen												

	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A
Coot												
Spotted crane												
Oystercatcher												
Avocet												
Little Ringed Plover												
Ringed Plover												
Golden Plover												
Lapwing												
Grey Plover												
Sanderling												
Little Stint												
Temminck's stint												
Curlew sandpiper												
Dunlin												
Ruff												
Snipe												
Woodcock												
Black-tailed Godwit												
Bar-tailed Godwit												
Whimbrel												
Curlew												
Spotted Redshank												
Redshank												
Greenshank												
Green Sandpiper												
Wood Sandpiper												
Common Sandpiper												
Turnstone												
Mediterranean Gull												
Little Gull												
Black-headed Gull												
Common Gull												
Herring Gull												
<i>Yellow-legged Gull</i>												
<i>Caspian gull</i>												
Lesser Black-backed Gull												
Great Black-backed Gull												
Little Tern												
Sandwich tern												
Arctic Tern												
Common Tern												
Black Tern												
Stock Dove												
Woodpigeon												
Collared Dove												
Turtle Dove												
Cuckoo												
Barn Owl												
Little Owl												
Tawny Owl												
Short-eared owl												
Kingfisher												
Green Woodpecker												
Great Spotted Woodpecker												
Lssr Spotted Woodpecker												
Skylark												
Swift												
Sand Martin												
Swallow												
House Martin												
Meadow Pipit												
Rock Pipit												

	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A
Yellow Wagtail												
Grey-headed Wagtail												
Grey Wagtail												
Pied Wagtail												
White Wagtail												
Wren												
Dunnock												
Robin												
Nightingale												
Redstart												
Whinchat												
Stonechat												
Wheatear												
Fieldfare												
Blackbird												
Song thrush												
Redwing												
Mistle Thrush												
Grasshopper warbler												
Sedge Warbler												
Reed Warbler												
Lesser whitethroat												
Whitethroat												
Garden Warbler												
Blackcap												
Yellow-browed warbler												
Chiffchaff												
Willow Warbler												
Spotted Flycatcher												
Goldcrest												
Firecrest												
Bearded tit												
Long-tailed Tit												
Marsh Tit												
Coal Tit												
Blue Tit												
Great Tit												
Nuthatch												
Treecreeper												
Jay												
Magpie												
Jackdaw												
Rook												
Carrion Crow												
Raven												
Starling												
House Sparrow												
Tree Sparrow												
Chaffinch												
Brambling												
Bullfinch												
Greenfinch												
Goldfinch												
Siskin												
Linnet												
Lesser Redpoll												
Mealy Redpoll												
Yellowhammer												
Reed Bunting												
Corn Bunting												

## Wildlife at Paxton Pits 2004

Jim Stevenson

We don't get nearly as many records for wildlife as we do for birds, so I would like to thank almost 40 observers for submitting records. If you can add more detail, please send your records to me at the Visitor Centre or email [paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk](mailto:paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk).

### Mammals

A team of volunteers built an otter holt during the winter and we have seen otter droppings in several places. Just five lucky people saw **otters** on the reserve, on four dates throughout the year and all at different places. All were singles, except for a group of three that crossed the Ouse Valley Way and slid into the water next to Washout Pit on 17<sup>th</sup> January (CM/GAR). Sadly, one was found dead, a victim of a passing vehicle, by Paxton Lock in April (RM). By welcome contrast, **mink** records seem to be getting fewer. Let's hope it stays that way!

**Muntjac** deer are mostly seen in winter, but they are very abundant. As with **rabbits**, last year's dry season resulted in a shortage of green-stuff and a lot of bushes and shrubs were browsed. **Foxes** can be seen at almost any time, (we had about 30 records, including an adult and five cubs near Boughton Lodge Farm on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, MD/JH/JW) but **badgers** are much harder to see. We had two sightings of live ones and one dead on the A1, but we see lots of tracks and signs. **Brown hares** were seen throughout the year at the north end of the pits, most frequently during the spring. Most were singles, so three in late July is encouraging. We hope to see them on our farmed part of the nature reserve soon. **Weasels** were seen several times, but no stoats this year. We see lots of **grey squirrels**, but one black one was seen in the allotments. **Water shrews** were found at the A1 North Pit, the Sailing Lake and the Conservation Area pond in East Scrub. A nasty black and white cat caught a few common shrews in the meadow. **Noctule** and **pipistrelle bats** were seen, but we did not have the huge midge swarms to attract them as in previous years.

### Reptiles

Two terrapins were sunning on a log in the river, and one in Farm Pit. These were probably **red-eared terrapins**. This summer was a good one for **grass snakes**, particularly around the Cloudy Pit. We released two that were stuck, but alive, in the well on Great Meadow.

### Amphibians

I saw a couple of **common toads** in the carr on Hayling Pit and one lump of frogspawn along the Ouse Valley Way. **Great crested newts** were in the Visitor Centre pond as usual and **smooth newts** were all over the place.

### Fish

The best fish watching was in Southoe Brook near the river viewpoint where rangers have seen **eels, gudgeons, minnows, sticklebacks, perch, pike, roach** and **chub**. In addition, the lakes hold **carp, bream, rudd, tench** and **roach**. I found a rare **spined loach** in Cloudy Pit in August. This is a Red Data Book and UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species.

### Invertebrates

Autumn 2003 was excellent for **hornets**, with many records until 17<sup>th</sup> September, and in May 2004, some attempted to build a nest in the Hayden Hide. Late July saw one of East Anglia's biggest ever invasions of **hoverflies**, principally of two species. Although we didn't have as many as the coast, Paxton must have had tens of thousands. Although we had no records for them, this was a splendid year for **crickets** and **grasshoppers**.

### Butterflies

Last year, the big butterfly event was the high number of migrants such as **painted ladies**, with several seen into September and one on the late date of 26<sup>th</sup> October (SM). There were fewer in 2004, with just a handful from 13<sup>th</sup> June onwards, though numbers picked up during August. We also saw a few **clouded yellows**, the last being on 4<sup>th</sup> November in the Meadow (JS), along with a **small tortoiseshell** and **brimstone**.

First butterfly of the year was a **small tortoiseshell**, reported on 25<sup>th</sup> January. **Marbled whites** (up to 12) appeared for the second time in East Scrub this year. Summer 2004's mixed weather meant that it wasn't a classic year for common butterflies, but many visitors commented on the remarkable number of **gatekeepers** during late July and early August: at their peak, there must have been several thousand around the pits. Other species seen included **comma**, **red admiral**, **peacock**, **Essex skipper**, **small skipper**, **large skipper**, **holly blue**, **common blue**, **small blue**, **brown argus**, **small copper**, **small heath**, **meadow brown**, **speckled wood**, **green veined white**, **small white** and **large (cabbage) white**.

We had no records for spiders or snails this year, but these would be worth a good look.

### Dragonflies

This was an amazing year for dragonflies and damselflies. We seem to get all the species you could possibly expect in this part of the world, because we have a variety of habitats for them. The newest species at Paxton was **small red-eyed damselfly**, found in Cloudy Pit in early August (GR/JS), a first for the pits. Several in Essex in 1999 were the first ever in Britain, since when they have rapidly colonised the south and east of England. These are believed to be the first records for Cambridgeshire, though within days of our find, more were found in pools across the south of the county.

Besides this find, the complete list is: **white-legged damselfly**, **large red damselfly**, **emerald damselfly**, **red-eyed damselfly**, **blue tailed damselfly**, **common blue damselfly**, **variable damselfly**, **azure damselfly**, **ruddy darter**, **emperor**, **brown hawker**, **southern hawker**, **migrant hawker**, **black tailed skimmer**, **four spotted chaser**, **scarce chaser**, **broad bodied chaser**, **common darter**, **hairy dragonfly**. There was a particular abundance of **banded demoiselles** this year, in a long season that ran from mid May to mid August.

### Flowers and trees

Every year is different and, partly due to last year's drought, and this year's spring rains, we have had a bumper season for orchids, with over 1,000 **bee orchids** at the Sailing Lake meadow and over 40 at the car park. We also had a lot of **spotted orchids** and a few **pyramidals**. The prize for nasty weed this year goes to **New Zealand stonecrop** that now practically surrounds the Weedy Pit, an invasive introduction still on sale in garden centres. We have a few native parasitic plants that did well this year. **Great dodder** is parasitic on nettles, and **common broomrape** is on clovers. **Purple toothwort** is parasitic on willows, but this is a garden escape.

The unusual weather conditions played havoc with the timing of flowering and fruiting. The first **sallows** (pussy willow) were budding on 18<sup>th</sup> January, **coltsfoot** was in flower on 12<sup>th</sup> February (DM/JM), **cowslips** and **lesser celandine** on 26<sup>th</sup> March, **bluebells** were flowering by 19<sup>th</sup> April. And by mid July, many **blackberries** were already ripe, six weeks earlier than usual. A scarce flower of marshy places, **ragged robin**, had a fantastic year, with hundreds of stems on the Sailing Lake meadow and several more on the nearby islands.

Keep those records coming in, please.

## The PaxTON Challenge

**Martin Davis, Julian Hughes and Jamie Wells**

More than a decade ago, we discussed with Laurence Rose, a stalwart birder from Little Paxton, the possibility of seeing 100 species in a day around the Paxton Pits complex. One day, Laurence said, he'd give it a go, but then a new job took him to a new life in Yorkshire.

Seeing over eighty species in a day at Paxton Pits is relatively easy in early May, but the next 20 require putting in the time and a lot of luck. In April 2004, JW clocked up 94 species and this spurred us to take up Laurence's challenge. We decided to give it a shot on the first Sunday of May, having no idea that it would prove to be one of the best ever days at the Pits. We took it relatively easy: no dawn start, no late finish and a pub lunch in the middle of the afternoon. You could say we were almost casual about it.

The first hour, from 6.30 am, ticked along nicely to the first 30. A snipe was a bonus, as often they have left for their breeding sites by the end of April. Then, while scanning one of the islands, the angelic form of a little tern glided into view. Only the 18<sup>th</sup> ever seen at Paxton, and the first ever for two of us, it was a good omen for the day. Indeed, within a few minutes, we had seen turnstone and two bar-tailed godwits – leftovers from a remarkable wader passage during the previous week – and late-staying wigeon, goldeneye and pochard. Ruff, dunlin, red-crested pochard and two male garganeys augmented the list, while the scrub around the pits began to yield the migrant warblers and buntings, including the 'jangling keys' of a corn bunting, now a breeding season rarity. In the air, huge numbers of swifts and hirundines fed, joined by a couple of hobbies.

By breakfast, the list comprised 80 species, and a phone call told us that a female whinchat was in the A1 Fields. By the time we arrived, it had gone to ground, though a wheatear was nice compensation. Our tally crept up gradually, in tandem with the miles we walked. Nightingales were easy, of course, though a female redstart and a spotted flycatcher - the second earliest ever at the Pits - gave us the run around for almost an hour. But that was the beauty of this escapade. Unlike a county birdrace, we were not constantly watching the clock, thinking of where we should be next. We could only be wherever we could walk to!

While looking for the flycatcher, buzzard and marsh harrier were added to the list, the latter our 100<sup>th</sup> bird at only 2 pm! Another search revealed the whinchat, a female, but marsh tit was to elude us all day. By early evening, we were mopping up species that we knew might be around, including teal and common gull. A greenshank called as it flew many hundreds of feet above the pits, but the last green sandpiper of the winter must already have departed.

By now the sun was going down and we were ready to quit at 105. But we hadn't accounted for an osprey that flew slowly but intently north, eliciting a noisy response from the colony of black-headed gulls. And as we walked back to the car, a quick scan found two whimbrels, which soon followed the osprey north.

It was not yet dark, and we could have hunted for an owl or two, but we'd done what we set out to do, and were content to leave it there, at 107. We'd seen almost every breeding species around the Pits, and 12 waders, 11 ducks, 7 gulls and 6 raptors, plus several scarce passage species.

Laurence had been right, and we'd had luck on our side, but we'd put 13 species over the previous highest Paxton count, and more to the point, it had been a lot of fun. So far as we know, no-one has seen more than 100 species in a day at a site in Cambridgeshire. Indeed, the county daylist record stands at 130, while in neighbouring Bedfordshire it is 111.

The full list, of 107 species, is on the website: [www.paxton-pits.org.uk/daylist](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk/daylist)



## Trends in breeding waterbirds at Paxton Pits

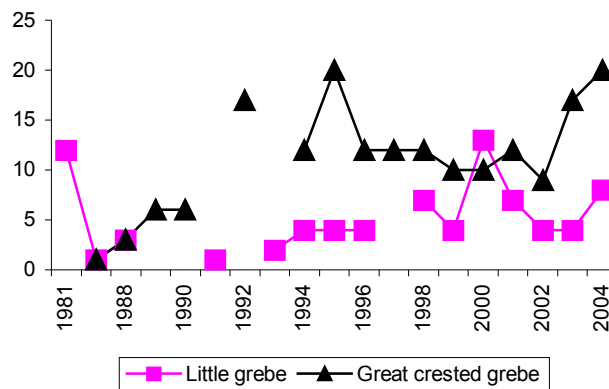
Julian Hughes and Trevor Gunton

The lakes are, of course, the dominant feature at Paxton Pits. During the winter, they host thousands of waterbirds, including nationally-important numbers of some duck species. By late April, however, most of the lakes have been deserted, with scarcely a ripple on the water. But birds are there, particularly on those lakes where local volunteers from the RSPB have been managing the habitats for breeding waders, terns and gulls, in partnership with Little Paxton Sailing Club and Bardon Aggregates, which leases some of the pits in the complex.

We have scoured the archives to provide, for the first time, a review of the numbers of breeding waterbirds at Paxton Pits. We should state at the outset that, unlike the landbirds (see page 53), these figures have not been derived from systematic monitoring, but are the result of many hours in the field during the long breeding season, which extends from mid April to early September in some years. Thus, we do not have figures from every year, and we believe the numbers to be more accurate in some years than others, depending on the number of visits that observers were able to make. Nevertheless, we feel that they do reflect the overall trend in numbers during the last two decades.

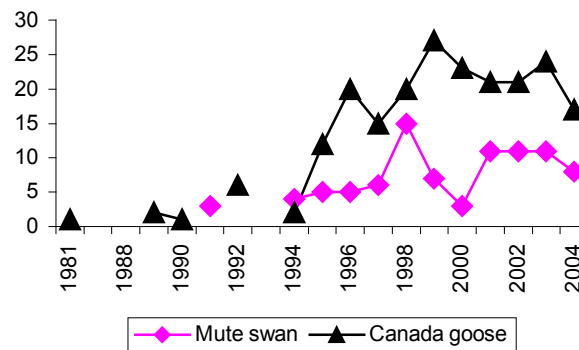
### Grebes

It seems remarkable now that, in the early 1980s, little grebes were more abundant than great crested grebes. It was much later in the decade that great-crested pulled away, apparently better able to take advantage of the newly excavated lakes than its smaller cousin, which prefers mature, well-vegetated edges in which to hide its nest. Indeed, for most of this period, the tiny, undisturbed Farm Pit has held almost all of the little grebes – only in 2004 have they made a real break with form. Aside from a remarkable ‘boom’ in 2000, when little grebes reached an all-time high, numbers of both species seem to have been stable.

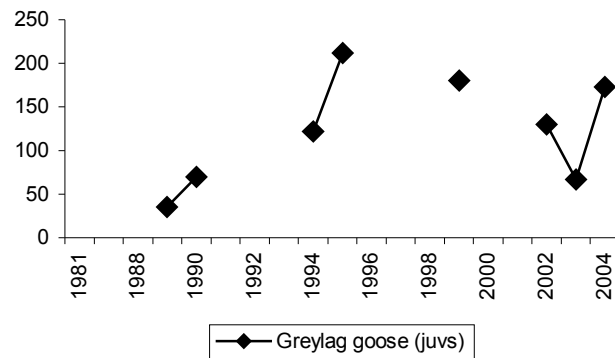


### Swans and geese

Mute swan numbers have grown gradually in line with the continued extension of the gravel pits, and apart from a boom year in 1998 and a bust year in 2000, the number of nesting pairs has been steady, perhaps increasingly slightly for the last decade. In most years, one can expect a territory on each of the main lakes in the complex. By contrast, numbers of the exotic Canada goose remained very low between 1960 (when records began with CF Tebbutt reported that a pair raised six young), after which they exploded, regularly rearing in excess of 60 juveniles from 1995 onwards. Intriguingly, this is the opposite trend to their wintering numbers: the Wetland Bird Survey shows a continuing decline in peak monthly counts since the mid 1990s.

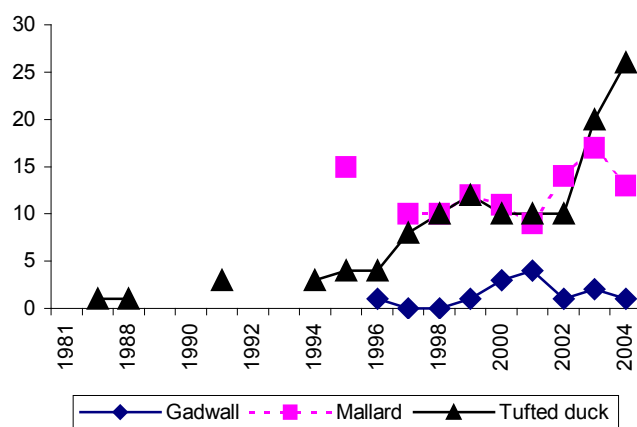


Nesting greylag geese prove much harder to count at Paxton, with many pairs occupying Island Pit, which cannot be counted with any accuracy. Thus, we have used counts of mature juveniles taken in mid summer as a guide to numbers. This suggests that, although numbers have been higher since the early 1990s than previously, the growth has not continued and capacity has been reached – at least until more island habitat becomes available!



### Ducks

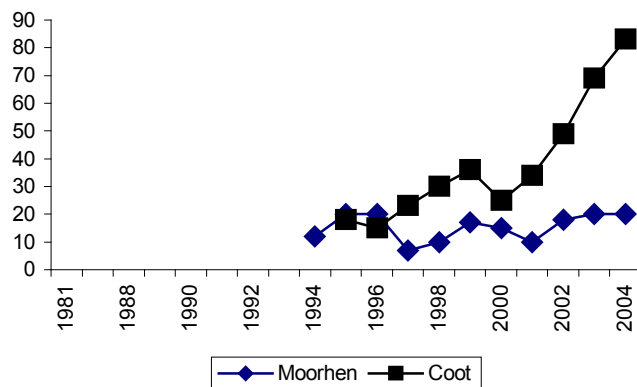
A tale of three ducks. Numbers of mallard, once the commonest breeding duck at Paxton, have remained stable since the mid 1990s, but have been overtaken by tufted ducks in the last couple of years. Tufted ducks have bred here since the Pits were first excavated: they seem able to occupy almost any tiny patch of vegetation, bringing their flotillas of fluffy, chocolate-brown chicks onto the water from late June onwards.



The counts, however, are very dependent on regular observations throughout the summer – an entire brood can be lost within a few days, and so can pass unnoticed. As early as 1974, the number of breeding pairs had reached double figures, but for some inexplicable reason it took another quarter century to repeat the total and then surpass it significantly. Gadwall, by contrast, has always been a scarce breeder at Paxton Pits. Although one or two pairs remained through the summer from the early 1960s, it was not until 1996 that a pair was proven to have bred. It has been repeated on six occasions since, though the increase witnessed early this decade would seem to have faltered.

### Rails

The graph says it all: moorhen numbers are remarkably stable at Paxton, while numbers of breeding coot have taken off. The latter may be partly a result of more consistent counting in recent years, especially of double-brooded pairs, but nevertheless we believe that some of the growth is real. The coot breeding season is long, with the first chicks in the first



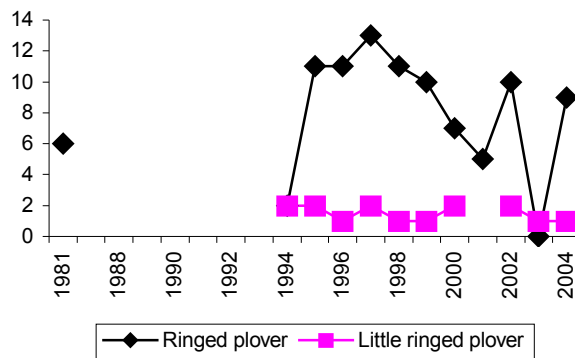
few days of April and tiny youngsters still hatching into early September in some years, though nesting success is often determined by the variation in water levels early in the season.

### Ringed and little ringed plovers

The gravel substrate of a quarry is perfect for these two species. Migrant little ringed plovers are early colonisers, doing best when the ground is disturbed and the quarrying recent. They seem to tolerate no vegetation or other nesting birds.

From the first Paxton record in 1956, it was only six years before the first pairs nested, and numbers grew quickly, peaking at 12 pairs in 1978.

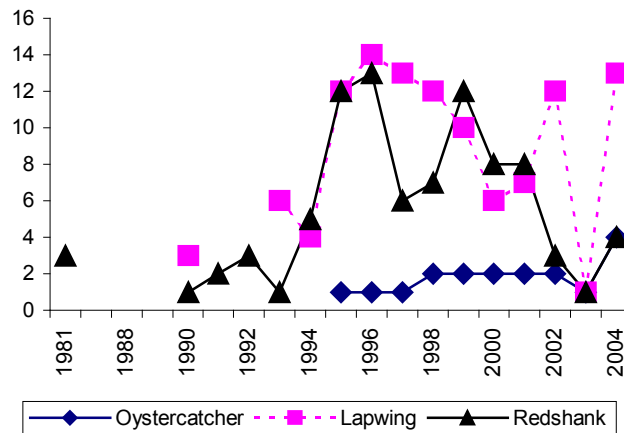
Since the early 1990s, however, only one or two pairs have attempted nesting each year, perhaps because there is now only a couple of years between excavation and restoration of pits, when they are filled with water.



One or two pairs of ringed plovers were already breeding at Paxton when its smaller migrant cousin turned up in the early 1960s, and by the mid 1970s up to 10 pairs were breeding. Numbers seem to have fluctuated since, in recent years taking advantage of shingle islands created for nesting waders on Sailing Lake and Pumphouse Pit. They generally wait three or four years before occupying an island, until there is a green cover in which to hide the shallow scrape nest. In recent years, numbers seem to have fluctuated even more markedly, with 2003 perhaps being the first year without breeding since records began. We believe that a mink took all of the clutches very soon after laying and before it was possible to count the nests.

### Lapwing, redshank and oystercatcher

Lapwing and redshank are two of the three breeding waders of lowland grassland (the other being snipe) for which a severe decline has been documented in England in recent years. We have to assume that half a century ago, prior to the mechanisation of farming and the associated drainage of the valley, these waders would have nested in spring-sown crops and in temporal



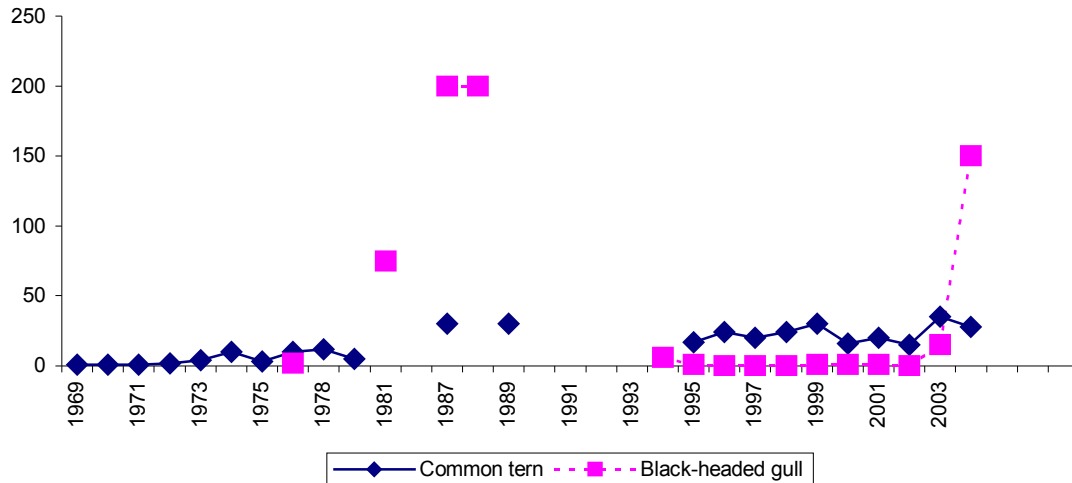
wet flushes in the fields that preceded the Pits. Sadly, such birds were relatively abundant, so we have no record of their presence.

Quarrying inevitably removes the nesting habitat of these birds, but experience shows that within a couple of years of extraction, as vegetation starts to recolonise, lapwings will join ringed plovers in the basin, though the eggs and young are vulnerable to predation, particularly by foxes. This is only temporary, too, however, as water inundates the pits. Only where islands are created – and, importantly, managed for breeding waders – can lapwings, and later redshanks, hold on. The graph shows that both species maintained strong populations during the mid to late 1990s, but in the last five years, breeding numbers have fluctuated annually, with redshank faring poorly compared to lapwing.

Meanwhile, oystercatcher has really bucked the trend. First breeding in Cambridgeshire in 1971, it was not until 1989 that a pair of oystercatchers took a territory at Paxton Pits (mating

was noted, but there was no evidence of nesting) and a further six years before young were reared. Since then, breeding has been annual at Paxton Pits, though young are rarely fledged (it has been suggested that, being at the edge of their range, ours may often be first-time breeders, less likely to be successful). In 2004, however, up to four pairs have bred, a significant leap on previous years.

## Gulls and terns



Sometimes thought of as seabirds, there is a long history of both species nesting in the county. Indeed, the population of black-headed gulls at Whittlesey Mere, prior to its drainage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, may have been huge. Breeding of the gulls was noted near Peterborough from 1904 onwards, with common terns at Orton from 1954. At Paxton Pits, a gull colony became established on Island Pit in 1976 and increased strongly, peaking at 300 breeding pairs in 1983. In 1987, hundreds of pairs deserted for no known reason, and although up to 200 pairs were present in 1988, the colony ceased to exist. After that, there were just occasional nesting attempts, in 1994 and in 1999-2001. Then, without warning, 15 pairs nested on one of the Pumphouse Pit islands in 2003, and then mushroomed to an estimated 150 pairs in 2004. It is one of just five colonies in Cambridgeshire, and is now one of the largest.

Common tern numbers, by contrast, have remained constant. Breeding at Paxton Pits goes back to 1969, when it was only the fourth occurrence ever in Huntingdonshire. Numbers reached around 30 pairs during the mid 1980s, always on the Sailing Lake islands. The colony extended to Pumphouse Pit from 1994, but total numbers have never exceeded 35 pairs, and 20-30 young are typically fledged each year.

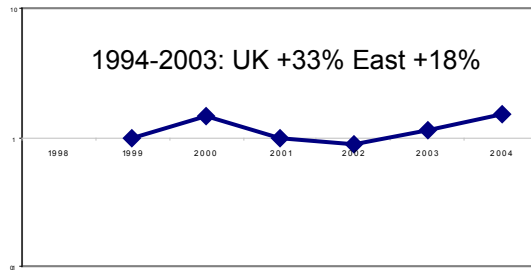
## Breeding landbirds at Paxton Pits

### PBBS volunteers

The Paxton Breeding Bird Survey, simultaneous counts across the entire Pits complex, is used to estimate the abundance of birds, particularly songbirds, in the Report. Here we present the trends since 1999, alongside the trends for the UK and Eastern England during 1994-2003, measured by the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. At Paxton there are more winners than losers: 38 species are increasing, four are stable and seven species are declining.

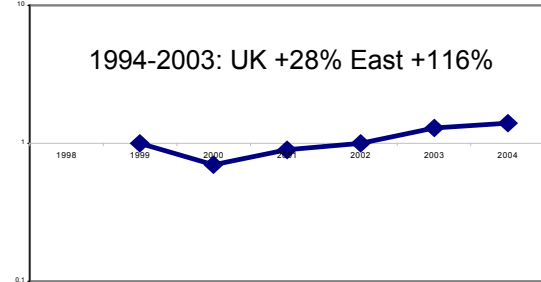
#### Pheasant

Not listed



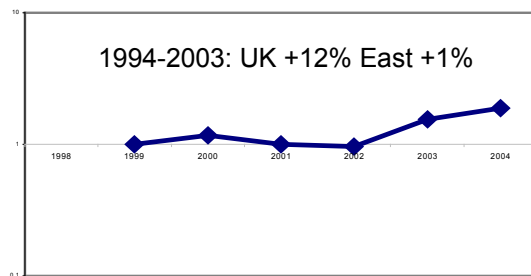
#### Green woodpecker

Amber



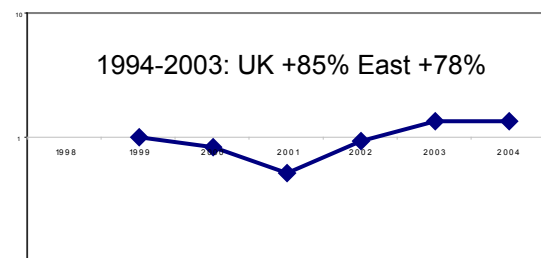
#### Woodpigeon

Green



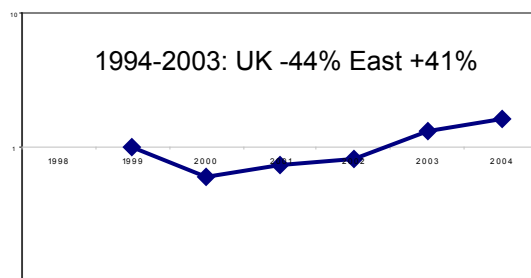
#### Great spotted woodpecker

Green



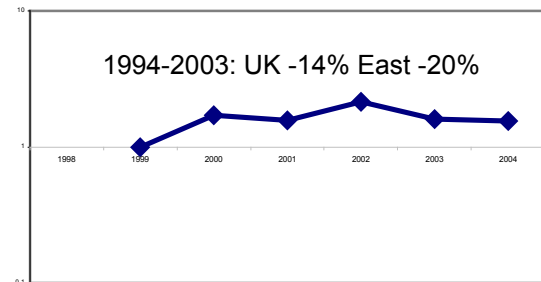
#### Turtle dove

Red



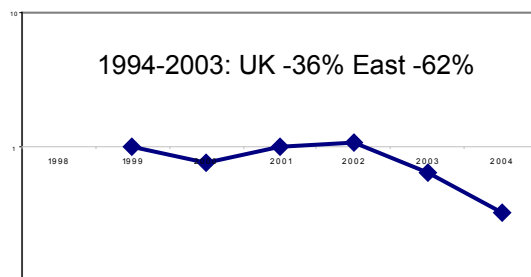
#### Skylark

Red



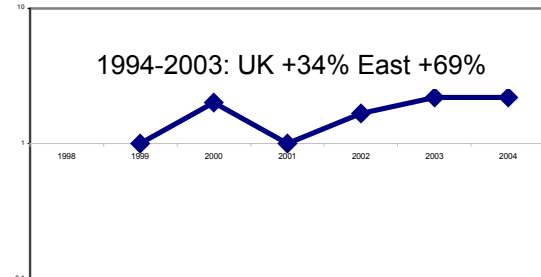
#### Cuckoo

Amber



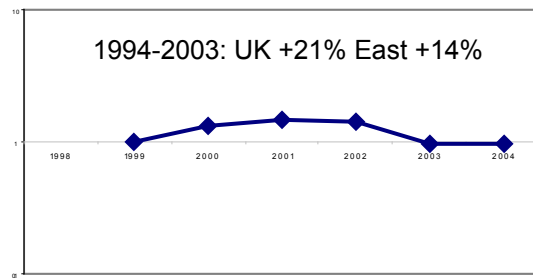
#### Pied wagtail

Green



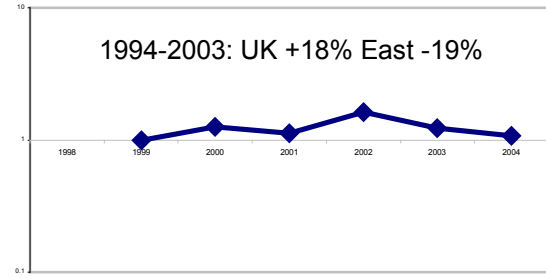
**Dunnock**

Amber



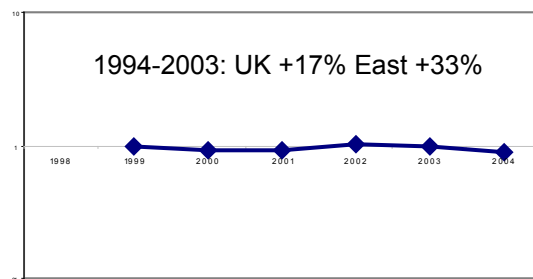
**Song thrush**

Red



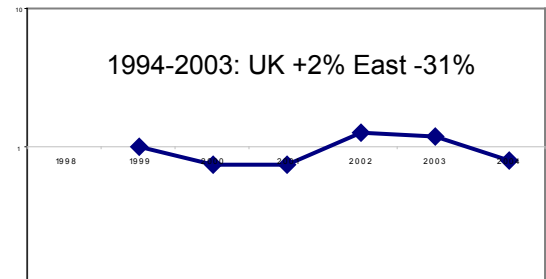
**Robin**

Green



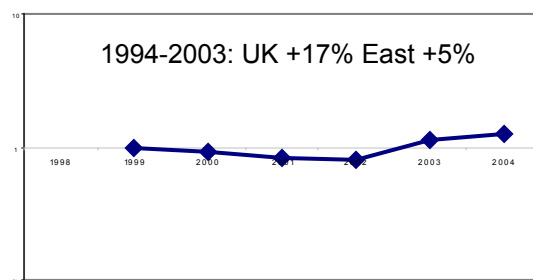
**Mistle thrush**

Amber



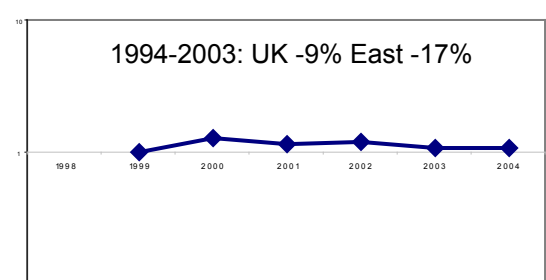
**Wren**

Green



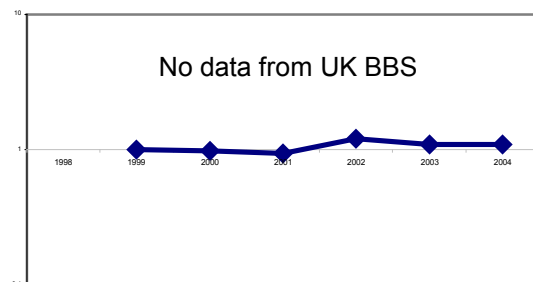
**Sedge warbler**

Green



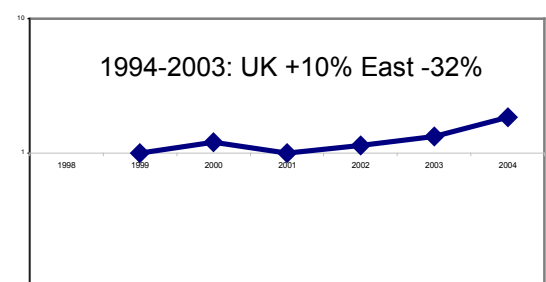
**Nightingale**

Amber



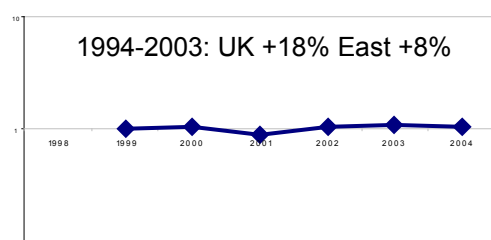
**Reed warbler**

Green



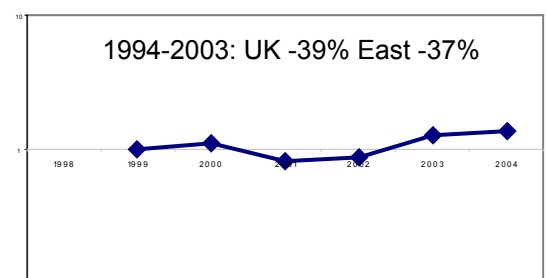
**Blackbird**

Green



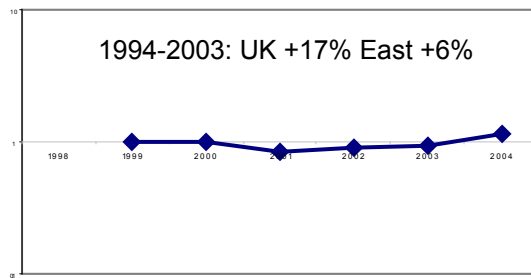
**Lesser whitethroat**

Green



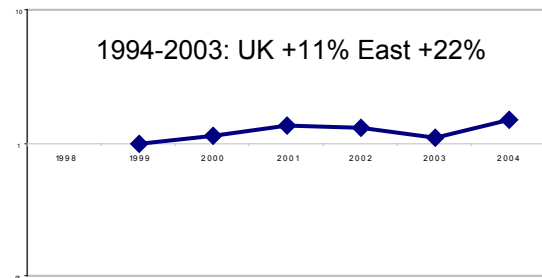
### Whitethroat

Green



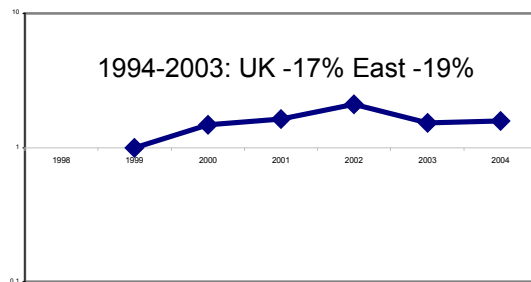
### Long-tailed tit

Green



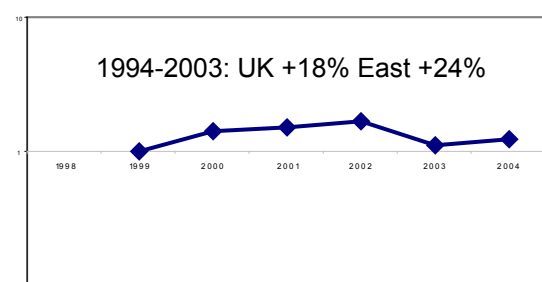
### Garden warbler

Green



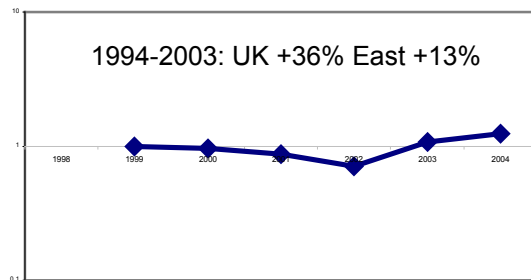
### Blue tit

Green



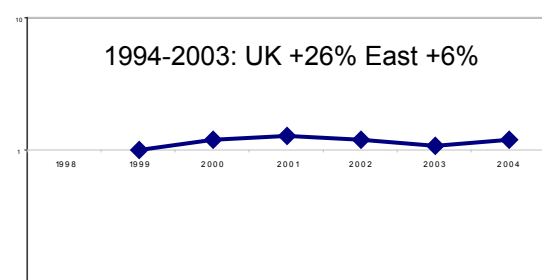
### Blackcap

Green



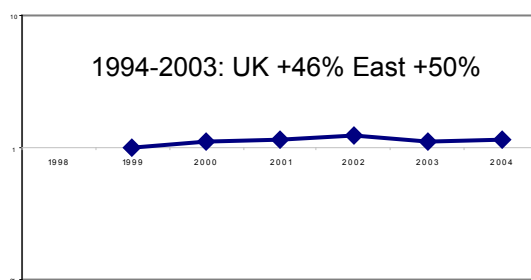
### Great tit

Green



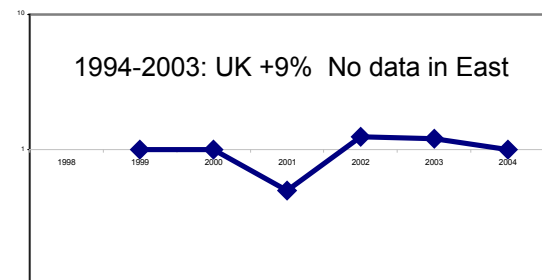
### Chiffchaff

Green



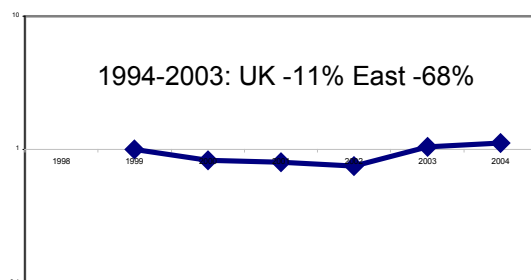
### Treecreeper

Green



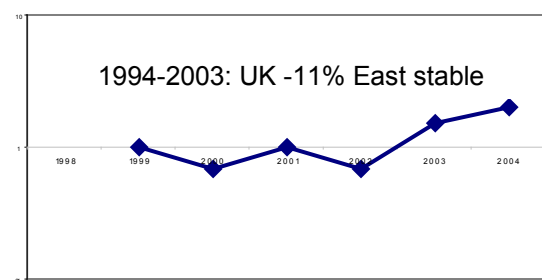
### Willow warbler

Amber



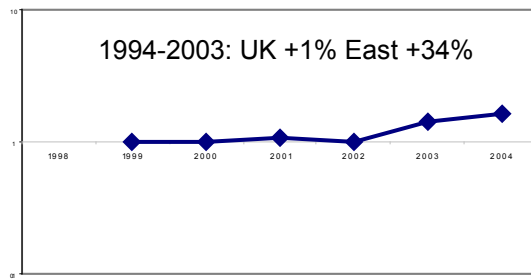
### Jay

Green



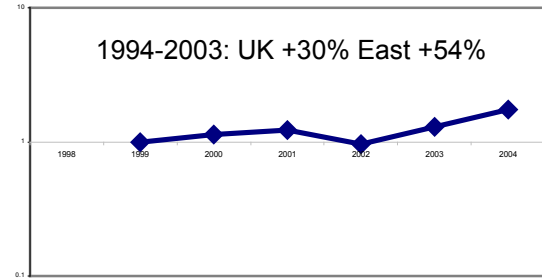
**Magpie**

Green



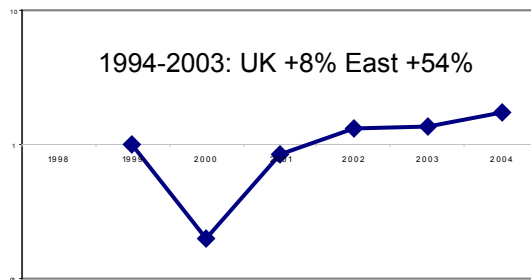
**Greenfinch**

Green



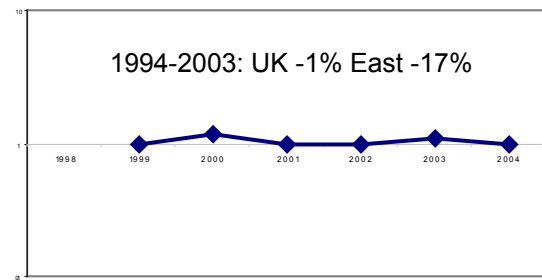
**Carrion crow**

Green



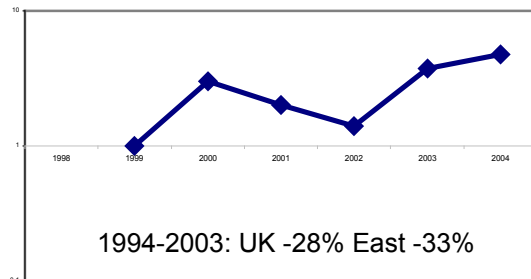
**Linnet**

Red



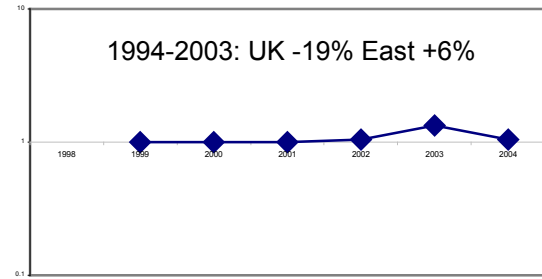
**Starling**

Red



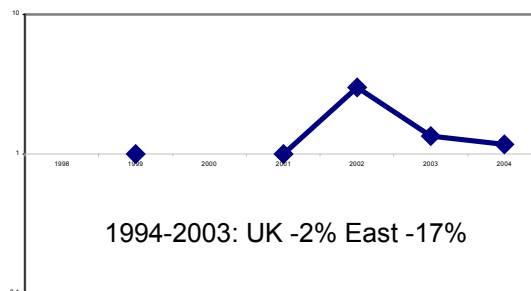
**Bullfinch**

Red



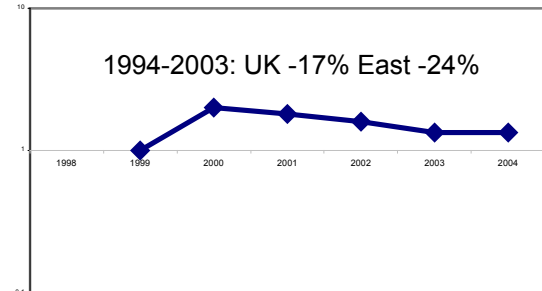
**House sparrow**

Red



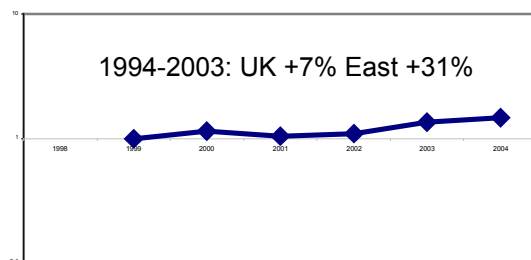
**Yellowhammer**

Red



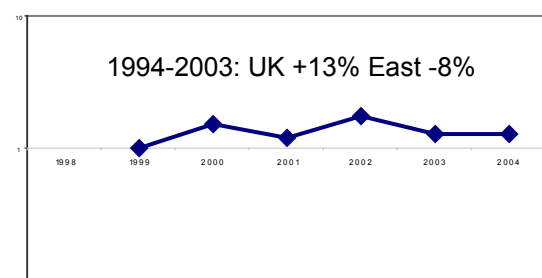
**Chaffinch**

Green



**Reed bunting**

Red





### **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, breeding records or the unusual – please send them to Alison Pearson, 4 Kipling Place, Eaton Ford, St Neots PE19 7RG. Please contact Alison for guidance of recording birds in gardens. E-mail: [alison.pearson@dpconsultant.co.uk](mailto:alison.pearson@dpconsultant.co.uk).

Copies of the 2003 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 2004 report should be available in early spring 2005.

### **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 (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](http://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 Arthur & Min Stephens, 16 Water End, Cople, Bedford MK44 3TX.**

**Or visit [www.paxton-pits.org.uk/snbw](http://www.paxton-pits.org.uk/snbw)**

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Association, Paul Rule  
Chris Sargeant (CS), Bob Scott, Martin Shadbolt (MSh), Sheffield RSPB Group, Ken Smith  
(KSm), Martin Smith (MSm), Ben Stafford, Jim Stevenson (JS), Brian Stretch (BS), Pat  
Sumner (PS)  
David Thompson, Guy Thompson  
Alan Wadsworth, Mark Ward, Jamie Wells (JW), Audrey and Gwyn (GW) Williams, Jill  
Williams, Steve Williams, Clare Wilson  
Andy (AY) and Jean Young (JY)  
Paxton Breeding Bird Survey (PBBS)  
Rare Bird Alert (RBA).  
Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS)

Particular thanks to John Oates and Cambridge Bird Club for providing access to records submitted to their bird report and website, to the artists whose illustrations bring life to this report and to the RSPB for the use of those by John Busby, Rob Hume and Mike Langman.

Please send all records of birds recorded between September 2004 and August 2005 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](mailto:paxpits@paxton-pits.org.uk)

Or record them, with your full name, in the sightings book at the Visitor Centre.

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**Find out more about the wildlife of Paxton Pits, including details of the latest sightings and of St Neots Bird & Wildlife Club, by visiting our website:**

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

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